Studying Contemporary Festivity: Some Reflections on Theory and Method

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The sociologist Frank Manning, writing in the early 1980s, claimed that "throughout both the industrialized and developing nations, new celebrations are being created and older ones revived on a scale that is surely unmatched in human history."[1] Manning may have been overstating the case, but there is evidence that festive celebration in Europe and North America has experienced a renaissance.[2] In the 1980s, festivity seemed poised to garner the attention of academics;[3] but the prominent theories of festivity were little more than theological treatises loosely grounded in empirical observations of actual festivals,[4] the complexity and scale of much festivity made their study difficult, and an interest in cultural flows, migration, and globalization tended to result in overlooking festivals because of their strongly local nature. But festivity is once again drawing the academic's eye, and my aim here is to offer some reflections on studying contemporary festivals, and make a pitch for the use of video as an analytical and interpretive tool.

Between the fall of 2004 and the fall of 2006, I made four trips to Wittenberg, Germany, to conduct ethnographic based research on the

1. Frank Manning, *The Celebration of Society*, (Bolwing Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1989), 4.

2. See Jeremy Boissevain, *Revitalizing European Rituals* (New York: Routledge, 1992), a collection of case studies on the resurgence of traditional celebrations across Europe.

3. See, for example, Victor Turner, ed. *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982) and Barbara A. Babcock, *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

4. Influential examples include Harvey Cox's *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) and Joseph Pieper *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965).

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town's two annual Luther-themed festivals.[5] Wittenberg is located about an hour southwest of Berlin, in the former East Germany. Martin Luther is the city's most famous citizen. Wittenberg was Luther's home for 36 years, and birthplace of the German Reformation. Today, it is a UNESCO World Heritage site, a magnet for Lutheran and Protestant pilgrims and visitors, and the capital of the thriving tourist and heritage region known as *Lutherland.* Each year, Wittenberg hosts two large, public festivals. Reformation Day is a centuries old celebration of Luther's posting of the 95 theses; in principle, Reformation Day is a church festival, but its liturgical dimensions are rivaled by the secular, the aesthetic, and the popular. The festival attracts about 20,000 visitors. Luther's Wedding is a new festival, inaugurated in 1994, built around the theme of the wedding of Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora. Roughly 100,000 people pour into the old city for the three day event—a potpourri of music, theatrical and street performance, processions, worship, parades, drinking, and the display and consumption of traditional foods, arts, and crafts.

A number of interrelated features characterize celebration. Celebrations often recall mythological or historical origins, deeds and persons pivotal to religious, regional, national, or other group identities. Celebrations are comprised of a mix of ritual and performance genres. Celebrations are public events, and hence tend to be participatory events—the line between audience and participants often blurs, partly because celebrations take place in the streets and open, public space, rather than in tightly framed spaces (such as a church, theatre, or concert hall). Celebrations are seasonal events; they come around repeatedly, having their own autonomous, cyclical time, punctuating an otherwise homogenous calendar. Celebrations have entertainment value, they are typically joyful, exuberant occasions, and they appeal to all the senses.

Of the various ritual types catalogued by scholars, festivity (or celebration, I shall use the terms interchangeably) is one of the more difficult rites to study. How does one go about observing, documenting, and then analyzing, interpreting, and presenting a culturally complex, multidimensional, large-scale event such as a public festival? An obvious descriptive strategy would be to follow the events on the program. Festivals

5. A book and DVD, based on this research, is forthcoming with Oxford University Press (March, 2010).

often follow narrative lines, especially those that commemorate historical events and persons. But a linear, beginning-to-end narrative description of a festival would be onerous to write, boring to read, and practically impossible, since no one person can cover a festival in its entirety. What is required is a selective presentation of particular scenes, moments in the life of a festival, informed by both the desire to be faithful to its complexity and tenor (the aims of comprehensiveness and objectivity), and the utility of certain scenes to illustrate particular analytical, interpretive, and theoretical interests of the researcher.

I have found it helpful to think about the Wittenberg festivals using an analytical technique known as 'framing.' Frame analysis began with the work of Erving Goffman. "I assume," Goffman explains, "that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principals of organization which govern events. . . . and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify."[6] For example, if you see somebody being attacked on stage in a theatre, the framing of the event—the building, your ticket and seat, the stage set—allows you to recognize the attack as play or drama. Should the actor be doing actual harm to the other player, it may take some time for the audience to notice, since fake blood, the sound of breaking bones, cries of pain and the like are understood by the audience to be part of a good performance. The example is perhaps extreme, but it makes the point of how powerfully frames can shape our perceptions and understandings of an event. A theatre is literally a framed space, but we also employ gestures, smells, images, concepts, and words in defining a situation. A wink and wry smile before calling a friend an 'ass' communicates, 'I'm only kidding.' Extending one's open hand frames an encounter on the street as cordial and non-threatening. Frames shape not merely the "principals" that organize the social world (a handshake rather than, say, a bow) but also "our subjective involvement in them" (the decorum governing a situation may demand a handshake, but we may loathe the person we are greeting).

In a word, festivals *sprawl*, and framing is a way of focusing attention on a few basic elements or themes:

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6. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 10.

1. **Time.** Festivals sprawl across time, usually lasting several days, and their reach typically extends back through the centuries. Festivals take place in 'real time.' But in between the beginning and the end, time is imagined and organized in a variety of ways: a remembered and represented past, a hoped for future, the rhythms of the tourism cycle, the dates of liturgical calendars, the narratives of sacred history, the history of the specific festival, the event-times on the festival program. Festivals are *events*; they have a linear, forward temporal flow: they begin, they happen, they end. They also have a circular flow; they come around again, and again, and again. The researcher needs knowledge of historical contexts, must be cognizant of moving in and out of a variety of temporally framed spaces (such as a 'medieval' *Marktplatz*), and must get up early, go to bed late, be on their feet all day long, and do this for several days in a row.

2. **Space.** Festivals sprawl across space, taking over blocks of streets, flowing into and out of town squares, public buildings, and homes. Festivals utilize space and place in a variety of ways. Festivals often take place at locations made special (even sacred) through a variety of architectural, commemorative, and ritual practices and strategies. Festivals sites are often architecturally rich, utilize parades and processions to link together locations, and employ staging (sometimes elaborate) to create a unique setting. Because festivals spread out over a large space, they are difficult events to cover. In addition to being on his or her feet for two or three days, full coverage of a large, complex festival demands of the researcher being at two or more places at the same time. This means choices must be made, since key events may happen simultaneously at different locations; moreover, when in one place, the researcher must metaphorically 'move' between or across imagined places (for example, between a contemporary and medieval *Marktplatz*).

3. **Cultural Domains.** Festivals sprawl across cultural domains. Cultural domains are rarely hermetically sealed; in public festivity, the borders between the arts, religion, politics, and economics tend to bleed into one another, since a variety of individuals and groups bring their own unique interests and perspectives into the public sphere. Reformation Day is a church festival, but in the *Marktplatz*, it looks more like a *Volksfest*. A sermon may praise Luther; the festival fool pokes fun at him. For a hotel owner, the festival is a good opportunity to fill rooms; for the Lucas Cranach society, it is an occasion to promote the local art school and foundation. Even though academics often talk a good interdisciplinary game, in practice it's a difficult one to play. Familiarity with the theories, methods, and histories of multiple disciplines or fields demands both time and the willingness to stray across academic borders that are at times vigorously defended.

4. **Senses.** Festivals sprawl across the full range of sensory experience. In festivity, sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and touches intermingle, emerge and fade, make our mouths water and eyes pop, and, when we've reached the point of saturation, send us running in search of quiet shelter. In recent years, scholars working in various disciplines have argued for a more integrated understanding of the interplay of tactile, acoustic, olfactory, gustatory, visual, and kinesthetic senses in shaping personal and group experiences, the embodied meanings of ritual practice, and the nature and dynamics of cultural performances. Reformation Day and Luther's Wedding are characterized by sensory intensification, sensory indulgence, and, as a result, sensory overload.

5. **Ritual & Performance.** Festivals sprawl across ritual and performative genres: carnival, liturgy, civil ceremony, parades and processions, initiation, speeches and theatre, feasting, music, dance, revelry—all these, and more, may make up a festival. Understanding how each of these genres interlock and interweave (or, alternatively, clash and conflict) to produce the conglomeration collectively referred to in colloquial and scholarly speech as a 'festival' is yet another conundrum facing the researcher. Conceived as a rite in and of itself, that is, in its totality, a festival must be greater than the sum of its parts. What binds these parts together? Which rites and performances are primary, deserving of extra attention, and which are secondary? Are certain kinds of rites and performances employed by different social-cultural domains or groups?

6. **Objects.** Festivals employ a variety of objects and images: banners, icons, corporate logos, the products of traditional crafts or regional cuisines, relics, even historical figures who become commoditized through imagery or heritage performance. Whereas in everyday life objects are valued primarily for the use value or exchange value, in performance events objects are imbued with symbolic value. Objects are crucial in creating the ambiance and ethos of the festival setting; a festival may even owe its very existence to particular a object (for example, a wine festival).

These six frames are not sacrosanct, but, taken together, they offer a relatively comprehensive set of analytical tools. While there is a certain arbitrariness to them, they are also intuitive categories; festival organizers and participants often use such frames in planning or interacting with festival events. In analyzing a festival in terms of these frames, beginning with one inevitably leads to reflection on the others, and part of the job is to explore patterns and connections between the various frames.

Frames have an impact on subjective experience and knowledge; people make frames, employ them (often unconsciously), and, if they don't like them, seek to tear them down and create new ones. Framing and frame criticism happens within the Wittenberg festivals, and within academic study. For the field researcher, "[f]rame analysis is the study of boundaries, boundary conditions, and boundary crossings. What it requires of fieldworkers is a rhythm, either physical or conceptual, of moving in and out of some cultural domain. . .while noticing both in themselves and in others what transpires."[7]

Below is a description of a scene I witnessed in Wittenberg. In writing up this scene, which I have dubbed "A Beer for Martin," my aim was to transport readers to the Reformation Day festival, to communicate a feeling for what the festival, at least parts of it, is like. Let us imagine ourselves then in Wittenberg, in the city's lively *Marktplatz*, location of the "medieval market spectacle."

> The festival fool and his music playing, juggling, comic, theatricalizing cohorts call the crowd to order, aided by a short blast from a herald trumpet—'Da-Da-Da-DAA!'. It is a sunny, warm, fall day, the crowd gathered in the *Marktplatz* is in good spirits, and the spirits (mostly beer, a little wine) are beginning to flow. After a few jokes—satire of clergy and sexual innuendo about monks and nuns, Martin and Katie—the fool procures himself a beer from a nearby vendor. Balancing the beer delicately on his cocked head, the fool weaves his way through the crowd, back to the small stage tucked away in the corner of the town square.
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> There he waits, beer on head, as his fellow *Spieleute* volunteer a heavy-set, grizzled member of the crowd into their merry band. As fate (or good planning or performing) would have it, his name is Martin. His task? To down the fool's large mug of Katharina von Bora beer without coming up for air.
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> Martin is up to the job, and receives the crowd's approval by way of rousing applause, helped along with a few more blasts on the trumpet. But the performance is not over. One of the fool's men turns his trumpet end for end and, holding it to his ear, listens attentively to the stirrings in Martin's belly. Satisfied that all is settling well, the fool then spins Martin around like a top. Dizzy from the spinning—not to mention the beer—the players bend the poor man over and listen again—this time the narrow end of the trumpet probing the air near the man's backside, the large end funneling fumes back to the player's nose, which

7. Ronald Grimes, *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in its Practice, Essays on its Theory* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 92.

they inhale with vigor. Martin produces the desired wind, the crowd cheers, and the fool pronounces the annual *Reformationsfest* open.

A frame analysis of "A Beer for Martin" is charted in table 1. The scene is an example of the medieval, carnivalesque ethos of Wittenberg's Luther festivals. The performance of a bawdy, beer guzzling Martin Luther that afternoon in Wittenberg's *Marktplatz* lasted all of ten minutes, but the scene is a small window that opens on to the dynamics of contemporary Luther festivity. "A Beer for Martin" taught me that bracketing out the "medieval" *Marktplatz* and focusing on ecclesiastical and civil religion—historically, the bread and butter of Luther festivity—would result in a very limited perspective. In witnessing the scene, my conceptualization of the festival crossed-over from the liturgical and ceremonial into aesthetic performances and the carnivalesque.

Time	• unofficial beginning of the festival • symbolic time: late medieval; pre-Reformation Wittenberg • enfolding of times (historical Martin in the contemporary *Marktplatz*) • message: as he is today (a beer drinker, one of the folk), so he was then
Space	• outdoors; in the streets; public space • *Marktplatz* (marketplace): place for games, food & drink, conversation, buying, selling, aesthetic performances (dance, street theatre, heritage performance, music) • symbolic: 'old Wittenberg;' the festival's 'center' or 'heart'
Senses	• spectacle—visually compelling & sensuous (smells, tastes, movement, sounds concentrated and intensified) • taste & smell employed metaphorically; 'lower' senses = low culture • kinesthetic/metaphoric: off-balance, spinning, tipsy
Performance Type	• street theatre; aesthetic performance • carnivalesque; ludic • *Spielleute* (players), not *Schauspieler* (actors) • performer—spectator boundary collapsed; viewers also participants/performers • performance space—city plaza as stage • aesthetic: low; guttural humor; sexual innuendo; anti-authoritarian
Objects; Images	• beer; loved by Martin; challenges Martin as elevated celebratory object • Trumpet: traditional symbol of royalty; here, inverted, used to probe, listen & smell, rather than announce/pronounce
Persons	• The Fool: a foil to Martin • Martin Luther: present among festival-goers; one of the people; brought down from imposing pedestal of the Luther monument
Domains	• Public; popular culture; entertainment • Economic: *Marktplatz*—the marketplace; cultural performance as commoditized product

"A Beer for Martin" was itself an exercise in framing. Unlike Luther's Wedding, the Reformation Day festival does not have a formal opening or ending. Coming at the beginning of the festival, it set a tone for those present, a tone of playful—for a few, offensive—merry-making. Significantly, the scene was not on the scheduled event-program. The "Medieval Market Spectacle" was on the 2004 program, but scheduled to begin on Sunday, which happened to coincide with October 31, the traditional date of Luther's posting of the 95 theses. Performers and vendors set up the market on Friday evening and Saturday morning. By Saturday at noon, enough people were beginning to congregate in the old town that most of the stalls selling food, drinks, and souvenirs were up and running. An unofficial printed poster and word of mouth announced a 4 p.m. festival opening in the *Marktplatz*, and roughly 200 people were present to witness the performance. The impromptu opening of the festival was primarily satire of 'medieval', Luther-era clergy and monastics; by implication, the performers satirized the liturgical dimensions of contemporary Luther festivity. Coming on the eve of Reformation Day, the opening in the *Marktplatz* pushed the traditionally liturgical basis of the festival in the direction of the carnivalesque. The performance marked the festival as an occasion for play, entertainment, and socializing, rather than commemoration, worship, and speeches.

Let us consider one of these frames in greater detail, the sensual dimensions of festivity and its study. Ritual is a sensual activity, and scholars studying ritual need to give more attention to this fact. Histories of the senses tell the story of the triumph of the visual in western culture. The academic contribution to this triumph is the text. We work on texts, produce texts, and read them at conferences. We even "read" phenomena that obviously are not texts—things like temples, cock fights, festivals, and cinema—as though they were. For those studying the senses, western visualism is often a target of criticism. Steven Feld and others have focused on the centrality of sound in non-western cultures; in so doing, they have alerted us to the variety of sensory awareness in human societies. But Feld insists that this new found awareness of the aural and other senses should not become a form of anti-visualism. What is required, Feld writes, is an integrated understanding of

the "interplay of tactile, sonic, and visual senses."[8] This is a tall order, and the desire for such an integrated approach raises the question of whether the text and the spoken word, the two conventional forms of academic knowledge, are up to the task.

"A Beer for Martin," as a piece of street theatre, was primarily visual: people watched it, though the border between performers and audience was less defined than in stage theatre. Gustatory, olfactory, auditory and kinesthetic qualities were also present, both literally and metaphorically. Beer is an object with a ubiquitous presence at festival time, so conspicuous its significance might be easily overlooked. Ritual action is everyday action elevated, stylized, condensed, formalized. During festival time in Wittenberg, beer drinking (an ordinary, perhaps even everyday occurrence) becomes ritualized action and beer a ritual object. Beer is given as a gift; it shows up in rites and performances; balanced on the head, like a crown; the drinking of a beer marks the opening and closing of events; the strewn (at night) and stacked (in the morning) empties in Wittenberg's streets are testaments to a voracious appetite for and ability to consume vast quantities of the golden, amber, or dark liquid; the act of drinking beer with friends while sitting at the foot of Schadow's Luther monument on Reformation Day is a from of teenage protest. Beer has the effect of altering normal sensory states. The spinning of Martin, coupled with the chugged beer, played havoc with the man's kinesthetic sense. Martin was off balance, and almost fell over—a model of and for the carnival-like, topsy-turvy atmosphere of the festival. The kinesthetic sense of the scene was one of derangement. Its metaphorical sense was that of inversion. The performance focused on the "lower" senses associated with the genitals, mouth, gut, bowels. Martin Luther, the culture hero who posted the 95 theses, became for a moment something of a beer-loving, paunchy, farting, stumble-bum. Reformation Day is marked on the liturgical and civic calendars in Sachsen-Anhalt. It is an elevated, special, extraordinary occasion: its liturgical focus is on the text and the preaching of the Word. The meaning embodied in the postures and gestures that Saturday afternoon seemed to be: let's not forget that Reformation Day, however elevated it may be, is also in the gutter; an event

8. Steven Feld. "Waterfalls of Song," in ed. Stephen Feld and Keith Basso, *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), 91–136.

of and for the folk; a time to praise, but also to poke-fun—maybe there is even something about the festival that stinks.

In writing about smells (however metaphorical and symbolic they may have been) I'm not trying to be flippant, crude, or provocative; we ought not to trivialize or lightly pass over this probing for smells in the *Marktplatz*. The scene demands attention for two reasons: (1) for some, the play of the *Spielleute* was mildly offensive, and (2) such actions were not a part of traditional Luther festivity in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In earlier eras of Luther festivity, the man was not the butt of jokes, at least not publicly. At a conference dealing with "religion and the senses," I presented a paper that included a reading of the scene "A Beer for Martin." A German philosopher, presenting after me, commented, "my paper doesn't deal with anything quite so entertaining as farts and beer; my paper is about Being rather than beer." The comment is telling, indicative of cultural attitudes towards smell, "low" culture, and body humor. Alain Corbin complains that Western history, as written, is "odorless," an observation that points to the suppression of senses other than visual that accompanied modernity.[9] Various cultural theorists have argued that a central feature of modernity is the loss of the full range of the human sensorium, a loss that carries with it a cost: the repression of diverse perceptual dispositions, which in turn facilitates authoritarian control of the political subject and a narrowing of potential worldviews. The language betrays the point: who today has a "worldtaste"? Twentieth century fascism and totalitarianism were, if nothing else, obsessed with the clean, the polished, the shiny, and relied heavily on the professionally stage-managed visual spectacle.

Characterized by spontaneity, improvisation, and a weakening of the performer-audience boundary, "A Beer for Martin," was not pure play, but something in between play and theatre; *Spielleute* (players) are not *Schauspieler* (actors). There was no script for this performance, but rather a scenario around which the players and spectators improvised. The scenario was something like: an important, esteemed, well-known man (on the precise day set aside to publicly honor him) drinks too much, gets horny (the herald trumpet was briefly transformed into a phallus, and pointed at a "nun"), dizzy, farts, and makes a fool of himself in public—an

9. Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination*, trans. Miriam L. Kocahn, Roy Porter and Christopher Prendergast (Leamington: Berg, 1986).

age-old tale. Performed on Reformation Day, the effect was that of lowering Martin Luther from his pedestal in the *Martkplatz*. Mikhail Bakhtin notes that "debasement" and "degradation" are forms of "grotesque realism," a chief aim of which is to "bring down to earth, [to] turn their subject into flesh."[10] For a few minutes, the man in the crowd was not just Martin, but Martin Luther, who in turn is fashioned as a man of the people, a bit bawdy, gustatory, a roguish connoisseur of fine beer, a man who appreciates a good festival. The scene allowed the public to poke fun at the high and mighty, well simultaneously used the figure of Luther to emphasize certain features of 'German' character.

Martin played his role well. Upon finishing his beer, with an exaggerated sweep of his arm across his mouth, Martin mopped up of the golden liquid running down his chin, and proudly thrust out his chest. Drinking the mug down in one fell swoop was a performance of German beer drinking prowess. Drinking a beer is a common enough activity in Germany. In the *Marktplatz* on Reformation Day, called upon by *Spielleute*, surrounded by fellow festival-goers, the smell of roast pig and the sounds of trumpets in the air, banners waving in the wind—in such a situation drinking a beer becomes a scene, that is, theatrical and emplotted in a narrative structure. I use the term 'scene' in both a colloquial and technical sense. In everyday speech, a scene is a happening, an event that captures our attention. Richard Schechner identifies a continuum of perspectives from which we can consider ritual and performance: brain event, microbit, bit, sign, scene, drama, and macrodrama, each drawing on and presupposing the former. Schechner refers to this continuum as the "magnitudes of performance."[11] Though Schechner is interested in ethological perspectives (the first four magnitudes), he tends to focus on the later end of the spectrum, those magnitudes of performance that can be characterized as the showing of doing, more or less self-conscious display. The scene is the point on the continuum where drama, theatricality, and narrative enter into play. The difference between just drinking a beer and the beer that Martin drank is in the narrative theatricality of the action; the framing, the fit between the play

10. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 20.

11. Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory,* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 325.

and the expectations of the audience made for a successful, entertaining performance.

Another factor that made the performance fun and entertaining is that it drew the spectators into the play. The crowd formed a performance space in the *Marktplatz* by gathering in a semi-circle, and people were thus on the border between being on and off stage, between being an audience member and being part of the production. Martin, one of the crowd, served as the crowd's representative, and others contributed with shouting, clapping, comments, and cat-calls. One of the characteristics of festivity is that festival-goers are part of the production; this active participation is quite unlike, say, proscenium theatre, where an audience-performer boundary is demarcated and maintained throughout the performance. In festivity, spectators or consumers are also performers and producers. If you can consume a large mug of beer in a single, long gulp, if you dress-up and perform your character, if you spend beyond your means, you amplify the ethos of festive celebration. A good festival is partly dependent on the willingness of the audience to engage in festive behavior.

The degree of separation between performers and audience is one feature often used to distinguish ritual from theatre. Where a high degree of separation exists, we have formal theatre; at the other end of the continuum, where spectator becomes participant, is ritual. Play is also characterized by the absence of a performer-audience boundary: if you are watching, you are not playing. Festivals that move in the direction of audience participation head in the direction of ritual and play, and those attending the event also play a part in its production; where the audience is passive, we have a cultural performance, looked upon and consumed by spectators.

One outcome of "A Beer for Martin," was that it drove home to me Paul Stoller's plea that ethnographers attend to the "sensuous body—its smells, tastes, textures and sensations." Stoller derived this methodological conclusion based on fieldwork in Niger. Stoller concluded that perception "devolves not simply from vision (and the linked metaphors of reading and writing) but also from smell, touch, taste, and hearing." The "lower senses," as Stoller calls them, "are central to the metaphoric organization of experience."[12] The employment of the "lower senses" in Wittenberg's

12. Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), xvi.

Marktplatz perhaps reflects how different social classes or groups utilize different sensory orders. More than one church member complained to me about the *Volkish* nature of the Reformation Day festival; the historical context to such a complaint is the tension between the sensual bawdiness of carnival and the pious asceticism of lent. Stoller and others have suggested that non-western cultures tend to employ and value these "lower senses" more so than those of the west. But such a conclusion is likely the product of decades of relative disinterest in doing ethnography in western cultures, coupled with academia's historical fascination with the "big tradition," which consists primarily of the texts of "high culture," rather than the street performances of itinerant players and their descendents. The players in the *Marktplatz* brought my gaze and attention down from the majestic, reaching towers of the *Stadtkirche* (town church) that loom over the square to the actual bodies in the streets.

The move to expand the range of phenomena we study is based on what anthropologist Nicolas Thomas calls the epistemology of quantity. Thomas writes: "Defects are absences that can be rectified through the addition of further information, and more can be known about a particular topic by adding other ways of perceiving it. 'Bias' is thus associated with a lack that can be rectified or balanced out by the addition of further perspectives."[13] If academia has privileged the textual, tending to the sensory dimensions of social-cultural life, like tending to visual and material culture, ritual and performance, emotion and gesture, place and landscape, promises greater comprehensiveness.

But there is a crucial difference between using and studying the senses, though the two are obviously related. Tasting, hearing, touching—these can extend the reach of academic study without fundamentally altering its assumptions or direction. We may find a place for the senses in our discussions, or recognize their importance to the cultural or symbolic life of the people or religious tradition we study; but how do the senses find their way into academia? Are the senses part of the way we form and communicate knowledge? If we are honest, the answer, I think, it that they are not. Through a well crafted description, we can try and communicate the sensual dimensions of ritual activity, as I attempt in writing "A Beer for Martin," but perhaps other media are better suited to the task.

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13. Nicholas Thomas, "Against Ethnography," *Cultural Anthropology* 6.3 (1991): 306–22.

The sprawling, fast-paced action of the Wittenberg festivals made detailed note taking an impractical strategy, so I relied on digital video to document the events. I shot the surfaces, speeches, colors, music, sounds, places, and bodies of the festivals, and this documentation became the data for my analysis. But film can do more than simply document events. Film, I suggest, is closer to sensual experience than is the text. Film poses fundamental challenges to conventional forms of scholarly speaking, knowing, and representation. Film is a sensual medium. The written text, no matter how thick or transparent, is, in the end, a translation of what one perceives; film is an *analogue* of what one perceives. The difference between text and film is that between conceptual and perceptual knowing. Bertrand Russell describes this difference in terms of "knowledge by description" versus "knowledge by acquaintance." In general, academic study has deemed this latter kind of knowledge to be superfluous, off-limits, or inaccessible.

Once cumbersome monstrosities, cameras are now easy to handle; just point and click. Some academics, being self-reflexive animals, are quick to note that someone is always doing the pointing, and they likely have a point to make. The images of film or photography are not raw data, since the camera operator is not transparently *seeing* what takes place, but actively *looking*. The manner is which the person behind the camera 'looks' is a complex matter. How and where do you place yourself in relation to the action? How willing are you to get a particular shot? What kinds of things do you shoot? Do you wait for the cloud to pass, the rain to stop, or for the clock to strike twelve in order to have a "better" shot? Should a shot use wide angle, zoom, varying focal lengths, filters, tripods, camera harnesses? The ethnographer who uses digital video in the field may or may not give much thought to such questions; the answers given may be implicit or made on the fly, but they are constitutive of experience, meaning, and knowledge. Film and photography are inherently reflexive. "Corporeal images are not just the images of other bodies; they are also images of the body behind the camera and its relation to the world."[14] Watching the video shot in Wittenberg, the viewer sees a record of bodies in motion; implicitly (occasionally, explicitly) they also see my body. Look closely and the viewer

14. David MacDougall, *The Corporal Image: Film, Ethnography and the Senses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 3.

can detect my movement, my foci of attention and lacunae, where and how I located myself (literally and metaphorically) in relation to my subjects.

Shooting and framing ritual and performance with a camera both enlarges and diminishes vision. Filming involves foregrounding a particular something against a background, to call attention to it, to emphasize it, while simultaneously sacrificing background connections of no interest to (or unknown to) the person behind the camera. Even though a camera shot foregrounds, and thus selectively removes objects, buildings, and bodies, film and video nevertheless fill in more than does a text. The wealth of detail in a single photograph may require a dozen pages of written description. Moreover, textual description is once removed from the image; translation from image to text is a process of abstraction and translation. Film and photography, on the other hand, are analogues of the visual, not translations, and hence closer to sensate reality, to the tactility of surfaces. In reading a text, the imagination fills in a great deal; with film, a street becomes a particular street, bodies become particular bodies—this one face.

My combining text and digital video in my fieldwork and interpretive analysis raises many questions. What, for example, "can pictorial images convey that words cannot? How do film images mean?"[15] Film or video, I suggest, has the power to acquaint us with people, places, events, emotions, sounds. Film has presence; it is evocative. Film *inserts* both the fieldworker and viewer into a place and into people's lives in a manner that a text can rarely, certainly not easily, match. Film takes a step towards a more unified field of experience and knowledge, incorporating the visual, the verbal, the kinesthetic, and the acoustic in a single medium. As the viewer engages with the multisensory world of film, the object of study becomes more of a subject, figured, textured, and placed.

When Clifford Geertz calls for "thick description" as the methodological basis for fieldstudy, he is demanding that ethnographic accounts be richly detailed, rooted in the setting, scenes, and lives encountered in the field. One reason driving Geertz's desire for thick description is that good theory requires good data. This is not his only reason, however; theory building is important, but not all. Geertz writes that "the essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available

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15. Jay Ruby, *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 166.

to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man [sic] has said."[16] Good humanist that he is, Geertz holds that such representational work has moral value. Film has an important contribution to make here. The knowledge acquired from images is an affective, experiential, and mimetic knowing. Film "makes available" not just what people say, but how they look, how they move, the places they inhabit; the "consultable record" of film is inherently thick.

Ethnographies, whether textual or filmic, vary in their styles and aims. Some move toward assertions, conclusions, and theory building; in others, theory is a side issue, the chief aim being to present to the reader a sense of having 'been there,' to communicate the encounter and the conversations. The best varieties of the former type advance our understanding of the workings of social-cultural life, increase our predictive powers, apply, test, and revise theories in relation to the concrete case; the worst simply reproduce existing theories, constricting, rather than expanding understanding, proving the theory correct like a dog chasing its tail. The best of the later type are informed by the genres of travel writing, autobiography, or documentary film; they present to the reader, through the eyes, voice, and experiences of the individual ethnographer (and, usually his or her subjects) a previously unknown or little known world; ethnographic materials mediate life-worlds. The worst are simply vehicles for the author to explore their own self, interests, and affectations; the setting is not valued for its own sake, there is little sense of an encounter with otherness, a lack of receptivity, and a failure to see the intricacies of surfaces and to sink into the ground on which one walks.

For the fieldworker, the aim, again to quote Geertz, is neither to "become natives" but "to converse with them, a matter a great deal more difficult, and not only with strangers, than is commonly recognized."[17] Geertz acknowledges that the encounter with other cultures, other ideas and values, may serve to expand, clarify or critique our own. Part of doing fieldwork and cultural interpretation entails openness to the possibility that we may indeed be moved by (or repulsed by) a work of art, the enactment of a rite, our conversations with others. In representing the details and

16. Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 30.
17. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 13.

events of individual and group life, ethnography straddles the slippery border between fact and fiction. In writing-up field notes or editing video, a move is made from telling and describing to showing and enacting. The ancient Greeks called this move *mimesis*, as opposed to *diegesis*. The former is not simply "imitation," as it often understood in aesthetics, but refers to representational forms that include "make-believe, pretend, and ways of pretending."[18] Mimesis takes place in the subjunctive mood. Contemporary scholarship refers to the performative qualities of ethnographic based texts as "writing culture." Ethnographers are not simply observers and presenters of information; they employ literary tropes, narratives forms, and styles that have a determinative impact on knowledge. Ethnographically informed writings are "fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are 'something made, 'something fashioned'—the original meaning of *fictio*—not that they are false, unfactual, or merely 'as if' thought experiments."[19]

There is desire in mimesis. As Walter Benjamin describes it, mimesis is the "urge . . . to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction." For Benjamin, miming, copying, representing, imitating are rooted in the desire to know the other. In copying or imitating, "a palpable, sensuous connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived" is made possible.[20] Consider "A Beer for Martin." I chose for a representation of the Reformation Day festival a rather off-center moment, a small slice of a festival whose dominant ethos (at least historically) is ecclesiastical and liturgical. In so doing, I am enacting in writing a narrative about the festival. The piece of street theatre caught my eye, ear, and belly; it got hold of me, and my writing it "up" is my attempt to "get hold" of it, even elevate to a position others may feel it does not deserve. A part of me identifies with the *Spielleute*, their stories and antics. Representing in writing their poking fun at Luther is a way to craft a connection between "perceiver and perceived," between me and them. Witnessing the scene has led me to frame an approach to the festivals in terms of distinctions (even tensions) between "high" and "low" culture, between the rites and performances of the church and those that take place in the streets.

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18. Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 43.

19. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 15.

20. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 20–21.

The traditions and cannons of scientistic objectivism balk at the pseudo-mysticism of this mimetic urge and its presumed power to generate "palpable, sensuous connections." (As Benjamin recognized, there is a secularized version of sympathetic magic implied here.) Moralists see in it a disturbing academic imperialism: in representing a performance, I fix it in words, capture it, in effect, and hence control it. Following the thought of Michael Taussig, who is turn indebted to Benjamin, I want to try to redeem the mimetic faculty from such criticisms, flesh out its implications for studying and theorizing ritual and performance, and develop a framework for thinking about a more developed role for visual technologies and media, one that moves our conception and use of them beyond the realist concerns of 'data collection.'

In the past twenty years, much ink has been spilled in anthropology and allied disciplines and fields over the process and politics of representation and translation. For one, representation requires elimination; the researcher can never hope to fold everything observed, photographed, filmed, or taped in the field into their descriptions and analysis. A written chapter on a festival is clearly not the same thing as a festival; nor is a festival a text; the text is many steps removed from the real thing. Debates over representation and translation also include discussion of asymmetrical power relations between the fieldworker and his or her subjects. The issue, as Geertz puts it, cutting to the heart of the matter, is whether "one sees poking into the lives of people who are not in a position to poke into yours as something of a colonial relic."[21] The location of my fieldwork, coupled with my focus on public events, pushed this issue into the background somewhat. Nevertheless, in both text and film, I am representing real events, describing and quoting real people, and offering interpretations, theories, and even criticism of their doings.

The recognition over the past twenty years that ethnographic writing and filming employs the mimetic faculty has been the bugbear of field-based scholarship. We are now aware that "[o]nce the mimetic faculty has sprung into being, a terrifically terrifying power is established; there is born the power to represent the world, yet the same power is a power to falsify, mask, and pose. The two powers are inseparable." Michael Taussig,

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21. Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections and Philosophical Topics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 117.

whom I am quoting here, sees in the mimetic faculty the "prospects for a sensuous knowledge in our time, a knowledge that in adhering to the skin of things through realist copying disconcerts and entrances by spinning off into fantastic formation." These prospects are, however, entangled in the fact that mimesis is caught up in a naïve faith in human powers of representation, coupled with a history of conceptual and other forms of colonization. Mimesis (or representation) "is said to pertain to forced ideologies or representation crippled by illusions pumped into our nervous systems by social constructions of Naturalism and Essentialism. Indeed, mimesis has become that dreaded, absurd, or merely tiresome Other, that straw-man against whose feeble pretensions poststructuralists [a species of which is made up of postmodernists] prance and strut."[22]

Visual media in academia have been primarily supplemental and naturalistic. The visual is a confirmation, illustration, or background to insights, observations, arguments, and theories expounded through the text. But the image, I suggest, can be more than a form of note taking. It may be that there is a fundamental incommensurability between sensory experience and knowledge and the academic text; can visual, auditory and tactile experience be conveyed through linguistic means? Perhaps innovative and experimental forms of writing will prove effective, but "as some scholars are searching for parity among the senses" we might consider a greater parity among modes of academic expression."[23] My short description and interpretation of "A Beer for Martin" suffers from being too short; but there is a deeper problem.

Writing is a cumulative, aggregative medium; photography a composite medium; film is both sequential and composite. What this means is that is well neigh impossible to convey the interpenetration of sensory domains in a text; in a text, you have to do each one at a time; in the film, the simultaneity or co-presentation of sound and image are a more faithful representation of the original sensory environment. Mimesis is now something of a dirty word; but it may not be quite as bad as the politics of difference would have us believe. Appearance, sound, motion, texture, volume, space—these can be perceived, in unison, through film.

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22. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 42–44.

23. MacDougall, *The Corporal Image*, 60.

Like a strong smell, film or a photograph has an immediate, brute, sensual presence that words lack. They also have a transcultural quality: everyone can look at a photograph or watch a piece of video, not everyone can read a text. If a text communicates, a film implicates; it implicates subject, spectator and filmmaker—a process that favors experience over explanation. A film or image is not an unadulterated revelation of some objective reality; but it is a less conventionalized system of signification and representation then is writing. Herein rests its power for studying the senses and related phenomenon, such as ritual, place, social environments, and gendered and other kinds of identities. This is not simply a question of new avenues of interest but of new kinds of understandings, made possible by alternate means of approach and expression. Perceptual knowledge acquired through film is a kind of knowledge, and it ought to be accorded as much weight as other kinds—knowledge by explanation, metaphor, proposition, or analogy, for example. The analytical and experiential, the conceptual and the perceptual, description and depiction: as anyone who has been to a first grade 'show and tell' knows, these perspectives are neither opposed nor hierarchical.

Models that have served us so well in the past—the system, the network, the structure—are applied only with great force to the study of ritual, the senses or the complexities of festivity in a globalized world. One way of coping with the crisis in textual representation has been to experiment with narrative and cinematic styles of writing; perhaps such efforts are better achieved through film itself.

Roland Barthes emphasized the pleasures of the text; some texts do in fact appeal to the senses, even those read aloud at a conference, and published in a journal and my polemical "text versus film" denies a potentially more complementary relationship. My hope is that the written scene "A Beer for Martin," which was influenced by my working with video, evokes emplacement and embodiment. Nevertheless, film, I feel, does appeal more directly to the human sensorium, by virtue of its qualities of simultaneity and co-presentation. For students of ritual and related genres, film holds out the potential for creating more affective and realistic interpretations of the rites we study.