

# Body, Action and Power: the Semiotic of Ritual in Contemporary Society

Body, Action and Power: the Semiotic of Ritual in Contemporary Society  
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"There are rituals without gods, and gods that come from rituals" Émile Durkheim

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To  
make a proper analysis of contemporary ritual it is important to point out that, until recently, rituals had always been associated with religion, and the believes that determined it. This point of view has harmed the study of ritual as an expression not necessarily religious in any way. We propose that to study ritual we must also treat and discuss each of its components separately before integrating them in a whole view. In this sense we explore rituals following this line of approach: ritual is body, following a sequence of actions, determined by a set of rules, occurs in a specific space and time, and where certain symbols are used in a particular community. Actions can also be analyzed in aspects like their sequence and their repetition. Body is a main component en ritual practices, it is their main character and scenario, where symbols act, but it does not make rites to happen by itself, since body is also part of other symbolic practices usually not considered rituals. In this paper we also differentiate rituals in contemporary societies from traditional symbolic practices pointing out that in our societies rites are, to some extent, more flexible and they adequate easily to group specific needs. We also suggest that rituals have a semiotic purpose, based on its role as instrument of social control, power, dominance and resistance.

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faire un adéquat analyses des rituels contemporains il est important de signaler que jusque très récemment le rituel avait été associé au religion et aux croyances, et on pensait que ceux-ci le déterminaient. Ce point de vue a porté des dommages à l'étude du rituel comme une expression pas nécessairement liée au religion. Nous proposons que pour étudier le rituel il est nécessaire de traiter et de discuter séparément chaque élément avant de l'intégrer à la totalité. En ce sens, pour nous, le rituel est d'abord corps, qui suit une séquence d'actions, qui est déterminée par un ensemble de règles, qui se développe en certain espace et certain temps, et où certain symboles sont utilisés par une communauté particulière. Les actions peuvent aussi être analysées en tenant compte de leur séquence et de leur répétition. Le corps est un élément essentiel des pratiques rituelles, il est en même temps le principal élément et leur scénario, c'est là où les symboles jouent, mais le corps étant tout à fait nécessaire n'est pas suffisant à faire, par soi même, que les rites accomplissent leur fonction, car le corps est aussi part d'autres pratiques symboliques qui ne sont pas considérées eux-mêmes comme rites. Dans cette communication nous différencions les rituels contemporains des traditionnelles pratiques symboliques tout en signalant que dans nos sociétés les rites sont caractérisés par une plasticité que leur permet de s'adapter aisément aux nécessités spécifiques des communautés. Nous suggérons aussi que les rites ont un propos sémiotique, basé sur leur rôle en tant qu'instruments de control social, pouvoir, de dominance et résistance.

Introduction  
The

ritual is a semiotic system that has been a victim of association and mediations of other cultural systems which limited the perception of its own specificity during a long time. Durkheim, following a long tradition, was one of the first to attribute with more certainty the

rituals to the religious phenomenon. "The religious phenomena -he affirmed- are classified in two fundamental categories: the beliefs and the rituals" (Durkheim 1992 [1912]: 32). Since then and until very recently, the rituals have been associated with a system of religious beliefs that determine it. To associate the ritual to a system of beliefs that, according to the authors, made it possible has been extremely harmful to a systematic study of the ritual as an expression, capable of expressing non religious social and cultural content, capable of assuming and promoting the non-religious symbols of times and actions.

Another of the limitations suffered by the ritual, as a system, has been its long and systematic association with the myth. As Mary points out, to better understand it "it's been necessary (...) that the ritual separates from that false friend that was the myth" (Mary 1997:1). Grimes also argues that "it is common to regard rituals as enactments of myths, theological ideas, or moral principles. The result of these views has been to reduce ritual to mere illustrations or to treat the body as if it were only incidental to enactment" (Grimes 1982:61). The secular contemporary ritual must be examined under the light of a progressive disappearance of the wide relation between society and religion, to which Augé refers to when he quotes Marcel Gauchet: "what deteriorates in modern society -he affirms- is the identification of religion and society. (...) Before the modern period religion 'was identical to society'. Religion 'hierarchicized' the world, even the social world" (Augé 1996:111). Certainly the desacralization that modern society has known, particularly in this about-to-extinguish century, has contributed to call the attention of different scientific disciplines about a group of symbolic actions that, for reasons of comfort, are usually called rituals. Since anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, etiology and the theory of communication, the ritual has become an area of common interest and, as a consequence, the term has entered a sea of in-definitions, in the shaky arena of a concept, which is able to gobble up the somewhat repetitive behaviors of the private life, the ways of courtesy in the personal exchange, and the protocol formulas of public acts.

How to define the ritual in contemporary societies?

For

some years now we have been analyzing what in general terms we have called rituals in contemporary society. We have always tried to do these analysis from a semiotic point of view, because we are convinced that this is the discipline capable of contributing with new ways of defining the ritual and, above all, of explaining the functioning of the contemporary symbolic behaviors.

If

the ritual has lost its religious content, what are the new contents that define it? Which are the internal mechanisms that convert a succession of actions into a ritual? If a religious system was capable of generating a ritual system, using its expression of fundamental beliefs as an instrument, which is the cultural system that generates it today, and what values does it transmit?

In our analysis of beauty pageants, both male and female, (Finol 1999a, 1999b), and of bridal showers (Finol 1993a, 1993b, 1994), we have tried to find systems of actions in social contemporary praxis, may be verbal or bodily, that can explain a conception of the non-religious ritual.

The concept of the ritual

In 1912 Durkheim, pointed out the existence of rituals that were not necessarily tied to a belief or a religious deity in the interior of a religious rituality. "Even in the interior of the religious deists, can be found a great number of rituals that are completely independent from any idea of gods or spiritual beings" (1992 [1912]: 30). This way it is possible to think of behaviors considered rituals, or non-utility symbolic actions, separated from the *stricto sensu* religious content. The definitions of the ritual are endless. Some authors prefer to differentiate between ritual and ritualization. Grimes points out that "when the meaning, the communication, or the performance becomes more

important that the pragmatic function and objective, the ritualization has begun to occur" (Grimes 1982: 36, our highlight). Turner's definition conserves the old religious content of the definition of a ritual, which is defined as "formal behavior prescribed for occasions not given over to technological routine that have reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers" (in Grimes 1982: 54). For Augé "the ritual will be defined as the putting to work of a device with symbolic means that contribute to the relative identities through mediating alterities" (Augé 1996:88). For Goodman "a ritual is a social encounter in which each participant has a well-rehearsed role to act out. It takes place within a set time span and in a limited space, and involves a predetermined set of events" (Goodman 1992: 31).

For a definition of the ritual in a traditional sense it is necessary to make an inventory of its essential components: the body, action, space, time, a set of rules, society and symbol. We could advance saying that these seven are the basic components of the ritual as it is known and practiced, in general, in traditional societies. Ritual is always about the human body, practicing a sequence of determined actions that follow a somewhat set pattern of rules (movements, words, gestures, sounds, etc.), in a time (pentecost, time of death) and in a certain space (church or burial place), that have specific symbols in the context of a particular society or group. We can add that action, body, and symbols are internal components of rituals, and while rules, space, time, and society are external components.

Since actions are the basic, initial raw material of all ritual it is important to add two main characteristics of those actions. One characteristic is internal to actions, and it is usually called sequentiality, and the other regards the whole ritual, and it is called repetitiveness. Actions during ritual performance follow a sequence, a syntactic model by means of which each one is always followed by the other, in the same order. This order is usually strictly followed in particular in religious rituals, since frequently they developed a pick pattern in which actions start with a crescendo movement till they get a pick, and then actions begin a movement of descent, finally coming down to the end. On the other hand, rituals are always set to be repeated, at the proper time and space. Repetition of rituals prove their effectiveness and their capability to fulfill, in every opportunity, the necessities, whatever these are, of participants.

I think we can say that these are the basic components of any ritual, no matter where it is executed. As can be deduced, these elements exclude the private conduct of individuals that do not respond to a somewhat generalized social or group model. I do not consider this last type of behavior as ritual.

If we review each of these components we will see that the first two to lose power in the contemporary ritual are time and space. As a matter of fact, contemporary rituality, for being a desacralized rituality, do not always require a specific place. For example, a bridal shower can take place in a friend's house, a clubhouse, a community gathering room or even a restaurant. Just the same, a beauty pageant can be done in a theater, a bullfighting arena or a fair camp.

As for time, contemporary rituals have given it great flexibility. If a bridal shower must always be done before the wedding, the date itself is extremely variable and, just like in American communities, the same bridal shower ritual for one person can be repeated many times, practically with no limit. So it is possible to find different types of showers associated with the type of present that is being given (lingerie shower, kitchen shower, etc.) or with the participating group (relatives, work-friends, church members, etc.). Of course, the notion of time is a substantial part of rituality even of contemporary rituality, but with no doubt in this last one the flexibility, comfort to certain situations and personal interests distinguish it from religious rituality, which is usually associated with specific dates or with concrete natural events.

Another important difference comes from the fact that rules governing

contemporary ritual behavior are usually more flexible than traditional, religious and non religious, ritual performances. That is to say that while every action is strictly prescribed in religious ritual as well as, for instance, in military rituals, in contemporary groups and community rituals the sense of rules to be followed are much more loose. This condition allows contemporary rituals to even make the patterned order of rituals to be changed, and usually components of the syntactic structure are exchanged according to circumstances, and personal or group interests

The body is the center of rituality; this is the scenario or main character of the actions that make up the ritual. But of course, the ritual is not just about the body and its actions. Body and actions are equal components of the theater or dance without these being considered rituals in the strict sense. If in the dance and theater there is intervention from the body and its actions then, what differences the ritual from the theater and the dance? A first answer would consist in saying that in the ritual the actions have an explicit symbolic content. It is about the semiotic structures that try to bind a message beyond the action itself. But with no doubt we can say exactly the same about the theater and dance, they are both, as ritual, systems of representation. A second, more fruitful hypothesis, would be to say that ritual actions are defined by their repetitive character, structured towards a determined context that gives it a particular sense. While a theatrical representation is a hors-contextual system, capable of containing in itself the historical context to which the theatrical actions refer to, the ritual would have as a stage, as context, the world itself. The repetition of a ritual would not have the same sense of a theatrical repetition or the execution of a dance. In a certain sense, the theater and dance are artificial representations, while the ritual is a "natural" representation, or, to be more precise, "naturalized", seen by society as a "natural" part of social life, legitimiser of values and uses of it members, be it a group or a society. While the theater and dance are artistic representations, in a conventional or artificial sense, the ritual, which is not art, --at least not in the common sense which we usually give to this term--, would not have a conventional sense but a naturalized one, product, of course, of an ideological strategy of self conservation from the group that accomplish the ritual. While the theater and dance are constituted by actions established by an individual transmitter that creates a work of art, the ritual responds to a social normative, it is the product of a social creation by nature and it responds not to an esthetic or political interest of its creator but to a social project of social or group normativization.

If we re-elaborate that comparison between the theater and dance, on one hand, and the ritual, on the other, knowing that the first two are art, we will see that they both involve the body and its actions. Nevertheless, art is free, it lacks a utilitarian end, the art is convention and artifice, a semiotic search of new and unexpected combinations, as the surrealists used to say, a purely esthetic experience or a rupture of the established perceptions, as the abstractionists say; the art is revolution, change and rupture. On the contrary, the ritual is conservative, it creates institutions, and sets and regulates social behaviors, re-enforces and holds values considered "appropriate", "good", "beneficial".

Let us ask new questions. What is the relation that the ritual, in one hand, and the theater on the other, has established with society? Is it the same type of relation? How does the theater view society? How does the ritual view it? And in particular, how does society view the theater and the ritual? I think we may take of from the hypothesis that they are both viewed differently, that different functions are attributed to both of them. If they both carry out the same fundamental semiotic process, the meeting between signifiant and signifié, to use Saussure's terms, or between a representamen, an object, and an interpretant, to use Peirce's terms, the particular sense that they

both bind is different because society participates in them in a different way. One of these differences, and maybe the most important one, is that the members of a society or group participate in the theater as spectators while in the more profound sense of the ritual society participates as an actor. In other words, traditional ritual is totally opposite to the show notion, a phenomenon whose purpose is to be seen, heard, but rarely participated in, with merely formal exceptions such as clapping, or singing along. The contemporary ritual, unlike the traditional one, has in some occasions become a show, such is the case of the beauty pageants which left the limited scene of the fairs, parties in private clubs, or schools, to take the privileged space of the contemporary show: the television. Thanks to this process, this type of contemporary ritual winds up as something similar to a sporting event: they both convoke the idolatry of the body and re-actualize the mythical sense of the hero. But with no doubt, this common simiosis between the ritual turned into a spectacle, and the sporting spectacle take different meanings, their symbolism are not the same, because while the sport convokes the joy of the action and triumph, the contemporary ritual of beauty convokes the epiphany of the body in which two ideological values that go beyond the mere enjoyment of the spectacle are incarnated. In the ritual/spectacle of beauty, it is not about observing but about contemplating.

Now, if we move to a second level of definition we should add that the ritual, despite of what it is often said, does have a purpose, it is not about free actions with non defined purpose. The ritual has a purpose. Now, the efficiency of this purpose is not only determined by the expressive means of the ritual but fundamentally by its insertion in social, political and ideological tensions and conflicts that it reflects. Durkheim affirmed that the ritual's purpose was social control, and more recently Bell affirms that the ritual is "a strategic game of power, dominance and resistance in the arena of the social body" (Bell 1992: 204). I believe that Bell's analysis allows us to perceive with more precision where the traditional ritual differs from the contemporary. As a matter of fact, the religious contents of the traditional ritual in our time have been substituted by a search for the objectification and legitimization of the conflicting relations of power. In every contemporary social micro-universe emerge new ways of rituality that seek to legitimize or destroy the existing relations. The bridal shower, a modern substitute for the dowry, would seek to replace the authoritarian relation of vertical power, between father and daughter, to a more participative, horizontal relationship, in which the close member of groups (relatives, friends, work mates, etc.) are the ones to provide the dowry for the new home. On the contrary, the beauty pageants, both male and female, seek to re-legitimize and re-enforce a structure of values associated with the concepts of femininity and masculinity, values which are linked to a fight for power that is expressed daily in the critical relationship between one-another. Turner defines ceremonies as those rituals that promote change and transition: "The ritual is transforming, the ceremony is confirmatory" (Turner 1967: 95). Contemporary secular rituality is, more than ever, a way of social action where the representation is not based in a remake of previous events, like in catholic mass or a baptism, where historic events are represented, but in the arbitrary creation of actions not destined to express new relations based on mythical beings of beliefs but values and social and political practices. In a way, the ritual plays a key roll in the dynamics of contemporary culture and in the mobility of social organization. Now, what does the secular contemporary ritual legitimize? Bourdieu affirms that "all rites tend to consecrate or legitimate an arbitrary boundary, by fostering a misrecognition of the arbitrary nature of the limit and encouraging a recognition of it as legitimate" (Bourdieu 1997: 118). In the case of contemporary secular rituals, that arbitrary limit is a limit of power that individuals, groups, classes or societies have over other individuals, groups, classes or societies, in a determined historic moment. As Bell expresses, "the deployment of ritualization,

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consciously or unconsciously, is the deployment of a particular construction of power relationship, a particular relationship of domination, consent, and resistance" (Bell 1992: 206). Often, the ritual resolves conflicts of power creating new relations in the interior of the social micro-universes where it takes place. This way a continuous process of structurization and un-structurization of social micro-politics is formed, a process based on semiotic systems, thanks to which new relations that are expressed in the body, the gestures and actions of the ritual, are again re-presented, re-interpreted, and re-actualized.

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