Becoming the Medium

by

Bradford Gyori

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy

Approved April 2011 by the Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Maureen Goggin, Chair
Daniel Bernardi
Hjorleifur Jonsson

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2011
ABSTRACT

The original mediums were not texts or technologies; they were ritual actors performing acts of mediumship. Mediating between determined norms (the status quo) and emergent trends (change), they invoked divine authority to conjure meanings that proved adaptive, nonadaptive and/or maladaptive. With the advent of the written word, ritual became formalized and codified. The medium became a communication device, something abstract and external to the human condition. It then became possible to speak of “media effects” imposing influence in a logical deterministic manner. Yet with the advent of new media, we are witnessing a return to modes of cultural discourse that are spontaneous, interactive, communal and unscripted, all hallmarks of ritual action. This “ritual return” centers on the emergence of the “prosumer” (producer/consumer), a figure actively engaged in mediating practices. While resembling the original archaic “medium” in some respects, the prosumer is a “literate ritualist” allied with a multiplicity of cultural tribes. Thus the “new media” has given rise to “the new medium.” The pages that follow focus on acts of contemporary mediumship, examining related concepts such as “ecology,” “niche,” “role,” “affordance,” and “trope.” Each section considers how specific mediating practices afford and constrain modes of ritualized behavior. I call this practice-oriented approach to media studies “praxism.”
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: BECOMING THE MEDIUM

A photograph of two girls kissing is posted online. Is it child pornography? A hate-crime? Commercial exploitation? A declaration of love? The image alone does little to resolve such mysteries. Neither does the format in which it is being displayed. Personal biases will certainly influence how particular audience members interpret it, but these do not entirely override the author’s intentions. It matters if the image is posted on a lesbian activist website. It matters if the image is accompanied by text that is disparaging, erotic, or analytical. It matters because these added details carry real rhetorical weight. When we contribute to public discourses in particular ways, we become the medium. This process involves submitting to the formal requirements of a particular ritual role that both affords and demands specific behaviors. We do not have complete control of how such acts of mediumship will be perceived, and yet our intentions and the manner in which we express them are significant. In other words, the meaning of this picture is not merely in
the eye of the beholder; it also has been inflected by the intentions of a particular “medium” seeking to conjure a particular type of reality.

The following chapter examines how ritual mediums actively create—and are created by—culture. This marks a return to the original definition of the word “medium.” Before it denoted a type of text or technology, the central term of “media studies” referred to a ritual performer engaged in an act of mediation between determined norms and emergent change. I call the study of these mediating practices “Praxism.”

Part one of this work examines the “epistemology” of praxism, which is defined in terms of two key characteristics: “reciprocity” and “multiplicity.” This section draws on the work of ecological psychology (Bandura 1977; Gibson 1979; Kaufmann & Clément 2007; Chemero 2009), sociology (Goffman 1997), media studies (Bernardi 2002) and rhetoric (Burke 1935). Part two focuses on the “methodology” of praxism. While philosophy presumes logical categories and poststructuralism deconstructs them, praxism examines how logical categories come into being in the first place by examining the ritual act of conflation.” This section draws on arguments from ritual studies (Douglas 1966), philosophy (Foucault 1977; Holland et al. 1998), sociology (Goffman 1997), cultural studies (Williams 1983; Hall 1996) and anthropology (Moore 2006).
PART ONE: Epistemology.

There is paradox at the heart of the humanities: the view that human beings are both products of social environments and producers of cultural innovation. Rather than ignore or attempt to resolve this seeming contradiction, the following pages examine it. They do so by considering how ritual roles form dynamic feedback loops between individuals and environments, allowing them to exert mutual influence across multiple ecological domains. I call this approach “praxism.”

In his prison notebooks, Antonio Gramsci often used the word “praxis” as a code for Marxism. He occasionally described Marxism as a “philosophy of praxis,” stressing its practical applications for achieving social justice (1935). Praxis, in the Gramscian sense, means activism aimed at achieving greater equality for the masses. As with all Marxist theories, it strives to entirely break with ideology and focus on the purely practical.

In a similar sense, the praxis intervention initiated by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1990s strove to be “the solvent of doxa.” This perspective aimed to disabuse both observer and observed of false consciousness.

I find these Marxist and Neo-Marxist interpretations of praxis problematic because they presume that analysis can transcend belief and operate a realm of pure, unalloyed rationality. To break with “false
consciousness,” after all, these theorists must be privy to “true consciousness,” but is this really the case?

Human beings are forever attempting to transcend belief. Unfortunately, we’re not any good at it. Yet we are extremely good at “modeling belief.” We are the best “belief modelers” on the planet. This has given us a distinct advantage over other species. It is the basis of all of our cultural innovations. Unfortunately, we also have knack for being modeled by beliefs, and there’s the rub. The very gift that allows us to adapt to cultural change, leaves us vulnerable to ideological manipulations that may render us nonadaptive and even maladaptive, hence the value of closely examining mediation practices.

Rather than positing an antidote to ideology, praxism examines “ideology in action.” It is a belief modeling kit, a “how to” guide for negotiating leaps of faith. Because the line between self-delusion and self-direction is necessarily blurry, it cannot presume to name a single path to “enlightenment.” It can merely hint at various means for achieving a degree of mastery over the many ritual roles each individual may simultaneously submit to and learn to deploy in order to engage with culture. Human beings do not automatically conform to tradition, and we do not automatically get caught up in the latest trends. We do a bit of both. This means we are adaptive in two ways. We can adapt to determined norms (the status quo) or emergent behaviors (change). Because determined and emergent influences seldom perfectly align, we
are almost always adapting to one, or the other, or striking a compromise between the two. The performance of a successful mediation rite, therefore, is a complex negotiation between the dictates of cultural custom and the influence of spontaneously evolving circumstance, which are related to two forms of complimentary and competing modes of cognition.¹

**Logical cognition:** reasoning according to determined principles.

**Analogical cognition:** comparing emergent patterns.

Logical thinking aims to be categorical, ahistorical and apolitical. It identifies cause and effect relations based on supposedly fixed categories. Its chief ally and opponent in this regard is analogical cognition, which both defines the categories in question and threatens to undermine them by suggesting alternative correlations. Whereas logical cognition is analytical and conceptual, analogical cognition is intuitive and context-sensitive. Logical cognition is deterministic. Analogical cognition is emergent.

At times, the equilibrium of a particular “cultural ecology” is unsettled when tensions rise between logical and analogical cognition,

¹ Kaufmann & Clément point out that, “cognitive and developmental psychologies tend to discriminate between two main modes of reasoning and understanding, namely the causal [logical] and the analogical.” The former focuses on causes and effect sequences of events, the latter on relational patterns (2007, 233-4).
that is between the existing symbolic order and changing circumstances. This threatens social stability, so some mode of intervention is required. The advent of culture has allowed human beings to domesticate nature, but it has also made us maladaptive. Whereas natural ecologies spontaneously seek equilibrium, cultural ecologies are tied to symbol systems, which are often resistant to change. What’s more, cultural ecologies do not merely emerge. They are also partly designed by social actors with specific agendas. In the jungle, the lion is king of the beasts. He can kill and injure other animals, dominating them with sheer power, but he does not get to decide if other animals count as symbolically legitimate. Any plausible theory of cultural ecologies needs to account for both institutional and ideological power relations, which are certainly interrelated but not always perfectly allied. Modes of mediumship that allow ritual actors to affirm and/or redefine social norms are not purely logical or analogical; they exist in a medial realm between these two modes of cognition. As empiricist David Hume notes, we are never purely rational.

2 As anthropologist Roy Rappaport acknowledges, “cultures and ecosystems are not directly commensurable” (1979). Although Rapport’s groundbreaking work with the Tsembaga of New Guinea (1968) revealed that cultural rituals do, in some instances, perform an adaptive function, he maintains that cultures might also be maladaptive and even exploitative (Biersack 1999). Whereas ecosystems favor states of natural equilibrium, cultures often harm the natural environment (Hoey, 590). When considering the impending threat of global warming, it is seems apparent that nature and culture are, in many respects, at odds with one another.
When we look about us towards external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connection; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other. There is required a medium, which may enable the mind to draw such an inference, if indeed it be drawn by reasoning and argument. What that medium is, I must confess, passes my comprehension; and it is incumbent on those to produce it, who assert that it really exists, and is the origin of all our conclusions concerning matter of fact (1737, 35).

As the name suggests, “the medium” inhabits the middle ground, a betwixt and between space, a domain that is neither here nor there. The medium is a go between, a lynchpin standing at the intersection of being and becoming, logical determinism and analogical emergence. This requires critical thinking, or what I call “ecological cognition.”

**Ecological cognition:** counterpoised analogical and logical cognition.

Ecological cognition holds logical and analogical cognition in a state of mutual tension, negotiating ongoing cultural compromises

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3 In *Marxism and Literature* (1978), Raymond Williams discuss two types of cultural influence, “emergent” and “residual,” the former occurring spontaneously and the latter handed down from previous generations.
between the two. Often acts of mediumship are triggered by emergent circumstances. “Emergence”—which is the root of the word “emergency”—is unpredictable and context-sensitive, highly productive and extremely disruptive. Not surprisingly, it frequently culminates in a public crisis. At its best, it is emancipation, at its worst, mob rule. All members of a social group potentially contribute to the emergence of collective patterns: flocking, shunning, scattering, etc. But only specially sanctioned “mediums” can create significant alterations to the structure of the ecology itself. Ritual mediums have long sought to grapple with emergent complexity as effectively as possible. After all, an especially gifted medium can stop to a revolution or create one.

**Locating the Medium.**

Between the earth’s crust and its molten core, there is the “mantle.” This is the region that mediates between the roiling pressures below and the rigidly stratified surface above. Earthquakes and volcanoes are not flukes of nature, they are adaptive processes, signs that the mantle is busy negotiating between emergent pressures and determined structures. In the age of global warming, the planet’s ecology is under

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4 Ecological cognition is indebted to James J. Gibson’s “ecological psychology,” which focuses primarily on direct perception (1979). Subsequent theorists have modified Gibson’s approach to allow for the environmental influence of conceptual constructs such as ritual practices (Neisser 1993; Shore 1996; Kaufmann and Celément 2007; and Chemero 2009).
intense stress and the mantle is working hard to adjust, hence the many “acts of nature” now plaguing our species.

In the age of New Media, cultural ecologies are also under tremendous stress. The advent of interactive and participatory media allow for all sorts of novel cultural clashes. The spread of international sex trafficking, the drag trade, Islamic jihad, organized crime and gang violence are a few symptoms related to this state of radical flux. Such changes do not merely destabilize the norms of conventional cultural ecologies; they also destabilize one another as each vies for increased global influence.

Because we are living in an era of drastic cultural upheaval, scholars are addressing new theoretic challenges. While continuing to consider the ways in which hegemonic institutions determine normative behaviors, we are simultaneously considering the influence of emergent change. This means digging beneath the textual artifacts that comprise culture toward the zone of “negotiation” and “adaptation” where competing ecologies actually come into being, the site of the shifting mantle, the realm of the medium.

The rationalist tradition created a false dichotomy between logical and analogical thinking, defining the former as “reason” and the latter as “superstition.” Human progress according to this view is a process of gradually shedding analogic intuition and moving toward a mindset characterized by pure, unadulterated logic. Because we cannot even begin
to reason without first drawing analogical comparisons, the Logocentric fantasy is deeply deceptive. As D.R. Hofstadter explains, the idea that logical categories are stable entities is an illusion. “Categories are quintessentially fluid entities; they adapt to a set of incoming stimuli and try to align themselves with it. The process of inexact matching between prior categories and new things being perceived (whether those ‘things’ are physical objects or bit-sized events or grand sagas) is analogy-making par excellence” (2001, 503). In other words, while logic deduction is the bedrock foundation of culture, analogical intuition is the substance undergirding it. Because logic derives from analogy, it can never be pure. The instant we draw a single conclusion, we are in the grip of ideology. We cannot reason without it. Reason needs belief. The recognition of this intuitive substrate has been unsettling philosophical discourse for some time now. It has allowed theorists to view cultural production more critically and to cultivate an increasingly ecological mindset.

*The Flailing Signifier.*

Some of the first significant cracks in the bedrock of western rationalism emerged in the early 20th century when Swiss linguist Ferdinand Saussure attempted to discern between the historically emergent and ideologically determined aspects of linguistic production. In Saussure’s terminology, a “signifier” is any linguistic “sign” that conveys meaning. For instance, the signifier “apple” denotes the image of
particular type of fruit that grows on trees (1983). Structuralist philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss would later coin the phrase “floating signifier.” By this, he meant a signifier with no universally accepted meaning. For instance, the slang term “oomph,” which has no fixed definition (1987, 55).

In the mid-1960s, Jacques Derrida would inaugurate the Poststructuralist critique by arguing that all signifiers are in some respects “floating” because the act of interpretation always distorts meaning. Derrida calls this phenomena “freeplay.” The notion of freeplay is radically unsettling to the Logocentric tradition, which is founded on a belief that linguistic signs refer to something ultimately fixed and stable and that the dialectic process allows us to move closer to that meaning. By arguing that discourse is inherently anti-reductive, that it actually “adds” meaning rather than distilling language down toward some ultimate Truth, Derrida turned western rationalism on its head, drawing attention to the shifting analogic mantle at its base.⁵

The poststructuralist critique reminds us of the aspects of discourse that are undecided, unstable and “free.” For over forty years, poststructural theorists have dug through the bedrock of hegemonic discourse, past the mantle, and clear down to the molten core of emergence, locating cultural significance primarily in this roiling

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⁵ “The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified” (Derrida 2001, 365 6).
temporal realm. The American strain of poststructuralism—AKA “cultural studies”—has been particularly interested in deconstructing cultural hierarchies and exposing their historically contingent status. This has proven a highly effective means of unsettling countless ideological commitments. However, in an age of mushrooming complexity, reflexively deconstructing ideologies to reveal still greater complexity has become a bit like battling a hydra-headed monster. What theorists need now is a way of managing the complexity already apparent by considering how cultural innovation is initially achieved and/or resisted.

Praxism proceeds from the assumption that the signifier is not merely floating; it’s *flailing*, tethered by many competing worldviews, each vying for allegiance. Certainly, individual psyches add an interpretative element at the moment of reception, but shared knowledge is also possible. In fact, it is the basis of social cooperation and contestation, the lynchpin of cultural mediation. The attempt to define the signifier in a particular way in order to serve the interests of a particular group is the essence of mediumship. Thus, such practices demand closer attention.

Poststructuralism disassembles determined structures. In contrast, praxism examines how such ideological structures are formulated in the first place. Rather than *dismantling* texts, it examines the mantle itself, that shifting indeterminate realm where culture first comes into being. In so doing, it addresses a number of theoretical questions related to the
actual *practice* of mediation, including, how does a ritual medium reassert the validity of determined norms? How does she adapt culture to emergent change? And why are certain mediation rites more or less effective in certain cultural contexts?

Before attempting to address these crucial questions, I want to first define the two key characteristics of ecological cognition: reciprocity and multiplicity.

**Reciprocity**: the individual and the environment are mutually influential.

Praxism studies the *dance* between the individual and the environment. This dance has no fixed rules, only guidelines, no constant tempo or tune, just an array of familiar but variable themes. The manner in which the individual and environment interrelate betrays fleeting glimmers of agency that suggest cultural intent. The praxist perspective, therefore, is a conceptual leap from “reception” to “feedback,” from “active audiences” to “reciprocal ritualists.”

When we become the medium we are not merely “receivers” reacting to incoming stimulus, nor are we sites of political “resistance.”

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6 Albert Bandura’s theory of “reciprocal determinism” addresses the “dance-like” nature of engaging with the environment in a manner that entails both cultural complicity and strategic thought. He states, “Contrary to the unidirectional view, human accomplishments result from reciprocal interaction of external circumstances with a host of personal determinants, including endowed potentialities, acquired competencies, reflective thought, and high level of self-initiative” (1977, 207).
Instead, we are negotiators engaged in a process of constant compromise. The more a particular role empowers us; the more compliance it demands in return. As it permits us to articulate one view, it insists that we disarticulate another. It may even influence us to migrate to new cultural domains, or adopt new ritual personae. Thus we do more than merely acquire or reject input, flashing between green light and red light; we strive to marshal the abilities necessary to afford the dance in exchange for what the dance will afford us. This affording dance, or “affordance,” is a single step in a ritual role allowing us to mediate between our selves and the cultural environment.

Engaging in an act of mediumship means inhabiting the space between our physical selves and the environment. It is a complex negotiation involving an elaborate system of feedback loops. These cultural sinews bend and flex as the dance goes on and on. In order to truly grasp the dance metaphor, we must allow it to grasp us back.

Whether we like it or not, the environment tends to see us in certain ways. We not only gravitate to certain roles, they also gravitate to us. Some ritual personae attach like barnacles. Others—try as we might to claim them—slip through our arms, time and again. When we accept or

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7 Asserting the mutuality of individual and environment, Holland et al. state, “We reject a dichotomy between the sociological and the psychological. “Person” and “society” are alike as sites, or moments, of the production and reproduction of social practices” (1998, 270).
invite “attaching roles,” they offer empowerment along predictable lines, but limit less orthodox modes of empowerment.

Returning to the photograph of the young women kissing, we might assume that it was taken at a party, and that one of them is considering posting it online. She knows that her family will be upset if they see it, as it goes against their traditional values. On the other hand, many of her friends have been posting similar pictures attracting humorous responses and heightening their online visibility. Eventually, she decides to go ahead and post it. At that moment, what exactly is happening? Is she resisting determined norms? Or submitting to an emergent trend? Is this a case of a bold innovator defying tradition? Or a fad-follower going with the flow? In order to support one of these arguments, we need to spotlight a single type of adaptation, and keep the other hidden off stage, presuming it insignificant, but this is misleading.

Acknowledging the co-existence of two primary forms of cultural adaptation presents significant conceptual challenges. Yet when we only theorize in terms of one type of adaptation, we unduly restrict human agency. After all, if the environment is strictly hegemonic, how can the individual expect to create meaningful social change? Accepting or resisting the influence of monolithic power structures hardly constitutes cultural innovation. On the other hand, when an individual embraces emergent change, she risks being characterized as a mindless fad-follower. Some people do follow fads. Others cling to traditions. But
these inclinations do not foreclose the possibility that a fad-follower might occasionally gravitate toward a more conventional path, and that a traditionalist might occasionally make a novel choice.

When someone is described as a product of her environment, we are obliged to ask, “which one? The environment determined by our ancestors? Or the environment that is newly emergent, ushering in social change?” After all, we live at the intersection of being and becoming. Every moment of every day is an agonistic struggle between determined and emergent forces, and although they are not always ideologically opposed, these phenomena are, nonetheless, distinct. This means that the tension between them is irresolvable. At every turn, we are confronted with this irreducible complexity, thus consciously or unconsciously, we are constantly required to make choices. If we are not adapting to the status quo, we are adapting to change. If we are not accepting received knowledge, we are getting swept up in the latest trend. And more often than not, we are striking a compromise between the two. In fact, this is how cultural innovation occurs (the young women might decide to get married!)\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{8} Cartesian mentalism and Behaviorist psychology are both post-political. The former defines human beings as purely self-determined. The latter defines us as strictly socially constructed. In either case, the individual is robbed of anything resembling true agency, the ability to consciously choose between competing modes of adaptation. Yet the world we actually inhabit is \textit{deeply} political. We have no choice but to constantly change and/or resist change.
Lest we mistake the ongoing tension between emergence and determinism as the age-old struggle between tyranny and freedom, one quick survey of the Internet will disabuse us of this fantasy. As Daniel Bernardi writes in reference to the homegrown hate groups proliferating online, “Unlike public television, cyberspace is by the people for the people. It is, as technophiles like to point out, the most democratic form of mass communication in human history. But democracy, like polysemic television and postmodern ‘identity,’ doesn’t always lead to emancipation and critical consciousness. Hate is democratic” (2002, 162).

Thus oppression is not merely something that is determined by the formal architecture of dominant discourse; it is also reproduced in viral patterns resonating in the psyches of every day people caught up in the sweep of historic circumstances. Because of this, it is naïve, and even dangerous, to automatically characterize emergence as the rejection of outmoded cultural norms, or to automatically and uncritically valorize such rejections when they occur. Without some semblance of cultural authority, communities are thrown into chaos. A worthy goal, therefore, is not the automatic rejection of all ordering systems, but rather a

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9 Writing during the Great Depression, an era still reeling from the indulgence of the 1920s, Kenneth Burke describes the ways in which emergent behavior can take on a reactionary quality: “As the world tries painfully to retrench after its long debauch, we see, not without misgivings, the emergent outlines of a justification by conformity. If a race for conformity became the basis of a new competitiveness, it would be the critic’s problem to present as many counter-influences as possible” (1935, 265).
growing tolerance for multiple systems that can serve to counterbalance one another, mitigating instances of abusive and exploitative hegemony.

**Multiplicity**: multiple relations between individual and environment.

Human beings are psychologically complex and the social worlds we inhabit are complex as well. Because we live at the intersection of so many dynamic forces, we cultivate multiple ritual roles to navigate the interplay between them. Rather than crystallizing into coherent predetermined dispositions (Bourdieu, 1972), these “performances of self” are ongoing negotiations between the individual and environment. Sociologist Erving Goffman explains, “It is a basic assumption of role analysis that each individual will be involved in more than one system or pattern and, therefore, perform more than one role. Each individual will, therefore, have several selves, providing us with the interesting problem of how these selves are related” (1997, 36).

Let’s return to the young woman at the moment before she posts the photograph online. As I’ve said, she knows many people who have posted similar pictures, but she is also concerned about how her family will respond. Yet in addition to existing within the ecology of her close friends and relations, she also lives in the ecology of young people in the United States at the start of the new millennium. She has read opinion polls that indicate this group is increasingly tolerant of same sex
relationships. At the same time, she is a Catholic and the church
publically opposes homosexuality. She is not, in fact, certain that she is
gay, so she may or may not entirely belong in the lesbian ecology. To
further complicate matters, she has shown the photograph to two of her
sisters. One has expressed shock and disapproval. The other has
couraged her to post it. Meanwhile, her mother has begun pressuring
her to get married.

Clearly, no single preconstituted “disposition” is capable of
meeting the competing demands of all of the unstable ecological
domains. A decision has to be made, and somebody has to make it. Even
if the other young woman in the photo urges her to post it, our heroine
can simply refuse, or put off making a decision indefinitely. While the
individual must decide which social demands to meet, the demands
themselves are not her creation. As Erving Goffman explains,
“identificatory demands” are both opportunities and obligations related to
a menu of social roles. The individual “frees [herself] from one group,
not to be free, but because there is another hold on [her]. While actively
participating in an activity system, [she] is, nevertheless, also obliged to
engage in other matters, in relationships, in multi-situated system of
activity, in sustaining norms of conduct that crosscut many particular
activity systems” (40).

Because determinism and emergence exert simultaneously
influence in all of these competing contexts, we must allow for some
degree of conscious choice on the part of individuals negotiating within and through these echoing ecologies. Still, there is a risk. The value and the chief danger of a more multi-centered perspective are related. A multi-centered mediascape promises new modes of empowerment and new alternatives to dominant regimes of representation. However, it should not to be mistaken for the final realization of that promise. Dominant ecologies are remarkably resilient. These massive galaxies of entrenched belief exert significant gravitational pull. Individuals are drawn to them because they are reliable sources of empowerment and social stability to those who willingly accept traditional roles, i.e. conforming to gender or ethnic stereotypes in order to gain acceptance. At the same time, people may achieve media visibility, and thus a degree of social prominence, by openly rejecting dominant discourses, hence, the many popular counter-culture and sub-culture ecologies. Because such alternate discourses are constantly emerging, we must allow that culture is formed according to multiple rules in multiple domains, thus innovation is not only possible, it is all around us.

**PART TWO: Methodology.**

Praxism resists viewing the media as an accomplished thing to be defended or taken apart. Instead, it examines media *in media res*, considering it a constant process of cultural negotiation and renegotiation. This means finding ways to theorize the act of ideological “conflation.”
**Conflation:** fusing distinct concepts into a supposed singularity.

Figures 2-4. Conflation

Take two ideas and push them together. Insists that they constitute a single fixed cultural category. This is how conflation works. It plays to the cultural biases of particular groups in an effort to manufacture greater consensus. The image of the kissing girls might be conflated with a cartoon heart and become part of a YouTube slideshow with slow dissolves to other pictures of the young lovers and soft romantic music throughout. This would be a “positive conflation.” The same picture might be combined with a shot of another young woman simulating vomiting and accompanied by a long blog entry, disparaging lesbianism and equating it with “sickness” or “repulsion.” This would be a “negative conflation.” Or the image of the two girls might be conflated with the American flag and then intercut with footage of soldiers marching and headlines about the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Policy” being repealed. This would be a “complex conflation,” expressing a degree of ambivalence on the part of the medium.
Mary Douglas stresses the cultural significance of ritually defining and redefining symbolic meaning. “The more we know about primitive religions the more clearly it appears that in their symbolic structures there is scope for mediation on the great mysteries of religion and philosophy” (1966, 6). To the members of any given culture, an inherited symbol system seems timeless and unchanging. “But there is every reason to believe that [such systems] are sensitive to change. The same impulse to impose order, which brings them into existence, can be supposed to be continually modifying or enriching them” (5). Douglas explains that, by creating new symbols and remediating old ones, we discriminate between good and evil, pure and impure. “The analysis of ritual symbolism cannot begin until we recognize ritual as an attempt to create and maintain a particular culture, a particular set of assumptions by which experience in controlled” (158).

Conflation is the essence of belief modeling because it attempts to view analogical and logical thinking as perfectly aligned. Yet while the two are occasionally compatible, they are fundamentally distinct. The analogical mind proceeds by correlation, the idea that, “this is similar to that.” The logical mind proceeds by causation, the idea that, “this causes that.” Rationalism tends to uncritically champion the logical mind, but logical arguments are necessarily premised on analogical intuition. Keith Holyoak, et al. explain, “In the aftermath of analogical reasoning, learning can result in the generation of new categories and schemas”
(2001, 9-10). In other words, the logical mind needs the analogical mind to set the stage. Logic cannot proceed until analogic has helped to create the categories it places in opposition to one another. These categories often appear stable and those that are based as they are on empirical observations are certainly more defensible than those that are primarily speculative. Yet at some level, even bedrock convictions are always at risk of coming unglued. This is unsettling to the logical mind, which seeks out certainty and order. It wants to fuse correlations together, to transform them from analogical patterns to immutable categories, hence “conflation.”

Like all faith-based enterprises, this is an alchemical process, requiring an act of mythological transmutation. Enter the medium. The essence of mediumship is conflation. If the medium isn’t busy conflating two correlated ideas, he or she is busy dismantling a conflation that no longer seems relevant. This is what myth in motion looks like: conflating and deconflating, constructing and deconstructing.

**Conflation is Identification.**

Conflation is the center of gravity that the dancers pivot around and the fulcrum they leverage their positions against when colliding with other dancers.  

10 It is both a game of “keep away” and a game of “hot

10 With its emphasis on emotional bias and intuitive pattern recognition as the basis of analytical thought, conflation is similar Raymond William’s
potato,” claiming positive qualities for one’s own group, and foisting negative qualities onto rivals. It is preaching to the choir, and mischaracterizing the competition. It is how fervid emotions pretend at impartiality and how similarity disguises itself as exact equivalence. Regardless of the approach taken, mediumship always involves some form of conflation. This requires a “source” and a “target.”

**Source:** a subject associated or dissociated with the medium.

**Target:** a subject to be conflated with the source.

Rather than merely comparing and contrasting the target and the source—as in analogy—conflation considers them perfectly integrated, a singular whole. This reflects the medium’s ideological agenda. Even if her identity is not directly conflated with the performed rite, the manner in which she strives to maintain or modify the status quo necessarily betrays a degree of self-interest. Erving Goffman explains, “Ritual is a perfunctory, conventionalized act through which an individual portrays his respect and regard for some object of ultimate value to that object of ultimate value or to its stand-in” (1997, 114).

In works such as *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Michel Foucault described social subjects largely constrained by institutional domination, yet before his death, Foucault was in the process of amending these

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notion of “affective structures” (1983) and Henrietta’s Moore’s concept of “pre-theoretical commitments” (2006).
views. Stuart Hall believes he was striving to formulate a less one-sided view of identity formation (1996, 2). With this in mind, he describes the “suturing” of the individual subject to a particular “subject position” and argues that this should be thought of as a two-sided process that involves both a fairly automatic and unconscious response to ideological conditioning, but also a degree of strategic identification (6).

Holland et al. agree with Hall’s reciprocal, two-way street model, but object to his use of the term “suturing.” They argue, “A better metaphor for us is not ‘suture,’ which makes the person and the position seem to arrive performed at the moment of suturing, but ‘co-development’—the linked development of people, cultural forms, and social positions in particular historical worlds” (1998, 33).

If we view the subject position as a type of ritual role that both adopts the medium and is adopted by her, as she strives to achieve a particular end, we may view it as not entirely sutured, but nonetheless, aspiring toward that level of conflation. The medium strives to fuse perfectly with the ritual role and might, at times, appear to do so. At such moments, she begins to actually live the performance. In fact, this is the

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Later in his career, Michel Foucault was particularly interested in emergence, moments when “in certain orders of knowledge, there are these sudden takeoffs, these hastenings of evolution, these transformations.” He notes how these changes are related to “the sign of something else: a modification of rules of formation of statements which are accepted as scientifically true” (1977, 112). I argue that one of the adaptive functions the medium performs is modifying the symbolic order in response to emergent change.
goal of the ritual act, to become deeply immersed, larger than oneself, ceremonially sutured.\textsuperscript{12} But why conjure conflations in the first place?

Let’s say I observe a recurring pattern: several men appear to be effective leaders. Because I am a male, I identify with this group and wish to view it in a positive light. This is not merely social conditioning; it is tied to my actually \textit{physiological} identity. In order to promote a positive self-image, I conflate the pattern of “leadership” and the pattern of “masculinity” and fuse them together, arguing that they are one and the same. As I exist in a social world rife with long determined patriarchal norms, many cultural discourses affirm my status as “strong male leader,” but there are two problems: emergence and perception. First, emergence: while the social ecologies I inhabit are largely patriarchal, the emergent discourse known as feminism has called into question many of these longstanding assumptions. This perspective often equates masculinity with aggression, exploitation and sexism, negative traits in a leader. Then there is the issue of perception. Inevitably, I observe that some men are poor leaders, and many women are good leaders. So is the subject position of “strong masculine leader” neatly and

\textsuperscript{12}The visual rhetorics of digital media seem particularly conducive to such suturing, as J. Anthony Blair states, “Visual arguments tend to be one-dimensional: they present the case for one side only, without including the arguments against it, or without doing so sympathetically, and without representing alternative standpoints and their merits and defects” (2004, 361). Visual conflations militate against critical thinking, forcing the viewer to perceive separate concepts as inherently consubstantial. This is the source of their power and their appeal. What’s more, the text and audio accompanying these images often underscore the conflation rather than complicating it.
unproblematically sutured to my identity? Hardly. It is under threat by both the emergent force of feminism and observable reality. The “sutured subject” is never a \textit{fait accompli}. Try as he might, he will never entirely transcend the shaky analogical substrate. The neatly fused concepts that define his assumed identity are always in danger of coming unglued. Thus, in order for the conflation to hold, it must be continually defended and reinforced and this requires ritual.\textsuperscript{13}

The first duty of a conflation is to pretend that it is a fixed category. In conservative discourse in the United States, it may synonymize “families” with “values,” “radicalism” with “Islam,” “freedom” with “capitalism,” “morality” with “heterosexuality,” “Osama bin Laden” with “Saddam Hussein,” “George W. Bush” with “Ronald Reagan,” “Barack Obama” with “Adolph Hitler,” and “liberalism” with “degeneracy.” In progressive discourse, it may synonymize “masculinity” with “sexism,” “blackness” with “authenticity,” “religion” with “warmongering,” “George W. Bush” with “Adolph Hitler,” “Barack Obama” with “Abraham Lincoln,” “The Tea Party” with “Racism” and “conservatism” with “intolerance.”

By establishing such conflations, these discourses attempt to control what can and cannot be said regarding a particular subject. They are ways of making the playing field less even by equating positive

\textsuperscript{13} Often what is not conflated is as important as what is. NRA members argue: “guns don’t kill people. People kill people.” By refusing to recognize the connection between the availability of automatic weapons and murder, they argue that gun control legislation makes no sense.
values with one’s own group and negative values with the opposition. If religion is synonymous with patriotism, then nonreligious people must be less patriotic. Conversely, if nonreligious people are thought to be unpatriotic, then religious people, by implication, must be patriotic. As John Fiske states, “The struggles over whose discourse events should be put into is part of the reality of the politics of everyday life. The discursive patterns of domination, subordination, and contestation are where the weaving of the social fabric is politicized” (1996, 7). Because the patterns that characterize this “fabric” are woven by ritual practice, we need tools for examining how and why such mediation rites operate as they do.

Conflation appears to simplify the world, but the act itself is highly complex. This is because it cuts multiple ways. It can justify institutional force, or oppose it. It can advocate conformity, reform, subversion, or revolution. In terms of reciprocity, conflation not only connects actors to ecologies; it also connects actors within ecologies. What’s more, it connects whole ecologies to one another and/or pushes them apart. The picture of the two girls kissing conflated with the cartoon heart appears on Flickr. Members of a conservative group post negative comments about it. This creates a reaction from those who support the girls. Back and forth, comments are exchanged. The participants seldom alter their opinions, but they do define them with increasing adamancy. These online discourses become ritual spaces where they can define and
refine their particular worldviews and possibly exert a measure of influence on the larger ecology.

Because conflations are context-sensitive, their relative influence is tied to ecological conditions. Thus, in a context where particular type of emergence is pronounced, a mediation rite that conflates an emergent source with a particular target will prove successful. For instance, in an ecology celebrating newfound gay rights, a conflation that equates the picture of the girls with a positive cultural value such as the cartoon heart will attract positive identification. On the other hand, in a context where determined norms are deeply engrained, a mediating rite that associates a determined source with a target phenomenon should prove more successful. For example, in a heteronormative ecology, a conflation that equates the picture of the girls with a negative cultural value symbolized by a woman sticking a finger down her throat will serve to justify negative identification.

In terms of multiplicity, a single conflation may influence multiple cultural ecologies in multiple ways. For instance, conflating the image of the kissing girls with the cartoon heart will have positive salience within the academic discipline known as “queer studies,” but in terms of the cultural ecology of the entire United States, it will likely attract support, condemnation, ambivalence and various combinations of all three.
By reclaiming the original definition of the communication “medium,” praxism acknowledges the many diverse modes of ritual practice. In so doing, it steps away from the postmodern dissection table and toward the premodern ritual space. It stops deconstructing institutional power and starts reexamining competing modes of ritual authority. This move necessarily redirects critical focus. Rather than dismantling textual artifacts, it locates the shifting “mantle” underlying them and examines how they first come into being.

DOMAINS

This volume consists of a series of ecological domains bookended by an introduction and a conclusion. The first domain is titled “Ritual.” It focuses on the mediating practices involved in the maintenance and modification of cultural discourses. The next domain, “Ecology,” focuses on ecological theory in general and how it relates to media studies. This is followed by “Niche.” A niche is a microcosm of a larger ecology attracting individuals engaged in particular types of ritual roles. I examine how different cultural niches compete to define a single cultural discourse. The next domain is titled “Role.” It focuses on the component features of particular niches. In particular, it suggests how various roles afford ecological agents different modes of cultural empowerment. The domain titled “Affordance” defines the “media affordances” that
comprise each ritual role. These behavioral models are the roadmaps of particular mediation rites. The domain titled “Trope” considers the perceptual and conceptual components comprising particular media affordances. It examines how life imitates art and visa versa. Lastly, the conclusion, “We Will Never Be Secular,” asserts that attempts to study human behavior according to any single theory or ideological scheme will always fail. It suggests that a more achievable goal for media studies and the humanities in general is an ecological analysis of contending ideologies.
Chapter 2

RITUAL

tag YouTube Chronos medium
kairotic space types analogical gang
mythos shaman logical praxism
Duchamp logos ritual return
patterns cultivating identity kiva Dionysiac
Appoline Bronze Age one-to-many one-to-one agency
many-to-many paradigm aura

Figure 5. Ritual Cloud

A gang member enters enemy territory and tags a project wall. He does a “cross out” on the name of a rival that his crew recently killed. Now, he is claiming a piece of his rivals’ domain. In the days to come, the owner of the building will see this graffiti and shake his head in frustration. To him, it will seem little more than an act of senseless vandalism. But for the gang member and his crew, it is a ritual performance, a way of creating meaning. The deed to this piece of property will never belong to them. Nonetheless, this building has become their turf.
This chapter explores the ritualized nature of new media discourses. It explains how mediumship was practiced in the ancient world and how the advent of writing transformed the concept of the medium into a material object. It also examines how new media discourses are growing increasingly ritualistic and defines some characteristics of the contemporary ritual actor or “new medium.” Finally, it explains how mediumship allows individuals to claim a degree of “ritual authority” by cultivating culturally significant identities. This section builds on the work of classical scholars (Dodds 1951; Havelock 1963; Jaynes 1976; Cohen 1995; Freund 2003), new media studies (Andrejevic 2003), anthropology (Turner 1975) and philosophy (Barthes 1957). First, however, I return to the issue if tagging.

**Tags.**

The practice of “tagging” long related to gang activity has recently become a staple of online discourse. As it turns out, this all-too-familiar cultural practice is a highly sophisticated means of constructing meaning via conflation. It is how ritual mediums challenge conventional wisdom, constructing alternate Truths for themselves, in defiance of the
status quo and especially their rivals. Tagging is very much about control. It is about which gang dominates which area of a specific community in a specific way. In a similar sense, online tagging is about staking out bits of ideological terrain related to particular cultural concepts and contexts.

In the early days of the Internet, search engines relied chiefly on logical cognition. They located websites based on simple categorical distinctions. Yet as the online community grew, the flaws in this approach were revealed. For instance, a word such as “salsa” might refer to a type of food, a type of music or a type of dance. In a network divided by fixed categories, it had to mean just one thing. Thus, people searching for salsa the dance might only be directed to websites about salsa the food. The addition of analogical “tags” helped to remedy this issue.

These days, when uploading a video to YouTube, you are prompted to identify it as a fixed category, i.e. “entertainment,” “education,” “business,” etc. In order to do so, the analogical mind must propose a rigid conflation. If this were the only way YouTube classified its content, a video of a dance class identified as “education,” would not show up on a search for “entertainment.” This is why YouTube also allows users to add “tags.” Tags suggest alternate associations that may both compliment and conflict with the initial categorical conflation. Thus, if the video of the dance class is tagged as a “performance,” it may well show up under a search for entertainment content. As with a building tagged by both allied and rival gangs, a bit of online content featuring
various tags is a multiplicity that cannot ultimately be confined to a single
categorical definition, it relates to a variety of overlapping and
interpenetrating categories in a variety of ways.

While attempts have been made to construct purely tag-based
search engines, these have proven difficult to navigate. The best
compromise appears to be a mix of both “types” and “tags,” both logical
and analogical processing. The hyperlinked graphic known as a “tag
cloud” is a fitting emblem of this ecological approach. It is a kind of
“conceptual organism,” a cluster of analogical relations centering on a
particular logically defined category. As with all complex systems, it can
never be completely understood only partially mapped. Of particular
interest are patterns that recur in more than one tag cloud, echoing across
domains and up and down scales. These fractal relations are the feedback
loops between various sociocultural contexts.

Of course, tagging isn’t just about marking territory. It is also a
powerful communication strategy, a means of advocating particular
worldviews and opposing others. Tags contain information about a gang’s
identity, values, members, activities and opponents. When gangs are at

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14 As opposed to the concept of the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari 1987),
tag clouds are not purely nonlinear or purely nonhierarchical. In fact, they
are defined by key hierarchical distinctions, specifically the hieratic sizing
and shading employed to place emphasis on key words. Even if all of the
words were the same shade and size, they could not be arranged in a
purely nonhierarchical fashion. Due to the western technique of reading
from left to right, terms on the left side of the cloud must necessarily
command immediate attention and thus be viewed as particularly significant.
What’s more, due to the basic rules of visual composition, images in the
center of cloud tend to be seen as particularly significant as well.
war, they aggressively tag one another’s territory, sending threats, making boasts, commemorating and celebrating deaths. These acts of signification are never free-floating. They are ongoing power struggles, symbolic truths to fight and die for. The building’s owner is guided by a different symbolic order. To him, the signs seem illogical. But for the gangs, their meaning is profoundly real.

The theoretical approach that I call “praxism” focuses on these types of mediation practices. It does so by utilizing a combination of digital ethnography and ritual analysis to examine the relations between various cultural ecologies. Because praxism focuses on mediation practices, it strives to view tagging rites according to their own terms. In many respects, the gang members engaged in these practices are reproducing self-destructive and socially disruptive trends passed down from previous generations. Yet they have not merely been programmed to behave this way, and when they assume that institutional power is structured in a manner inimical to their interests, they are not entirely deluded. Their actions may be anti-social and self-destructive, but the gang members are not merely products of a bad environment. They are ritual actors capitalizing on environmental opportunities to the best of their ability. Their disenfranchisement and recourse to “street justice” is more than mere social conditioning. There is some measure of strategic thought at play, some sense that the rules of their own game may be a bit
less rigged than the rules designed by wealthy white politicians who steal, lie and even commit murder, but seldom go to jail.

When a gang member “tags” a particular building, he assumes his rivals will recognize the significance of the act. Although the two groups are at war, they are members of the same overall “gang ecology,” so the general meaning of the tag is commonly understood. In contrast, the property owner only has a vague sense of its significance. Because human beings inhabit different “symbolic universes,” (Berger & Luckman 1966), different groups interpret observed phenomena in different ways. There may, in fact, be no such thing as a meta-phenomenon that means the exact same thing to all people; yet particular ecologies can share the same general views about specific topics.15 Affirming the supposed truth or falsehood of these “ways of knowing” requires cultural engagement, the active creation, maintenance and transformation of media discourses, and this requires the performance of mediation rites. Such rites hark back to our most ancient cultural practices.

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15 When a tag cloud is displayed on a web site, one can click on a particular term and link to the topic in question. Often multiple definitions will be proffered. This serves to destabilize the tag cloud by suggesting meanings incompatible with its central design, reminding us of the heteroglossic indeterminacy of linguistic construction (Bakhtin 1981).
The Original Medium.

A “medium” in the original sense was a ritualist mediating the space between observed reality and the mind’s capacity for conceptual abstraction by “channeling” contact with the spirit world. Cultural psychologist Julian Jaynes has suggested that the ethereal voices that the original mediums heard were the stirrings of nascent cognitive abilities (1976, 67-83). A medium in this sense was a person engaged in a ritual process that allowed him or her to think abstractly about the physical environment to “mediate” it and transform it into a new type of conceptual space. In contrast to run-of-the-mill ritualists, ritual mediums did not merely perform formal rites; they spontaneously composed them.

Figure 7. Delphic Oracle of Apollo

When viewing images of ancient mediums in ecstatic trances, we may be tempted to dismiss their behavior as utterly nonsensical, but in many respects it reflects a high level of critical thinking. Ritual mediums were adept at improvising cultural innovations in a manner suggesting fairly sophisticated cognitive functions. The mediums of the ancient world were a special class of ritualist, capable of instructing the tribe by channeling spirits of the dead. In ancient Greece, this afforded them a high level of cultural distinction. Unlike the intoxicated mobs of
Dionysian cults, mediums were linked to the Appoline tradition and were charged with divining esoteric knowledge of the future or of the hidden present. As classical scholar E.R. Dodds explains, “Dionysiac experience is essentially collective or congregational … and is so far from being a rare gift that it is highly infectious,” whereas “mediumship is the rare gift of chosen individuals” (1951, 69).

Two types of events occasioned acts of mediumship. First, there were regulatory, seasonal ceremonies performed to maintain social equilibrium. Then there were special rites performed in times of crisis and meant to combat disequilibrium (Turner 1969). In both instances, the particular role invoked was directly related to the emergent forces the medium was attempting to manage. By scrupulously cultivating collective illusions meant to validate the existing power structure, savvy mediums were able to maintain their own status in the social hierarchy. In general, this meant convincing the community that the spirit world had divinely anointed their leaders. In so doing, the mediums were also able to justify and safeguard their own authority. Thus, when ancient mediums negotiated between this world and the next, they were also negotiating between the community and its leaders, working to maintain a sense of cultural equilibrium.
Mediumship is a rhetorical art that can both buoy and undercut institutional authority.\textsuperscript{16} Thus ancient mediums were either the greatest allies or most threatening rivals of community leaders. Indeed, at times of extreme social crisis, ancient mediums might break with the existing power structure, advocating change and even open revolt. This might result in a social revolution, their own martyrdom, or both (as in the case of Jesus of Nazareth). Because the mediums’ brand of ritual authority was both a boon and a threat to the powers-that-be, their social status could be precarious. Both the community and its leaders were known to regard them with a mix of reverence and suspicion. Nonetheless, their role was vital.

Managing emergence means modeling discourse, but because ancient mediums were also engaged in multiple discourses, their behavior was, in many respects, influenced by predetermined norms and emergent circumstances. They were not “free thinkers” in the sense of being divorced from all cultural imperatives. Though in many respects, they were critical thinkers, innovators adept at fashioning productive perspectives on the very material and historical forces they were

\textsuperscript{16} Raymond Williams cautions against viewing cultural mediation as merely a means of serving the interests of ruling elites. “The cultural process must not be assumed to be merely adaptive, extensive and incorporative. Authentic breaks within and beyond it, in specific social conditions, which can vary from extreme isolation to pre-revolutionary breakdowns and actual revolutionary activity, have often in fact occurred” (1977, 114).
enmeshed within, thus influencing what could and could not be said or even considered about certain subjects.

Because human beings are fallible and biased, and because all prophets are, to some degree, “false,” mediumship was far from an exact science. A medium might favor one form of adaptation over another, automatically clinging to tradition as a “conservative” pundit might, or uncritically celebrating change, in the fashion of a “progressive” pundit. Some mediums chased after emergence in the manner of a politician who shifts opinions to score higher approval ratings. While some mediums stubbornly ignored emergence, as with a politician who holds fast to his views despite plummeting approval ratings. Some mediums actually reduced social equilibrium, growing despotic and holding society back, while others pushed society to the brink of chaos. Fortunately, there always has been another medium waiting in the wings, eager to step in and take the necessary corrective measures.

**Chronos, Logos, and Mythos**

Because emergence spreads quickly, ancient mediums attempted to control it by stopping the clock, hence ritual. The Greeks had different conceptions of time. “Chronos” or “chronological time” involved emergent circumstance. “Logos” was the eternal moment, related to principles of order and logic that were, supposedly, unchanging. And then there was “kairos,” the medial zone between the irresistible force of
chronos and the immovable object of Logos. This was the realm of mythology or “mythos.” Kairos was a sort of “time out of time,” a break from the ceaseless flow of human affairs. The ritual space was a kairotic realm where time stood still and common knowledge could be reengineered. It was a sort of “common knowledge generator,” a machine for manufacturing consensus. The Sophists believed gifted rhetors could utilize kairos to negotiate cultural transformation. The medium assumed this role, placating the tribe by renewing their belief in sacred signs, or—when this proved ineffectual—modifying the symbolic order, altering culture at its very foundation by reconceiving or even supplanting its root metaphors.

What we call “myths” are the ideological interventions of earlier times that have lost their cultural salience and no longer appear relevant. They are discarded “logics” whose mythic origins have been

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17 Victor Turner defines “liminal” or “limonoid” phases as periods in which “all previous standards and models are subjected to criticism and fresh new ways of describing and interpreting sociocultural experience are formulated” (1975, 15). According to him, each public crisis has “liminal characteristics,” because such events are thresholds between more-or-less stable phases of the social process. These anti-structural phenomena are moments when the symbolic order is in a state of flux and society is actually reinventing itself through the process of ritual action. When this occurs, ritual practice can be quite disruptive. “It takes up its menacing stance in the forum itself and, as it were, dares the representatives of order to grapple with it. It cannot be ignored or wished away” (39).

18 Barthes rejects the idea that the so-called “secular world” has transcended belief and no longer finds anything sacred. He sees myths everywhere: in photography, cinema, reporting, sports, TV shows, even wrestling-matches and plastic-ware. These are the apparently “timeless” Truths of the present era (1957).
exposed. These empty husks are now only significant as cultural artifacts. Yet every one of them was once an “innovation,” performing a valuable adaptive function, helping our ancestors negotiate an impasse between emergent change and determined norms.

Myths are difficult to analyze because they are always in motion, flowing in one of two directions: either losing salience and betraying their historically-contingent status or gaining salience and becoming the invisible “Truths” underwriting common sense. There are countless living myths being formulated and fought over all around us, doing the hard work of aspiring to logic, resisting the forces that would expose them as mere intuition. Granted, no myth is ever universally embraced, but as long as a medium’s manna is influencing a large number of people, it should be considered culturally significant.

The Word.

The practice of mediumship would gain new authority with the advent of literacy, a phenomenon that invested the act of signification with a new source of immutable authority. The ascendancy of logical cognition was directly related to the advent of the written word. As our ancestors’ minds were able to reason more logically, they were able to invent symbol systems to transform oral language into logograms and alphabets. In turn, these systems served to further cultivate nascent logical cognition. As Gunther Kress points out by creating “reading
paths” that “grant us very little or no leeway,” writing privileges logical thought process, which are linear and sequential. “The simple yet profound fact of sequence in time orients us towards a world of causality” (2003, 4).

Additionally, the ability to write down our beliefs invested them with more perceived authority. Thus, the advent of literacy was a powerful ritual innovation. It gave the medium an external imprimatur far more impressive than a guardian spirit—one seemingly much more tangible, visible, and best of all eternal! Leonard Shlain explains, “The written word is essentially immortal. To a hyper-conscious primate who had become aware that death was inevitable, the discovery of a method to project one’s self beyond a single life span seemed nothing less than miraculous” (79). Once mediumship gave rise to her sister discipline “authorship,” ritual participants were demoted to mere audience members\(^\text{19}\) and inspirational spirits were demoted to mere muses. The real source of authority was thereafter located in the Word itself. The

\(^{19}\) Theater Historian Philip Freund explains how ritual was “tamed” by the advent of theatrical scripts. “When it was apparent that the Dionysian revels were a fixed and possibly disruptive feature of the Athenian calendar, prompting a large outpouring of tipsy the garlanded participants, the more sober religious and civic leaders of the city state, concerned to subdue them, gradually took steps to change the tumultuous rites into stately processions and more orderly episodes. They were transformed into sedate and official occasions, graced with Apollonian dignity and grave beauty. An archon was appointed to preside over the ceremony, and the city council established strict rules to control and guide it. Its phallic aspect, the orgiastic element, was separated from the tragic to become what is now identified as comedy, a largely independent art form. This is thought to have begun in the seventh century BC.” (2003, 43).
ability to convey detailed information across time and space afforded our most elite ancestors tremendous power, which is why, for the first two thousand years after the advent of literacy, the ability to read and write remained the jealously guarded privilege of social elites. It was not merely a means of conveying information; it was a way of consolidating power. The first attempts to “tame” ritual occurred twenty five hundred years ago during the Bronze Age. After the advent of the written word, culture was increasingly considered a textual product or technical mode of production rather than a cultural process. Western civilization since the age of ancient Greece has been “Logocentric.” That is, it has prized logical causation over analogical correlation, word over deed, product over practice.

As Eric Havelock explains, Greek philosophers demanded that “a discourse of ‘becoming,’ that is of endless doings and of events, be replaced by a discourse of ‘being,’ that is of statements which are in modern jargon ‘analytic’, are free from time-conditioning” (Havelock, 1963. 182). “It was simply a crystallization of the demand that the Greek language and the Greek mind break with the poetic inheritance, the rhythmically memorized flow of imagery, and substitute the syntax of scientific discourse, whether the science be moral or physical” (1963. 182).

Unlike ritual practice, the written word was not a transaction with nature. In fact, it broke with attempting to imitate nature altogether.
Instead, it collapsed verbal utterances into abstract patterns or “letters” that were then gathered into clusters that in no way resembled natural phenomena. This was a hermetic process, a sealing up, a closing off, a containment of ideas and experience. Clusters of symbols could actually confer a kind of immortality on the literate, preserving their thoughts long after they were dead. Thus, they became the ultimate repositories of meaning and the preferred measure of cultural significance.

The classical age was the era of archetypal imagery, master narratives, and universalizing rhetoric. Human beings no longer wanted to imitate the natural world. They wanted to master it, isolating and identifying the essential facts beneath the messy particulars of day-to-day existence. In keeping with this trend, their gods grew increasingly anthropomorphic and fewer in number, an emergent trend related to the rise of monotheism, deism and finally rationalism and its deification of the human intellect.

The rise of classicism was not an absolute shedding of ritual, so much as the emergence of a concomitant and, in some respects, competing perspective. With the advent of the written word and monetary systems, our ancestors were able to formalize the diverse sociocultural practices their rituals had long enacted. The Bronze Age saw the birth of the theater (the Ritual of Dionysus became the Theater of Dionysus),

\(^{20}\) Theater eventually supplanted ritual in Aztecan Mexico, serving as a form of instruction and socialization. It became a “preferred non-
philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, the legal system and various civil institutions, including the first democracy. These changes signaled a shift of focus as people began to fixate more on products and modes of production than the practice of mediumship itself. Once we began to view the media as a thing external to human beings we could speak of it in terms of simplistic cause and effect arguments. The notion of “media effects” presumes that mediums are forces existing out there in the environment that impose influence on us, or, in the case of media producers (artists, authors, film directors), through us. But this estrangement is an illusion.

At any rate, the birth of theater did not mean the death of ritual. As the dithyrambs were danced on stage in the Theatre of Dionysus, approximately forty yards behind the skene (or stage house) on the hillside of the Acropolis, bulls were being ritualistically slaughtered on a sacred altar (Pizzato 22). And although he tended to debunk the theological superstructure—the ironic tragedian Euripides also insisted on the preservation of ritual practice and included many examples of it in his plays (Foley 1985, 22). Even the supreme “rationalist” Plato expressed little doubt about the need for ritual (22). Yet despite the father of western philosophy’s misgivings about theater and advocacy of ritual, subsequent thinkers would consider ritual the inferior form. After all, physically coercive means of exercising social control through thought control” (Pizzato 24).
Platonism helped inaugurate the view that human progress is a teleological march toward increased perfection. The first theatrical producers, the Athenian priests, had drawn a key distinction between modern and primitive culture. After the advent of theater, ritual was considered not only archaic, but also suspiciously unstable, subject to radical transformations and reinterpretations. Both ritual and theater were long-lived and portable, but as specific rituals migrated from culture-to-culture and era-to-era, they were much more readily inflected by local and historical particulars. In contrast, theater was far less improvisatory with fixed dialogue and predictable outcomes. Thus, it was thought to be the more perfect form. As long as the rationalist mindset held sway, predictability and singularity would be valued over mutability and multiplicity, and ritual would be consigned to an increasingly marginal status in human affairs, often associated with primitive dogma and superstition (Goody, 1977).

The advent of the audience increasingly diminished the public’s active participation in public events. To make allowance for this, new cultural practices were created that afforded our ancestor’s alternative means of influencing public discourse, including opportunities to vote, serve on juries, defend legal claims, compete in sporting events and dramatic and artistic contests. This type of “empathic engagement” (Shore 1996, 109) allowed them to feel they could still affect the larger social arena and gave them a new type of stake in social outcomes, while
formalizing the manner of their participation in order to limit the possibility for disruptive innovation.

Rather than dispose of ritual altogether, Greek civil society partially dismantled it, stripping away some of its original functions. For instance, with the advent of the Athenian legal system, rituals were no longer charged with resolving blood feuds. Instead, these disputes were absorbed into a formal civic template that allowed wealthy citizens to protect their interests, while dominating, attacking and even declaring war on others with state approval.

Cohen describes how, in his last dialogue *Laws*, “Plato grounds the rule of law in a “collective fiction” which removes legislation and law from the realm of politics by defining them as operating above faction and domination and by attaching to them an aura of sanctity and then mutability” (1995, 55). He rejects the notion that Greek society was growing more equitable, but stresses that it was important for citizens to believe that that was the case in order for civic rule to be established and maintained. “For the role of law to succeed, then, citizens must be

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21 Plato spoke of educating the *demos* via a process of educational socialization, which would induce them to believe that they should not challenge established institutions because laws are inherently “sovereign,” “sacred,” “eternal,” and “just” (Cohen 1995, 49). In contrast, Aristotle believed that the best democratic state should combine both democratic and the oligarchic features in order subject the *demos* to coercive institutional control. He saw the state as performing a censorial function and believed that it must “concern itself with virtue” (48).
educated to believe that they cannot make such fundamental changes because the laws are sovereign, sacred, eternal, and just” (49).

For thousands of years, the written word has served to sanction such cultural formalities thus dominating cultural discourse. Yet since the advent of mass media, its primacy has been under threat. And now, in the age of new media, we are experiencing a resurgence of our most ancient mode of cultural discourse.

The Ritual Return.

As media discourses grow increasingly interactive and participatory, mass communication is taking on a highly ritualized quality, hence recent interest in mediation “practices.” One of the first theoretical works to seriously examine the concept of “media rituals” was Media Events by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992). It focuses on large-scale televised ceremonies such as Princess Di’s funeral and the Olympics. Dayan and Katz emphasize the manner in which such communal rites affirm collective values. Along with Dayan and Katz, James Carey originally stressed the communal aspects of “communication rituals” (1989), yet his more recent work defines them as a site of political engagement (1998). Nick Couldry opts for a more

22 James Carey advocates expanding the definition of media rituals proposed by Dayan and Katz to allow for the possibility of political struggle. “In short, the existing analysis of media events is less able to handle drama without rest or resolution, drama without catharsis or consensus, drama which divides people more sharply and intensifies the
media-centric definition, equating the term “media ritual” with all media related values” (2003, 29).

Drawing on all three of these perspectives, I view media rituals in terms of ecological complexity. They are—according to this perspective—means of creating communities, engaging politically and perpetuating inherent values. In the age of the Internet, the ritualized nature of mass-media discourse is more apparent than ever. Real time, interactive participation allows emergent trends to spread instantaneously across the globe in multiple directions. Our newfound ability to spontaneously meld the symbolic production of authorship with the symbolic action of ritual has profound implications for how we conceptualize culture. Specifically, it suggests that the newest thing about “new media” may be something quite ancient.

In We Have Never Been Modern, Bruno Latour rejects what he considers an arbitrary distinction between the “archaic” and the “modern.” In this way, he suggests the possibility of a “comparative anthropology,” bridging the past and the present (1993, 10). He also suggests reconceptualizing social subjects as more than mere intermediaries (passive go-between) influenced by either natural or society. He believes we should instead view them as “mediators—that is, perception of social difference, drama which separates rather than unites: drama involving confrontation which spills outside its ritual frame to contaminate and reconfigure social relations” (1998, 67).

Nick Couldry writes, “Media rituals are formalized actions organized around key media-related categories and boundaries, whose performance frames, or suggests a connection with, wider media-related values” (2003, 29).
actors endowed with the capacity to translate what they transport, to redefine it, redeploy it, and also to betray it” (1993, 81).

Our primitive ancestors did not have theaters, libraries, courtrooms, or cathedrals, but they did have ritual. Our earliest cultural artifacts are all tied to ritual practices, modes of public discourse that invite participation and serve to symbolically unite communities. Yet while ritual is the foundation of modern culture, for thousands of years, culture itself has been defined in opposition to it. According to this way of thinking, being “cultured” means transcending primitive rites and cultivating a more rarified theatrical sensibility. What then are we to make of the increasingly ritualized character of today’s participatory media? From the “soft scripted” melodrama of reality TV, to the primal trauma of terrorist spectacles, to the cabalistic protocols of social media cults, communication discourses are growing increasingly interactive, improvisatory, spontaneous and communal—all distinct characteristics of ritual practice.

The “ritual return” is a reawakening of interest in ritual performance and the ways that it serves to mediate culture. This is not a regression, I argue, so much as a growing realization of the central role ritual has always played, and continues to play, in our attempts to make sense of the world around us. Ritual is not the antithesis of culture but rather the wellspring from which culture continually emerges. This fount of predictable reproduction and startling innovation includes the often
violent and orgiastic rites that serve to reify our highest aspirations and expose our most transgressive desires. I am not suggesting that new media practices mark a sudden return to primitive rituals. Such a view would prove insupportable, not because society has become too civilized to engage in such practices, but because, in fact, we have never stopped doing so. We cannot return to the ritual altar because we never left it.

The ritual return is a reawakening of ritual consciousness, a re-emergence of interest in the mediating practices that have always been central to the production of cultural discourse. As with tribal customs, interactive technologies invite participation, undermine notions of passive consumption and invite more direct engagement. Rituals—which have no audience per se, only participants—flourish in such an environment. As new media forms increasingly unsettle distinctions between authors, actors and audiences, the whole enterprise of creating culture appears to be gravitating toward the center of a vast and tumultuous ritual space.

As Clay Shirky explains, before the Internet, there were two general types of media technologies: broadcast media and communications media (2008, 86).

![Figure 8. One-to-One Communication](image)

Traditionally, the one-to-one “communication model” has been associated with social interaction.
Figure 9. One-to-Many Communication

The one-to-many “broadcast model” has been linked to cultural production.

Figure 10. Many-to-Many Communication

Now, participatory media signals a return to many-to-many communication, long the hallmark of ritual practice. ²⁴

Figure 11. Kiva

Building on a metaphor proposed by Michael Chwe, I associate this view of participatory media with the circular form of a Native American kiva, a ritual space affording a real-time “feedback loop”

²⁴ Clay Shirky elaborates: “The distinction between communications and broadcast media was always a function of technology rather than a deep truth about human nature. The old habit of treating communications tools like the phone differently from broadcast tools like television no longer makes sense. The two patterns shade into each other and now small group communications and large broadcast outlets all exist as part of a single interconnected ecosystem” (2008, 99).
between its inward facing inhabitants, serving to generate “common knowledge” as all participants are aware that they are being observed by one another (2001). This concept resonates with what James Carey calls, “the ritual view of communication,” a perspective that has traditionally been deemphasized and even marginalized in industrial societies. This type of cultural interaction emerges organically and is “linked to terms such as ‘sharing,’ ‘participation,’ ‘association,’ ‘fellowship,’ and ‘the possession of a common faith.’ What’s more, it exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms ‘commonness,’ ‘communion’ and ‘community’” (1989, 18).

The ritual return is a family reunion of unprecedented scale. The far-flung tribes of the world are converging in multiple overlapping ritual kivas, bumping into each other in surprising ways, recalling common ancestries, shared beliefs and age old rivalries. In the space of a single generation, we have gone from less than a million people distributing media globally to over a billion. As Clay Shirky points out, “We are living in the middle of the largest increase in expressive capability in the history of the human race” (2008, 105-6). But why are so many people expressing so much? Grasping the significance of this change involves viewing the media in a new (and old) way, not as something imposed on

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25 Like Chwe’s kiva, Michel Foucault’s description of an all-seeing “panopticon” (1975) has been used as a metaphor of mass media discourse. Yet while the kiva acts as a common knowledge generator (Chwe 2001), the Panopticon’s power resides in its ability to isolate and atomize individuals subordinating them the control of a single central authority.
us from without, but rather something that resonates within, affording various patterns of behavior that we both perform and conform to.

*The Ritual Aura.*

In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production,” Walter Benjamin argues that modern art has lost its “ritual aura.” Benjamin writes, “to pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose ‘sense of the universal equality of things’ has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction” (2009, 9). Benjamin is correct. Once digitized, even the Mona Lisa loses her “ritual aura,” the sense that she is rare and ephemeral yet somehow timeless. But this aura has not been obliterated. It has merely migrated to a new locale. In many respects, the work of art has always been, a stand-in for ritual and an imperfect one at that.

This convenient container for ritual significance was portable and durable, though not particularly flexible. Thus, a work of art was a useable fetish and a reliable means of transmitting ritual protocols from place to place and generation to generation, yet any numinous quality it was thought to possess needed to be constantly reaffirmed by its handlers, the official curators of its use-value.

The ritual aura *has* traditionally been one of the key characteristics of art, but ritual existed for thousands of years before
culture began to celebrate the works of famous artists. Certainly, ritual actors etched images on cave walls and grave markers, made pottery and wove fabric, but these creations were meant to serve practical functions as either physical tools or ritual fetishes. They were not viewed as works of self-expression belonging to a particular oeuvre. The creation of these objects was a ceremonial act. Artists never signed these pieces and there were no patrons to admire them other than the gods they were created to delight.

As literacy redefined culture, it redefined art as well. For centuries, the Church censored the production of “graven images.” Though, gradually, it allowed artists to grace the walls of churches and cathedrals with sacred imagery. This proved to be a cultural risk as it led to the apotheosis of especially gifted artists whose reputations earned them quasi-divine status. As famous names such as Da Vinci and Michelangelo took on preternatural luster, art gained material value but began hemorrhaging its ritual aura. This process would accelerate throughout the modern era. As gallery owners and agents replaced the clergy as chief patrons, both the subject matter and status of art changed radically. It became more gritty and experimental, a vehicle for displaying the virtuosity and originality of the artist. It was suddenly a commodity, a “product” to be bought, sold, consumed and ranked. As Maureen Goggin points out, “Under a modernist conception of art, artists became identified with the products of their creation rather than with
praxis and knowledge of praxis. Concurrently, products became hierarchically organized, with privileged objects of art positioned at the top and other objects demoted as lowly crafts and often distinguished in negative terms as ‘useful’ objects that became positioned toward the bottom” (2000, 17).

“High art” in this sense was venerated as a commodity first and ritual fetish last. Yet while Walter Benjamin laments the desacralization of the rarified objet d’art, as ritual itself was increasingly devalued in the high modern era, lesser forms had no trouble retaining their ritual aura. The ritual space was demoted to a “sewing circle” where low status individuals could dabble in communal “crafts” and “folk art.” Status-seekers did not create art as a form of ritual practice. They did so to rise above the community. A lone opera singer on a stage was considered an artistic triumph. A crowd of people harmonizing was a mere “sing along.”

Figure 12. Duchamp Remediates Da Vinci

If the art object became less holy and more of a commodity in the modern era, most artists didn’t seem to mind. Besides, as Marcel
Duchamp asserted, art is not an object. It’s an idea. So perhaps the ritual aura never actually belonged to the rarified art object.

Perhaps it was merely on loan. And now that we are all potential mediums—thanks to the advent of new media—perhaps ritual has come back home to roost. Benjamin was right. Mechanical reproduction does undermine the numinous significance of the art object, but this only directs our attention beyond its physical presence to the ritual practices, which gave rise to it and sustain its cultural salience. Once digitized, even Shakespeare loses his ritual aura, but each of his words instantly becomes a manipulable affordance ready to be deployed by a savvy ritualist adopting a particular role in order to attain a particular end. Thus, rather than merely vanish, the ritual aura has returned to its initial status as a disembodied state, a spirit of mediumship. As it becomes increasingly problematic to study culture as an object separate from social acts, our focus is drifting back toward the shifting medial realm. Certainly, powerful social forces continue to play tug-o-war with textual meaning,

26 “Dada was an extreme protest against the physical side of painting. It was a metaphysical attitude. It was intimately and consciously involved with ‘literature.’ It was a sort of nihilism to which I am still very sympathetic. It was a way to get out of a state of mind—to avoid being influenced by one’s immediate environment, or by the past: to get away from clichés—to get free” (Duchamp 1946, 394).

27 The surrealists lionized a young nihilist named Jacques Vaché who believed that all art is imbecility and refused to produce anything at all. André Breton credited him with being one of the inspirations behind the movement. He died from an opium overdose at age 26.
but politics also exists in the ritual space between the individual and the environment, the crucible from which culture continually rises anew.

*The New Medium.*

Throughout history, relatively few people have been able to exert wide scale cultural influence though acts of mediumship. Naturally, such unique individuals are often feared and admired. Yet we are all mediums on a more modest scale, seeking equilibrium between changing times (a car crash, an earthquake, turning thirty) and established norms (parental advice, commercial advertising, film narratives). With the advent of the Internet, much of this once private and personal mediumship has gone public, occurring on social networking sites, blogs and via email exchanges. We live in an age of unparalleled complexity. The spread of emergent patterns is now occurring at a speed, scale and intensity with no historic precedent, but what are we to make of all of this burgeoning chaos? Anything we wish, apparently. Though, of course, it is hardly that simple.

In general, the viral patterns spreading across the mediascape conform to familiar cultural scripts. More unsettling than innovations occurring within particular ecologies is the clash between ecologies, both large and small. Increasingly, we are all compelled to navigate between these conflicting worldviews. And even when others aren’t paying attention, we are aware that they might be. Thus we are increasingly
conscious of the performed nature of our social interactions. This is the essence of ritual consciousness, an awareness of the “public self” enacting a particular role in pursuit of a particular aim.

Today’s “new media” gives rise to “the new medium.” Unlike traditional ritualists, who emerged from oral traditions, the new medium is often (though not always) literate; spontaneously remediating received knowledge, manipulating copious amounts of multimodal information at the click of a mouse key. This is fortuitous. Individuals are only capable of adopting a select number of ritual roles and not all ritual roles are compatible with all social milieus. Because of this, mediumship is an uneven playing field. When we become the medium, we take on a role most amenable to our interests and abilities and best suited for exerting influence within a particular environmental context. For “new mediums,” this process means taking on multiple, often competing roles while navigating within and between the most diverse cultural niches imaginable: geographic, affinitive, ethnic, political and religious, while deploying all of the communication strategies at our disposal.

Figure 13. The New Medium
All of us currently express ideas online are new mediums, negotiating between the status quo and emergent trends in any number of cultural ecologies. Currently, there are new mediums as far as the eye can see and there is no shortage of rituals for us to perform. A computer screen with several navigation windows open at the same time is a mosaic of potential associations waiting to be brought into vivid relief. All one has to do is connect the dots, but in what order? And to what end?

The most technological adroit new mediums are often labeled “digital natives,” a descriptor that simultaneously exoticizes and pathologizes them. When viewed in this light, they become magical beings able to commune with technology as effortlessly as tribal “primitives” purportedly communed with nature. At the same time, they are considered crude savages ill-equipped to read novels or write in a manner not riddled with the defects borne of excessive text messaging. Both of these perspectives are partly true, but largely exaggerated.

All new mediums—myself included—increasingly adopt a variety of virtual personae: video game avatar, photo-shopped still, CGI animation. We are disembodied, dismembered and disembedded, inhabiting multiple discourses, locations and historical eras at once, wresting information from the grip of tightly bound professional communities, flouting accreditation and membership of any kind, but at the same time, remaining somewhat deluded by our own press, the
techno-geek-mystique that declares we are capable of remodeling the mediascape with unbridled freewill. Many of us are addicted to the “new,” embracing a fashionable and suspect calculus that equates surrendering privacy and modesty with social empowerment. The transgressive displays of these ritual actors are less moral lapses than calculated bids for increased visibility.

When we engage in acts of “new mediumship,” we are standing at the intersection of the territory and the map and mediating between them in both directions at once, making the territory more map-like (flash mobs, speed dating, performance art) and the map more territory-like (reality TV, sexting, comedic improv). Increasingly, we prefer our information “just in time” and “on demand.” Our attention spans are growing shorter, and so is our patience with rigidly delimited cultural categories. Many new mediums are baffled by disciplinary silos that attempt to maintain distinctions between “us” (sociology) and “them” (anthropology) and are amused by gatekeepers who seek to maintain proprietary distinctions of any kind. Most of us are becoming more adept at multi-tasking, capable of tracking several interweaving narrative threads at the same instant (provided they can hold our interest). A

28 In his book *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*, Mark Andrejevic suggests that modern consumers have grown accustomed to surrendering privacy in them name of individuation. “The idea is that we can gain control by submitting to comprehensive monitoring of the rhythms of our daily lives” (2003, 6).
textual poacher, a mediator, a re-mediator, a tweeter, a blogger—all of these appellations apply, none of them epitomize.

We are often susceptible to the homogenizing influence of “group think,” but we also celebrate the emergent genius of knowledge building collectives. The communities we join are often blind to differences of race, class and gender, and just as often predicated on them. We are equally suspicious of leaders and followers, but we are a bit of both. Our interactions are synchronous and asynchronous, insular and open source. We often encounter the same stores, products and cultural tropes as we travel the world in search of diversity. When we find it, we are often adept code-switchers, able to assume a variety of context-specific personae. We almost certainly speak English. Our brand is transparency, accessibility and innovation. We appear eminently available, but are actually quite aloof, celebrating emancipation of the communal will while seeking to identify as unique, original and outré.

Best of all, we can make almost any image or sound instantaneously materialize. We see media affordances everywhere. A bit of small talk, a narrative structure, a cell phone camera, a diary entry, red hair, the Pledge of Allegiance, a social bond, the clear blue sky, a software program, a giddy laugh, a camera angle, a slogan, a rhyme scheme, a metonymic trope, a video game, a dance step, a guitar solo—all of it, raw material, a fathomless fund of inspiration and potential content crying out to be mixed, remixed and mixed again. So we seize
culture and let it seize us back, submitting to its thrall, enhancing, manipulating and transmitting new semblances of selfhood around the world and back in the blink of an eye.

Next.

The following chapter explores how the diverse modes of ritual authority invoked by new mediums are forcing theorists to break with arguments emphasizing a single coherent scale of institutional power. Social hierarchies remain a key consideration, but mediumship takes on many forms and exerts many types of influence for a variety of reasons. Thus, the metaphor of a standardized 19th century economy favored by Marx is increasingly being supplanted by the metaphor of a complex cultural ecology.
In the United States in the mid-1950s, television both promoted and facilitated the atomizing of human communities into nuclear families connected by one-way strands of cultural convention broadcast via the media airwaves. There were just three networks then, promoting consumerism and catering to particularly desirable sociocultural demographics.
TV representations showed viewers what it meant to count as a respectable and legitimate member of society. Specifically, late fifties TV celebrated white, male, middle class values. On “the tube,” dad worked. Mom stayed home. The neighbors kept to themselves. And almost everyone was Anglo Saxon, reasonably well off and politically conservative. In such an era, it was not particularly problematic to theorize media in terms of top-down effects, but then something strange happened.

Rather than becoming entirely brainwashed into mindless conformists, the first generation of children weaned on “the boob tube” grew shockingly rebellious. Indeed, the baby boomers ushered in a massive counter-cultural revolution. Breaking with the traditions of past generations, they engaged in political activism, experimented with drugs and sexual liberation, promoted equality for all races and both genders and completely revamped the sociocultural landscape. But why should this occur? If the predominant values being instilled in young people were male and middle class and white, why would so many young men grow their hair long, dress in faded and torn clothing and sing black music? If gender conformity and mass consumption were being sold to the masses, why would so many young women develop more nontraditional attitudes toward sex and break with standard domestic roles? The “media effects” model had no way of accounting for these seeming anomalies.
One explanation for the rise of the counter-culture comes from Joshua Meyrowitz. He theorizes that television tends to undermine social hierarchies by breaking with the traditional developmental stages of childhood. Because there is no means of regulating the information children are exposed to, young people learn a great deal about the adult world before they have passed through processes of cognitive maturation. Because everyone is exposed to the same basic information, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between the traditional social roles of adults and children (1985 264-5). Meyrowitz also believes that television blurs the distinction between the private and the public sphere, which, concomitantly, blurs gender distinctions (224-5).

While these influences may well have mitigated the conformist messages saturating early television programming, we should also consider narratological influence. Television is primarily a form of entertainment, as such, it needs to convey stories, and stories require transgressions, conflict and extreme behavior, moments when characters clash and break with normative behavior. In a traditional televisual storyline such disruptions are neatly resolved before the final commercial break, but this may not entirely force the genie back into the bottle. If the dominant discourse is conformist, the most interesting characters will be those that oppose this worldview. Thus, the loners, rebels, outlaws and beatniks that were a regular staple on early television may have been more than mere cautionary figures. They may also have been “media
affordances,” potential modes of behavior on offer to anyone willing to risk breaking with majority norms in exchange for the glamour and excitement of social revolt. Fifties television, therefore, did not merely teach children how to consume and conform. It also provided them with many handy examples of how to rebel.

*Pop Goes the Culture.*

Of course, other social and cultural factors were related to the changes to come: the advent of the birth control pill, experimentation with drugs, the institution of the draft for the Vietnam war and the civil rights movement. Also, there was a shocking new development in the world of modern art. The cultural implosion of postmodernism collapsed high culture into pop culture and turned every aspect of contemporary life into a potential art object. This break with the private world of the artist was no neo-classical backlash. By this point, things were moving too fast for that. Postmodernism wasn’t about reclaiming formalism. It was about spontaneously shattering and recombining found objects, including narratives, images, film clips, magazine advertisements, just about anything else the artist could get his hands on.

Figure 16. Andy Warhol
The figure at the vanguard of this cultural shift, Andy Warhol, availed himself of all sorts of media affordances: Campbell Soup cans, Brillo Boxes, movie cameras, buildings, even people. Through the mid-to-late 1960s, he assembled an impossibly chic, outrageously disaffected coterie of self-described “superstars” made famous for simply being famous. He especially loved exotic cross-pollinations. Mixing his acquaintances like daubs of paint, Warhol connected gay with straight, black with white, glitterati with street culture and filmed all of these interactions.

Along with fellow pop art pioneers, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, Warhol created new type of “ecological art.” The subject matter had little to do with the concerns of modern ecological movements. Being inhabitants of a modern ecology, these artists focused less on rocks, trees and rivers and more on billboards and cereal boxes. Nonetheless, the works they created were intimately and complexly connected to the cultural environment, always referring to something outside the frame and beyond the screen. Pop art was deeply intersubjective. It only made sense in relation to the larger cultural world. The method was pastiche, the perfect mix of logical and analogical thought, category understood as pattern. The artist’s job was to remediate

29 Jean Baudrillard describes postmodern art as, “a parody of culture by culture itself as an act of vengeance, characteristic of radical disillusionment. It is as though history were rifling through its own dustbins and looking for redemption in the rubbish” (263).
and recombine, at will. After Warhol, anything or anyone could become art instantaneously (for at least 15 minutes). Pop art marked a shattering of the finally categorical distinction alienating the individual from the environment. It killed off the myth of the insular, inwardly directed artistic genius. If anything could be art, then anyone could be a medium. Pop art signaled the final collapse of the feedback loop between artist and audience, setting the stage for the arrival of new media and its many Warhol-like avatars: the new mediums.

The Ecologics of New Media.

This chapter examines the rise of the ecological metaphor that has gained prominence over several decades has begun to supplant the 19th century economic metaphor long dominant in cultural studies. In order to examine the intricacies of this paradigm shift, I will refer to the work of various Marxist theorists (Marx & Engels 1846, 1848; Adorno & Horkheimer 1944; Gramsci 1935; Bourdieu 1972) and Neo-Marxists (Hall 1980; Williams 1978; Laclau & Mouffe 1985), as well as many advocates of ecological theory (Bateson 1972; Gibson 1979; Latour 2004; Fuller 2007). The pages that follow suggest that this conceptual shift represents the best way for theorists to grapple with the burgeoning complexity of new media discourses.

In the current era, due to a number of interrelated factors—
including the advent of economic globalization, international travel and
the Internet—we find ourselves immersed in a complex and de-centralized (or perhaps multi-centered) cultural environment. This does not mean that corporate powers are losing their ability to model public discourse. In many respects, media power has never been more concentrated. As Henry Jenkins (2006, 11) points out, corporations such as Disney, Viacom and News Corp have consolidated resources forming massive monopolistic multi-conglomerates. At the same time individual media users are increasingly able to produce, consume and freely share media discourses. The cultural impact of these changes is staggering. Media moguls can no longer impose direct influence, so they are scrambling to find new ways to persuade media users, convincing them to voluntarily cede a measure of control in return for perceived benefits and offering them a “seat at the table” in terms of increased ability to interact, participate and even perform publicly.

As media influence can no longer be effectively asserted in any across-the-board manner, media discourses must grow increasingly persuasive. Largely, this is accomplished via permission marketing, social media tracking, product placement, multi-platforming and synergistic cross-promotion. As a result, media formats are becoming less nakedly assertive and more cunningly rhetorical. They are less about imposed effects and more about tantalizing “affordances.”

In an era in

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30 The term “affordance” was coined by James Gibson to connote a behavioral option offered by the environment, for instance, a chair affords sitting (1979).
which computer networks are digitizing all known literary works, artworks, films and TV shows, in which effective censorship is increasingly difficult to achieve, in which sampling, counterfeiting, copyright infringement and file sharing are near impossible to combat, in which the music industry is collapsing and the publishing, film and TV industries are under tremendous stress, in which commerce has gone virtual, driving many shopping malls, bookstores, and video game retailers into extinction, in which academia is going online and disciplinary boundaries are growing increasingly porous, and in which the neat distinctions between culture and society, producer and consumer, participant and audience are crumbling like the walls of a falling temple, a more expansive view of the media is certainly in order.

Media studies, long relegated to the margins of the humanities, is now moving to center stage. Just as our conception of what constitutes a media discourse is becoming broader and looser, media studies itself is becoming more diverse and expansive, merging the social sciences with literary critique, ethnography with textual analysis, widening out to encompass new terrain. Increasingly, it is less about objects and artifacts than about specific types of people taking on specific roles in order to construct and be constructed by specific cultural discourses. But there is a risk to all of this outward expansion. As our field of inquiry grows more diffuse, our modes of inquiry must be modified as well. This can lead to a loss of common purpose and shared analytical approach. The interests of
communication studies and media studies have never been more germane to more diverse disciplines. Many of these fields—including design, marketing, political science, journalism and production—are looking to us for guidance. After all, the many profound changes radically revamping society are intimately related to new media. Thus media studies needs to develop new ways to make sense of them. Media studies needs to figure out how to meaningfully theorize the increasingly interactive and participatory nature of the diverse media discourses billions of people are now actively engaging in.

Not long ago, there was a supposedly coherent thing called “culture” that one could actually claim to “study.” But that was an illusion. In the age of “social media,” the neat distinction between the social world and the cultural realm has become radically, perhaps permanently unsettled. If a photo shared on “Flickr” is both a cultural artifact and a mode of social interaction, we need to rethink some of core assumptions about how we conceptualize culture. Can the rubric of “cultural studies” be modified to meet these challenges, or is a new concept in order? These are the pressing concerns facing our discipline at this historic moment. In the age of new media, power increasingly flows in multiple directions. An individual authoring a blog is, no doubt, influenced by hegemonic regimes of representation imposed and maintained by industry titans, but he is also acutely aware of trends spreading virally online. Finding viable ways to account for the combined
influence of determined and emergent power is the new challenge facing, not only media studies, but all of the humanities.

The first step in this process involves recognizing that culture is a relationship rather than an object of study. It is the social world commenting on itself. Rather than merely consuming received knowledge; the masses are increasingly generating and maintaining countless highly public discourses. This represents a significant challenge to analytical models that emphasize cultural norms imposed on audiences in a top-down fashion (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). Yet because the behavior of new media users often conforms to predictable cultural scripts, such activities also present a challenge to gratification models that, in some respects, suggest unconstrained, bottom-up agency (McQuail, Blumler and Brown, 1972). And while Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model allows that media audiences can accept, oppose or negotiate in relation to dominant readings (1980), media

31 Key members of the Frankfurt School Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer coined the term “the culture industry” to describe how mass culture resembles a factory producing standardized cultural goods and manipulating the masses into passivity (1944).

32 According to Ellen Seiter, “The uses and gratifications research represented a shift to a more optimistic and less harmful characterization of the relationship between media and audiences, emphasizing active engagement and the ways the media could be employed by individuals to satisfy needs and accomplish personal goals (Seiter 1999, 12).

33 Seiter describes Stuart Hall’s encoding-decoding model as “an attempt to get away from a linear send-message-receiver model of mass communication. It posits three distinctive types of interpretations or decodings. The dominant reading is performed by viewers who accept the
users do more than merely comply or resist these days; we also participate in mediation rites that maintain, subvert and challenge highly public discourses. We too are belief modelers and complexity managers. We too are mediums. Thus Media Studies requires an alternative perspective for conceptualizing interactive discourses as complex, self-organizing, multi-nodal networks in which information flows in multiple directions simultaneously and constantly feeds back on itself.

David Gauntlett has called for a sweeping reconception of media studies in relation to the social networking capacity of “Web 2.0” (2009). Along with fellow theorist William Merrin, he has dubbed this nascent approach, “Media Studies 2.0.” While Media Studies 2.0 is very much a work-in-progress, Gauntlett hopes that it will eventually address “considerable changes in the media ecosystem” (147). Such changes include the ways in which Internet-based technologies “blur the range of places users can encounter, interact with and contribute to media content”…“collapse separate categories of ‘producer’ and ‘audience’” (cf. the media prosumer)…and encourage us to “turn away from ‘professional’ media productions, toward every day participatory and creative possibilities” (147).

program and its genre completely … In a negotiated reading, the viewer inflects his interpretation on the basis of a particular social experience. The viewer may enjoy a ‘pick and choose’ relation to the genre … The most radical viewing position is that of an oppositional reading—in which the viewer goes against the preferred reading” (1999, 14-5).
Approaching the issue of new media theory in a more circumspect manner, David Morley suggests that, among media scholars, there is a widespread tendency to overestimate the ‘newness’ of the digital era. Interactive technology is often defined as active and participatory in contrast to traditional electronic media, which are considered merely passive (2007, 243). Morley points out that theorists have long known that TV viewers are never simply passive and that “the activities that most viewers of interactive media engage in are often relatively trivial, such as clicking a remote control or a mouse to select one item (a camera angle, for example) from a predetermined menu of choices.” He also laments a recent rash of “digitalization fever,” the “resanctification of Marshall McLuhan” and what he describes as the “rebirth of a strand of technological determinism in media and cultural studies” (240-44).

Additionally, Morley draws our attention to a recent shift from studies of “media consumption” to ethnographic research involving “media in context.” He sounds a cautionary note regarding this process, indicating “the very real dangers of ethnography.” In his opinion, “context may be a crucial research issue, but too much of it can be a dangerous thing if a project is not to collapse under the weight of its own unanalyzed data” (251).

Although they stake out seemingly polarized positions, Gauntlett’s call to action and Morley’s concerns about properly theorizing digital media each stress the importance of developing a new,
compelling and coherent methodological paradigm. As Thomas Kuhn points out, paradigm shifts are generally discovered over time by likeminded thinkers, rather than invented by a single individual. Initially, they emerge as a means of more effectively theorizing a newly observed anomaly, something that traditional paradigms are not suited to address (1970, 53). In the case of new media, Gauntlet has outlined the anomalous aspects, and Morley has acknowledged the shortcomings of traditional models (both consumption and ethnography based). The remaining challenge involves outlining an emergent paradigm that builds off of the many ideas currently circulating in media studies as well as several related fields, including cultural anthropology, sociology, cognitive psychology, literature and rhetoric.

In order to address this challenge, media theorists are primarily looking in two directions at once—back to our most ancient cultural practice: ritual (Dayan and Katz 1992; Carey, 1989, 1998; Couldry, 2003), and forward to the farthest frontiers of ecological complexity (Hayles, 2002; Strate, 2006; Fuller, 2007). The former approach—examining media rituals—allows theorist to address the participatory nature of interactive discourses, both old and new. Unlike cultural norms, which one can either accept or reject, rituals are complex, even paradoxical, requiring a constant process of negotiation and strategic thought. We can capitalize on the benefits they afford but only if we submit to their formal constraints and demands.
Rise of the Prosumer.

In his book *The Third Wave*, Futurist Alvin Toffler (1980) coined the word “prosumer,” a neologism anticipating the eventual collapse of the distinction between producer and consumer. Recently, the term prosumer has been applied to media users in the age of the Internet (Rickert and M. Salvo, 2006), but Toffler was not actually speaking of media production and consumption. Instead, he was describing the production and consumption of material goods—the worldly province of the chief as opposed to the supernatural province of the shaman.

Toffler predicted that as mass production and standardized products created a saturated marketplace, businesses would employ mass customization to appeal to consumer demands. This would afford consumers an opportunity to participate in the production process by designing their own goods. He also stated that prosumption is an old and familiar process. Before the Industrial Revolution, most workers supported themselves by producing and consuming crops and livestock on small subsistence farms and ranches. Thus, the masses retained the means of production until about two hundred years ago. On the scale of cultural evolution, therefore, the separation of material production and consumption appears to be a fairly recent development and a fleeting one at that. In contrast, the masses largely lost the means of media production around 500 BC when many key cultural rites were transformed into
theatrical productions and ritual participants became fairly sedentary audience members. Therefore, the reemergence of the ‘media posumer’ marks more than a minor leap back to the days before industrialization, it represents a far more dramatic and far reaching return to an archaic, and in some respects, primitive cultural dynamic.

If we allow that the materialist prosumer (chief) and the media prosumer (shaman) fulfill different—sometimes complimentary, sometimes competing—social roles, we can allow that the influence of these roles may have different historic trajectories. For instance, at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, the era in which, according to Toffler, the masses stopped being material prosumers, a different type of revolution was afoot that would increasingly allow ordinary people to become media prosumers once again after thousands of years of restless spectating.

Throughout the middle ages and well into the Renaissance, the clergy and the landed gentry had largely controlled the process of mediation. These taste makers supported artists who supported their own worldviews, producing works that celebrated humanity’s “noble traits,” and by extension, their noble patrons. With the birth of capitalism, democracy, and the industrial revolution, the monarchies began to disappear, and, increasingly, the general public began to dictate popular taste. Initially, the feedback loop between the media and consumer culture was fairly lax, based on annual trends. If a certain type of book
made a splash, the following year, several books similar to it would be published, and this trend would continue until the audience tired of it or discovered a more diverting fad to embrace. The birth of the penny press helped to tighten the feedback loop between the media and consumer tastes. Soon editors, particularly in the field of high fashion, began writing about seasonal trends that might only last only a few months.

By the mid-nineteenth century, public life was speeding up and the production chain was collapsing to such a degree that manufacturing and the popular press could also produce seasonal trends. This emergent phenomenon served to jog a long dormant aspect of cultural memory, revealing new stress points in the western rationalist tradition and signaling the first stirrings of the ritual return. As the burgeoning mass media grew increasingly sensitive to consumer tastes, it became apparent that the production chain still had the potential to function as a type of ritual feedback loop—albeit a rather sluggish one—a kiva in which common knowledge could be generated and free circulated. This era also saw the rise of modern sociology, anthropology, and psychotherapy, disciplines that reconceived the individual as a product of the social environment. These views served to further accelerate the collapse of the traditional sociocultural order. Shifting norms (woman’s suffrage, the emancipation of slaves, the rise of class consciousness), coupled with the advent of new media technologies (the telegraph, the photography, the phonograph, film, radio, and TV), and an explosion of popular culture
(the tabloid press, penny dreadfuls, “hit” songs) conspired to further collapse the production chain and increasingly tighten the ritual feedback loop.

Emergence was in. Tradition was out. And immediacy was the order of the day. The public wanted news “hot off the press” and straight from “the man in the street.” Reporters in the 19th century began haunting train stations hoping to catch commuting celebrities off guard. As Ponce de Leon explains, this type of interview-by-ambush often elicited a response of “no comment” and made many celebrities hesitant to make public appearances, which in turn, inspired reporters to try that much harder to gain access to their homes (2002, 96).  

While the public continued clamoring for details about the private lives of public figures, private citizens increasingly longed for higher public profiles. The distance between audience and performer was growing closer by the minute.

Although media production was still largely influenced by the agendas of the aristocracy, the masses were exerting increased influence. Managing this emergent trend presented a significant challenge for those “in power.” As the feedback loop tightened, popular tastes began to

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34 “In a sense, human interest journalism about these figures was meant to obliterate the physical and social distance that separated readers from the movers and shakers of the world. The mass circulation press played a vital role in enabling ordinary people to apprehend this new world, mediating its bewildering complexity and impersonality by offering stories that stressed the continued importance of individual agency. Like other forms of human interest reporting, celebrity journalism sought to make the remote and impersonal seems familiar and human” (Ponce de Leon 82).
influence more than tabloid culture. Via public opinion polls, leaders could track their approval ratings. This spawned a new style of “populist politics” characterized by fear mongering, pandering, whipping up and catering to public hysteria.

While such populist tactics were a threat to the reigning elite, those who deployed them at least sought to operate within the established cultural framework. Yet a far more disruptive breed of public figure was beginning to appear. These latter day mediums were newly empowered to influence public opinion via the industrial production and worldwide distribution of books, magazine articles, newspaper editorials and broadsides containing their subversive opinions. Perhaps the most influential of these “new mediums” was Karl Marx, a figure, who, like all great shamans, believed he had utterly transcended ideology (awaking from the nightmare of history).

Figure 17. Marx

It is ironic to consider how Marxist thought resolutely denies the radicalizing potential of mediumship. After all, Marxist mediumship helped to trigger one of history’s great political revolutions by managing to posthumously instigate the emergence of communism in Russia. Yet he resolutely describes ideology as the lapdog of state power, little more
than a distracting “opiate,” meant to maintain and justify institution subjugation. Marx’s impoverished view of human psychology is characterized by a fixation on material wealth. According to him, ideology is nothing but a false promissory note, assuring the masses that they will be richly rewarded in the next life if they will just ignore the unequal distribution of wealth in this one.

To maintain this narrow view of human aspirations, Mark overlooks the ways in which ideologues often run afoul of state power. Jesus of Nazareth who espoused many views similar to Marx’s—helping the least among us, redistributing wealth—is but one example of this type of ideological firebrand. At any rate, this blind spot in Marxist thought would, eventually, help to create Stalin’s demagoguery. Outlawing traditional religious practice, merely created the necessary conditions for the emergence of a god/king, the pernicious conflation of shaman and chief into one figure. Belief abhors a vacuum and in the absence of a separate and distinct ideological system, the masses tend to worship state authority and its human godhead uncritically.

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35 Marx is never more ideological than when he claims to be transcending all belief in *The Germany Ideology (1846)*. Materialism, in his view, is the antithesis of belief, a clear-eyed vision of humanity as it actually is, or at least, as it should be.

36 Most tribal cultures are sophisticated enough to practice a separation of church and state, locating worldly authority in the figure of the chief and numinous power in the figure of the shaman or ritual “medium,” refusing to conflate the two.
Marx must have intuitively understood that media production is not the same as material production; otherwise, he would not have been such an inspired medium.\(^{37}\) His work does not reflect what must have been a largely unconscious conviction. Nonetheless, it has gone on to influence generations of thinkers, who find his economic and political insights a highly effective means of critiquing capitalism.

**Economics and Ecologies.**

In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that the “root metaphors” that a culture embraces structure its view of the world (1980, 22). For example, thinking of marriage as a “contract” carries a different set of expectations than thinking of it as “a game,” or “a negotiation,” or “Russian roulette.” In the case of Cultural Studies, the dominant metaphor has long been that of an “economic system.” Because the field is grounded in Marxist theory, it posits a materialist view of cultural life. Races and Genders are described as social “classes” with individuals exchanging and stockpiling “cultural,” “social” and “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1972, 1984, 1994). Status is something to be “acquired” and “earned.”

\(^{37}\) According to Marx, when masses seize the means of material production, a communist utopia should naturally emerge. Yet while it is apparent that the masses now have the means of *media* production, our current political climate more closely resembles a free-for-all between rampaging capitalist exploitation and anarchy.
In contrast to Marx, contemporary economists view financial markets as complex and interdependent ecosystems based largely on the exchange of immaterial assets such as “stocks” and “derivatives.” They emphasize emotional affect, the ways in which sudden “panics,” waning “consumer confidence” and “investor timidity” influence markets. What's more, within a single geographical region such as the United States, citizens participate in multiple forms of economic exchange, garnering “frequent flyer miles,” “rewards points” and “game credits.” One economy represents the role of “world traveler,” another, the role of “savvy consumer,” still another, the role of “video game aficionado.” These alternate economies exist because human beings are complex. We seek out multiple economies because we crave multiple means of negotiating between the environment and our multiple selves.

![Multiple Economies](image)

**Figure 18. Multiple Economies**

Such complexity is alien to Marx, who was chiefly concerned with the exchange of capital within fairly predictable markets and between rigidly stratified class structures. Writing at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, he framed his arguments in terms of rational and coherent economic structures. Through the years, this reductive paradigm has been challenged and modified in a number of ways, even as it has
continued to exert a strong influence on scholarly discourse (Hall 1980; Williams 1978; Laclau & Mouffe 1985).

The economic metaphor long-favored by cultural studies is not unrivaled. Since the early 1970’s, the notion of a cultural “ecosystem” has been vying for increased consideration. Its inaugural moment was tied to the rise of modern ecological movements in the early nineteen seventies, but it has recently experienced a resurgence related to the emergence of the Internet and new media. As communication systems grow more complex and interactive, theorists increasingly invoke biological metaphors to describe their intricacies, yet the ecologic model sits uneasily beside the economic perspective, which remains the dominant paradigm for cultural studies.

Marxism is a particularly effective means of critiquing the exploitive practices of capitalism, but it does have many blind spots. For one thing, it is based on a 19th century view of economics with little relevance to our current Post-Fordist age. Yet that is not its greatest shortcoming. After all, even in the 19th century, human beings were not merely influenced by economic forces. Like any savvy ritualists, Marx sought to define the world in terms that afforded him the highest degree of ritual authority. His materialist conception of human society enshrined the economist as a type of philosopher king with insights into the true nature of human existence. By conjuring a particular conception of material existence, he identified what ailed humankind and prescribed his
own cure: communism. Yet, ironically, by attempting to critique capitalism’s acquisitive nature, he made “capital” itself the measure of all things. Marx’s economic metaphor reduces human relations to little more than material negotiations. Such an approach standardizes and stratifies culture in a manner so “apparently rigorous,” it cannot help but appeal to the frustrated scientist residing in the heart of every humanist, yet, as with any business transaction, there’s a price to be paid. The economic metaphor makes all sorts of blanket assumptions, especially regarding human motives, which are homogenized almost beyond recognition. It asserts that everyone in all social contexts seeks the same singular mode of cultural empowerment—improved material conditions. This is simple not true.

Marx wrote his doctoral thesis on the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who believed that the avoidance of fear and pain is the primary purpose of human existence. Epicurus was a sensualist who rejected the idea that the gods intervene in human affairs or that the soul lives on after death. Marx would break with the more elitist views espoused by the ancient philosopher, but in many respects, his is a modified Epicurean worldview. The similarity is most pronounced in Marx’s conception of man as “homo economicus,” a narrowly self-interested actor focused chiefly on the acquisition of creature comforts. According to this view, religion is little more than a promissory note for an “eternal reward,” a
way of duping the masses into accepting an unjust distribution of wealth here on earth in exchange for a big payday in the afterlife.\footnote{Iain Chambers has this to say about the economic metaphor, “The critical monologue that drones on castigating contemporary culture as if it were a unique ideological bloc subject to the role of an unmediated, wholly rational, economic mechanism (Fredric Jameson’s ‘logic of late capitalism,’ David Harvey’s ‘condition of postmodernity’), is concerned with the philosophical fate of mankind and the alienation of MAN in abstract. It has little to say about how real woman and men get by and make sense of the conditions in which they find themselves. It cannot speak to the lives, fears, hopes, passions and expressions revealed in the immediate culture of the everyday world” (1994, 97).}

In *The German Ideology* (1846), in which he and Friedrich Engels formulate the views that will serve as the philosophical basis of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx argues that his “materialist” worldview is utterly non-ideological. He has, by his own account, transcended belief. Engels assists him in this regard by coining the term “false consciousness.” Victims of false consciousness have, according to Engels, been seduced by ideology. Losing sight of the fact that their class interests are closely aligned with members of their own economic strata, they fixate on other forms of difference: race, gender, sexuality, etc. The terminology is telling. Engels states emphatically that a perspective focusing on similarities other than class is not “different,” or “alternative.” It is purely and simply, “false.”

One of the first major revisions of classical Marxism came from Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci. Karl Marx had predicted that workers in the Industrial Age would eventually rebel against the capitalist system, rising up in revolt. This eventually occurred in Russia and China, but not...
in more advanced industrialized democracies. In order to account for the apparent complacency of western workers, Gramsci modified the term of “hegemony.” As Raymond Williams explains, “The traditional definition of ‘hegemony’ is political rule or domination, especially in relations between states. Marxism extended the definition to rule or domination between social classes, and especially to definitions of a ruling class” (1977, 109). Gramsci modifies the term yet again, defining it as a type of consensual fiction serving the ruling class but perpetuated by all society. Primarily, this occurs when values that primarily benefit the elites come to be seen as universal norms thought to benefit everyone. The concept of hegemony explains how dominant groups retain political, economic and ideological power with the consent of the majority (Gramsci 1935).

While this definition of “hegemony” is the one generally accepted by Cultural Studies, many theorists have pointed out that Gramsci was far from consistent in his use of the word (Comaroff 2006; Williams 1978; Gitlin 1979). This has led to some instances of oversimplification. As Raymond Williams explains, “A static hegemony, of the kind that is indicated by abstract totalizing definitions of a dominant ‘ideology’ or ‘worldview,’ can ignore or isolate alternatives and opposition” (1977, 113). By emphasizing the idea that hegemony is an active process, rather than a “social fact,” Williams offers a more ecological view of the term. He allows that its practices are “reciprocally confirming,” serving the interests of the ruling class, but also, to a lesser—but nonetheless
significant—degree, those who adopt postures of subordination. He also allows for the emergence of “alternative” and “oppositional hegemonies” (110-3).

Additional modifications of the term appear in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, presumes the necessity of social innovation. In fact, they define “hegemony” as an open and chaotic system and emphasize its “unsutured character.”

Laclau and Mouffe describe themselves as “post-Marxists.” They object to classical Marxist theory as it points toward a post-political state of perfect equality via perfect consensus that strikes them as neither attainable nor desirable for creatures as complex and contradictory as human beings.

Yet many theorists are reluctant to break with Marx entirely. The 19th century economic metaphor is clearly reductive, but it is also an effective means of critiquing issues of class conflict and cultural oppression. To a certain degree, money *does* make the world go around,

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39 Laclau and Mouffe define hegemony as, “a form of politics which is founded not upon dogmatic postulation of any ‘essence of the social,’ but, on the contrary, on affirmation on the contingency and ambiguity of every essence, and on the constitutive character of social division and antagonism”...“an ‘order’ which exists only as a partial limiting of disorder; of a ‘meaning’ which is constructed only as excess and paradox in the face of meaninglessness—in other words, the field of the political as the space for a game which is never ‘zero-sum,’ because the rules and the players are never fully explicit. This game, which eludes the concept, does at least have a name: hegemony” (1985, 193).
yet it is hardly the only motivating force one can associate with human behavior. This is why it is problematic to conflate issues of “race,” “gender” or “sexuality” with the concept of an economic class. For instance, in 1969, the concept of “class” was invoked in a founding text of Second Wave Feminism, the “Redstocking Manifesto.” It reads:

Women are an oppressed class. Our oppression is total, affecting every facet of our lives. We are exploited as sex objects, breeders, domestic servants, and cheap labor. We are considered inferior beings, whose only purpose is to enhance men’s lives. Our humanity is denied. Our prescribed behavior is enforced by the threat of physical violence (1969, 223).

This polemic draws attention to the manner in which women are unfairly exploited in the workplace and the domestic sphere, but it proves problematic in other respects. As Raymond Williams warns, “It is misleading as a general method, to reduce all political and cultural initiatives and contributions to the terms of the hegemony…The specific functions of ‘the hegemonic,’ ‘the dominant,’ have always to be stressed, but not in ways which suggest any a priori totality” (1977, 113). Totalizing statements presume that resistance is futile, yet clearly it is not, women have made great strides since the early seventies. As Holland
et al. point out, “Even within grossly asymmetrical power relations, the powerful participants rarely control the weaker so completely that the latter’s ability to improvise resistance becomes irrelevant” (1998, 277). What’s more, every individual is a multiplicity of identities existing in a multiplicity of social contexts simultaneously, so oppression is almost never total.

**Distinction.**

The constructivist theories of Pierre Bourdieu draw attention to alternative modes of socio-cultural empowerment, and yet retain a primarily Marxist outlook. Bourdieu focuses on stockpiling markers of class distinction, what he calls “cultural,” “social” and “symbolic capital” (1972, 1984, 1994). However, the economic metaphor is strained when we considered that distinctions are not merely *acquired* from without (as with music trivia, business contacts, and college degrees); they are also

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40 When defining markers of distinction, Bourdieu repeatedly emphasizes the economic basis of his conception: “Because they are acquired in social fields which are also markets in which they receive their price, cultural competences are dependent on these markets, and all struggles over culture are aimed at creating the market most favorable to the products which are marked, in their manners, by a particular class of conditions of acquisition, i.e. a particular market” (96). He allows that what is called the “counter-culture” may be the “product” of an endeavor to create a sort of alternative market “with its own consecrating agencies” (96). Yet while this appears to allow for a measure of cultural innovation, human motives remain narrowly constrained by his acquisitive scheme. According to this way of thinking, the only reason for bucking the system is to create a new system more advantageous to one’s ability to accumulate wealth and power.
cultivated from within (as with talent, charm and temperament) and physically embodied (as with visual appearance and vocal tone). As Bourdieu suggests, certain dominant economies of distinction do exist; yet I argue that in the age of globalization and the Internet, they under tremendous stress and becoming increasingly destabilized. What’s more, we never exist in a single economy at any one time. A person in a corporate board meeting is being pulled in multiple directions by multiple modes of identification. When he speaks, he speaks as a businessperson, but also as a member of a particular ethnic group, a particular gender, a particular class, a particular sexual orientation, etc. A statement that counts as “cultural capital” within one of these ecologies may signal a loss of status in another. Thus, he is engaged in a constant negotiation between competing ecologies defined by competing modes of identification. Like all Marxist-inflected critiques, Bourdieu’s theory of “distinction” focuses on the transaction of standardized currency. He writes: “Practice never ceases to conform to economic calculation even when it gives every appearance of disinterestedness by departing from the logic of interested calculation (in the narrow sense) and playing for stakes that are non-material and not easily quantified” (1972, 177). Here,  

Ellen Seiter says, “Critics of Bourdieu have suggested that his model is functionalist, overly pessimistic and deterministic, and puts forward the dominant ideology as an all-powerful and universally accepted standard” (1999, 27). John Hall points out that Bourdieu assumes that everyone recognizes the legitimacy of distinctions handed down ‘from above’: ‘To describe any one social group’s calculus as the effective one is to confer legitimacy to a calculus that, as Bourdieu recognizes, remains in play with others…’ (Hall 1992, 279).
Bourdieu draws our attention to the value of non-material practices, but maintains the Logocentric view that symbolic resources are merely cultural *products* to be kept at arms length rather than affordances, inviting the formation and contestation of various modes of identification.

Additionally, Bourdieu has theorized the interplay of determined norms and emergent circumstances in terms of a collection of “dispositions” largely prefabricated by social forces. He writes, “Each agent, wittingly or unwittingly, willy nilly, is a producer and reproducer of a modus operandi of which he is not the producer and has no conscious mastery, they contain an ‘objective intention,’ as the Scholastics put it, which always outruns his conscious intentions. The schemes of thought and expression he has acquired are the basis of the *intentionless invention* [his emphasis] of regulated improvisation” (79).

According to this view, emergent circumstances present the individual with a particular challenge, and he reflexively deploys a disposition that is, hopefully, appropriate. Contra Bourdieu, I argue that we are *not* behavioral jukeboxes preprogrammed to play specific “tunes” when the occasion demands. In many respects, we are just as complex as the world around us. Thus our identities are not merely a selection of prefabricated dispositions conforming to the pursuit of institutional distinction. Our motives are many and our various personality traits are in

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42 David Gauntlett finds Bourdieu’s perspective too restrictive and states, “It is not clear whether putting the notion of self-reflexivity (which highlights agency) within the frame of the habitus (which is mostly an outline of constraint) can really work” (2007, 66-69).
constant dialogue with the environment, serving to shape it even as it shapes us. As Anthony Giddens argues, the self is never an accomplished thing. Instead, it is an ongoing project, “something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual” (1991, 52).

The media prosumer is not chiefly an economic actor, because he is not exclusively or even primarily motivated by economic gain. Marshall McLuhan considered media technologies “the extensions of man” (1964), but media practices are the site of identification itself (or perhaps “its selves”). They are where the ongoing construction, destruction and reconstruction of multiple forms of “selfhood” occur.

Standardized systems of cultural, social and symbolic status presuppose a “standardized humanity.” If forms of “symbolic capital” can be ranked on a standardized scale—i.e. an expensive home is always more impressive than an advanced degree—then all cultural contexts and modes of interaction must be roughly equivalent, but this is simply not true. What counts as legitimacy among entrepreneurs is quite different than what counts as legitimacy among academics. In some instances, entire values systems may be inverted, so that a quality stigmatized in one context is prized in another. Cultural environments are complex and so are the people who comprise them. A particular environment or individual can only successfully symbolize certain ideals and not others.
In his later work, Bourdieu expands his definition of “symbolic capital” to account for physical appearance, writing: “One of the dimensions of symbolic capital, in differentiated societies, is ethnic identity, which, with names or skin color, is a percipi, a being-perceived, functioning as positive or negative symbolic capital” (1994, 104). By allowing that people can physically embody symbolic value, this modification both elaborates and undermines his initial scheme. After all, how can something truly function as capital if it cannot be freely exchanged? Mediums model identities that others may emulate in order to feel symbolically empowered, but this is not an exchange of goods, it is a conjuring of collective memory, a communal rite. The transaction that occurs is not between bargaining individuals; it is between the tribal members and their shared sense of identity.

The notion of “symbolic capital” presumes a cultural coherence that is at best, highly provisional in people’s day-to-day lives. Even within a single context, different modes of identification invoke different types of authority. A Hispanic male, a black woman and a white woman all walk into the same room. Before they speak, much of their perceived authority is apparent. This is related to who else is in the room and how those people view the world, but it is also tied to the physical appearance of the three aforementioned individuals. Picturing the Hispanic male, the black woman and the white woman, one might ask, who can speak most authoritatively about issues of gender? Who do can speak most
authoritatively about issues of race? Such preconceptions may ultimately prove false. But they nonetheless exist. Thus they are culturally relevant and frequently exploited by medium’s summoning the right to speak as a particular type of individual.

We do not only speak for a cause, after all, we also speak as a cause. And based on our perceived identity, we all find it easier to speak “as” certain causes than others. We cultivate particular types of identity in order to claim particular types of authority. This does not mean we can entirely control how others see us. But it does mean we can, in some respects, utilize the ways in which we are seen in order to leverage meaningful cultural change.

*Emerging Ecologies.*

Because new media discourses afford ritual participation at the global scale, people from all walks of life can interact. So rather than defining community in terms of local norms, new media rites offer highly complex modes of identification and dissociation, hence the value of the ecological perspective, which allows theorists to conceptualize the complexity of multiple overlapping and interpenetrating discourses. Following the fluctuations of these interrelated but often clashing ecologies is a bit like tracking shifting weather patterns. It requires a theoretical approach that can acknowledge complexity without becoming overwhelmed by it. In an effort to address such challenges, media
theorists have increasingly dispensed with deterministic schemes and the whole notion of “media effects,” hence the recent influx of terminology from the field of ecological psychology and its related fields: systems theory, chaos theory, connectionism, biosemiotics, situated learning, Actor Network Theory (ANT), speech acts, pragmatism, radical empiricism and cognitive anthropology.

Words such as “ecology,” “ecosystem,” “complex system,” “emergent behavior,” “meme” and one of the most fashionable buzzwords of all, “affordance,” have begun to infuse the lexicon of media studies, but there is a problem. These terms were originally used to describe phenomenon in the physical environment and nothing more. Media studies, on the other hand, is interested in how human beings mediate between the perceived environment and the conceived environment, between raw sensory experiences and the cultural significance we glean from them, between the territory and the map. Because of this, ecological terms and popular conceptions of media phenomena are not perfectly compatible. Certainly the need for a new theoretical paradigm is pressing, and the ecological perspective is promising in many respects. It tantalizes with the prospect of potentially theorizing complex interactive discourses. But because the map can never actually be the territory, it seems that some recalibration is in order. In the pages that follow, I attempt to bring ecological theory and media studies into closer accord. To clarify: this work does not argue against
the use of ecological terms in media studies, nor does it praise such efforts uncritically. Instead, it focuses on the ways in which ecological theory and media studies are both compatible in some respects and seemingly incompatible in others. Concepts from ecological theory cannot be effectively imported into media studies unless we first modify engrained perspectives regarding how these two fields do and do not relate to one another.

The ecological perspective has informed many different fields, including anthropology (Bateson 1972), economics (Martínez-Alier & Schlupmann 1993), philosophy (Guattari 2000), politics (Bennett 2009) and theology (McFague 1993). In the age of the Internet, the mass media is often referred to as a vast “ecology,” but the characteristics of this complex adaptive system are very much in dispute. Business leaders focus chiefly on the institutional applications of information exchange (Davenport & Prusak 1997). The disciples of Marshall McLuhan and the Toronto School emphasize the formal dimensions of media technologies (Altheide 1995; Biersack 1999; Lum 2006; Strate 2006). And some literary theorists have begun to examine the relationship between semiotics, technology and culture (Hayles 2002; Kittler 1999). So far, however, no dominant conception of what constitutes a media ecosystem has emerged. Perhaps this is because theorists are wary of defining complexity too narrowly. After all, a perspective that defines media ecologies and affordances primarily in terms of technological hardware
(McLuhan 1964) is not truly complex. By the same token, a perspective that asserts the primacy of cultural influence (Williams 1974) is also incomplete. The analysis of complexity is not a zero sum game. Any perspective that seeks to claim complexity for its camp by denying it to others is ultimately self-limiting. To define ‘media complexity’ strictly in terms of one mode of influence (textual, technological, institutional or performative) is to confine oneself to a perspective too narrow to conceptualize how the interplay of all of these contributing factors works to afford both emergent and determined influence.

Fortunately, increasingly inclusive notions of complexity are gaining acceptance. Matthew Fuller, for instance, has surveyed the above perspectives while refusing to provide a neat Hegelian synthesis (2007). Also, Bruno Latour has posited “political ecology,” a way of defining complexity in terms of ideological agonism, as opposed to perfect homeostatic equilibrium (2004). While Latour’s view is a bit challenging to conceptualize, it possesses the virtue of being truly complex. What’s

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43 Marshall McLuhan spoke of media complexity as early as The Guttenberg Galaxy (1962). The title of that work referred to a type of media ecosystem. In later interviews, he explicitly discussed “media ecologies” (2005) and his followers continue to advocate an ecological perspective that emphasizes the ways in which technological complexity influences culture (Strate 2006). These theorists tend to downplay or overlook the significance local and historic cultural influence.

44 Though an advocate of the ecological metaphor, Raymond Williams tends to focus on cultural phenomena such as “societies, languages and institutions” rather than technologies (1983). In fact, he calls Marshall McLuhan a “technological determinist and argues that culture, not technology, is the primary influence on media discourse (1974).
more, it works to unsettle the contrived distinction between nature and culture that has haunted humanity since the days when the first ritualists sought communion with increasingly estranged animistic spirits.45

*Cultivating Identity.*

Perhaps the most unnerving thing about new mediums is that, despite our apparent self-absorption, we are not exclusively motivated by the acquisition of material wealth and institutional status. In fact, we tend to reject metaphors that equate all acts of cultural engagement with forms of economic gain. Overall, new mediums make far less money and receive far less acclaim for producing and distributing media than their predecessors did, and yet we continue to freely create and share texts on an unprecedented scale. It appears, therefore, that the new mediums may not be exclusively, or even primarily, economic actors. We may actually cares less about the acquisition of institutionally sanctioned status than the *cultivation of identity*. Certainly, we crave fame and fortune, but when they are not immediately forthcoming, we continues our mediation rites undaunted, accepting that there are as many different measures of success as there are human motives and that there are many ways of assuming ritual authority in relation to them. We can adopt a superior posture, make a pathetic appeal, or battle injustice. We can claim to be detached

45 The burgeoning field of “biosemiotics” views culture as an organic outgrowth of nature (Wheeler 2006, 35).
and objective, or ironically debunk received wisdom. We can even affirm a shared worldview by playing the role of victim or villain. Because each of these postures requires specific aptitudes and frames the medium in a particular light, our primary concern is having some say regarding the roles we eventually attempt to play.

When becoming the medium we don't just submit to authority, we claim it. After all, the root of authority is “author.” And authorship is merely the formalized version of mediumship. Becoming the medium means claiming the authority to participate in the process of authoring our own lives. This is what primarily interests ritual actors, a desire for some semblance of self-determination, however, compromised and constrained. If mediums were merely interested in social status, we would be easy to control, but we are forever envisioning something beyond our immediate circumstances. This can leave us vulnerable to attack, but it can also inspire others to follow our lead. This is what compels our restless striving, not some external marker of distinction, but an internal longing to become visible, to be seen in a particular way at a particular moment in time. After all, even when we seek the approval of the chief, we remain, first and foremost, a shaman.

Next.

The following chapter examines the ways in which competing cultural niches vie to influence larger media ecologies. In order to explore
such dynamics in depth, I focus on a single case study related to footage of a young Iranian woman, Neda Agha Soltan. Soltan is shown dying on camera after being shot during her country’s post-election protests in the summer of 2009. This powerful and disturbing viral video has become a compelling media affordance for groups seeking to advance different ideological agendas by conflating Neda’s death with concepts related to their most heartfelt beliefs.
When the social world is in disarray, we are especially persuadable, but the manner in which we are persuaded always speaks to our preferred modes of self-definition. When a group of animals gravitates to a particular “ecological niche,” they are self-organizing according to collective needs, but also individual abilities and interests. Some prefer high plateaus, some lush lowlands. All preferences involve some degree of strategic choices. The animals take stock of various
alternatives before selecting the paths that appear most congenial to their aptitudes and desires (Gibson 1979, 128-30).46

The same thing occurs within and among cultural ecologies. Whereas the inhabitants of physical niches are defined by physiological traits, the inhabitants of cultural niches are defined by ideological dispositions, specifically, a particular mode of identification that members of the niche are attempting to adopt. Usually, these groups are clustered around a central conflation that insists someone or something they relate to must be consubstantial with a concept deserving of utmost respect.

By joining a particular niche, ritualists are seeking out what psychologists called the “halo effect,” a sort of “sanctification by association, a burnishing of their personal “brand” (Rosenzweig 2009). Joining a cultural niche often means basking in the reflected radiance of a famous medium, celebrating their ritual role, while perhaps evading its more stringent requirements. If we are somewhat reluctant to follow in the exact footsteps of those who commit entirely to a cause, we are happy to cheer them from the periphery. And even if we are unwilling to risk as much as they do, our identities are still linked to them. By framing these individuals in a particular light, we are building a case for how we want

46 “In ecology a niche is a setting of environmental features that are suitable for an animal, into which it fits metaphorically”(Gibson 1979, 129).
to be seen, the particular type of ritual authority we wish to claim and thus, the type of cultural influence we hope to wield.

This chapter focuses on the cultural niches that have formed in relation to a bit of cell phone footage revealing the death of a young Iranian woman, Neda Agha Soltan. Soltan was shot and killed during Iran’s post-election protests in the summer of 2009. The pages that follow are a mix of digital ethnography, rhetorical analysis and ritual analysis examining the complex practices related to circulating, analyzing and remediating the “Neda footage.” In addition to drawing on a wide variety of news sources, magazines, documentaries, websites, blogs and viral videos, I refer to the work of political analysts (Diane Singerman 2004; Beeman 2005; Chesters & Welsh 2006; Hamedani 2009), rhetoricians (Crowley 2006) and social commentators (Sontag 2006).

*Neda.*

There wasn’t much time. The bullet had hit her chest. She was already on the ground, bleeding, in shock, losing consciousness. When she saw the cell-phone-camera did she realize it was capturing her last moments? Or was she just staring at it out of habit, the ways she had looked into the camera when her recent portraits had been taken? Is there a glimmer of consciousness in the face staring at us as we witness the tragic spectacle of her life irretrievably draining away? The power of that
gaze has been subsequently, distorted, suppressed, exaggerated and
denied, but it cannot be dismissed.

Figure 20. Neda

Human beings have to make sense of our highly chaotic world.
Our minds are not blank slates, waiting to be constructed by external
stimuli. What matters to us are the things that resonate with views we are
already firmly clinging to, or desperately attempting to grasp. The world
around us is rife with emergent trends looking for opportunities to spread.
Media affordances that resonate with these phenomena operate as strange
attractors, drawing us toward them, creating discursive patterns out of the
confused welter of everyday life. Images that captured the Death of
Saddam Hussein, the abuses of Abu Ghraib and the 9/11 attacks all
possessed a particular type of significance for those who recorded and
distributed them, but they immediately took on countless new meanings
for people who viewed them in different locations and from different
ideological perspectives around the world.

In a similar sense, footage of Neda Agha Soltan, a young woman
killed during Iran’s post-election protests in the summer of 2009, has
inspired the creation of many competing discursive patterns, compelling
to different groups for different reasons. These cultural niches are all vying to define the ideological significance of her death.

Immediately after Neda was shot, she was buried without an autopsy. The Iranian government ordered all of the mosques in Tehran to close so there would be no official funeral. A few people attempted to gather at the site of her death, but were dispersed by militia members. Flowers were left on the site, but witnesses say a garbage truck came by and dumped trash on them (BBC 6/25/09).

As with a gang member crossing out the tag of a rival crew, gestures like this are a form of symbolic violence, a way of fighting ritual with ritual. In the aftermath of Neda’s death, such discursive aggression has been quite common. Cultural niches from around the globe have engaged in rhetorical warfare, effacing and defacing the influence of rival groups, while staking out and defending their own ideological terrain. Often this involves tagging images of Neda in various ways. Ritual mediums have sought to define her, and, by extension, themselves, according to long held and newly emergent beliefs. Interacting via YouTube videos, social media sites, and mainstream news outlets, they conflate her identity with positive and negative imagery in order to associate and dissociate it with their own identities.

Figure 21. Neda Tag
As polarized as the various “Neda niches” appear, at the scale of the larger Neda ecology, they do agree on certain common features. They all acknowledge the existence of cell phone footage of a young woman who appears to have been shot and appears to be dying amid protests on the streets of Iran. However, when it comes to interpreting who this woman is, who shot her, why she died, and in fact, whether she actually died or not, they are in sharp disagreement. At the scale of the general Neda ecology, we can recognize certain common features, yet at the scale of smaller Neda niches, striking differences begin to emerge.

Notions of “scale” are a key aspect of ecological theory. This is because an ecological perspective defines difference in terms of relative perceptions rather than absolute conceptions. In other words, rather than insisting that Neda was absolutely a martyr, a rebel or a hoax, it allows that, from different perspectives, she can been seen as all these things. This does not, however, mean that all Neda’s are created equal.

The logical mind illuminates by identifying accurate causes (Neda was killed by a bullet) and deludes by suggesting misleading causes (the bullet was fired by a fellow protestor or the CIA or a British journalist). The analogical mind illuminates by identifying accurate correlations (Neda resembles religious martyrs of the past) and deludes by identifying misleading correlations (Like other Iranian martyrs, Neda was killed by enemies of the Iranian government). Because we do not merely decode information, we also move around inside of it, we engage with media
maps in multiple ways, often at the same time. This fluidity of motion allows us to more readily recognize media affordances that may or may not be based on accurate causation and correlation. Fortunately, flawed logical and analogical assumptions are often easier to detect at the scale of more expansive ecologies, levels of generalization that carefully counterbalance multiple contesting maps. For instance, at the scale of the entire media ecology related to Neda Agha Soltan, we discover that little empirical evidence has been produced to support the claim that Neda’s death was a hoax whereas much evidence has been produced to indicate she was a real person killed by a member of the Basij militia, a paramilitary force whose members had been attacking and murdering protestors for several days.

This is a key feature of the ecological perspective; James Gibson’s insistence that affordances can be directly perceived as objective features in the world, rather than sensory stimuli trapped inside our individual psyches.\footnote{“An important fact about affordances of the environment is that they are in a sense objective, real, and physical, unlike values and meanings, which are often supposed to be subjective, phenomenal, and mental. But, actually, an affordance is neither an objective property nor a subjective property; or it is both if you like. An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer” (Gibson 1979, 129).} Although we can never determine definitively what Neda’s death should mean for all time and all people, we can at
least have some basis for forming general opinions about who she was and how she died.

Many of the people who have sought to define the meaning of the Neda footage live outside of Iran and are not of Iranian dissent. Their connection to the circumstances surrounding Neda’s death are based primarily on ideology rather than direct ethnic or geographic affiliation. Most of them have never been to Iran, or the Middle East and do not have close contact with anyone from that region. Nonetheless, many of them have participated in impassioned protests on behalf of Neda and the Iranian people.

In their book *Complexity and Social Movements: Multitudes at the Edge of Chaos*, Graeme Chesters and Ian Welsh make the counter-intuitive claim that such “weak ties” are becoming an increasingly important aspect of social activism. As it turns out, weak ties, rather than direct affiliations and strong friendships are a more important means of launching new projects, organizing protests and accessing news. “This is because weak ties are crucial for being able to communicate beyond one’s immediate social (or activist) worlds” (2006, 105).\footnote{48 Chesters and}

\footnote{\footnotesize{48 Terrorism draws attention to political issues by inflicting victimage. Passive resistance accomplishes the same thing by enduring victimage. In both cases, the significance of the act is tied to the fact that it is to be witnessed by others outside of the immediate cultural milieu. Innovative activists such as Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King realized the value of exposing instances of political injustice to outside observers, who might pressure their foes to behave in a more humane manner. As Bernard Giesen explains, “Rituals of collective identity are no longer a matter of just two parties, the insiders and the excluded and offended outsiders.}}
Welsh discuss the concept of “bridge worlds,” which are defined as “spaces wherein diverse movements [can] be made.” In such ecological niches, weak ties function as “social bridges” and serve to facilitate communication and provide access to resources (105). Because they are widely dispersed, flexible and adaptive, weak ties are a highly effective means of mobilizing social movements and spreading emergent behaviors. They “activate new channels of information and maximize potential for agency” (105). Examples of weak tie connections include: emails, social networking, blogging and file sharing. Ecological niches defined largely by weak ties are characterized by structural resilience, rapid communication, collective intelligence and decentralized patterns of bottom-up self-organization. They are highly effective at information management, material and symbolic contestation and mobilization at both the local and global levels. To some extent, the weaker the ties, the greater the complexity. The fact that many niche-alliances emerge online obviates traditional barriers to participation. While members of the ecological niche are well aware of traditional hierarchies of class, culture, age, gender, and race, they are less constrained by them than activists in the street. As Diane Singerman explains in her essay “The Networked World of Islamist Social Movements,” informal transnational activist networks are “key transmission belts of collective identity, drawing the ideas, sensibilities, reflexivity of people together while crisscrossing

Instead, they are constantly monitored and morally evaluated by a large third part, that is, the international public” (2004, 152).
social, economic, and political hierarchies” (2004, 144). The ties that are
cultivated by these networks forge identities that challenge the boundary
between institutionalized and non-institutionalized politics. According to
Singerman, such activism subverts institutional politics by employing
innovative collective action. Collective action is defined as innovative if
it “incorporates claims, selects objects of claims, includes collective self-
representations, and/or adopts means that are either unprecedented or
forbidden within the regime in question” (150).

As participatory media discourses rearticulate the boundary
between the public and the private, traditional institutional structures are
undercut by the strategic mobilization of competing ideological visions.
These discourses rely on loose, informal, personal networks and religious
and cultural affiliations. Because they are loosely aggregated, they are
challenging to combat. There is no central command to neutralize, no
organizational hierarchy to subvert, no coherent strategy to counter. Their
influence spans multiple social and political fields, intentionally and
unintentionally shaping discourse in multiple ways by mediums invoking
multiple types of ritual authority. The ritualists in question include
“religious and intellectual authorities, poets, essayists, journalists,
cartoonists, and even movie producers” (152). Focusing on the issue of
Islamic activism, Singerman adds, “Given sets of rituals, practices, and
cultural artifacts can themselves be ‘evidence’ of commitment to the
Islamic movement and signs of shared beliefs that resonate among fellow
travelers. Identifying movement adherents by these processes of signification”(152).

The discourses surrounding Middle Eastern politics are highly ritualized for a number of reasons. The cultures involved are deeply religious, new media technologies allow them to publicly proselytize, and because they live under the rule of repressive regimes, more conventional modes of dissent are often illegal. 49 Strong commitments and weak ties enable strategic reflection and practical invention, retaining diversity whilst exerting social and political force.

In weak tie niches, little things mean a lot. The minor player may exert significant influence by altering environmental conditions in a meaningful way. Thus, unpredictable and frequently spectacular outcomes are the result of seemingly peripheral activities (Chesters & Welsh 2006, 101-8).

49 Writing in 2004, Diane Singerman explained, “The Middle East, as a region, is characterized by political exclusion and extremely limited practices of citizenship. Monarchy, dynastic rule, and the military dominate political life, plain and simple. Families, with hereditary right to rule, govern 14 Middle Eastern states outright (144). With the political revolutions that have recently occurred in the Middle East, Singerman’s statistics are in flux. Nonetheless, they reveal how historically oppressed the general populace has been. Singerman adds, “Legislative bodies remain subject to the pleasure of the monarch and political parties, and other groups suffer from legal and extralegal constraints on fund-raising, mobilization, and freedom of association” (145). What’s more, “The modern state, as such, continues to thrive with little transparency, financial accountability, legislative or judicial autonomy, or rule of law” (145). Yet, as Singerman also points out, “Particularly in repressive systems, symbolic politics and collective identity build movements characterized as ‘discursive communities’” (152).
Figures 22 & 23. Direct Identification

Some activists directly conflated themselves with Neda.

Figure 24. Indirect Identification

Other conflations were indirect, with mediums honoring her via candlelight vigils, creating shrines and chanting. These rites were highly reverential, associating her with saints and martyrs of the past.50

Figure 25. Positive and Negative Conflations

Some mediums stressed positive conflations. Some stressed negative conflations. Some stressed both.51

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50 Bernhard Giesen explains that rituals of remembrance “abandon traditional modes of constructing collective identity in manifold ways. They focus on victims instead of victors, on the past instead of the future, on the similar fate of the outsiders instead of the homogeneity of the insiders…Cultivating memories by rituals and memorials creates a collective identity that is protected against doubts and objections” (2004, 153-4).
Since the advent of suicide bombing in the 1980s, stories of middle-eastern “martyrs” willingly dying for their beliefs have become an all-too-familiar feature of international news coverage. In some respects, Neda’s death resembles these martyrdom operations. She was Iranian, taking part in a political protest, and supporters say she willingly died for her beliefs. Yet unlike other middle-eastern martyrs, Neda has been canonized around the world. This suggests that the act of martyrdom, which western commentators often equate with outmoded superstition, remains emotionally compelling to the supposedly “secular” west. Unlike the Iranian martyrs usually discussed in the press, Neda had not set out to harm anyone else. Also, according to popular interpretations, she had died for freedom, democracy and feminism. Here was a martyr that the west could uncritically celebrate, but how exactly did she emerge?

Psychologist Peter Weinreich defines two types of “aspirational identification.” The first involves attempting to emulate a favored agent. The second involves attempting to dissociate with a despised agent (2003, 97).
The Protests.

On June 12, 2009 Iran conducted its presidential election. Shortly after the polls closed, there were reports that the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, had won a decisive victory. The following day, Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Hoseyni Khamenei officially announced the election results in favor of Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad’s opponent, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, immediately questioned the validity of the vote and demanded either a recount, or an entirely new vote. Around this time, the ruling regime ordered a media blackout to limit communications coming in or out of the country. Also Iran’s Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance banned foreign journalists from the streets of Tehran and began detaining those who challenged this edict. To some Iranians, these precautions seemed excessive, as on the day that the election results were announced, the protests were mostly silent, a solemn show of solidarity with Mousavi and his call for a recount. However, in the days that followed, the protests would grow larger and the protestors would grow more vocal.

52 Rather than directly opposing authorities, the protestors initially sought to peacefully align themselves with sympathetic figures in the government. As Hjorleifur Jonsson explains, subcultures can effectively gain insider status by redefining their collective identity in a manner amenable to state power via the performance of public rites demonstrating allegiance and deference (2005, 109).
On June 15th, Mir-Hossein Mousavi first appeared among the growing crowds. Standing atop his SUV he used a megaphone to address hundreds of thousands of people gathered in Tehran’s Azadi (Freedom) Square, who cheered him on and shouted words of support. That day, seven people were reportedly killed in clashes on the fringes of the massive rally. (Aljazeera 6/16/09).

The media blackout was expanded. The government began shutting down communication services operating within Iran’s borders in order to inhibit the ability of protestors to organize. At the same time, government officials organized a counter-demonstration in Valiasr Square with thousands of Iranians condemning the protests. Images of this rally were featured on state-run television. Despite such measures, the election protests continued to grow. Protestors used social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook to organize their activities and to
contact supporters outside the country, spreading news of their ongoing struggle.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{53} In December of 2010, an unemployed Tunisia man desperate to feed his family became a high profile martyr by setting himself on fire. This act of self-immolation instigating protests, which lead to the ouster of Tunisia’s strong-arm president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (CBS News 1/14/11). As the Tunisian regime was crumbling, pro-democracy protests spread throughout the Arab World, presenting both challenges and opportunities for western powers such as the United States. Soon hundreds of thousands of protestors were demanding regime changes in Egypt and Yemen. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter helped protestors organize and sent word of the protests around the world (AP 1/28/11). Protests then spread to other countries including Jordan, the Sudan and Syria (Los Angeles Times 2/2/11). As the violence in Egypt escalated, U.S. intelligence agencies came under fire from congressional critics who said there should have been much more warning because the demonstrators were using the Internet and social media to organize. The chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Mike Rogers replied, “We’ve got to be realistic about [the CIA’s] limits, especially regarding the complex and interactive behavior of millions of people” (AP 2/5/11).

Egypt’s president Hosni Mubarak stepped down on February 12\textsuperscript{th}. Countries across the mid-east, including Israel, applauded the move toward democracy, though not without trepidation. The Obama administration praised the move, while striving to conflate its pro-democracy rhetoric with the protestors even though the U.S. has often supported kings and dictators in order to ensure access to the region’s rich petroleum supplies. At the same time, anti-western powers were eager to manage the emergent chaos by practicing modes of mediumship favoring their own ideologies. Iran sought to portray the events as a replay of its 1979 revolution. In an effort to determine the significance of this emergent change, Iranian President Ahmadinejad gave a speech in which he stated, “Despite all the (West’s) complicated and satanic designs…a new Middle East is emerging without the Zionist regime and U.S. interference, a place where the arrogant powers will have no place.” These words were delivered to a crowd filling Tehran’s \textit{Azadi}, or “Freedom Square,” site of the largest protests against his regime in the summer of 2009 (AP 2/12/11).

The day after Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak stepped down, 10,000 Algerians battled police in order to demand democratic reforms for their country (AP 2/13/11). The next day, protestors in Yemeni clashed with police, seeking the ouster of their U.S.-backed president. Additional protests soon emerged in Bahrain, Djibouti, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and Sudan.
Because three-quarters of Iran’s population of approximately 70 million was born during or after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, most Iranians are under the age of thirty. Younger people tend to be familiar with Internet and social media technologies. Thus a large portion of Iran’s populace is very media savvy. During the post-election protests, they became self-organizing citizen-reporters, utilizing mobile media and the Internet to interact with each other and the outside world.

Over the next few days, there were more clashes with the militia members now patrolling the streets in increasing numbers. Then, on June 19th, while conducting a Friday Prayer broadcast, Iran’s Supreme Leader, the cleric Ali Khamenei, demanded an end to the protests and cautioned that those who continued to agitate would be met with fierce opposition. Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department began sending Twitter messages in Farsi in the hope of reaching social media users in Iran. They accused the Iranian government of illegalizing dissent while praising Egyptian protestors for the same activities (AP 2/14/11). The next day, protests flared in Iran. Tens of thousands of protestors assembled in the streets of Tehran, conflating the names of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Egypt’s deposed president Hosni Mubarak by chanting, “Bin Ali, Mubarak, it’s Seyed Ali’s turn!” Government forces fired on the protestors with tear gas, rubber bullets and birdshot. A pro-government news agency reported that one bystander was killed by gunfire. (AP 2/15/11).
This announcement discouraged many from protesting over the following days and those who did continue to demand a recount were increasingly endangered. As clashes between the militia and the protestors grew more violent, reports of new fatalities began to leak out of the country. These were accompanied by shocking images shot on cell phones and digital cameras of protestors shot or beaten to death in the streets (Hamedani 2009, 11).

Figures 32—34 Protestors injured and killed (6/20-21/09)

While attempting to quell this dissent, Iran’s ruling regime expanded the media blackout further still. They shut down entire broadcast technologies, including Twitter, western television signals and Internet access. They even shut down cell phone nodes that were allowing protestors to organize. To justify these actions, Ahmadinejad accused the international media of launching a “psychological war” against his country. Reporters, foreign and domestic, were banned from the streets. (AP 6/15/2009). This anti-western bluster provided a convenient—if suspect—smoke screen as the Iranian president attempted to deflect attention from the fact that his government was struggling to silence the highly mediated interactions of its own people. Yet despite
such efforts, footage of the protests continued flooding from the country, generating an international uproar.\textsuperscript{54}

In the west, media coverage of the protests was largely cobbled together from masses of photographs and footage distributed internationally via the Internet by unknown sources. Since western reporters had been banned from the streets of Tehran, news organizations were obliged to acknowledge that they could not confirm the validity of the shocking images they were uploading to their broadcast screens.\textsuperscript{55}

This created many blind spots and undermined traditional journalistic codes, signaling a shift of emphasis from well informed first hand observation, to largely uninformed, second hand \textit{interpretation}. U.S. anchors could not even verify that the images they were broadcasting had actually been posted from inside Iran. As a result, the attendant reportage

\textsuperscript{54} The Iranian government is not the only oppressive social institution unsettled by the new media revolution. In 2008, the Chinese government was caught off guard when—in the wake of a devastating earthquake—hundreds of citizens began reporting the incident on Twitter and placing images of the devastation recorded by cell-phone-cameras online. Hundreds of students had been killed when poorly constructing buildings collapsed. Their parents began protesting this injustice and these images also appeared online and were seen around the world, deeply embarrassing the Chinese government (NBC 5/22/2008).

\textsuperscript{55} In 2009, the still unknown person who shot the Neda footage was honored with the George Polk Award for excellence in journalism. This was the first time the prize had been bestowed on a citizen reporter, let alone an anonymous individual.
often reflected as much about U.S. social norms as it did about the
Iranian protests.\textsuperscript{56}

In the \textit{Washington Report on Middle East Affairs}, Nina Hamedani
states that mainstream U.S. media outlets have made little attempt to
conceal their biases against Ahmadinejad and the Islamic Republic and
have been “quick to jump on the election fraud bandwagon.” She finds
their supposedly ‘factual’ coverage almost entirely one-sided in favor of
the challenger (13). She also points out that the U.S. press has frequently
displayed a lack of knowledge about the nuances of Iranian society. For
instance it was widely reported that Ahmadinejad’s rival, Mir-Hossein
Mousavi was a left-leaning candidate with a history of championing
political reforms, but there was less attention paid to what types of

\footnote{\textsuperscript{56}The long-standing tensions between Iran and the United States date
back to 1953 when a CIA backed a coup d’état deposed the democratically
elected government of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddeq and
replaced him with an all-powerful monarch, Mohammed Reza Pahlevi,
AKA, the “Shah of Iran,” who ruled for the next 26 years until he was
overthrown in 1979. After the deposition of the Shah and the ensuing
Iranian hostage crisis, the United States severed all diplomatic ties with
Iran. In 2003, the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iran’s old rival, Iraq
both threatened and emboldened the Iranian government, which began to
actively undermine the U.S. military operation. Resentment surrounding
the U.S. invasion of Iraq helped to bring hard line leader Mahmoud
Ahmadinejad in to power. Soon his regime expanded the country’s nuclear
capabilities, purportedly in pursuit of peaceful, economic advantages. Yet
fears of a nuclear-armed Iran have motivated many western countries, led
by the U.S., to enforce more stringent economic sanctions in order to force
Iran to conform with international policies regarding nonproliferation. The
Iranian election crisis heightened western hopes that a more moderate
leader would defeat Ahmadinejad, placing the U.S. in a more
advantageous bargaining position.}
reforms he had supported. For instance, in the 1970s, he was jailed for organizing street protests challenging Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's modernization policies. Later, he helped form the Islamic Republican Party with the explicit purpose of overthrowing the monarchy and replacing it with an Islamic Republic. Mousavi rose to his most prominent political position during the Iraq-Iran war, serving as prime minister for eight years. During this time, he tolerated no public demonstrations opposing government policies.

In 2009, Mousavi campaigned as a conservative moderate with the slogan “Return to Stability, Return to Rationality.” At campaign rallies, he proved a somewhat bland, soft-spoken figure. Nonetheless, his supporters’ expert use of new media and the Internet, and the fact that he was the only presidential candidate to campaign in the company of his supporters’ expert use of new media and the Internet, and the fact that he was the only presidential candidate to campaign in the company of his 57

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57 Another fact commonly overlooked by the U.S. media: the only accurate foreign pre-election poll—one conducted by the BBC and ABC news, through the New America Foundation (NAF), about a week before the election—predicted an 89 percent voter turnout and a 2-to-1 advantage for Ahmadinejad nationwide. Its findings seem to have been confirmed when, on June 13, Ahmadinejad was declared the landslide winner of the election in which 24.5 million votes were cast by an historic 85 percent of eligible voters (Hamedani, 14).

58 Additionally, in the U.S. media, the protests were commonly characterized as the first significant protests in the Islamic Republic's 30-year history. This is not true. Through the years, there have been numerous demonstrations in Iran, the most violent occurring in 1999 when students protested the closing of liberal newspapers by then president Seyed Mohamma Khatami. The chief political advisor to Khatami during his two terms in office was 2009’s “reform” candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi (Hamedani, 14).
wife, appealed to young voters and Iran's urban middle class. Thus, he eventually came to be known as “the reform candidate.”

In some respects, Mousavi deserves the title. His platform promised to disband state TV and eradicate the morality police, and his popular and politically savvy wife, Zahra Rahnavard, pledged equal rights for women. Still, throughout the election and subsequent protests, many Iranians wondered whether a 1979 Islamic revolutionary could actually transform himself into a 2009 reformer.

Figures 35 & 36. The “Great Satan” & the “Mad Mullah

In his book, *The “Great Satan” vs. the “Mad Mullahs”: How the United States and Iran Demonize Each Other*, William O. Beeman argues that the ongoing dispute between the U.S. and Iran is “a true postmodern culture conflict.” This clash of cultures centers on symbolic discourse: “forces in both the United States and in the Middle East [have] constructed a mythological image that [serves] to ‘demonize’ the other parties in vivid terms, calculated to be immediately understood by the man on the street” (2005, 4). Iran caricatures the U.S. as a den of
iniquity, AKA “The Great Satan,” and the U.S. caricatures Iran as a haven of crazed holy men, AKA “Mad Mullahs.”

In addition to these crude stereotypes, the conflict centers on different theories about how the two country’s social structures should be conceptualized. Beeman explains, “the United States largely assumes egalitarian communication structures within [their own] communities, and hierarchical structures between the two communities,” whereas, “the Iranian model [is] precisely the opposite. They assume hierarchical structures within their own community and egalitarian structures between the two communities” (43). The tension between the two countries is not merely a clash of ideologies; it is a clash of ideological frames. The United States and Iran cannot approach consensus because they cannot even agree on how to argue. This type of tropic disconnect is the antithesis of the rhetorical concept of “stasis,” the possibility of framing an argument in a manner amenable to all parties and thereby affording the possibility of meaningful exchange (Crowley 2006, 30). Beeman adds, “Clearly, the Iranian and the U.S. assumptions about the context of communication cannot coexist in the same discourse sphere with ease, and indeed they do not” (44).

59 The maintenance of conflicting perceptual frames perpetuates political discord, but also serves an ideological purpose. Simon Harrison points out that in the 19th century, communities of Pacific Islanders were known to consciously emphasize difference as a means of retaining a sense of political sovereignty and cultural singularity. “Each group treated its emblematic practices as precious monopolies it jealously had to safeguard from outsiders; and it sought constantly, not just to preserve, but to
Western powers have long questioned the Iranian government’s legitimacy and status as a true democracy. In the eyes of many, the election protests appeared to reinforce the view that the state of Iran is an unjust totalitarian regime. To challenge these views, media savvy Iranian officials crafted arguments that depicted their tactics as fundamentally fair and objective. For instance, soon after the protests began, Iran's PressTV Channel began uploading short segments on YouTube and other sites. In a weekly summary piece titled “Reality Check,” they examined what was described as “biased Western coverage” on such networks as CNN and Fox News and repeatedly cited a poll done by an organization called Terror-free Tomorrow that predicted a 2:1 victory for Ahmadinejad before the election took place (CitizenTube. 6/22/09). These actions served to construct counter-narratives that some Iranians found convincing. Nonetheless, a new story was about to emerge from the streets of Tehran, and it would prove far more difficult to downplay or deflect.

accentuate, its distinctiveness. Paradoxical though it may seem, these cultures were unified above all by a shared concern with maintaining differences” 2006, 17). Defining the hazards of “mimetic conflict,” René Girard explains, “Man cannot respond to that universal injunction, ‘Imitate me!’ without almost immediately encountering an inexplicable counter-order: ‘Don’t imitate me!’ (Which really means, ‘Do not appropriate my object’). This second command fills man with despair and turns him into the slave of an involuntary tyrant. Man and his desires thus perpetually transmit contradictory signals to one another” (1972, 147).
Sacrifice.

On the 23rd of June, as the government crackdown was growing increasingly violent, 26-year-old Neda Agha Soltan was shot and fatally wounded on the streets of Tehran. Witnesses said the gunman appeared to be a member of the Iran’s paramilitary militia, the Basij. The death of “Neda”—as she is now, familiarly called by activists worldwide—was filmed by a cell-phone-camera and within hours, that disturbing 36 second piece of footage was being broadcast internationally via the Internet and various news channels, and inside of Iran via Bluetooth. The emergence of these images sparked additional protests. Activists around the globe donned green armbands (in support of the Iran’s reformist “green party”) and held up signs identifying themselves with Neda and honoring her sacrifice (AP 6/23/09).

Within days of her death, Neda became a cottage industry as T-shirt, buttons and even coffee mugs with her likeness were produced and consumed. Yet when people acquired this merchandizing, what exactly were they buying?

Neda’s on-camera sacrifice transformed her into a ritual actor, recorded in a moment of victimage that resonated with the value systems
of people throughout the world. The BBC, HBO and PBS all produced documentaries, each framing her in somewhat different light. Viewers were introduced to Neda the political firebrand, Neda the apostle of peace, Neda the women’s rights activist, and Neda the spiritual prophet. Meanwhile, the Iranian government fought back by launching three simultaneous disinformation campaigns, utilizing both mainstream and social media: one claimed the event was a ruse perpetuated with the help of British reporters (New York Times 1/7/10), another asserted it was a CIA assassination meant to foment political dissent (AP 6/25/09). Still another argued she had been killed by her fellow protestors (AP 6/26/09).

In order to construct convincing “Neda mythologies,” social media producers needed to identify who Agha Soltan was in life as well as death, so the grisly footage was usually accompanied by one of two recent photographs of her. In the more stoic version, she is dressed in a traditional black scarf, which is wrapped around head and neck. As in the cell-camera footage, her eyes stare directly at us. Her expression is somber but not stern. She is quite beautiful and despite the orthodox attire, there are also certain western embellishments: plucked eyebrows, lipstick, mascara and a bit of blush.

The second photo—the one more commonly seen in the west—features Neda in a more informal pose. She is dressed in a flowered shirt that opens at the collar to reveal a small gold necklace. Her head is tilted to the left and her dark shoulder-length hair is draped in that direction.
with a few strands slightly obscuring her right eye. Once again, she is looking directly at us, but this time with a relaxed smile. There is a warmth and openness about this portrait.

Figures 40 & 41. Nedas

It is perhaps unsurprising that a mediascape so often bitterly divided by cultural and religious differences was offered two different Nedas to choose from. In the first shot, she is a pious martyr, perhaps a bit too “exotic” for some westerners to identify with, but earnest and traditional enough to merit the respect of Shiites. In the second shot, she seems sweet and approachable with westernized clothing, a look informal enough to elicit the identification of non-Muslims.

Figure 42. Neda the Pawn

In many ways, victimage made Neda Agha Soltan a pawn in a high stakes political game. In terms of her own personal safety, she had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yet she was an ideal
candidate for martyrdom: young, pretty and female. Not only had she
died on camera, she had done so without uttering a word, becoming a
blank screen that viewers could project all sorts of ideological
preconceptions onto. Yet, if we listen closely, Neda still has some things
to say about the ritual roles that have been posthumously ascribed to her.
These identities generally seek to conceal her complexity, papering over
the ambivalence she felt toward her homeland and her fellow Iranians.
Neda’s actions never perfectly align with the roles that have been
posthumously foisted on her by people with both noble and self-serving
intentions. The closer we look, the more complex the portrait becomes,
and the more we are required to acknowledge that her feelings regarding
the historic circumstances that claimed her life were quite complicated
and in many respects, contradictory.

*Bystander Niche.*

Neda had not actually been protesting when she was shot. She and
her music teacher, Hamid Panahi, were stuck in traffic on Karegar Street,
est of Tehran's Azadi (Freedom) Square, on their way to a larger
demonstration. It was just after 6:30 p.m. After sitting inside a Peugeot
206—a subcompact with a poorly working air conditioner—for over an
hour, they decided to get out of the car for some fresh air. Panahi later
told the press that the two of them were merely standing across the street
from some protestors and observing when a bullet fired from a
government militia member hit her in the chest, apparently severing a main artery and puncturing her lung (BBC News 6/25/09).

Two days after Neda’s death, her fiancé Caspian Makan was quoted on BBC Persian, a Web site run by the BBC in Farsi (Iran’s national language). He claimed that she had been politically neutral and that her goal was not to support reform leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi or conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. “She was just in love with her country.”

Many of the initial accounts of Neda’s death emphasized her political ambivalence and suggested she was merely a hapless bystander who had not been actively participating in the protests. A group of her close friends told the press she was fundamentally apolitical (Los Angeles Times, 6/22/09). Her mother, Hajar Rostami, stressed that she was not a political activist. “It was all about being young and feeling passionate about freedom. She wasn't political. She didn't belong to any party or group. She didn't support any faction. Every other young Iranian was there, and she was one of them (Muslims Debate 31 Jul 2009). The fact that Neda did not vote in the election would appear to lend credence to this perspective.

In subsequent interviews, however, friends and relations have described her as far more politically active and socially idealistic and thus more willing to risk her life for the post-election protests. Her sister, Hoda, told the BBC that Neda only resisted voting because of reported
fraud at the polling stations (Garnsey 2009). Nonetheless, those who knew Neda best *initially* characterized her as apolitical. Why?

In the days following Neda’s death, Iran’s political climate was extremely tense and volatile. The few Iranians who were willing to speak to the press at that point insisted on disguising their identities with false names. Under such conditions, associating oneself with a political agitator would have been a very risky proposition. Eventually, however, Neda’s sacrifice gained mythical status. When this occurred, those directly associated with her discovered that they were able to speak much more openly about political matters than ordinary Iranians could. After all, any attempt to persecute them, would only confirm the impression that the government had unfairly persecuted Neda in the first place.

Then there is the issue of “ritual relevance.” Willed action—or at least the appearance of it—is the key to making ritual victimage meaningful. If those mourning Neda did not ascribe some higher significance to her passing, it would seem less meaningful than it otherwise might. She would have died in vain.

Given these pressures and incentives, it is not surprising that Neda was initially characterized as a passive bystander and then increasingly described as a political and religious firebrand. But none of these ritual roles has proven a perfect fit. In terms of the bystander persona, we must allow that Neda was not entirely apolitical. After all, she would have been much safer had she merely stayed at home. Then there was her
placement in the environment. When she and her music instructor parked their car and stepped out for a breath of air, they chose to stand near the protestors. If she had kept her distance from the group, it seems unlikely that she would have been shot. Finally, at the moment of her death, she chose to look directly into the camera. Whether or not this last act was a conscious choice or a fairly automatic reflex, it would prove the most rhetorically significant gesture to emerge from Iran’s post-election turmoil.

Figure 43. Open Eyes

*Hoax Niche.*

After the footage of Neda’s death created an international furor, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told the head of Iran's judiciary, Ayatollah Hashemi Shahroudi, to probe the incident and make the results of his investigations public. “The massive propaganda of the foreign media, as well as other evidence, proves the interference of the enemies of the Iranian nation who want to take political advantage and darken the pure face of the Islamic republic,” he said in a letter to
Shahroudi. Ahmadinejad also stated, “I didn't see who shot who,” adding, “The whole scene looked suspicious to me” (CNN 6/29/09).

The outrage over Neda’s death was certainly a boon to powerful western forces such as the U.S. government who would prefer to see Iran’s theocratic regime toppled. The footage of Neda’s death has proved to be such a powerful piece of anti-Ahmadinejad propaganda many Iranian officials have felt compelled to dismiss it as a hoax. Their voices have been joined by some unlikely allies, western conspiracy theorists who are generally sympathetic to the protestors but, nonetheless, deeply suspicious of western powers.

In the blog American Everyman, Scott Creighton writes: “The Neda killing in Iran was a staged attempt to ferment indignation in Iran and the rest of the world against the ruling party that had just won the election. It was yet another example of an attempt to overthrow a regime that was unfriendly to U.S. corporations and bankers probably devised by the CIA like so many in the past” (4/13/10).

Libertarian pundit Gary Trieste states, “I don't want to bust anyone's bubble, but there seems to be too many ‘just right’ elements to this story…The mass media, starving for news, and implicitly antipathetic toward the Iranian regime for their actions, snatched up this story and ran with it. It was just too good not to be true” (Nolan Chart 6/24, 2009).
A posting on AboveTopSecret.com features a shot-by-shot breakdown of the video and comments such as “A gunshot wound to the chest would have killed her or left her unconscious. Yet she keeps looking, not at the people she ‘knows.’ She looks at the cameraman” (10-2-2010).

Because Neda makes eye contact with the viewer, media discourses seeking to define the footage as a hoax are compelled to take a stand in relation to her unblinking gaze. As cinematographer Seven D. Katz explains, in film, the viewer identifies with the camera and this creates a strong sense of emotional connection (1991, 240-1).

Figure 44. Eye Contact

Neda’s gaze is a powerful media affordance that savvy ritualists can capitalize on order to positively conflate her death with martyrdom. On the other hand, if they wish to deny the ritual significance of Neda’s death, they must reject the power of that look, defining it as manipulative stagecraft, as in the image above.

Figures 45 & 46. Blood
The blood that spilled from Neda’s mouth and nose at the moment of her death is also rhetorically significant. Here are two stills taken from the Neda footage and captions questioning the placement of the blood and suggesting that Neda’s death was a fabrication. According to AboveTopSecret.com, one of the figures leaning over Neda is seen placing some fake blood in her nose. “Shortly thereafter blood appears to pour out her right nostril . . . Looking carefully in the video, it appears that both the mouth and nostril bleeding occurs right after a hand is seen pushing up onto or into them. These flow patterns appear more to be from a blood bladder timed for rupture when the camera was in the correct position. And the nosebleed appears only after what appears to be a rapid slight-of-hand insertion of blood into her nose. (10-2-2010).

Offering a slightly different perspective, Scott Creighton suggests that Neda applied the blood herself, “It’s an obviously staged event. She’s got the tube of fake blood in her left hand and you can see her apply it to her own face after it squirts out a bit and runs down her hand and down her arm” (4/13, 2010).

Such conspiracy theories are challenged by the fact that the Neda footage is shot in a single continuous take. Because there are no edits, there are fewer opportunities for fooling the audience. Thus, those who

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60 Directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, Martin Scorsese, Paul Thomas Anderson and Mike Leigh have included extended takes in their films. While challenging to choreograph, such scenes create dramatic tension and heightened verisimilitude as, often for minutes at a time, the camera refuses to blink.
consider the footage a hoax must indicate seemingly deceptive instances of on-camera “blocking.” For instance, Scott Creighton states, “She then drops the tube of fake blood and the doctor who helped stage the event tries to push it under her so the camera won’t see it”

![Figure 47. ID card of Abbas Javid Kargar](image)

According to those who witnessed Neda’s death, some protestors captured the man responsible for shooting her. A video was later posted on YouTube depicting the incident. It shows Basij member Abbas Javid Kargar being detained by protesters, who undress him and confiscate his identity card. Reportedly, Kargar was heard shouting, “I didn't want to kill her” (Radio Free Europe 6/20/10).

In 2010, a documentary titled *Crossroads* appeared in Iranian state television. In line with previous statements by Iranian authorities, which have called the Neda footage a pre-planned scenario aimed at defaming Iran, it suggests that the opposition Mujahedin Khalq Organization (MKO) was behind the incident. In the documentary, Kargar denies ever confessing and says instead that he had shouted that he wasn't armed. “If I had a gun, what happened to it?” he asks.

In the documentary, Kargar first appears on camera wearing a green surgical mask similar to those protesters in Tehran and other cities have used to wear to protect their identities from security forces. This
move rhetorically conflates him with the same protestors he is accused of attacking. He says he was forced to move out of his house after his ID card and personal information were posted on the Internet and that he wears the mask in public in order to protect himself. *(BeforeItsNews June 21, 2010)*.

By depicting Kargar as a victim of an anti-Iranian conspiracy, *Crossroads* attempts to exonerate the Iranian government of any wrongdoing. While the film places blame on elements outside Iran, it does at least acknowledge that a person named Neda Agha Soltan existed, that she was shot on the streets of Tehran and that images of her death were captured by a cell-phone-camera.

In contrast, western conspiracy theories often insist that Neda did not die on camera. They must, therefore, suggest explanations for why she was never seen or heard from again. Scott Creighton of the *American Everyman* blog dismisses the footage of Neda’s death as patently false. Meanwhile, he is compelled to imagine a different type of killing. “Unfortunately for Neda,” he writes, “she was too young to realize that when people like this stage fraudulent ‘events’ in order to try to install their neoliberal regime in a country, it doesn’t do to have the martyr of the revolution running around, so they probably killed her later…apparently by shooting her in the back” *(4/13, 2010)*.
Rebel Niche.

In the eyes of millions, it did not matter that ‘Neda’ was not a political activist. Immediately, she became a symbol of political revolt. And within hours of her death, Youtube subscribers began posting tributes, including a song performed by a young Iranian man titled “The Call of My Country,” which featured the lyrics, “I swear on your last innocent look, that we will take back your vote from the deceivers, that we will always confront oppressors, that we will continue your path for all eternity” (Washington Post, 6/23/09).

![Poster in Tehran](image)

Figures 48. Poster in Tehran

It was not until five days after Neda’s death, that a coherent, eyewitness account emerged. The BBC News website featured an interview with Dr. Arash Hejazi, one of the two men who had been leaning over Neda’s body in the tragic footage. Hejazi, who was studying at a university in the south of England, had managed to escape Iran after the killing. Later, he decided to step forward to describe the incident despite the risks involved in doing so.

![Dr. Arash Hejazi](image)

Figure 49. Dr. Arash Hejazi
In the video interview, Hejazi is soft spoken and articulate, a man in his mid-thirties with black hair, dressed in a blue oxford cloth shirt, frequently peering reflectively over the top of his wire-rimmed glasses. The BBC reporter points out the images of Neda's death have become a rallying point for protestors around the world, and since he was one of the two men shown leaning over the body, he is now connected to that footage. She asks how he feels about that?

Hejazi explains that he is risking his life and his reputation by speaking out about Neda's death. He won’t be able to return to Iran for the foreseeable future, and the ruling party is likely to smear his reputation, yet he is compelled to speak about the event. “I feel responsible,” he says. “She died for a cause … She was fighting for basic rights, basic human rights. She wanted her vote to be counted. She wanted to be free, freedom of assembly.”

Hejazi makes these statements after explaining that he actually did not know Neda and had never spoken to her. And as the cell phone footage reveals, she was unable to speak after being shot and died in less than a minute. This means that any assumptions he is making about her motives are conjecture. Still, he persists: “I don’t want her blood to have been shed in vain,” he says. “She died on the street to say something, and the image has traveled so fast around the world, it means something. It means that there is a message there.”
Dr. Hejazi was not the first person to define Neda’s death as a political act. While Neda’s finance, Caspian Makan, had described her as an apolitical person a few days earlier, he, nonetheless, sought to ascribe political significance to her sacrifice, saying, “She was a young woman but gave a big lesson to everybody … Neda just wanted to have freedom for everybody” (Washington Post 6/22/09).

Hamid Panahi, the music teacher who accompanied Neda to the protests also downplayed her activism initially, but later ascribed political motives to her as well, telling reporters she did not fear death and was determined to support the protesters and take a stand against “the injustice of it all” (Daily News 6/23/09).

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61 Neda’s fiancé Caspian Makan has left Iran. In March of 2010, he visited Israel and met with President Shimon Peres. Said Makan, “I come to Israel as an ambassador of the Iranian people, a messenger from the camp of peace...I have no doubt that Neda's spirit and soul feels the sensitivity and warmth I received in this meeting” (Los Angeles Times 3/23/10). In response to the move, Neda’s mother Hajar Rostami, told reporters that Mr. Makan does not represent the views of Neda or her family. (BBC 3/26/10) Meanwhile, the Iranian-backed broadcaster, Press TV, published a piece on its website calling Makan a “suspect” in Neda’s murder. Comments on the site suggested that Mr. Makan was a Mossad agent, who killed Neda and then returned to his homeland. The hard-line and pro-Ahmadinejad Fars News Agency said the meeting between Peres and Makan is further evidence that foreign countries were involved in Neda's death. (AP 6/21/10).
Fearing a government crackdown, green party protestors initially wore green scarves, surgical masks and strips of tape over their mouths. This served as a reminder that they were to remain calm and quiet, an approach that would, hopefully, prove less provocative to the notoriously violent Basij militia. After Neda’s death, the facial coverings served to disguise the identities of protestors engaging in increasingly violent acts of rebellion. After the government crackdown, the protests grew smaller. Yet while they were being suppressed and silenced at every turn, those who wished to topple the Iranian theocracy were eager to prove that they were willing to fight on. For many, Neda’s bloody death became a justification for bloody retribution. The most militant protestors in Iran were determined to construct Neda as a rebel, representing their own desire for vengeance and revolt.

Forty days after Neda was killed, presidential candidate Mir Hosein Mousavi made a pilgrimage to her grave. The timing was highly...
symbolic. Shi’ite Muslims mourn on the 3rd, 7th and 40th days after a death. These commemorations are a pivotal part of Iran's history. During the Revolution, the pattern of confrontations between the Shah's security forces and the revolutionaries often played out in 40-day cycles. (Time 8/1/09).

Figures 56 & 57. Ahmadinejad & Ali Khamenei Drowning in Neda’s Blood

As Mousavi approached the graveyard, Iranian officials prevented him from entering. Almost immediately, a riot ensued. Police fired tear gas, attacked demonstrators with batons and smashed car windshields. But the protesters fought back, battling hand-to-hand with security forces in some of the most violent confrontations of the summer. Witnesses reported that, in one case, three members of the Basij were beaten with their own batons after a group of opposition activists pulled them off their motorcycles near a park. The motorcycles were then set on fire. “I saw a man throw a brick right in the face of a riot police officer. He fell on the ground,” one witness said. At other locations, demonstrators shouted, “Our Neda hasn’t died. It’s the government that has died!” (Washington Post, 7/31/09)
Threat Niche.

With the exception of the Vatican, the Islamic Republic of Iran is the only working theocracy in the world. At the same time, the forces of modernization and an explosion in population growth have radically destabilized this traditionalist culture. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, television came into the homes of most Iranians, ushering in a profound sense of culture shock. William O. Beeman explains, “Iran was plunged directly into the age of sound and visual media without every achieving literacy for the majority of the population” (2005, 58).

U.S. “baby boomers” who grew up watching television in the 1950s would engage in countercultural practices in the 1960s. Likewise, after a decade of television viewing, Iran’s populous began clamoring for social change. Yet a largely illiterate culture with increased access to the mass media tends to engage in mediation rites tied to more traditional ritual practices. The ouster of the U.S. backed Shah was led by well educated students, some with Marxist leanings, but in the chaos of post-

62 In many Middle Eastern cultures poor citizens, and woman in particular, are discouraged and even forbidden from attaining literacy. This helps to contain dissent. One of the most significant issues pertaining to the current political reformation of the Middle East involves the difference between oral and literate mediumship. A medium who does not know how to read is dependent on institutional authorities to interpret legal statutes and sacred texts such as the Qur’an. Thus, she is less likely to deviate from accepted protocols. In contrast, the “new medium” or “literate medium” can freely reinterpret and remediate any text at her disposal. She is far more likely to practice and even prize innovation (normative transgression). The relative mix of literate and illiterate mediums in a given culture profoundly influences emergent patterns of political engagement.
Revolution politics, citizens reverted to older cultural values and formed the theocratic superstructure that continues to dominate Iranian politics.

Western opposition has in many respects strengthened the Iranian regime, lending credence to claims that the country is under siege from corrupt external forces (Beeman 2005, 79). Without the west, a theocracy in power for over thirty years could hardly call itself “revolutionary.” This apparent celebration of cultural upheaval is counterpoised by a strain of deep conservatism. Iran is noted for its reactionary backlashes against progressive activism. Nonetheless, instances of activism are on the rise. This increase is tied to the country’s predominantly youthful populace and their fascination with western culture and mastery of social networking technologies. In such a climate, it is hardly surprising that the Iranian government should assert that Neda’s supporters are a “threat,” undermining traditional Iranian values.

In many respects, Neda was nontraditional. She was shot while wearing westernized clothing (a baseball cap and jeans). And even when she photographed in Islamic garb, she wore make-up. She was divorced and somewhat worldly, a travel agent who had been to Dubai, Turkey and Thailand and wanted to live Istanbul one day. She had a Turkish Fiancé. She was student of philosophy and she had arrived at the protests in a French car. She was also an aspiring pianist and a singer (BBC 7/30/09 & CBS 6/23/09).
According the BBC, the Iranian government offered to pay a financial reward and to declare Neda an official “Iranian Martyr” if her family would claim that foreign agitators had killed her. They refused (Garnsey 2009). But while the Iranian regime has sought to aggressively discredit the stories circulating around Neda’s death, they have stopped short of impugning her character. Dishonoring the memory of a martyr is serious offense in any culture, so government officials have carefully avoided directly defaming Neda. However, they may have devised a means of discrediting her indirectly by conflating her with the western forces they blame for instigating the protests.

Figures 58 & 59. Clotilde Reiss and Neda Agha Soltan: Foreign Threats?

During the first trial of Iranian protestors, the accused were not allowed to speak in their defense. This policy was changed during the second round of trials, not for any of the Iranian citizens being sentenced, but for Clotilde Reiss, a young French woman accused of instigating social unrest. By this point, Neda—whose name means “diving calling” in Farsi—had been named, “The Voice of Iran.”63 But by letting Reiss speak, the Iranian government gave another voice to the protests. According to the Islamic Republic News Agency, Reiss confessed in a

63 Neda has also been called, “The Angel of Freedom” and “The Angel of Iran” (Telegraph.co.uk, 6/22/09).
heavy French accent, “I had personal motives for joining gatherings to see what was happening out of curiosity, but I admit that I made a mistake and should not have attended.” Reiss had no legal representation. Nonetheless, a government prosecutor accused her of attempting to engineer a “soft overthrow” of the government (AP 8/8/09).

Reiss was 24 at the time, just two years younger than Neda. She appeared with her dark hair covered by a scarf, as Neda had in the photos that were, by then, circulating widely on the Internet. Her delicate features and quiet demeanor made her a suitable stand-in for Agha Soltan in the counter-narrative of “foreign interference” that the Iranian government was carefully constructing. By conflating Neda’s image with that of a foreign agitator, Iranian officials could imply a sort of “guilt by association,” subtly discrediting Neda and confronting Iranians with a new face of counter-revolutionary protest.

As Michael Taussig explains, we often define ourselves by defining who we are not. “Identity formation is engaged in this habitually bracing activity in which the issue is not so much staying the same, but maintaining sameness through alterity” (1993, 129). This means an ongoing interrogation of difference, a constant isolation and even quarantining of Otherness. In order to maintain the illusion of cultural coherence, opinion leaders frequently fixated on social threats, figures clearly and emphatically defined as foreign and thus outside the norm.
According to this way of thinking, if we are to be one, we must reject the alien and the impure.

The tropic structures of monotheistic religions favor such rigid binaries. If there is only one god, then any perspective that deviates from this view must be evil. The Bible and the Koran are filled with condemnations of “sinners” and “infidels.” The ideologies they describe are defined in terms of absolute difference, thus monotheists tend to strongly dissociate with any figure thought to challenge their worldview. As William O. Beeman explains, “In Islamic terms, compromise with evil is not only impossible, but blasphemous. In Islam, sincere believers must ‘promote the right, and resist the wrong.’ If a force in the world is identified as corrupting, it must be opposed” (2005, 5).

When such a mindset predominates, ideological pluralism is unthinkable. One is forced to make a stand and hold to it rigidly, even in the face of evidence that appears to strongly refute one’s ideological assumptions. As the Neda footage circulated, generating protests around the globe, forces inside the Iranian theocracy began contriving all sorts of conflicting counter-narratives in order to justify their views. Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei alleged that Neda was shot by a fellow protestor (AP 6/26/09), while Iran's ambassador to Mexico, Mohammad Hassan Ghadiri, suggested that the CIA could have been involved in the killing (AP 6/25/09).
Even before Neda’s death, Iranian officials were seeking to discredit the protestors. Several days prior to the incident, Iran’s intelligence minister, Gholamhossein Mohseni-Ejei blamed the protest on a mix of Iranian militancy and western influence. He said his bureau was investigating two categories of people who were seeking to create instability, one of them backed from abroad and hoping to achieve its goal through “explosions and terror” (reportedly, fifty suspects of this type had been arrested and more than twenty explosive devices had been discovered). The second category of dissenters, according to Mohseni-Ejei, was made up of “counter-revolutionary groups” who had penetrated the headquarters of the election candidates (twenty-six of these figures had, purportedly, been arrested) (Aljazeera 6/16/09).

The Iranian government had to determinedly point out foreign threats as a means of combating a serious internal threat. Footage of civil unrest captured on the streets of Tehran had begun traveling to all parts of the globe. Especially damning were images of Basij militia members violently attacking protestors. In order to defuse this political minefield, the actions of the protestors had to appear violent enough to warrant an aggressive counter-response. As cultural analyst, Nina Hamedani suggests, creating this impression may have involved escalating violence through duplicitous means. During past demonstrations, members of the Basij had dressed in ordinary clothes and infiltrated crowds to incite riots.

64 “Counter-revolutionary” in an Iranian context means opposed to the principles of the Islamic revolution that founded the current government.
by instigating fights, or using fires as street barricades. Such actions appear to justify a violent response from uniformed militia members. Unaware of these tactics, western media tends to assume that all of the people wearing plain clothes who have been shown throwing rocks and starting fires must be protestors. This may or may not be the case (2009, 15).

_Martyr Niche(s)._ Of the many cultural niches seeking to define the meaning of Neda’s death, the biggest by far is “the martyr niche.” It has grown so large and complex; it has split into many “sub-niches,” each depicting a different type of martyrdom.

![Figure 60. Iranian Martyr?](image)

Before Neda’s death, the Iranian leadership believed it had a highly effective strategy for challenging the global primacy of the west, a mix of ancient ritual practice and high-tech media dissemination. Martyrdom operations such as a suicide bombings could generate

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65 Shiites have a long history of martyrdom. The first Shiite martyr was Imam Hussein, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson. He believed it was better to die fighting injustice than to live with injustice under illegitimate rule.
international press and radically destabilize Iran’s foes with none of the long-term financial risk of full-scale military campaigns. What’s more, martyrdom served as a form of conceptual camouflage helping to justify the murder of anonymous civilians, as the attack was—in the eyes of the faithful—an act of pious self-sacrifice. The practice had been perfected during the country’s long and brutal war with Iraq and has since been used in Israel and against western targets.

In 2005, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stated, “a nation with martyrdom knows no captivity” (Nissimov & Savyon 2008, 1), but at the time, he failed to consider that the act of self-sacrifice can be motivated by any number of ideologies, including those deeply inimical to his own views.66 He went on to declare, “Today, more than ever, we must inculcate in the younger generation the culture of shahada [martyrdom]. This is a mission of supreme ideological importance ... One who treads the path of martyrdom and brings himself to this extreme attains the pinnacle of human achievement.” The irony of these statements deepens when we consider that the Basij, the paramilitary militia group Ahmadinejad was addressing, would soon be implicated in the country’s most infamous act of martyrdom in decades, not by becoming martyrs themselves, but by creating a new type of Iranian martyr.

66 The death of various martyrs played a decisive role when the populous deposed the Shah of Iran during 1979 Islamic revolution.
A few months later, in a May 2008 speech to families of shahids [martyrs], Iran’s Supreme Leader, the Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei characterized martyrdom as “a source of pride” and as “sacrifice in the path of God,” which “gladdens [the heart of] God.” In an attempt to achieve what it believed were ideological victories against the west, the Iranian leadership was actively cultivating what Ahmadinejad called, “a culture of martyrdom.”

The mistake that he, Ali Khamenei and other Iranian leaders made was assuming that they—or any group—could somehow lay claim to the most socially disruptive ritual act possible. There can be no “culture of martyrdom” because the practice of martyrdom is counter-cultural. It is an inherently radical act. Its chief aim is the rejection of traditional cultural structures. These unflinching advocates of shahada were, unwittingly, setting the stage for a new type of sacrifice.

Figures 61 & 62. Feminist Martyr?

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67 Iranian director Morteza Avini makes propaganda films to “incite martyrdom.” He says that martyrs learn “that there is no fear, because one cannot fear that which they want, to be closer to God.” According to Avini, belief is not a theoretical but a practical knowledge. “You need to transcend worldly qualities; like fear; it’s a practical matter that should be experienced in practice” (Varzi 2006, 82).

68 The etymology of “radical” leads back to the Latin radix meaning “root.” Being “radical,” means tearing something up by the roots.
In 2007, the leaders of Iran’s martyrdom movement began a new publicity campaign. For years, they had been successfully recruiting male martyrs. Now they began targeting women. In an effort to promote female martyrdom, leaders of the group stated that because martyrdom was a “religious duty,” women did not require the permission of their fathers, their husbands, or “even of the ruling jurisprudent.” Inspired by such speeches, some 20,000 women signed up for martyrdom operations (Nissimov 2008, 1).

Editors of the Iranian women’s magazine Zanan were deeply troubled by this trend. They published an investigative article condemning the recruitment campaign. This spawned an act of retaliation by the Iranian government. In late January of 2008, the Media Supervision Committee of Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance ordered the closure of the magazine, which was accused of “breaking the law and defaming military and revolutionary institutions.” By publishing reports that served to undermine Iranian society's “spiritual security, morale, and ideological strength,” the editors of Zanan had, purportedly, created a sense of “insecurity in society” and discredited the “status of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

It is no small irony that, a year and a half later, the world would witness, what many believe to be Iran’s first “feminist martyrdom.” Here was an Iranian martyr in many ways similar to the 20,000 other women
recruited by the government. Except that Neda had not died in support of the Iranian regime. She had died in opposition to it.

Liberal progressives within Iran and around the globe could not help but feel deeply conflicted. Surely, any praise of martyrdom would only serve to perpetuate a violent and primitive practice. On the other hand, Neda had apparently sacrificed herself as a champion of women’s rights, issuing a strong challenge to Iran’s patriarchal regime.

It is probably an overstatement to describe Neda as a “feminist,” yet, like many young Iranian woman, she often wore western attire even when it might have been more prudent to dress in traditional Islamic garb. The HBO documentary For Neda (2010) views Agha Soltan’s sacrifice primarily as a challenge to Iranian patriarchy. Neda is depicted as a young woman who defied Iranian custom at her own peril. In one scene, the narrator, an older Iranian woman, Shohreh Aghdashloo, explains how, not long before her death, the wives of some Basij members approached Neda on the street. The women warned her to cover her face before appearing in public. They were concerned that her appearance might prove threatening to Basij members, who would be intimidated by her beauty. Based on the images of Neda’s death, we know she did not heed these warnings. In fact, on the day she was shot, her face was entirely exposed. This may or may not be why she was targeted, but it is certainly related to the emotional impact of the footage.
In addition to feminism, Neda’s martyrdom has ascribed to many other causes. Conflating her image the Statue of Liberty and calling her Iran’s “Angel of Freedom” suggests she died for freedom.

Conflating Neda’s image with a peace sign suggests she died for peace.

Conflating Neda’s image with Barack Obama suggests she died for progress.

Conflating Neda’s image with #Neda suggests she died for love.
Conflating Neda’s name with broken targeted, or shattered heart suggests she died for the love of her country. In a eulogy for her late sister Hoda Agha Soltan stated, “My sister died because she was not allowed to live like a human being; my sister died because injustice would not end; my sister died because she loved life so much, and my sister died because she cared lovingly for her fellow humans’ well-being” (LiveLeak.com 6/22/09).

Figures 72 & 73. Islamic Martyr?

Conflating Neda’s image or name with God or angels suggests she died for Islam. Neda’s mother, Hajer Rostami Motlagh, says her daughter was deeply religious. “Philosophy and theology were her favorite subjects … She was a spiritual person. She believed in God” (BBC News 7/30/09).

According to some accounts, Neda had premonitions of her death, evidence many interpret as a type of divine revelation. The night before she was killed she had a dream. “There was a war going on,” she told her mother the next morning, “and I was in the front.” Upon hearing this, Hajer Rostami urged her daughter to stay away from Saturday’s march, but Neda refused to listen (CNN 11/5/09).
A close friend also warned her to stay away, but she reportedly replied, “Don't worry. It's just one bullet and its over” (Los Angeles Times 6/23/09).

After Neda’s death, protestors were able to draw on a tradition dating back to the Iranian revolution of 1979. Every night for several weeks, people stood on rooftops around Tehran and shouted the traditional Shiite protest, “Allahu akbar!” which translates as, “God is great!” (AP 6/27/09).

Figures 74 & 75. Christian Martyr?

In July of 2009, some western websites began suggesting that Neda might be a Christian (The New Testament News 7/3/09). A well-known photo of Agha Soltan accompanied these articles. An area below her neck was circled and enlarged, drawing attention to what appeared to be a crucifix. Christians who accepted this theory could view Neda’s death as another episode in a long-standing feud between Muslims and Christians, underscoring key ideological differences, including opposing views of martyrdom.  

As Keith Lewinstein explains, Christian and Islamic martyrdom have different characteristics related to their historic origins. “Martyrdom achieved its religious significance for Christians in the period before the faith had enjoyed any political success … Islam, by contrast, had more
Some typical responses to the “Christian rumor” include the following blog posts: “I wouldn’t be surprised if she was targeted by the Basiji thug because of her cross necklace” (Nice Deb Blog 7/5/09) And “In fact, if she is a Christian, that could create greater support for religious freedom in Iran” (GetReligion.org 7/6/09).

To date, no credible evidence has surfaced that would suggest Neda actually was a Christian. The pendant around her neck is most likely a farvahar, one of the best-known symbols of Zoroastrianism and the Iranian nation.

_Neda Complex._

Figure 76—80. Neda Flags

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success from the beginning; it emerged not as a persecuted sect, but in the course of military conquest and political victory. (2002, 79). Carole Straw adds, “A Christian gloried in suffering for its own sake, for this sacrifice imitated the passion of Christ, which had redeemed humanity from the dreadful damnation of hell. Passivity itself became the ideal” (2002, 41). In contrast, “What struck the Muslims more naturally was the Prophet’s call for active struggle against injustice and idolatry” (Lewinstein 2002, 80).
In the months after her death, photographs, drawings and paintings of Neda were combined with images the Iranian flags and maps. These “complex conflations” reflect the deep ambivalence many Iranians feel toward their country.

The father of modern semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure made a distinction between the spoken and the written word. He believed that spoken language is always in flux, but textual signs are relatively stable and autonomous. He asserted, “[Writing] is a self-contained whole and a principle of classification. Once we give it first place among the facts of speech, we introduce a natural order into an assemblage that is amenable to no other classification” (1922, 25). M.M. Bakhtin would later refute this idea, writing about the “polyphonic” dimensions of all language both spoken and written (1973, 198-99). If we relate this approach to the conflations centering on Neda Agha Soltan’s death, we see that a single act of victimage is never a monophonic mode of rhetorical invention; instead, it is the occasion of a high stakes debate. One man’s saint is another man’s infidel. Is Che Guevara a martyr or a monster? How about Malcolm X? Or Lenny Bruce? Victimage not only creates consensus, it also allows for contention. And if we can allow that a single act of victimage many be variously interpreted, we can move from a didactic to a polyphonic mode of interpretation.

Of course, even if Saussure is wrong and the symbolic order is not stable and autonomous, human beings often proceed as if it is, conceiving
of linguistic signs as fixed and eternal. Language, in this sense, is not an anchor stabilizing social relations; it is a bid for something above and beyond social life altogether. To “become a symbol” in this sense is to transcend mundane every day existence. One of the best ways of achieving such a transformation has always been via that ultimate measure of cultural value: victimage. Human beings become symbols when they are thought to willingly die for a particular cause. Still, transforming a living breathing person into a linguistic sign necessarily involves limiting their complexity. This is a reductive process, a distillation, a refinement bent on filtering away ambiguity, which can only be seen—according to this worldview—as noxious and impure. Of course, if linguistic signs are never entirely stable and autonomous, human beings—living or dead—certainly can’t be either, so at best this is a deeply flawed, if not outright delusional enterprise, hence the need for countless emphatic conflations.

Figure 81—86. Neda Maps
Pierre Bourdieu defines “symbolic violence” as the manner in which some forms of discourse serve to tacitly perpetuate discrimination against particular social groups (1972, 191). I expand this usage to account for the symbolic violence done to individuals, as well. Specifically, I call attention to the way that language participates in the reduction of a complex human being into monological sign. Symbolic violence, in this sense, is often related to real violence.

A polyvalent analysis of the media texts swirling around Neda’s death reveals that many people find it meaningful for many different reasons. Does this bring us any closer to understanding her “true motives” for being on the street that day? Perhaps not, but it may help us expose the ongoing symbolic violence militating against a more complex understanding of her identity. This matters because if we are to look past the ideological struggles that create division and disharmony, we must resist turning human beings into symbols and find way to actually empathize with them, to recognize that they are just as multifaceted and contradictory as we are.

Symbolic violence is highly seductive, because it tempts us with transcendence, the possibility that—by aligning ourselves with the lives of immortal saints or dissociating from purely evil demons—we might actually be able to conceive of a realm beyond earthly experience. Different “human-symbols” are thought to represent different cultural
values (or their contraries). If Neda is the “Angel of Freedom” then Ahmadinejad must be the devil.

Neda, can no longer speak for herself, thus we now feel compelled to speak for her. From a rhetorical standpoint, this is one of the chief advantages of sacrificial victimage; it entirely silences the very person whose deepest commitments it claims to represent. And because symbols feel fixed and definitive, they can serve as ideological fulcrums they can be utilized in order to leverage social change. Therefore, the ongoing attempts to transform Neda into a symbol are not merely sentimental gestures, or casual refutations. They are calls to action. Those most interested in Neda need her to become a particular sort of idea in order to further a particular cause. This why they must diminish her complexity, attempting to make of her a captivating, if necessarily two-dimensional icon.

Middle East Apartheid Today

Figure 87. Pick a Cause

In Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag describes the many fascinations related to photographic images of suffering. These
include sentimentality, self-absolution, sadism, prurience, sympathy, exploitation and morbid fixation (2006). Even when people arrive at similar conclusions after viewing the Neda footage, they may find it interesting for quite different reasons. One person might want to believe Neda is a progressive martyr because he wants Iran to become a liberal democracy, while another person might want to believe Neda is a progressive martyr so he can justify opening up financial trade routes.

Cultural niches are collections of individuals employing similar media affordances in similar ways, but often for quite different reasons. After all, niches are not uniform entities defined by a singular worldview. They are complex systems nested within other complex systems and thus subject to a diverse and unstable array of internal and external influences. They are patterns of influence resonating between the cultural environment and the individual.

In order to share the Neda footage with a friend, I must compose an email in which I summarize the subject matter, explain why it is worth sharing and why they might be interested. I also need to include a link and finally press, “send.” Each one of these acts influences how the footage will be received on the other end, and the complexity doesn’t end there. My ritual of remediation has become a media affordance. Any person who reads my email and views the linked footage is free to capitalize on the potentials they offer for the performance of further ritual acts. These rites may differ substantially from mine, as the person who
received my email will infer new and different meanings from both my message and from the Neda footage. Contained within each are an array of smaller potential affordances, which may, or may not, align with my original intentions. What color are Neda’s eyes? Where are they looking? Does she resemble other martyrs? Does she know what’s happening? What matters here is perception, not truth. A media affordance becomes viable when it can convincingly conjure the meanings we favor most.

Figure 88. Neda Shrine

Next.

The chapter to come examines ritual roles. It explores how new mediums work to actively cultivate and conform to particular “personal brands,” to reframe social contexts and to claim specific types of “ritual authority” so they can wield as much cultural influence as possible.
Achaikos has brought suit against his stepfather Elpis for committing the crime of “hubris.” Elpis, a former slave, has married Achaikos’ mother bringing shame upon their family name, a serious transgression according to the Athenian legal system. As the jury of two hundred citizens listens, Demosthenes, the gifted orator Achaikos has hired to represent him, makes his case. He explains that Achaikos is clearly superior to Elpis in every way. He speaks of Achaikos’ noble birth, his wealth, his power and his civic service. Then explains that Elpis’s mother was a prostitute and that his father earned a living though servile and dishonorable means. He reveals that Elpis himself was a slave
for several years and had no formal education. He portrays Elpis as a shameless social climber, who has seduced a naive widow. He demands that the marriage be dissolved and that Elpis be found guilty of committing an act of shameless effrontery. Elpis is clearly not the equal of Achaikos and should be punished for his scurrilous attack on the reputation of an important public figure of high birth.

In his book, *Law, Violence, and Community in Classical Athens*, David Cohen explains that in an agonistic society such as Ancient Greece, “a basic principle of honor provides that one does not compete with inferiors, one merely despises or disposes of them. Thus, when an inferior contends with a superior the appropriate response is indignation” (1995, 69). On the other hand, ordinary Athenians might resent the arrogance of the powerful ‘hubristai’ who felt that their power and station entitled them to license and privilege (70). In a case such as this, a skilled orator would appeal to the jury’s “resentment against the rich” (97). Witnesses in the Athenian courts were expected to address issues of character more often than the empirical facts of the case. Indeed, it was understood that they might lie in order to praise one of the litigants, and

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70 Another form of “hubris” was committing adultery, a crime for which, the punishment was often a form of public sexual humiliation that would avenge the damaged honor of the cuckold. A typical punishment involved the insertion of a large white radish into the anus of the adulterer (Cohen 1995, 148).

71 Cohen describes the case of a ruler who flew into a rage when a fellow citizen complimented his concubine. He had the man castrated and forced him to eat his own testicles, but was later put on trial for this “over-reaction” (148).
this was seen as a way of acknowledging the social status of the litigant in question. As Cohen explains, “They speak to tell (and embellish) the truth, but to lie without hesitation if they must.” (110). In fact, an effective character witness might barely know the litigant he was supporting. It was more important that he was ill disposed to the litigant’s rival. This meant that he would be willing to lavish the litigant with praise, while condemning his opponent. Such testimony may seem less than credible by today’s standards, but in an Athenian court, it proved that the litigant was well supported in the enmity he felt toward his rival (110).

Figure 90. Phryne in Court

In another well-known trial, the Greek courtesan Phryne stood accused of profaning the Eleusinian Mysteries. The trial was going poorly, until her orator, Hypereides, tore open her robe, displaying her naked body. Highly impressed with her beauty, the members of the jury promptly acquitted her. Clearly, Athenian courts viewed the concept of “evidence” differently than modern courts. In one of the cases that Cohen cites, the orator Isaeus suggests that the court should give more weight to circumstantial evidence than eyewitness testimony. The case in question
involved a dispute over inheritance, and Isaeus argued that witnesses might be compelled to lie, so the court should consider probabilistic assumptions more valid than direct testimony that was likely to be prejudicial (170). Such practices may sound absurd to modern readers. However, in a culture like ancient Greece just emerging from an oral tradition and steeped in ritual protocols, “ethos” was often privileged over “logos.” Thus in court, an ethical appeal trumped logical argumentation. But what type of ethics were these? Why should a former slave be punished for striving to be seen as a social equal and a wealthy elite punished for thinking himself superior? Where was the single universally applicable standard, applying to all people in all contexts? And why should the character of the litigants seem more important than the facts of the case?

With the advent of literacy, the ancient Greeks were able to codify laws and create a functioning civic justice system. This helped bring an end to some of the feuding and factionalism plaguing their culture. As the law grew more formalized, ethical standards became more clearly defined. In theory, the Greeks were growing more logical and civilized, yet in practice, they were still deeply influenced by rhetorical appeals that had little do with rational analysis or empirical observation.\textsuperscript{72} In fact,

\textsuperscript{72} In many eras throughout history, empirical proofs have been devalued. For instance, in the middle ages, monks held that there was a hierarchy of truth. At the highest level was scriptural conjecture about the fate of the universe. Next came moral truth, then allegorical truth. Finally, at the bottom, the least important, was literal truth, which was considered empty
David Cohen argues that the Greek courts afforded wealthy elites the means to protect their interests and pursue private grudges, dominating, attacking and even declaring war on others with state approval. As he explains, “Feud is never entirely suppressed, though, it may assume different forms” (1995, 19). Therefore in classical antiquity, “the increasing development of centralized bureaucratic power induced the wealthier members of the elite to abandon blood feuding and compete in the political arena” (20).

Because Institutional authorities (chiefs) are able to mandate what counts as “logic,” they tend to favor “logical” appeals. In contrast, ritual authorities (shamans) favor analogical appeals, privileging intuitive pattern recognition over deductive analysis. For instance, if a well-respected family has engaged in consistently valued behaviors over time, proving themselves reliable, honorable, and trustworthy, they have an established reputation. What’s more, if an individual is dependably charming, attractive, sympathetic, or amusing, he need only emphasize such behavioral patterns to invoke a particular brand of ritual authority.

As mediation practices grow increasingly participatory, and thus more ritualistic, the type of ethical pattern recognition that underwrites ritual authority is exerting increased cultural influence, hence a

of meaning and irrelevant. Justifying the veneration of divine revelation over empirical observation, a fourteenth-century writing manual explains, “Whether it is truth of history or fiction doesn't matter, because the example is not supplied for its own sake but for its signification” (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007, 37).
heightened emphasis on emergent trends, online customer reviews, viral marketing, lifestyle politics and positive word of mouth. In such an environment, institutional authority is increasingly undermined and business as usual is no longer an option.

This chapter examines the ways in which new mediums invoke particular types of ritual authority in order to achieve particular ends. I consider the ethical implications of this behavior and discuss such topics as “role playing,” “personal branding” and “ritual complexity.” While considering how ritual roles both constrain behavior and afford a degree of cultural innovation, I draw on the work of sociologists (Durkheim 1972; Goffman 1997), social movement theorists (Melucci 1996; Tilly 2004; Chesters & Welsh 2006; Warnke 2007) and media analysts (Mehl 2005).

Role Playing.

In the age of the new medium, hegemonic ethics are being unsettled by the “ethics of invention,” an emergent trend that privileges ritual authority over institutional control. By adopting a particular persona, the new medium claims the authority to author experience in a particular manner. Speaking for one’s self begins with claiming the “self” we intend to speak through…or at least attempting to do so.

We never speak from a neutral or generic position, so mediumship necessarily involves getting in character and channeling a
particular identity. The medium may choose to portray “a girl scout leader,” “a doctor,” or “a rapper.” Each of these personae affords a different mode of social empowerment and each requires a different set of cultural aptitudes (few people would be convincing as both the girl scout leader and the rapper). Although these roles are multivocal, variable and interactive, each demands capitulation to specific ritual protocols. Thus even if mediums are well suited to the roles they willingly adopt, they are never completely in control. At the same time, they may be able to improvise within the constraints of their roles thus influencing the environment around them including other ritual actors.

As James Gee explains, adapting to a particular mode of discourse is like acquiring an “‘identity kit,’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (2001, 1). Being the medium involves looking the part and playing by the rules, but also exploiting specific modes of identification in the service of a more expansive sense of self. Above all, it means grappling with the implications of perceived difference. In contrast to neo-liberal politics,

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73 The forefather of “method acting,” Constantin Stanislavski compared memorizing and performing a theatrical role with the relationship between grammar and poetry, arguing, “you can speak for your character in your own person. This is of utmost importance as you develop your work systematically and in detail. Everything that you add from an inner source will find its rightful place. Therefore, you should bring yourself to the point of taking hold of a new role concretely, as if it were your own life. When you sense that real kinship to your part, you will be able to pour feelings into your inner creative state, which borders on the subconscious, and boldly begin the study of the play and its main theme” (1936, 289).
which seek to elide difference in pursuit of social equality, ritual politics both emphasize and deemphasize difference in pursuit of a wide range of social goals including emancipation, contestation, dominance, submission, rejection, subversion, exploitation and revolution. According to this view, difference is not inherently empowering or disempowering. Too much or too little perceived difference can limit social mobility. One needs to strike an effective balance, to be seen as unique, but not too unique, partly autonomous, but still part of the community. We need to keep up with the Jonses, but we also need to be different than the Jonses. Mediation puts us on the map by foregrounding what makes us unique, either by enhancing what is immediately apparently, or revealing what is not. With considerable effort we might strive to alter our skin color or gender. We might don a toupee, wear lifts, affect an English accent and go to finishing school, but there is a limit to how much we can convincingly alter our perceived selves. Ultimately, we are obliged to grapple with the hand that nature has dealt us. Those who do so most effectively can be credited with mastering the art of invoking ritual authority.

Figure 91. Emulation
Emulation involves invoking authority not immediately apparent. This means imitating others, adopting behaviors, demeanors, clothing, hairstyles, facial expressions, etc. It is an attempt to fit in with a group one is not automatically associated with and to stand out from groups one is automatically associated with. Ritual performance allows us to enhance what is immediately apparent and to conjure what is not. The middle class white teenager who rebels against parental authority by listening to gangsta rap, the political conservative who dresses in drag, the bored housewife obsessed with romance novels are all mediums actively constructing alternatives identities for themselves in order to emulate a particular type of ritual authority. Because emulation involves challenging comfortable preconceptions, it is not always successful. Yet by breaking with convention, it can—in some instances—lead to startling cultural innovations.

Figure 92. Enhancement

Enhancement invokes authority by accentuating what is already apparent. This means playing up or making over inherent traits including physical appearance, talents, knowledge, and skill sets. A judge donning his robe, a scientist speaking in carefully measured tones, a homeless
man holding up a sign that draws attention to his pitiable condition, are all enhancing immediately apparent ritual roles.

Sometimes we are oblivious to the ritual roles we are performing, but others seldom are. The people we interact with on a daily basis cannot directly access our private psychological states, so there is no way they can see us as complexly as we see ourselves. Hopefully, our closest friends and relations afford us some degree of complexity and attempt to empathize with our concerns. Yet even they view us as particular “types” of communicators, conveying particular types of messages inflected by the sounds of our voices, the contours of our bodies, the memories we are able to access and the skills we are able to deploy. If we are unaware of how these media affordances are rhetorically encoded, our intentions are likely to be profoundly misunderstood. And if we are oblivious to the formal and normative requirements of the ritual personae we adopt, we are likely to grossly underestimate their influence upon us.

Cultivating identities involves capitalizing on various types of media affordances, some related to one’s physique or social station and some existing primarily in the collective imagination. Throughout our lives, we commit to any number of roles, some more slavishly than others. Even when a single role threatens to define us once and for all, there is always a different mode identity waiting in the wings. Erving Goffman explains, “While manifestly participating in one system of roles, the individual will have some capacity to hold in abeyance his
involvement in other patterns, thus sustaining one or more dormant roles that are enacted on other occasions” (Goffman 1997, 36). But why do we choose to adopt some modes of identification and not others?

**Personal Branding.**

According to a 2008 study, we are each subjected to 3,000 to 10,000 brand exposures every day (Dixit & Huston 2008). Logos are everywhere, in television commercials, on billboards, bumper stickers, T-shirts and coffee mugs. Ironically, logos often defy logic. They are actually an analogical means of invoking ritual authority. Mediums deploy them to conjure meanings that, in many respects, conflict with empirical evidence. A poor person sports a designer hat in an attempt to look more affluent, an uneducated person wears designer glasses to look more intelligent, and a frail man dons a leather jacket to look tougher. We may assume that logos *cause* people to see us in a particular way, but logos actually operate via *correlation*. Logos are patterns of associations that we *analogically* associate with specific modes of identification. This can influence how others see us and how we see ourselves. It can also influence how we act.

To test how brand logos influence behavior, researchers set up an experiment in which subjects saw either the Apple logo or the IBM logo subtly displayed. Test subjects were then asked to describe different uses for a common brick. The researchers found that—as long as the subjects
valued personal creativity to begin with—those who had seen the Apple logo came up with more creative answers. The logo did not impose a uniform effect, but if the test subject was someone who prized innovation, the “brand halo” of the Apple logo actually enhanced his capacity to innovate. By merely being in the presence of the logo, he became more creative!

In another experiment, people were exposed to the logo of either Disney or the E! Entertainment network. The study found that those who valued honesty and saw the Disney logo answered questions more honestly, whereas those who saw the E! logo, answered questions more dishonestly.

Study co-author Gavan Fitzsimons, a professor of psychology at Duke University explains, “Every brand comes with a set of associations. When we're exposed to logos, those associations fire automatically, activating our motivational systems and leading us to behave in ways that are consistent with the brand image.” Fitzsimons stresses that these responses are not automatic. They must relate to our preexisting values. Yet those of us who prize innovation and honesty find that associating with the Apple brand or the Disney brand can help to bring out these qualities in our own behavior (Dixit & Huston 2008). Thus affiliating oneself with a brand logo is not just about conspicuous consumption; it’s about cultivating a specific identity and thus invoking a particular type of ritual authority.
Since the 1980s, designer fashions have become a staple of popular culture. Often the designer logo is more valued than the product it is attached to, hence the rampant proliferation of designer counterfeits made of inferior quality materials. When someone in a poor urban milieu affiliates themselves with designer fashions, they are aspiring to be seen a certain way, to become a particular type of ritual actor and challenge the notion that their social mobility is limited by “performing affluence.”

Personal branding allows us to either enhance what is apparent or to emulate what is not. Such posturing, we hope, will challenge others to see us in a manner that allows us to achieve particular social goals, i.e. attaining greater acceptance, admiration, wealth, power, or fame.

![Figure 93. Personal Branding](image)

The notion of maintaining a “personal brand” is actually quite ancient. It harks back to the idea of a medium cultivating a particular ritual role. It might involve adopting a particular hairstyle, sporting certain clothes, or body markings, or it might entail developing specific talents, acquiring specialized knowledge, or engaging in advantageous behaviors. This role, or “brand” is a type of social pattern, existing in concert with other complex roles being enacted by other ritualists comprising the cultural environment.
Ritual Complexity.

Until recently worldwide visibility was the jealously guarded privilege of an elite few. Now it is potentially available to a large percentage of our planet’s populous. In the space of a decade, the velvet rope separating the visible from the invisible has vanished. With this barrier gone, it is easier than ever for a ritual medium to be seen. It is easier than ever for her rival mediums to be seen as well. Attracting notice in such an environment requires clever innovation and/or shameless exhibitionism. Yet try as we might, we can only make particular glimpses of our selves visible in particular ways for particular audiences. The roles we assume, act as perceptual filters, foreclosing other possible modes of identification.

When we preface a remark by saying, “speaking as a woman,” “a man,” “a parent,” “a teacher,” or “a Muslim,” we are not merely stating the obvious; we are becoming a particular type of communication device, formalizing the message in a manner just as specific as a radio or a television signal might. And when we array our bodies with tattoos, earrings, designer perfumes, hats and sunglasses, we are addressing the world with scripts as explicit and as meaningful as any novel or poem. Certainly, we can upload knowledge and upgrade abilities as a computer might, but we are not filling an empty hard drive with prefabricated
dispositions, we are collaborating with an existing ecology in a particular way.

If a white liberal inhabits a cultural ecology that privileges whiteness, she cannot stop being white, and she cannot pretend that she does not benefit from white privilege. On the other hand, in a black activist subculture actively critiquing the oppressive practices of white culture, the same person will, in some respects, lack perceived authority, as she can only argue from a historically privileged subject position and cannot claim direct knowledge of the type of discrimination experienced by her black colleagues. The ecological perspective allows us to consider the tension between the multiple cultural milieus we simultaneously inhabit in relation to the particular roles we are able to enact, i.e. the white liberal existing in the white dominated society and the black activist subculture at the same instant.

While most ritual practices merely perpetuate the status quo, ritual does have the potential to affect significant cultural change. As Holland et al argue, “People’s lives take shape among the identifications, figured and relational, that are arranged within the space of their activity … These social forms, these discourses and practices, are not simply the context but the content of inner life, albeit in some way transformed. The interpersonal becomes the intrapersonal in a literal way; the forms of speaking and interacting inhabit us to make ‘inner’ speech and ‘inner’ action. They are the mediating devices of our thinking, feeling, and
willing” (1998, 235). In the politics of everyday life, ritual roles exert significant influence, and as public and private ecologies continue to shade into one another, ritual authority becomes an increasingly viable means of orchestrating large-scale social change. In the current mediascape, bids for authority that were once viewed as unconventional and even unethical are increasing becoming moral universes unto themselves with their own modes of empowerment and obligation, their own “ethics of invention.”

Conjuring Context.

One of the best ways of discerning the type of ritual authority a person is attempting to invoke involves examining the type of culture they are working to create. Certain types of ritualists strive to create certain types of cultural contexts. At the same time, certain cultural contexts promote certain types of ritual behavior. What we believe is, to some extent, influenced by how we are believable. We are invested in seeing the world in a way that allows the world to see us in an especially empowered light. Attractive people may or may not flirt with authority figures in an attempt to achieve social mobility, and authority figures may or may not be swayed by such flattering. But this mode of empowerment is only available to a select group of people. Those who can potentially invoke this type of authority may resist doing so, choosing to earn their
advancement according to traditional institutional requirements, yet the potential remains, and some may, on occasion, choose to capitalize on it.

The waitress serving cocktails at the high society ball may know more about opera and fine art than the hostess who hired her, but in this context, such “cultural capital” may have less cache than the hostess’ flawless skin and flirtatious charm. Such markers of distinction may seem superficial, but their cultural resonance runs deep, as they afford certain modes of empowerment and rigidly constrain others, allowing ambitious ritualists a degree of upward mobility, while undermining their credibility in other respects.

 mediums have a gift for reciprocity. They are adept at “playing to the crowd” and “working the room.” Yet this skill can also leave them open to charges of pandering and self-serving manipulation. The ability to effectively embody a socially sanctioned role invests a medium with a particular type of authority, but it also limits his or her ability to effectively maneuver in social contexts less sensitive to her favored mode or authority. Mediumship, therefore, involves cultivating identities, while being cultivated by identities and creating contexts while being created by contexts.

Recombinant Selves.

Splicing together genetic material produces recombinant DNA. In a similar sense, recombining familiar cultural behaviors creates a ritual
role. A ritual role is a type of fractal pattern comprised of both
determined and emergent features, familiar scripts embellished with
spontaneous improvisations, thus exhibiting both persisting and variant
features in each of its multiple iterations.

Because society is always in flux, roles must be in flux as well. It
is misleading to speak of timeless archetypes and the immutable laws of
“human nature.” On the other hand, some patterns of behavior are
incredible durable, taking on different inflections in each new historic
context while maintaining a degree of cogency over time, a pattern that
can be traced and studied.

When we view the self-immolating behaviors of a reality TV star,
we are not witnessing an exact replication of primitive scapegoating rites.
Much has changed, but some things have carried over, and as long as
some of the central dynamics remain recognizable, the comparison is
worth drawing. Because ritual roles are permeable patterns, rather than
fixed structures, they are always inflected by the local and historic
particulars of the circumstances that have occasioned their recurrence.
Nonetheless, they are at least partly familiar, and modes of identification
that resonate deeply within the cultural memory of likeminded ritualists
carry real social force.

The politics of representation is also a politics of identification.
This is what the materialist perspective leaves out. We go to work to
acquire wealth, but we produce and consume media to make sense of our
constantly evolving selves in relation to our constantly evolving historic circumstances. This process of continual reevaluation would be unnecessary if human nature was an accomplished thing, handed down unchanged throughout the ages. Fortunately, this is not the case. Life is never entirely predictable, and media rituals are meaningful precisely because they are both familiar and strange. They act as a bridge between the world as it has always been and the world as it is rapidly becoming. This simultaneous sense of consistency and variance is what makes them so compelling and so culturally productive.

Figure 94. Keith Richards

In his autobiography, *Life* (2010), Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards muses on the “rebel” persona that has attached itself to him and that he has, in turn, exploited and modeled in various ways, during his fifty plus years as a public figure. This description provides a sense of the reciprocal “dance” between individual intent and cultural expectation that constitutes the ritual role. He says:

I can’t untie the threads of how much I played up to the part that was written for me. I mean the skull ring and the broken tooth and the kohl. Is it half and half? I think in a way your
persona, your image, as it used to be known, is like a ball and chain. People think I’m still a goddamn junkie. It’s 30 years since I gave up the dope! Image is like a long shadow. Even when the sun goes down, you can see it … There is something inside me that just wants to excite that thing in other people, because I know it’s there in everybody. There’s a demon in me, and there’s a demon in everybody else. I get a uniquely ridiculous response—the skulls flow in by the truckload, sent by well-wishers.

People love that image. They imagined me. They made me. The folks out there created this folk hero. Bless their hearts. And I’ll do the best I can to fulfill their needs (364-5).

The items that Richards lists—the skull ring, the broken tooth and the kohl—are all media affordances that resonate with the larger cultural field. His band, the Rolling Stones, were early proponents of the idea that there is no such thing as bad press, but there is also no such thing as a purely rebellious, self-determined identity. Richards has long cultivated a menacing, rough and tumble, counterculture image. The long hair, the drugs, the slurred speech, the cigarettes, the loud music, all challenge cultural norms, but Richards is also defined by media affordances that resonate with more typical markers of cultural distinction. His whiteness
and his Englishness are an equally important part of his ritual persona, enhancing its salience by affirming the same normative expectations his other mode of identification appear to flout. Thus, while few white American teens related to the black bluesmen that Richards modeled his persona after, many of them strongly identified with the members of the Rolling Stones.

**Role Requirements.**

The 1973 PBS series *An American Family* was the prototype for the countless reality shows to follow. It was publicized as a “slice of life” examination of the Loud family of Santa Barbara, California, an unblinking look at the day-to-day existence of a more or less typical, middle class, American clan. The program proved controversial, however, when twenty two year old Lance Loud was shown rejecting the heteronormative lifestyle of his parents and siblings, becoming one of the first openly gay “characters” on television.

![Figure 95. The Loud Family: 1973](image)

While Lance was certainly a stand out, the climax of the series occurred when matriarch Pat Loud confronted her husband, Bill, about the latest in a string of marital infidelities and, while the camera’s rolled,
asked him for a divorce. This first instance of a marriage breaking up on camera foreshadowed a future trend that infotainment reporters would eventually come to label, “the reality TV curse.” In time, other purported victims would include: Danny and Gretchen Bonaduce, Hulk and Linda Hogan, Travis and Moakler Barker, David Navarro and Carmen Electra, Nick Lachey and Jessica Simpson, Bobby Brown and Whitney Houston, Britney Spears and Kevin Federline, and Jon and Kate Gosselin. All of this domestic fallout begs the question is there something inherently corrosive about video taping the day-to-day challenges of married life?

In her autobiography, “Pat Loud: A Woman’s Story,” Pat Loud sheds some light on the matter: “We were living a story that had to be told, and the story was building to a climax. It was just as Craig [producer Craig Gilbert] had said: The truths that were lurking under the surface were now ready to explode into view.” She continues, “I just knew that now there was a stronger force pushing me to end the whole miserable mess than there had ever been before” (1974, 113).

When we adopt a ritual role we are no longer just one person. We assume a persona tied into a mode of collective identification defined by the cultural requirements of that subject position. Submitting to such an identity means seeing oneself as a particular type of social actor engaged in a particular type of performance. Pat Loud writes: “After you’ve played the same old marriage game for as long as we had, with both of you hitting the same foul balls and stealing the same old bases,
your tolerance for the same performance dwindles down to nothing.” She adds, “I was so tired of goading and being goaded back, it was as though my whole being had been reduced to suspicion and hurting self-hatred and weary forced participation in this lousy play that should have closed long ago” (112).

While Pat repeatedly describes herself as “too old for women’s lib,” (118), she was clearly aware of the burgeoning feminist movement and her newfound role as a public representative of her gender. For twenty years, “Pat the housewife” had resisted confronting her husband about his infidelities, but “Pat the public figure,” the heroine of “a Woman’s Story,” felt a growing obligation to a larger sense of identity. She adds, “ Couldn’t it be that since circumstances and fate had put me in a position to rip away the curtain of hypocrisy, that maybe, just maybe, we could help other families face their own problems more honestly?” (119). Thus, despite numerous misgivings, Pat—along with producer Craig Gilbert—arranged to confront Bill Loud on camera. She says, “there was the usual flurry over doing this scene” [my italics]. And admits, “I thought it was ratty.” But then adds, “If I had decided to divorce during the filming, I must be honest enough to do it openly and

74 In An American Family: A Televised Life, Jeffrey Ruoff argues that while Pat Loud never overtly identifies as a feminist, her “character” in the documentary “was widely used as a foil to discuss general issues related to the woman’s movement” (2002, 127). In fact, “during the promotional tour, she claimed to speak for the anonymous American wife and mother: ‘Every housewife I know has a story they are dying to tell but never do’” (123).
Role Violations.

Not all ritualists are willing or able to meet the requirements of a specific role. Some grow too timid. Others lose interest. Still others attempt to cheat the audience, feigning commitment, but secretly cutting corners. When they are caught doing this, they stand accused of a “role violation.”

For instance, everyone has what it takes to become a ritual scapegoat, yet few people are willing to pay the price. The scapegoat needs no special talent, no beauty, charm, intelligence, or wit. In some respects, he is better off without them. This is because he is obliged to portray the shameful part of ourselves that is most unworthy, yet most desirous of acclaim. For this, he is made to suffer. The scapegoat confirms the value of our most noble traits by embodying their antithesis and being punished for it. This is the source of his ritual authority. If he wishes to be rewarded with money and media visibility, he needs to become the abject. If he fails to do so convincingly, his credibility will be undermined, inviting even greater moral indignation and public rebuke.

For instance, in 2006, the Smoking Gun website reported that author James Fry’s confessional bestseller A Million Little Pieces contained fabricated plot points. This triggered a media backlash,
culminating in Fry being publicly excoriated by Oprah Winfrey who had initially endorsed the book and helped to make it a popular success. 

Media pundits who seized on the story either condemned or defended Fry’s actions, but generally failed to consider what cultural forces may have influenced them. Oddly enough, the best selling author was guilty of fabricating lies in order to appear less law abiding and well adjusted than he actually was. He stood accused of being covertly respectable!

Figure 96. James Fry and Oprah Winfrey

Robert Merton’s theory of “social anomie” suggests that capitalist societies place unrealistic emphasis on achieving fame and fortune. Initially, social actors strive to grasp the brass ring via legitimate means, but because society provides extremely limited opportunities for social mobility, this usually fails. As a result, they turn to illegitimate means, cheating and stealing to get ahead. This breakdown of social norms derives from Emile Durkheim’s concept of “anomie” (1972), the notion that inadequate means result in anti-social ends. The Fry case is intriguing because anomie was not merely an effect of social striving; it was an affordance, that is, an actual means of attaining media visibility. By performing anomie, Fry made himself worthy of media visibility. In
fact, if we allow that he was doing more than reacting to norms imposed by cultural discourses, we may detect a degree of strategic thought.

In an era in which tell-all memoirs become best sellers, fabricating shameful deeds to confess makes good business sense. Publicizing a work that details such “secrets” amounts to an extended act of public contrition, but for an aspiring novelist, the potential payback is significant. As Dominque Mehl explains, in a confessional culture, the act of witnessing trauma upstages the old emphasis on “expert testimony” (2005, 78-80). Audiences increasingly privilege first hand descriptions or even direct depictions (as with reality TV) of traumatic events to the dispassionate analysis of supposedly impartial institutional authorities. This celebration of trauma for its own sake tends to conjure both monsters and victims, those who inflict abuse and those who are willing to describe how abuse has been inflicted on them. No one escapes this process unscathed, as the monsters necessarily become victims themselves when they are subjected to public scorn and must endure the scapegoating process.

Cultures have always required ritual scapegoats, figures who affirm the validity of our beliefs by paying a price for flouting them. James Fry offered himself up as such a figure and was both punished and

75 The confessional act can function as a form of self-exoneration. Erving Goffman explains, “Apologies represent a splitting of the self into a blameworthy part and a part that stands back and sympathizes with the blame giving, and, by implication, is worthy of being brought back into the fold” (1997, 122).
richly rewarded in return. The story behind his falsified story is not merely a tale of imposed cultural norms, it is also an example of how an ambitious individual can set aside scruples and attain social empowerment by placing himself at odds with normative structures in a particularly intriguing way.

When today’s’ tabloid stars aren’t shattering into “a million little pieces,” they are busy pulling themselves back together. The resulting up and down rollercoaster ride has less to do with submitting to any dominant set of cultural norms than with meeting the requirements of a specific ritual role. In an increasingly ritualized media environment, the ability to fall apart on cue in public is highly valued. Thus, the “reliably unreliable” are richly rewarded for their high profile transgressions.

The fallout from the Fry scandal is particularly telling in this regard. We see that Oprah Winfrey, a popular purveyor of trauma culture, took the author to task. She harshly criticized him—not for engaging in the criminal behavior depicted in the book—but for failing to meet the requirements of his chosen role. He had doctored his resume, writing the type of confessional, tell-all memoir that the Oprah Winfrey Show was known to eagerly endorse without actually having all of his scapegoat credentials in order. He was guilty of the ethical lapse of being too ethical (at least by traditional standards). Adding irony to irony, the scandal was precisely the type of high profile disgrace that finally allowed Fry to claim the status of a true tabloid star, one whose most shameful secret
(not having enough shameful secrets) had been revealed for all the world to see. After Oprah lambasted him, *A Million Little Pieces* attracted even more readers. It has since been published in twenty-nine languages and has sold over 5 million copies.

By allowing himself to be publically chastised, James Fry eventually fulfilled his scapegoat role and redeemed himself in the eyes of his fellow ritualists. Yet the fact that he originally attempted to capitalize on the benefits of penning a confessional memoir by exaggerating scandalous details of his personal life suggests some interesting things about both his personal ethos and the enticements that confessional culture dangles before innovators willing to trade shame for fame (or at least, high profile infamy).

Scapegoats are not the only figures occasionally guilty of role violation. Ritualists who claim to be heroic are especially susceptible. Those who trade on their physical attractiveness also tread a tenuous tightrope (one that slackens with each passing year). And those ritualists celebrated for their wit and intelligence can only command attention as long as they can offer plenty of laughter and insights. In fact, the ways in which ritual mediums fail to meet specific requirements often says more about them than their ability to flawlessly enact their chosen roles.
Role Types.

There are countless ritual roles. In this section, I touch on a few. All of these roles can be inflected and intermingled in countless ways.

Figure 97. Comic Type

Authority: ability to challenge hypocrisy and corruption.

Appeal: opportunity to unsettle the status quo and get laughs.

Context: most effective when subverting “serious” discussion.

Requirement: must be humorous and insightful.

Violation: cannot be predictable, dull or serious.

Figure 98. Genial Type

Authority: able to command respect and loyalty.

Appeal: winning the approval of others, belonging.

Context: most effective when overcoming mutual mistrust.

Requirement: easy-going, approachable, down to earth demeanor.

Violation: appearing haughty, egotistical or aloof.

Figure 99. Sophisticated Type
Authority: ability to influence how others look and behave.

Appeal: chance to be style leader, trendsetter.

Context: most effective when transcending the crass and banal.

Requirement: strong fashion sense, elegance, poise.

Violation: appearing unkempt or unpolished in any way.

Figure 100. Radical Type

Authority: rejection of dominant norms.

Appeal: opportunity to dramatically change culture.

Context: most effective when rebelling against injustice.

Requirement: total commitment to a revolutionary cause.

Violation: placing personal ambition before the greater good.

Figure 101. Assertive Type

Authority: the persuasive force of raw conviction.

Appeal: the appearance of self-determination.

Context: most effective when combating chaos.

Requirement: unilateral decision-making, strong-arm tactics.

Violation: appearing indecisive.
Figure 102. Analytic Type

**Authority:** compelling analysis of complex issues.

**Appeal:** ability to soberly evaluate emotionally charged topics.

**Context:** most effective when challenging dogma and myopia.

**Requirement:** intelligence, research and thoughtful analysis

**Violation:** careless speculation or emotionalism.

Figure 103. Empathic Type

**Authority:** association with other person or group.

**Appeal:** vicarious sense of achievement.

**Context:** most effective when combating indifference.

**Requirement:** absolute devotion to ritual target.

**Violation:** apathy, dissociation.

Figure 104. Pathetic Type

**Authority:** eliciting the sympathy of supporters.
**Appeal:** means of avoiding greater consequences.

**Context:** most effective when submitting to climate of shame.

**Requirement:** publically pleading for forgiveness or understanding.

**Violation:** appearing merely self-serving or manipulative.

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**Embracement, Centering, Dabbling & Distancing.**

Mediums engage with different roles in different ways for different reasons. Because we exist in multiple cultural contexts simultaneously, we are largely defined by the identities we chose to embrace, centralize, dabble in or disown, but no one role can sum up the totality of who we are. What’s more, roles often attach themselves to us whether we like it or not. We cannot always successfully cultivate, shed or modify particular modes of identification. Yet despite such challenges, we *do* have a degree of choice regarding how others perceive us and how we generally perceive our selves.

![Figure 105. Role Embracement](image)

Ervin Goffman explains, “To embrace the role is to be embraced by it” (1997, 36). Role embracement involves committing wholly to a particular persona. This type of ritual engagement creates a tight feedback loop between individual and environment with little room for improvisation. It occurs when a role attaches itself to us, and we willingly
accept it. There are many advantages to such a maneuver. Allowing others to see us as they want to means confirming the validity of familiar cultural norms. When we do this, we are able to avail ourselves of modes of empowerment readily available to people who conform to a familiar social “type.”

Role embracement is less about the roles we pick than the roles that pick us. When a young man who is 6’5” agrees to try out for the basketball team, he is embracing a role that others want him to fulfill. In so doing, he is earning the approval of friends and teammates. Embracing this type of role is like swimming with the tide. It can feel effortless and perhaps a bit too easy. A petite woman may find she can readily persuade others by being sweet and nonthreatening, whereas she may have greater difficulty commanding authority by being firm and decisive.

The downside of embracement is that it can rigidly constrain one’s ability to innovate. By definition, it disallows deviation from the established norm. So the ritualist becomes more of a tactician than an innovator, navigating well-worn paths, rather than blazing new trails. Role embracement is about playing to our perceived strengths, rather than branching out and taking on new challenges. It seduces us with easy empowerment. By calling attention to his physical strength, a hypermasculine male may intimidate others who then submit to his will. By playing up her looks, a hyperfeminine woman may receive special treatment. Yet these roles often constrain as much as they empower,
limiting our ability to be seen or to see ourselves in more than stereotypical ways. Describing the uncritical role embracement characteristic of many housewives in the 1950s, Betty Freidan writes, “There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique” (1963, 50).

Because the roles one is most impelled to embrace are related to what is immediately apparent—sex, race, age, weight, height, skin color, hair color, etc.—role embracement encourages us to “live on the surface,” that is, to define ourselves primarily in terms of what is visible to the outside world. When the medium consents to this bargain, her source of ritual authority becomes largely external and often superficial. Rather than struggling to cultivate talents that are not immediately apparent, role embracers cut corners and fall back on the overly familiar. They celebrate biological “givens” as a source of “pride,” but their primary modes of empowerment are more inherited than achieved. Gaining easy approval by meeting obvious expectations, they limit their capacity to be seen in other ways.

By locating ritual authority in what is immediately apparent, role embracement may delude the medium into believing she has accomplished more she actually has. Often this mode of “empowerment” is ephemeral. It atrophies over time as external markers of prestige lose their power to persuade. When this occurs, the role embracer may find
she is clinging to an outmoded form of identification with little inherent substance. The body builder who gains a few extra pounds may appear to lose all credibility. And the supermodel that turns fifty may be surprised to find people are less interested in what she has to say.

Role centering is distinct from role embracement as it involves actively singling out a particular mode of identification and privileging it above all others. At best, it is a form of consciousness-raising, a chance to achieve solidarity, to rally around a particular cause. If a medium belongs to a group that has been singled out for discrimination, he or she may consciously choose to foreground the identity related to that niche as a means of resistance. In such instances, the role in question may come to eclipse all other modes of identification. This type of radical break with convention is a necessary step in any move toward social emancipation. It is also the most effective means challenging institutional hierarchies. Powerful modes of collective identification can actively subvert oppressive politics and expose exploitative practices.

On the other hand, role centering may involve clinging to convention, attempting to capitalize on an ability to exploit modes of ritual authority that neatly align with traditional norms. In such instances,
difference is also emphasized, but in a manner that plays into hegemonic schemes rather than opposing them. Those who seek this mode of social empowerment are prone to self-stereotype by exaggerating normative roles. Muscle-bound hypermasculine males, and silicon-enhanced hyperfeminine females fall into this category. When such roles become grossly exaggerated, normative centering takes on an ironic “anti-normative” status, and these figures join those who have chosen to centralized non-normative roles in the margins of mainstream culture.

Whether role centering involves challenging or embracing convention, it is always a bid for some form of acceptance, as well as a rejection of some type of perceived difference. Those centering dominant modes of identification must “perform self-determination” to prove that they have not been brainwashed by the system. And those centering unconventional modes of identification must “perform authenticity” to legitimate their inclusion into an embattled collective presenting a united front against injustice.

As a short-term strategy, role centering is often highly effective. In some instances, it may even trump institutional authority. It foregrounds difference with such vehemence, it is hard to dismiss. In the case of a person rejecting a social stigma, it can call attention to entrenched inequity. In the case of someone embracing convention, it might mean working the system to get ahead.
Deploying a role-centering tactic in a particular context in pursuit of a particular end need not limit one’s ability to identify in other ways in other contexts. Yet because role centering is such an effective strategy, it may tempt a medium to privilege one mode of identification in all social contexts. Role-centering as an all-inclusive way of life, as opposed to a short-term strategy, takes on a pathological dimension. If we are to identify as the same type of person at all times, we must flee complexity (the source of cultural innovation), denying any characteristics that don’t align with our chosen role and viewing alternate perspectives as entirely illegitimate. This sort of ideological trap frames all arguments according to a particular conceptual divide. In political science, this is known as “boundary activation.” As Charles Tilly explains, it involves “making one of several previously existing divisions among social locations so salient that it suppresses other divisions and organizes most political interaction around (and across) that division alone” (2004 xi).

Boundary activation occurs in social movements around the world. It emerges in divisions related to race, gender, language, national origin, business and labor. When we strive to identify primarily in one way, we assume others view us just as narrowly, and a polarizing worldview emerges. Such “us/them” thinking can promote progress but it can also lead to violent conflict. Because human beings are inherently complex, “centered identities” can be easily undermined. Just one exception disproves the rule. Thus, other forms of difference must be
guarded against. The very commitments that render a centered role distinct often render ritualists intolerant of other forms of diversity. Role-centering subjects tend to obsess over what does and does not count as legitimate behavior within their favored ecology. A centered role requires far more maintenance than a more loosely aggregated constellation of identities. When confronted by exceptions to preconceived rules, the role-centering ritualist may struggle to square his ideological perceptions with observed reality.

Black activist Malcolm X describes how some of his entrenched views were challenged when he encountered Moslems of many different ethnicities on a pilgrimage to Mecca: “My pilgrimage broadened my scope. It blessed me with a new insight. In two weeks in the Holy Land, I saw what I had never seen in thirty-nine years here in America. I saw all races, all colors—blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans—in true brotherhood! In unity! Living as one!” He adds, “In the past, yes, I have made sweeping indictments of all white people. I never will be guilty of that again—as I know now that some white people are sincere, that some truly are capable of being brotherly toward a black man” (1965, 369). Yet within a few paragraphs, X reverts to the polarizing rhetoric characteristic of role centering: “The white man can’t separate himself from the stigma that he automatically feels about anyone, no matter who, who is not his color. And the non-white peoples of the world are sick of the condescending white man!” (370).
Role-centering ritualists necessarily gravitate toward polarizing black and white arguments. This charges their words with unflinching conviction, but because human beings are naturally complex and inconsistent, such figures are prone to ideological lapses. The role-centering ritualist strives to embody a singular self-image, hoping to remain ideologically pure, this necessarily entails stigmatizing and caricaturizing opposing groups. If one’s own group is seen as fundamentally positive, then the opposing group must be viewed as fundamentally negative. Thus, one sign of role centering is a tendency to claim legitimacy for one’s own group while negatively stereotyping those with opposing perspectives. Ironically, this can lead to a form of “self-stereotyping.” By denying complexity to those we disagree with, we necessarily narrow and restrict our own worldview and self-image. If they are entirely evil, then we must be entirely good. Yet empathy demands complexity, so foregrounding a single mode of identification can invite others to either uncritically champion or reflexively condemn a particular ritual “type” without gleaning any real understanding of the person behind it.

When a role-centering ritualist fixates on a particular mode of identification, he may assume that others do as well. Thus, role centering may influence him to locate the source of any disagreement in the role being enacted. If someone challenges him, he may reflexively conclude that they are being intolerant of his dominant mode of identification. This
self-protective move creates ideological blind spots that frame even small personality disputes as elements of a larger socio-political struggle.

Because the dominant social norms of contemporary societies too often perpetuate racist, sexist, classist and homophobic oppression, we must not naively accept that life is a level playing field and that all groups have similar social advantages and disadvantages. However, as Stuart Hall points out when describing what he calls “politics without guarantees,” there is a danger to uncritically valorizing any group (1997). 76

The concept of hegemony acknowledges that oppressed groups are complicit in their own oppression, yet the nature of this complicity is generally left untheorized. To avoid “blaming the victim for the crime,” activist discourses often divide oppressed groups into heroes (who challenge oppression) and victims (who fall prey to it). This leads to an uncritical valorization of minority voices, leading Alberto Melucci to ask, “Are contemporary movements capable of bringing about social and political change or are they simply reducing collective action to expressive and ‘narcissistic’ celebration of the particularism of

76 Hall states, “In order to fight a politics, which is effective in ending the oppression of black people, you have to ask what is the right politics to do. You can’t depend on the fact that it’s blacks doing it; that this will guarantee in heaven that you’re doing the right thing. So I want blacks to enter into what I think they’ve been reserved in doing … having arguments with their own fellows, men and women who are black, about it. And that’s a difficult thing because in a way you have to mobilize effectively, you can’t depend on just the race to take you to your political objective.” (5).
identities?” (1996, 185). Discrimination traps the oppressed in an iron cage of negative stereotyping, whereas identity politics traps the oppressed in a golden cage of uncritical valorization. Because there are many of these cages and they are competing for the same resources and the attention of the same “general public,” only the most deserving parties, those who have been subjected to the most egregious injustices, can hope to merit increased social empowerment. Ironically, this often means accentuating marginalization, exaggerating difference and, most unfortunately, transforming complex identities into fixed “types.”

Chesters and Welsh make a distinction between “identity politics,” which they find problematic, and “collective identity,” which they consider a more constructive means of vying for increased social justice, stating: “For the purposes of clarity, we define ‘identity politics’ as the pursuit of political recognition for aspects of the social cultural specificity arising from his or her particularist identity based upon gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, age and so on.” On the other hand, “Collective identity is the process of constructing an action system. This identity is neither static nor fixed, but remains continuously in motion, requiring active identity-work even where it crystallizes into semi-permanent institutional forms” (2006, 131-2). The “identity-work” that

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77 Breaking with the identity politics tradition, Georgia Warnke strives to envision a theoretical scheme in which racial difference is acknowledged yet not automatically centralized. “These conditions of understanding require the same recognition of the limits of our understandings of one another in racial terms. We must acknowledge the conditions of their
Chesters and Welsh are describing involves acts of ongoing mediation between the ritualist and various cultural ecologies. As they explain, the concept of collective identity, “presumes the self-reflexive capacity of social actors to recognize themselves and the field of opportunities and constraints (environment) in which they are situated” (132).

Figure 107. Role Dabbling

The role dabbler is a dilettante who capitalizes on one mode of identification while acquiring the advantages of another. This type of ritualist is particularly susceptible to “false mastery,” the misguided belief that she has perfected talents or skills she has little understanding of. A role dabbler such as the reality TV star Paris Hilton trades on secondary modes of authority. She has done some acting, has recorded songs and appeared in music videos, but she is primarily famous for being famous. In general, she trades on a well-known name, wealthy relations, physical beauty and self-exposure—while making little attempt to cultivate any discernable talent. For this reason, she attracts both the possibility in a particular history; we must take them to be no less partial and no more fundamental accounts of who people are than accounts of people as Red Sox fans or siblings, and we must allow for numerous other possibilities of identity and identification” (2007, 119). While I share Warnke’s contention that different cultural contexts merit different modes of identification, I caution that in a high stakes context such as a job interview, a person’s racial status is likely to be more significant than their favorite sports team.
contempt and fascination of many ritualists, who express disdain for her lack of mastery and apparent narcissism and desire for her wealth, fame and sex appeal.

Figure 108. Role Distancing

The term “role distancing” comes from Ervin Goffman, who defines it as “skittish behavior” that is “intentional or unintentional, sincere or affected.” It constitutes “a wedge between the individual and his role” (1997, 37). Whereas role centering involves shamelessly embracing a role, role distancing involves shamefully eschewing one. The role distancer fears looking like a phony, a sell out, or a manipulator. At the same time, he seeks the advantages of a particular role. This creates a sense of inner-tension.

Early in his career, John Lennon eagerly embraced the role of pop star. Later, he attempted to distance himself from the appearance of pandering to fans, while at the same time, continuing to court fame. As Lennon became a political activist, he engaged in a different form of role distancing. Extremists often target advocates of peace and tolerance, so he may have sensed the danger of assuming this mode of identification. Unsuccessfully attempting to distance himself from this role, he made the following statements in his last interview: “What am I supposed to be,
some kind of martyr that’s not supposed to be rich? ... These critics with
the illusions they’ve created about artist’s—it’s like idol worship …
What they want is dead heroes, like Sid Vicious and James Dean. I’m not
interested in being a dead fucking hero…So forget ‘em, forget ‘em.”
(Cott 2010, 96). Interestingly, a few days after this interview, Lennon was
shot to death by a mentally disturbed fan.

Role distancing is not available to all people on equal terms.
When members of a dominant social group distance themselves from a
normative role, they are often viewed as innovators, but when members
of an oppressed group distance themselves from a normative role, they
risk being seen as sell outs, attempting to conform to the standards of the
dominant group. In general, it is less problematic for a member of a
subordinate group to centralize their oppressed identity than to
demeanorize it. This, unfortunately, limits their ability to be seen
complexly. Role distancers are interested in self-invention and wish to
convey true mastery of talents and skills that they have consciously
cultivated. Yet role distancing itself can become yet another ritual role
with its own set of requirements, allusions and modes of
empowerment. For instance, the role distancer is obliged to be somewhat
taciturn and remote, in particular, when he is engaged in activities that
afford him the advantages of the role he is apparently rejecting. He
cannot appear too eager to please, too quick to laugh, or too interested in

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78 “The way things are going, they’re gonna crucify me.” - The Ballad of
John and Yoko.
courting the favor of others. He must seem cool and detached especially when this aloof demeanor is belied by his willing submission to self-serving rites.

**Mixing, Melding, Antithesis & Alterity.**

Erving Goffman allows that ritualists have the capacity to manipulate aspects of identity, creating different types of hybrid roles. He states, “The image that emerges of the individual is that of a juggler and synthesizer, an accommodator and appeaser, who fulfils one function while he is apparently engaging in another” (1997, 40). In this section, I examine the ways that ritual roles can be combined, synthesized, juxtaposed and subverted.

Role mixing involves deliberately confounding expectations by embracing two or more seemingly conflicting roles. This move invites both controversy and fascination as it unsettles familiar modes of identification. It may be viewed as a cheat—a way of “having it both ways,” submitting to an exploitive practice, while insisting on inherent complexity. On the other hand, it may be considered an emancipatory
gesture—a way of breaking with convention and creating new spaces for social empowerment.

Often role mixers play familiar roles against one another as a means of both challenging and exploiting entrenched dichotomies. By intermingling the sacred and the profane, they simultaneously titillate and offend. This creates a particularly compelling, if volatile form or ritual authority.

In 2009, adult film actress Sasha Grey made a bid of mainstream stardom portraying a call girl in Oscar winner Stephen Soderberg’s The Girlfriend Experience. While promoting the project, she spoke to Michael Mooney of the Palm Beach New Times. In an article in which Grey references obscure philosophers and sex researcher Dr. Alfred Kinsey she, in many respects belies the image of a traditional sex worker. At one point she states, “I'm a feminist because I believe in sexually empowering women” (5/11/09). This unconventional bit of role mixing elicited some extremely polarized responses from online readers. One anonymous reaction states: “I believe that her making sexual choices in her private life would be empowering, however making them on camera only feeds into the self perpetuating system of objectification.” An opposing perspective from another anonymous source reads, “For me, as a young woman, Sasha Grey truly is an empowering female figure. She's not the only one, of course, I admire plenty of other women that are slightly more excepted [sic] in our society, but seriously, how many
women really are thought highly of in our society? Free your minds and express yourselves. SLUT POWER!!”

Almost any ritual role can be sexualized in a manner that invites fascination. This is the most common form of role mixing. For woman, the virgin/whore dichotomy is chiefly exploited. Feminine “fetish roles” mix heightened sexuality with socially sanctioned propriety, inviting fantasies related to institutional authority (the sexy doctor, dominatrix, or cop) or ritual authority (the sexy soccer mom, school girl, or nun).

In terms of masculine sexuality, role mixing often involves a conflation of the traditional macho-gay dichotomy. Longhaired and otherwise feminized male rock stars play up gender ambiguity in a manner that many fans—female and male—find captivating.

Role mixing involves more than sexuality, however. A person might combine traditional and counter-cultural tropes to interesting effect. They might strive to juxtapose characteristics of two or more ethnic cultures, academic disciplines, political parties, fashion eras, subcultures, age groups or ideologies. Role mixing is about more than creating exotic hybrids. At its most subversive, it is about leveraging hegemony against counter-hegemony to impel cultural change, and because it is often highly corrosive to cultural norms, it can be deeply

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79 Sex can sell anything, but some types of roll mixing are an easier sell than others. For instance, comedy subverts traditional power relations, so its perceived influence is somewhat unpredictable. A sense of humor is certainly charming, but a comedic appearance tends to undercut libidinal appeal. Thus, the “sexy clown” costume may never be a Halloween staple.
upsetting to non-mixers. It may even invert norms, first stripping an emergent phenomenon of its stigma and then sanctifying it.

The most successful role mixers learn to surf the zeitgeist, pairing a determined norm with a newly emergent trend. For instance, in the 1950s, some mainstream white radio stations discovered that their listeners enjoyed music recorded by black artists. As this trend gained momentum, Sun Records signed several white artists adept at singing black music, launching the careers of Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and Carl Perkins. The determined norm of whiteness with the emergent popularity of black music proved an irresistible combination for white music lovers around the world. Incipient fears of “race mixing” related to this “role mixing” only fueled interest in the nascent trend. As with all countercultural phenomena, the unleashed taboo (black music) was partly sanctified via association with the accepted norm (whiteness) and a fascinating cultural hybrid was born.

Often cultural innovators are mediums that discover successful ways to, at least ostensibly, sanctify emergent trends. Thus exhibitionism becomes emancipation, trauma becomes “reality” and murder becomes martyrdom. All are granted the imprimatur of culturally valid enterprises, deserving our attention and possibly, our emulation.

Figures 111 & 112. Role Melding
Ritualist aspiring to be all things to all people, or perhaps seeking to permanently distance themselves from a role they find overly constraining or shameful, may engage in role melding. This is what happens when roles blur together and become deeply ambiguous. Whereas the role mixer delights in playing up contrasts, the role melder strives to seamlessly synthesize competing modes of identification, or to escape one role by melding into another. Male and female, black and white, child and adult are merged into a single amorphous whole.

Figures 113—115. Role Antithesis

Ritual authority is sometimes thought to be “above the law,” but it is always constrained by ethical entailments. Even self-described “criminals” and “anarchists” are obliged to obey certain codes of conduct if they wish to convincingly maintain their ritual roles. There is no such thing a pure “non-conformity.” In fact, what is commonly referred to as “nonconformity,” is generally “anti-conformity,” deliberately antithetical behavior. The word “nonconformity” implies a degree of choice. A nonconformist may or may not choose to conform. In contrast, an anti-conformist or antithetical ritualists is obliged to reject mainstream culture in a narrowly constrained and carefully proscribed manner. In fact, the “uniforms of anti-conformity” are often far more constraining than
ordinary attire. In generally, fitting in with mainstream culture requires little effort, yet existing “outside the norm” has become a daunting challenge.

In the 1950s, people could become outsiders by merely combing their hair in a particular way. But since that time, the notion of being an “outsider” has taken on an increasingly romantic luster. Meanwhile, countless forms of rebellion have been co-opted by mainstream cultural. Thus, ritual innovators must now go to great lengths to break with cultural convention, permanently altering their bodies and wearing clothing and hairstyles that are often extremely difficult to maintain.

In general, entering the outside involves getting past gatekeepers who must be convinced that one’s appearance or behavior is conventionally unconventional (no clown shoes and rubber noses, please). Each era rigidly polices what counts as “legitimate nonconformity,” that is, what is outside the norm in a manner that is suitably “in.” In the nineteen twenties, short skirts, bobbed hair and jazz music were “in.” In the 1960s, long hair, incense and love beads were “in,” and at the start of the new millennium, eyeliner, androgyny and dyed black hair are “in.”

Maintaining outsider status is an ongoing challenge. As tattoos and piercings grow increasingly prevalent, one must acquire more tattoos and more piercings to stand out from the crowd. Far from being an escape from convention, cultivating a “counterculture” persona is a highly
demanding business, requiring concerted effort and a scrupulous tracking of the latest trends. Truly committing to an antithetic role often means making “lifestyle choices” that radically limit one’s opportunities for social mobility. Businesses willing to hire people with facial tattoos are also cultivating outsider status. Thus by limiting social options, certain “looks” constrain ritualists to habitats that necessarily resonate with values antithetical to mainstream culture. Because the antithetical ritualist cannot migrate outside of these antithetical ecologies, he is able to remain ideologically “pure.”

Figure 116 & 117. Role Alterity

While antithesis boldly challenges dominant norms, alterity slyly subverts them. Alternative ritualists embrace many qualities of mainstream culture, yet also represent forms of ritual authority that appear to naturally oppose hegemony. Often the most compelling forms of role alterity operate on multiple levels at once. Thus, in a culture dominated by white, masculine, heteronormative norms, a ritualist whose identity is an alternative in two respects is “doubly oppressed,” but also apparently uncompromised in two obvious ways. Audiences cleaving to traditional values will tend to stigmatize such figures, yet audiences seeking cultural alternatives will be drawn to them. For those in the
former category, their alterity will represent a source of attraction, a sign of progress and a source of credibility.

For instance, in many respects Oprah Winfrey and Ellen DeGeneres conform to comfortable middle class norms, but they are also women leaders in a patriarchal culture. Also, Winfrey is a powerful black woman in a society dominated by white values, and Ellen is a powerful lesbian in a society dominated by heteronormative values. Thus Oprah and Ellen are “double threats” to the status quo and, in the eyes of many, doubly heroic for achieving the cultural status they have.

*Locating Intent.*

The impact of institutional authority is often immediately apparent. A law is passed, a border is closed, a jail sentence is handed down. But the impact of ritual authority is much more difficult to quantify. Often the influence of a ritual act is not immediately apparent. The most unconventional rites tend to exert small-scale influence at first, or perhaps none at all, at least initially. Yet because rituals are now recordable and repeatable verbatim, that influence may spread overtime and eventually become quite significant. It may build and mutate taking on surprising and unexpected forms simultaneously in multiple locales along parallel but staggered timelines. Praxist theory seeks to track these branching permutations, tracing them back to their points of origin and
locating at least some of the guiding intentions of the ritualists who set them into motion.

Is a YouTube clip featuring footage of the 9/11 attacks a memoriam or a call to jihad? We cannot even begin to decide until we consider who posted it and with what aim. The intended meaning is not necessarily the meaning that others perceive, but it matters to the medium, so it matters to the culture that the medium is a part of. Inevitably, much of the medium’s intent will be lost in translation, but not all of it. Otherwise, there can be no basis for social cooperation. Human beings are both persuasive and persuadable. This is how culture is created and sustained. If we are to move from an analysis of interpretation to an analysis of practice, we must shift focus from the site of interpretation to the site of mediation, from decoding signs to becoming mediums. We must allow that intent matters.

Ritual mediums sense that issues of intent are important, so they often take steps to clarify their aims. When posting images and videos online, they usually add textual explanations to provide context. The form of expression, the content, the style of performance, are all clues as to the mode of identification the medium is aiming for. An individual may not possess the self-awareness to accurately express her most significant motives, or she may deliberately mask them. Nonetheless, the purported aims of the ritual medium are always worthy of careful consideration. They are where any search for intent must begin.
Fictional narratives provide insights into identity by exploring how specific characters behave under pressure. In a similar sense, praxism is an examination of how mediums attempt to leverage particular identities in order to achieve particular ends. It focuses on dramatic choices, moments when the medium apparently meets or resists the requirements of a familiar role. These moments provide a glimpse at the figure behind the performance and provide productive comparisons and contrasts between her and other ritualists in other cultural contexts.

Cultural logic is not causal logic. It has more to do with pattern recognition than deductive proofs. Intent cannot be proven, but it may be convincingly suggested. Locating intent is about alignment and nonalignment with a particular role, considering how far the medium will or will not go in order to achieve a specific end.

A deconstructive analysis reveals what a text downplays or occludes. It assumes that what is left unsaid is more revealing than what is overtly stated. In contrast, praxism places equal emphasis on the chosen mediation practice (ritual role) and the revealing ellipses where the media either fails or refuses to meet specific requirements. Rather than an excavation of suppressed meaning, it is an intuitive recognition of action and inaction, viewing both as highly significant.

In short, praxism emphasizes the importance of the ritual mask as well as the flashes of daylight that appear between it and the ritual medium. These revealing ellipses may not be the exact contours of any
coherent singular self. Nonetheless, they are telling glimpses of the
tenuous negotiations between the individual and the cultural
environment. During these moments of slippage, the medium may
migrate from one role to another, or mix or meld roles as well. Taking
stock of these instances, as well as moments when the mask and the
medium appear to perfectly align is not rhetorical analysis in the classic
sense. It is more like cataloguing rhetorical failures and successes in an
attempt to discern between avowed and actual intent, while striving to
glimpse the complex medium partly obscured and partly revealed by the
ritual mask.

Figure 118. Mask

Next.

The subsequent chapter defines the term “media affordance” as a
type of potential ritual practice. In contrast to “media effects,” which are
supposedly imposed on relatively passive audience members, media
affordances are opportunities to engage with the cultural environment in
various appealing ways.
Plato was the first media scholar. Not only was he wary of written composition (ironically, he was a prolific author), he also took issue with its sister discipline, theatrical production. The latter modified ritual in a number of ways, creating “the theatrical stage” (a demystified ritual space), “the text” (codified ritual), “the author” (a literate shaman) and “the actor” (a faux scapegoat). It also introduced an entirely new concept: “the audience.” There are no spectators in ritual, only participants. It is designed to be a communal experience, so one cannot witness it from a detached perspective. In contrast, the advent of the audience encouraged
the general public to remain passively receptive. Thus, for the first time, it became possible to speak of “media effects.” The effects model served to promote the notion of the artistic genius, working in isolation, cut off from society, issuing proclamations from on high that would impose influence on the impressionable masses. This perspective was perfectly plausible as long as the production chain remained distended far enough that no large scale, real time interaction could occur and a clear, unidirectional sequence of “media effects” seemed apparent (Jeffres 1997).

Plato wrote of “mimetic effects,” warning that some audience members were likely to imitate the actions of actors on stage (1956, 394C-396B). His student, Aristotle, would later counter that the theater, and tragedy in particular, had a “cathartic effect,” purging audience members of negative emotions by allowing them to break with any sense of vicarious identification at the moment of the tragic hero’s downfall (1996, 4.1). This dispute inaugurated the “effects debate” which has been central to media studies ever since.

Figure 120. Plato and Aristotle

While the mimetic and cathartic arguments attribute opposing effects to media texts and technologies, they have at least this much in common: they both deprive the audience of agency. Such overly causal
schemes tend to genericise humanity, rendering all audience members
more or less interchangeable and equally passive. In contrast to ritual
action, in which all participants consciously or unconsciously adopt a
*particular* role to achieve a particular end, the advent of the audience was
accompanied by an utterly dehumanizing view of humanity. 80 The
masses were demoted from ritual actors to human billiard balls buffeted
about by the intentions of an all-powerful author, imposing effects by
deploying various theatrical mechanisms. Plato *did* suggest that the poor
and uneducated were more susceptible to mimetic effects (1956),
retaining a measure of volition for the upper classes, but he made no
attempt to individuate members of the common herd. According to these
early, unsubtle effects-arguments, the media exert the same basic type of
influence on all audience members in all possible contexts. This tends to
homogenize people, turning them into purely reactive beings and draining
them of intent. In order to suggest that the media can impose predictable
effects, such theories locate it “out there,” entirely external to human
beings. The “media” becomes a text or technology rather than a social
practice.

This stimulus-response dynamic implies an antagonistic
relationship between media products and their audience. The scholar who

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80 Psychologist Albert Bandura draws attention to the dehumanizing
assumptions underlining such a media effects perspective: “When the
environment is regarded as an autonomous rather than an influenceable
determinant of behavior, valuation of dignifying human qualities and
accomplishments is diminished” (1977, 206-7).
theorizes in terms of media effects is the proverbial man with the hammer who sees the whole world as a nail. The arguments he wields describe how media texts and technologies hammer home specific behaviors and mindsets. For this reason, most contemporary media scholars reject the idea that any one-to-one correspondence between media consumption and media effects can be proved (see Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955). The monkey-see-monkey-do logic of Plato’s argument is too simplistic. And Aristotle’s notion of catharsis is too general. There is no reliable evidence that audience members automatically emulate media texts or reflexively experience a sense of catharsis when viewing the climax of a tragedy. Human beings are complex and do not respond to psychological stimuli in predictable ways. Certainly, the media production and social life are mutually influential, but this relationship is dynamic. One phenomenon does not strictly determine the other. For instance, globalization has been influenced by a variety of factors including the Internet, air travel, trade agreements, and ideological interventions. One might assume that the long crumbling cornerstone of media studies—the outdated media effects model—would finally collapse under the weight of all of this mushrooming complexity, yet it hasn’t…at least, not entirely. Amid all the recent talk of “multi-modality,” “complex adaptive systems,” “parallel processing,” “networked multiplicity” and “emergent behaviors,” the old deterministic schemes have managed to retain a firm
grasp on the popular imagination and even some realms of critical discourse.

These days, Plato’s mimetic argument has taken on a political cast, splitting into two polarized perspectives. In one camp, conservative pundits speak of the mimetic effects of transgressive media and how they trigger criminal behavior (Bennett 2003). 81 In the other camp, liberal pundits speak of the mimetic effects of media promoting mindless consumerism and conformity by “manufacturing consent” (Chomsky 2002). 82

Aristotle’s notion of catharsis also continues to thrive, serving as the chief defense of media producers who say works that focus on the acquisition of wealth and fame offer harmless escapism and their more violent creations provide audience members with a healthy sense of

81 In The Broken Hearth: Reversing the Moral Collapse of the American Family, William Bennett writes: “I would hardly go so far as to draw a direct, monocular connection between what the mass media put out and the crack-up of any individual marriage or relationship, anymore than a violence-filled movie (or television program or video game) by itself causes a viewer to arm himself and go out and kill. But the cumulative effect of these things—in connection with others—can and does make difference.” He then states, “What is being promoted is an ethic that is inimical to marriage and family life. And that ethic is advanced not simply by the leftist denizens of Beverly Hills but by Madison Avenue corporate executives, many of whom undoubtedly vote Republican and lament the reprehensible state of our culture” (1996, 34-35).

82 Noam Chomsky states, “The process of creating and entrenching highly selective, reshaped or completely fabricated memories of the past is what we call ‘indoctrination’ or ‘propaganda’ when it is conducted by official enemies, and ‘education,’ ‘moral instruction’ or ‘character building,’ when we do it ourselves. It is a valuable mechanism of control, since it effectively blocks any understanding of what is happening in the world” (1987, 124).
release from day-to-day tensions. For instance an online advertisement for the series of violent video games *Grand Theft Auto* states, “These games provide largely harmless, escapist fun … A game like this can provide a genuine release and offer challenging gameplay that's genuinely absorbing.”

This chapter breaks with totalizing media effects arguments by defining the media affordance as a cultural practice one may or may not choose to willingly engage in. The “medium” in this sense is not something we construct, or something that constructs us. It is something we actively become. A ritual medium in this sense must possess the appropriate attunements to be drawn to a particular affordance and must also possess the appropriate aptitudes to be able to enact it successfully. Given these conditions, any person who meets the formal requirements of a particular affordance can deploy such practices to influence culture. In an attempt to thoroughly explicate this concept, I draw on the work of media scholars (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955; Kellner 2005; Giroux 2006), psychologists (Bandura 1971; Vygotsky 1978; Gibson 1979; McArthur & Baron 1983; Reed 1988), cognitive anthropologists and philosophers (Shore 1996; Strauss & Quinn 1998; Kaufmann & Clément 2007; Chemero 2009) and political scientists (Chwe 2001; Pape 2005; Hafez 2007; Sageman 2008).
**Affordances.**

Invoking ecological metaphors is certainly one way of resisting reductive deterministic schemes, but unless theorists take great care, such complex explanatory models may confuse as well as illuminate. They may even promote more deterministic thinking as some theorists reject their opacity in favor of the false clarity of reductionism. Because of this we need to take a closer look at this conceptual tool.

![James J. Gibson](image)

**Figure 121. James J. Gibson**

James Gibson’s defining work *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* was published in 1979, the year of his death. He was sixty-five at the time and had spent his entire career defining and redefining theories of human perception. Gibson wanted psychology to reflect how we actually encounter the environment and how the environment relates to us. In an attempt to achieve this aim, he invented a theoretical school, which he called, “ecological psychology.”

It is a new approach to the whole field of psychology, for it involves rejecting the stimulus-response formula. This notion, borrowed from the so-called hard science of physiology, helped to get rid of the doctrine of the soul in psychology, but it never really worked. Neither mentalism
on the one hand nor conditioned response behaviorism on the other is good enough. What psychology needs is the kind of thinking that is beginning to be attempted in what is loosely called systems theory (Gibson 1979, 2).

In the first pages of his final work, Gibson states that most theories of visual perception are flawed because they posit a completely immobile subject, staring straight ahead and, therefore, largely oblivious to his surroundings (1). This has little to do with how we actually encounter the world. Gibson insists that visual perception is “ambient” and “ambulatory” (1). We perceive the visual contents of the environment, but also co-perceive our selves in relation to the environment. This occurs as we move around and acquire a sense of our bodies in relation to our surroundings. “The awareness of the world and the awareness of the self in the world seem to be concurrent. Both event motion in the world and locomotion of the self can be given by vision, the former by a local change in the perspective structure and the latter by a global change of the perspective structure of the ambient optic array” (187). Edward S. Reed elaborates, “Every observer has not simply a point of view, but a path of view. These paths overlap and intersect. Individuals’ paths of view are continuously changing, but the set of all possible paths of view is extremely persistent” (1988, 286-87).
This approach constitutes a significant break with most theories of perception, which tend to favor purely logical cause and effect schemes at the expense of the analogical mind. For instance, the classical theory of perception espoused by the ancient Greeks has the environment imposing sensory stimuli on the eye, whereas Descartes asserts that space is not seen but imagined by an autonomous self that imposes its preconceptions on the world (149). Both of these views create a dualism between the observer and the environment that presents significant theoretical lacunae. As long as the environment is thought to impose perception directly onto the observer or visa versa, there is no way of addressing how an observer might evaluate the characteristics of his surroundings, take stock of his own abilities and desires in relation to them and act appropriately. Deterministic schemes also provide little basis for the possibility of coordinated action between individuals (287-89).

Noting that such theories tend to view visual perception from the perspective of a detached, third person spectator who sees the individual perceiver and the environment as two distinct and dichotomous phenomena, Gibson proposes a radical shift of perspective. He does away with this God’s eye vantage and locates his view of perception in the spot where it actually occurs—at the exact intersection of the external environment and the internal world of the individual. According to this transactionist perspective, perception is two things at once: the subjectivity an individual observer with specific aptitudes and desires,
and the objective features of an environment offering specific benefits and drawbacks to all organisms capable of perceiving them. In other words, perception is a relationship between the subjectivity of the individual and the objective features of the environment. It is not merely something that happens to us. It is something that we do. What we perceive is what we go looking for, what we actively pick up on. Two people moving about the same party may notice very different things because they are receptive to different types of perceptions. Likewise different people navigating video games levels or surfing the Internet are liable to pick up on different visual or aural sensations.

This does not mean that we have unlimited freewill. Our range of motion is constrained by the environment, and even if we elect to do a bit of off-roading, we are only varying our path within the established topography. In order to describe the interface between the individual and the environment, Gibson coined a new word:

The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill. The verb to afford is found in the dictionary, but the noun affordance is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment (1979, 127).
Gibson positioned himself in opposition to two deterministic schemes: behaviorism, which had the environment imposing perceptual stimuli on the individual, and Cartesian mentalism, which had the individual imposing concepts on the environment. He wanted to focus solely on the relationship between the animal and the ecology, so he avoided addressing how human beings go about mediating mental perceptions in order to create culture. Gibson *does* consider two types of “ mediums” both related to perceptual experience. First, there are physical mediums such as air and water that serve to support organisms and separate the surfaces of the environment (16-19). Secondly, there are mediated perceptions, also known as “indirect affordances” such as photographs and strips of film (294-95).^83^ Because Gibson is focused strictly on sensory perception, he scrupulously avoids discussing the possible symbolic significance of mediated objects and merely describes them in terms of how they indirectly convey visual information. Thus in Gibson’s conception, a photograph is merely a text that can afford us an indirect view, via reproduction, of an object initially observed directly by the photographer. Because Gibson disregards conceptual thought, he does not address what mediated affordances offer in the way of possible

^83^ In regards to indirect affordances, Gibson expresses a dismissive attitude toward media analysis. He writes, “Present-day discussions of the ‘media of communication’ seem to me glib and superficial. I suspect that there are many kinds merging into one another, of great complexity” (1979 258). Gibson, a staunch anti-determinist, was, most likely, referring to longstanding debates regarding media effects.
instruction, education and indoctrination. This theoretical ellipsis is why the concept of affordances should not be imported into cultural studies without substantial modification.

**Gibson 2.0.**

Subsequent theorists have modified Gibson’s theory in all sorts of interesting ways. Donald Norman discusses the perceived “affordances” of design objects. In his parlance, something has “good affordances” if we can easily discern how it is meant to function, i.e. a door with a clearly graspable handle. Because this usage has become quite popular, the word “affordance” is often associated with physical objects. But this is needlessly restrictive. Scholars have also associated the term with all sorts of social and cultural phenomena, theorizing affordances related to physical attractiveness (Anderson 2009), anecdotes of recovering alcoholics (Cole 1996), the behavior of flocking pigeons (Klein 2003) and even images in bawdy engravings (Kaufmann and Celément 2007).

Leo Van Lier explains: “In recent years, many proposals have been made to extend the notion of affordances in different directions: cultural affordances, social affordances, cognitive affordances, and so on. Such affordances are indirect, or mediated, whereas the original type of affordance in visual perception as researched by Gibson is direct” (2004, 105). Ecological linguists such as Van Lier apply the concept of affordances to culture, society and best of all, mediated texts! But
something is still missing. Since they are primarily interested in accounting for learned behavior and specifically, how language is acquired, they want to know how ideas get from the environment into texts and then into our heads. Their object of study, therefore, is an existing text that affords learning. For them, the text is the medium.

Unlike Gibson’s conception, this type of “pre-mediated affordance” is a repository of both indirect perceptions and conceptual knowledge. In addition to informing the senses, it can also afford advanced cognition. It is primarily a conveyer of cultural meaning. The meaning in question is certainly open to interpretation, but the text itself is a closed system.

Unlike new media discourses, it is not a living ecology. While this is a productive approach for cognitive scientists interested in issues of language acquisition, it is theoretically mute about why ongoing media discourses are created, maintained and contested in specific ways. Therefore, it does little to address the primary research interests of media studies.

In recent years, Martin Oliver has argued that the term “affordance” has drifted so far from its original usage and has become so

84 The ecological perspective has become entangled in two ongoing debates. The first involves hard-core “Gibsonians” and mainstream cognitive psychologists. Philippe Rochat explains: “Gibsonians are essentially interested in the tight coupling between perception and action that allows animals to move and do things adaptively in the environment. Cognitive psychologists, on the other hand, are interested in modeling the reconstructive process of the mind as it engages in memorizing, thinking, or solving problems.”
mired in confusion it is no longer a viable theoretical concept (2005, 402). A less dismissive view of Gibson’s legacy is expressed by Anthony Chemero, who acknowledges the difficulty and even obscurity of some of Gibson’s ideas, but nonetheless, finds the affordance concept highly suggestive for theorizing interaction between individual and the environment (2009). In the age of interactive technology, such a dialogic perspective has obvious benefits, yet because we are accustomed to viewing the media as either products or modes of production, so-called “media affordances” are generally defined in terms of one of two materialist conceptions: the “media affordance as text” camp or the “media affordance as technology” camp. While these views are certainly adequate for discussing how information is acquired, conveyed and manipulated, when it comes to theorizing how culture actually comes into being, they fall short.

In order to bridge the gap between ecological theory and media studies we need to identify a different type of affordance, one that does more than pass along information, one that participates in the active production of cultural meaning. While searching for such a concept, I encountered related quotes from two different fields—the first, from psychologist James Gibson.

Although it is true that no two individuals can be at the same place at the same time, any individual can stand in the
same place at different times. Insofar as the habitat has a persisting substantial layout, therefore, all its inhabitants have an equal opportunity to explore it. In this sense the environment surrounds all observers in the same way that it surrounds a single observer (1979, 43).

The second quote comes from Political Scientist Michael Suk-Young Chwe, who describes the communal nature of cultural production.

Because only so many people can stand in one place; common knowledge is extended because each onlooker knows that others in the path of progress have seen or will see the same thing” (2001, 20.)

Whereas Gibson is describing the persisting features—or affordances—of a physical environment, Chwe is referring to a different type of affordance, “common knowledge,” a shared set of beliefs that allows human beings to form coherent communities. Individuals with different temperaments, different backgrounds and different “paths of view” are bound to interpret observed phenomena in different ways. However, the capacity for cultivating some measure of “common knowledge” is the foundation that culture is predicated upon.
When we are behind the steering wheel, we assume the drivers around us are aware of our position relative to them. We see their vehicles as obstacles, avoid crashing into them and assume that they will maneuver around us in a similar manner. Without possessing this type of common knowledge, we would never risk driving in a car. We would consider it far too dangerous.

Now, let’s say we arrive at a stop sign. It is not an obstacle. We could easily race past it, but we don’t. This is because the sign is another piece of common knowledge, a bit of the map that has been drawn onto the territory. It is there to signify two things. 1. We must stop and look both ways before proceeding. 2. Others will do the same (provided they are paying attention.)

But how did the stop sign appear in the first place? It was produced via cultural mediation, a rite conducted by people interested in determining certain formal ‘rules of the road.’ For these rules to be effective, everyone had to agree what a red sign with the word “STOP” on it meant. It was not enough that we were all aware of the stop sign; we all had to understand what it was meant to represent. Chwe explains,
“Common knowledge depends not only on me knowing that you receive a message but also on the existence of a shared symbolic system which allows me to know how you understand it” (7). Chwe’s insistence on the significance of common knowledge and shared symbolic vocabularies allows us to adopt a different type of ecological perspective.

Media Affordances.

Media affordances are potential “media practices.” The “praxist” perspective reminds us that while texts and technologies are things, media affordances are ways of interacting with our surroundings, including—but not limited to—social interactions, performed behaviors, narrative strategies, physical appearances, technological manipulations, stylistic flourishes, and normative protocols. When a particular schema appeals to an individual, it becomes an “affordance,” that is, a mode of behavior that affords a particular benefit, while requiring specific actions.

In the language of cognitive anthropology, a collection of cultural schema performing a complex function is known as a “cultural model” (see Shore 1996). I argue that when an individual deploys a cultural model in relation to a media discourse, it becomes a “ritual role.” Media affordances, therefore, are the cultural codes that serve to comprise a particular type of ritual personae.

Unlike the textual affordances described by linguists, media affordances are bits of common knowledge that afford the generation of
more common knowledge. Direct sensory perceptions—such as the events recorded by news cameras and reality show crews—can be directly mediated. And pre-mediated affordances such as books, films and theatrical scripts can be remediated to create new cultural artifacts. According to this perspective, the medium is no longer a bloodless disembodied text; it is a person who has been afforded an opportunity to act in relation to the environment. In the age of the prosumer, this seems an appropriate way of conceptualizing the interactive and participatory nature of new media, how we engage with it and what it requires in turn.

Chiefly, we find such media affordances meaningful for two reasons. 1. They appear to relate to our concerns. 2. They promise to accomplish things. Thus, affordances are not the opposite of effects. They are effects understood by analogy. Or to put things another way, they represent a menu of cause and effect dynamics that we can choose from. Of course, we must first find them meaningful and possess the abilities necessary to capitalize upon them. Affordances not only allow us to capitalize on particular effects; they also allow us to ascribe effects to

85 Holland et al. speak of “symbolic bootstrapping,” an idea inspired by Lev Vygotsky’s notion of “mediating devices.” They argue that certain forms of semiotic mediation operate as “tools of agency,” allowing us to modify our environments and our behavior (1998, 38).

86 As Bolter and Grusin point out, “A principal cultural attraction of digital visual media is that they place point of view under the user’s control” (1999, 243). “Although the programmer is not visible in the interface, the user as a subject is constantly present, clicking on buttons, choosing menu items, and dragging icons to windows” (1999, 33).
things that have already occurred. They are opportunities for us to say, “This causes that,” which is the essence of storytelling. Media affordances are stories we tell ourselves, and others, about how the world is supposed to function.

Grasping this view means recognizing that even the most abstract conceptual notions can, in some sense, be directly perceived, as they exist as part of a shared conceptual space that members of a particular community are all welcome to access, maintain, modify and challenge. Certainly individual perceivers have a storehouse of different memories relating to these perceived concepts, but the concepts themselves are not locked away in some insular psychic vault. They are potentially available to all who encounter them. Again, different people are liable to interpret observed phenomena in different ways. Still, common knowledge exists. Otherwise, simply driving across town would be impossible.

The advantage of this perspective is that it retains Gibson’s insistence that cognition is predicated on instances of direct perception rather than purely abstract conceptual thought. At the same time, it frees us to consider the ways in which conceptual schemas can be plucked from the environment and manipulated to serve the needs of the perceiver. Any observed concept or percept might afford an act of mediation. Viewing media in this manner marks a decisive break with the tradition of defining culture as somehow separate and distinct from social interaction. In fact, the term “social media” begins to sound like a bit of a
redundancy. According to this view, the media is inherently social; a point increasingly underscored by the advent of new media practices.

A ritual role is a dance between the individual and the environment, and each step in that dance is “media affordance,” an “affording dance” both permitting and requiring certain forms of mediation. Because Media affordances are potential practices rather than things, they are possibilities for engagement, means of accomplishing particular ends. They are the raw materials of mediation, the key relations that allow individuals to express agency. Moreover, they are not confined to one ecological level. Language, for instance, exists in bodies as well as books. We are not merely influenced by linguistic signs; we are linguistic signs. We are also technologies, performances, narratives and ideologies. Thus media affordances are located everywhere. They may be features of the natural environment, characteristics of a particular culture, or subculture, or they may reside within the medium herself. They do not impose influence in any unilinear way. Instead, they resonate back and forth between ecologies, connecting multiple modes of ritual identification.

*Affording Behavior.*

Because affordances are relationships between the individual and the environment, they afford particular types of behavior. A standard affordance—such as the design of a ladder—affords a standard
behavior—such as climbing. A media affordance—such as writing a blog, photographing a friend, or appearing a reality TV show—affords an act of mediation, a type of ritual practice.

To understand exactly what a ladder affords, we observe another person in the environment. We watch how he engages with the ladder, placing a hand on a high rung, a foot on a low rung, pulling himself up, then placing a different hand on a higher rung and a different foot on a higher rung. This is “behavior modeling.”

A pioneer in the field of behavior modeling, Albert Bandura, developed his “social learning theory” to explain the ways in which humans learn by modeling their behavior on the observed behavior of others. Bandura breaks with behaviorism by stressing that people only copy behavioral models that they find compelling (1971). In this respect, his ideas are compatible with James Gibson’s concept of the “affordance,” which emphasizes information “pick up,” rather than imposed “effects” (1979). Bandura also states that behavioral models are “generative.” In other words, they can be used to create and innovate other types of behaviors (1971, 38). A pianist who learns a particular musical scale is able to improvise upon that sequence of notes in all sorts of novel ways. In a similar respect, once we observe what an affordance

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87 Behavior modeling is distinct from “behaviorism.” Behaviorism assumes people reflexively respond to environmental stimuli (Pavlov 1927; Skinner 1971). Behavioral modeling assumes our subjective desires influence whether or not we emulate particular behaviors (Bandura 1971, 1977).
affords, we are free to improvise off of this knowledge. We might climb the ladder by placing our left hand on it first, rather than our right. We might also climb \textit{down} it, or hang from it, or lean against it, or turn around and sit on one of the rungs. The same is true of a media affordance. After observing a comedy routine uploaded to YouTube, we might be inspired to create a similar sketch, but with our own unique variations.

Bandura states that in cultures that are particularly complex and diverse the degree of behavioral improvisation will be much greater (38). The current media environment, in which individuals from around the globe are engaging as never before, is the most complex and diverse culture yet devised, thus a rich breeding ground for behavioral innovation.

Behavior modeling can occur directly or remotely. We might emulate the actions of someone standing a few feet away, or we might hear someone play a saxophone melody over the radio and wish to imitate and elaborate on it. Bandura explains that we also acquire complex patterns of behavior from “pictorially presented models” (41). A single piece of video footage may afford multiple things. For the aspiring director, it affords an opportunity to emulate a particular editing pattern. For the aspiring actor, it affords an opportunity to emulate a specific performance style. For the aspiring writer, it affords an opportunity to emulate a certain mode of dialogue composition.
In addition to the behaviors on view all around us, we are constantly witnessing rewards and punishments related to those behaviors. These perceived behavioral consequences influence which affordances we choose to emulate and which we deliberately avoid. As Bandura explains, “Imitative behavior is generally increased by observed reward and decreased by observed punishment” (48). Even though observed behaviors promise particular rewards and threaten particular punishments, there are no guarantees. Social life is complex and there are many complicated factors at play. Thus, an observer who decides to imitate a particular affordance may encounter an unexpected outcome. The chair that affords one person a place to sit may collapse under the weight of another. The on-camera tantrum that makes one person an object of fascination may make another person a pariah. Bandura explains, “diverse outcomes are often due to subtle differences in behavior. The same behavior may be rewarded, ignored, or punished depending upon the person toward whom it is expressed, the social setting in which it is exhibited, temporal considerations, and many other factors” (53).

**Affording Diversity.**

Although media affordances are predicated on the possibility of common knowledge, a single media affordance can be utilized in
different ways by different people, or even by the same person on different occasions.

Figure 123. Caricature of King Louis XVI as Horned Pig

When defining that they call “cultural affordances,” Laurence Kaufmann and Fabrice Clément refer to engravings of King Louis XVI that were part of the public outrage that would culminate in the French Revolution. They state, “One understands, therefore, how political chaos arises, at the middle of the eighteenth century, through the broad diffusion of the kind’s counter-portrait in seditious lampoons and bawdy engravings” (2007, 242).

A single image like the engraving above could afford multiple modes of mediation. As Kaufmann & Clément suggest, it served as a type of behavioral model, a permission slip for the French people to take on a role similar to that of the cartoonist, expressing open contempt for the monarchy. It was also a stylistic template for other cartoonists, a comedic framework for other satirists, a handy metaphor for political pundits and a visual aid for critics to circulate. What’s more, it remains all of these things today, resonating in relations between contemporary mediums and the cultural ecologies that we inhabit.
**Affording Power.**

The ecological perspective is an ontological shift, breaking with more deterministic paradigms regarding the relationship between the individual and the environment. It does *not* suggest that culture has no normative dimension. It merely points out that norms are not rigidly imposed in any predictable fashion from any consistent direction. They are on offer all around us, and while they *do* tend to serve the interests of the rich and powerful, they do not accomplish this by “constructing” behavior. Instead, they tempt social strategists who are on the look out for modes of empowerment by holding out the promise of social mobility in exchange for a degree of cultural complicity.

This type of socialization is not overt brainwashing. It is a negotiation, a tradeoff. If we submit to the status quo, we can avail ourselves of the social advantages currently on offer. The institutional powers and social trends dominating any milieu serve to constrain the type and number of affordances available—emphasizing some options, deemphasizing and completely eliding others—but they do not entirely *construct* social actors, impelling them to behave in particular ways. Even when we accept social conditioning and “drink the Kool-Aid,” we still have to decide which Kool-Aid to drink. There are many different brands vying for our allegiance and none of them are perfectly compatible with all of the others.
Because affordances operate at the level of perception, they are not about what is ultimately true in all contexts. They are about what is perceived to be true within particular contexts by particular individuals. Although they are comprised of internal cause and effect dynamics, these dynamics are viewed in relation to the ecological settings that contain them. They are “context sensitive.”

For example, we might imagine a woman entering a restaurant called “Social Mobility.” The year is 1910, the location, New York City. The menu in this particular establishment is extremely limited. The dishes with the smallest portions have labels such as “governess,” “maid,” “secretary” and “teacher.” However, at the top of the menu, in prominent gold script are the words, “Marry a millionaire.”

A hundred years later, another woman enters the same establishment. The menu has changed considerably. The “Marry a Millionaire” option is still visible, but there are many new and equally prominent affordances including, “Become a Doctor,” “Become a Lawyer” and “Become a CEO.” The woman might even innovate her own novel approach toward social mobility by building off of an existing pattern or cutting a path that is fairly unprecedented. Should this approach prove successful, it will provide a new positive affordance for future innovators. Should it prove unsuccessful, it will become a cautionary tale or “negative affordance.”

According the affordance model, the likelihood of the first woman
pursuing social mobility by attempting to marry a wealthy provider is greater than the likelihood of the second woman following the same course of action because, in the first instance, the affordances regarding social mobility are quite limited. This is how affordances influence behavior, not by imposing it on perfectly malleable objects but by strongly suggesting it to persuadable subjects and simultaneously limiting alternate courses of action. Affordances, in other words, are rhetorical. They persuade us by offering specific environmental benefits but always at a price.

**Anatomy of an Affordance.**

As I’ve said, in the age of participatory media spectacle has emerged as a dominant mode of mediation. Yet while each spectacle reflects specific characteristics of the culture from which it originates, people in diverse cultural milieus tend to perceive it quite differently. Douglas Kellner explains, “the politics of spectacle are highly unstable, subject to multiple interpretations, and often generate unanticipated effects” (2005, 78).

One of the few predictable things about new media spectacles is their propensity to fixate on transgressive displays of sex and violence. This has given rise to two new ritual roles: the “sex taper” and the “suicide bomber.” In the following section, I draw on key concepts from
the field of ecological theory, suggesting for how they might be modified in order to examine the media affordances relate to these roles.

**Figures 124 & 125. Emergent Media Affordances**

**Emergent Media Affordance:** a potential act of mediation based on an evolving cultural pattern.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEX TAPER</th>
<th>SUICIDE BOMBER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other ritualists make sex tapes.</td>
<td>Other bombings occurring worldwide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trend emerges on Internet. Censorship laws increasingly difficult to enforce. Media easier to distribute.</td>
<td>Local conditions getting worse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Military occupation of foreign powers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recruiters contact.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An effective medium is a pied piper encouraging others to flock toward a particular mode of identification. As more people follow in her footsteps, the allure of these emergent behaviors increases. For instance,
Jihadi Salafis insist that “suicide bombing is the best tactic to instill fear in the hearts of the invaders and demoralize their ranks. Also it deters others from cooperating with the occupiers” (Hafez 2007, 134).

The emergent affordances individuals choose to capitalize on reflect their subjective desires as well as the objective opportunities provided by a particular cultural ecology. We recognize an increasingly impactful behavior model and imitate it. Each time this process is repeated, the behavior appears more socially acceptable and thus, for some, more appealing. For example, a number of mainstream celebrities have appeared in sex tapes including Pam Anderson, Britney Spears, Lindsey Lohan, Verne Troyer and Kristin Davis. Reality TV stars featured in sex tapes include Paris Hilton, Kim Kardashian, Tila Tequila, Danielle Staub, Kendra Wilkinson, Karissa Shannon, Sam Jones, Charm Rice, and Taylor Royce.

Figures 126 & 127. Determined Media Affordances

**Determined Media Affordance:** a potential act of mediation based on an established cultural norm.
**SEX TAPER**

Patriarchal norms.

Gender norms. Notions of feminine beauty. The virgin/whore dichotomy.

**SUICIDE BOMBER**

Sacred Islamic martyrs.

History of Crusades.

Anti-Zionist sentiments.

Radical interpretation of the Qur’an.

“Determined media affordances” are stock symbols and modes of identification that can be manipulated to achieve particular cultural ends. Psychologist Lev Vygotsky, allows that determined knowledge need not rigidly dictate our thought processes. Symbolic artifacts can also function as “mediating devices” (1978). For example, “Jihadi Salafis frame ambiguous Quranic verses, Prophetic traditions, and historic Islamic rulings to justify suicide, killing civilians, and killing fellow Muslims. These arguments involve complex historical traditions that are open to multiple interpretations, yet jihadists have retrieved and presented them as unproblematic justifications for suicide terrorism in Iraq” (Hafez 2007, 134). Holland et al. refer to this as “symbolic bootstrapping,” the use of appropriated symbols for gaining some measure of influence over one’s environment. Symbolic bootstrapping in accordance with dominant norms can afford a degree of social mobility *within* a particular cultural ecology, but this type of maneuvering is more tactical than strategic. It
conforms to the rules of the game rather than redrafting them. However, we can also consciously leverage one symbolic universe against another as “counterculture” narratives do, thus inviting significant social change.

Figures 128 & 129. Positive Media Affordances

**Positive Media Affordances:** a potential act of mediation promising perceived benefit(s).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEX TAPER</th>
<th>SUICIDE BOMBER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media visibility. TV</td>
<td>Publicity for cause.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager. Film contract.</td>
<td>Revenge. Paradise.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to James Gibson a “positive affordance” is a way of relating to the physical environment in a manner that appears to offer a favorable outcome (1979, 137). The same is true of a “positive media affordance,” except that it offers a form of*mediation* that is perceived to be favorable in relation to the cultural environment. If we have no strong
feelings regarding a particular ritual role, its falls into the more general category of a “cultural schema” (Strauss & Quinn 1998), which may or may not have emotional salience for another social actor.

Unlike cultural schemas, affordances are partly defined by our subjectivity. Thus we cannot be indifferent to them. In order for us to even recognize the existence of an affordance (positive or negative), we must find it inherently meaningful. By definition, an affordance must be considered a boon or a bane, a goal attracting action or a threat promoting avoidance. The “allurements” associated with positive media affordances are always influenced by environmental factors. For instance, in a cultural niche where media visibility is prized for its own sake, media affordances that offer increased visibility at any cost are also prized.

After her sex tape surface, aspiring actress and spokesmodel Kim Kardashian became world famous. She was signed to appear in a hit reality TV series Keeping up with the Kardashians (E! 2007-2011). She was also cast in several movies. She launched her own fashion line and multiple fragrances. She also competed on ABC's Dancing with the Stars (2005-2011), produced an E! reality series, The Spin Crowd (2010). And along with her sisters, Kourtney and Khloé, she authored the best selling autobiography, Kardashian Konfidential.88

88 Kardashian’s sex tape co-star, William Raymond Norwood Jr. AKA, Ray J, also benefited from the exposure. He was signed to star in the VH1 series For the Love of Ray J. Additionally, he received a recording contract and released a music video for the song “Sexy Can I,” featuring such lyrics as, “Sexy, can I hit it from the front? Can I hit it from the
Along with increased cultural visibility, Media affordances offer the “power to persuade” others (and our selves) that our most heartfelt beliefs are valid. The mere act of becoming cultural mediators—regardless of the views we are expressing, or whether or not we actually have strong convictions—appears to heighten our cultural significance. This is one of the most attractive things about media affordances and a key reason why their influence is so difficult to resist or control.

In many respects, the concept of media affordances is even more disquieting than the notion of media effects. Whereas the effects model insists that life imitates art, the affordances model allows that life can become art. According to the effects view, if we can simply censor enough media offerings, we can potentially curb negative behavior, but the only way to curtail the influence of media affordances would be to censor life itself, ordering news outlets to suppress reports that raise the public profile of any person involved in acts of anti-normative behavior including sex tapers and suicide bombers, but also politicians, terrorists, soldiers, criminals, gang members, etc.

In 2010, the 19-year-old daughter of Matrix star Laurence Fishburne, Montana Fishburne (also known by the stage name “Chippie D”) released a sex tape in order to advance her career. She told reporters that she was inspired by the success of Kim Kardashian and her highly back? It’s a Kodak moment, let me go and get me camera. All I wanna know is, sexy, can I?”
publicized sex tape, saying, “Even though she got all that negative attention for it, she still has all these other ventures going on now. That is what I want to emulate: having a tape come out and still being seen as a positive person. Not just, ‘She's a porn star’” (Huffington Post 9/3/10).

In societies with a free press, censoring transgressive media affordances cannot, and should not happen. In fact, the opposite trend must increasingly predominate. In an overcrowded mediascape, only the most shocking stories can stand out (and thus turn a profit), so the market place impels reporters to play up the most salacious elements in their stories, which in turn, provide alluring behavioral models for aspiring public figures seeking increased exposure. Equally troubling is the realization that in an era in which media exposure is one of the key markers of cultural status, such figures are bound to proliferate at an alarming rate.

Figures 130 & 131. Negative Media Affordances

**Negative Media Affordances:** a potential act of mediation threatening perceived drawback(s).
In order to craft a self-justifying persona, ritualists take steps to counter “negative media affordances.” In the examples above, an actress denies consciously distributing a sex tape in an attempt to avoid seeming crass and calculating. In contrast, a suicide bomber records a video testimony in order to confirm that he is a willing martyr, deliberately going to his death for reasons that he believes are logical and just. (Hafez: 2006, 56). In terms of rhetorical impact, it doesn’t matter if this testimony is staged and scripted by others, as long as the aspiring martyr displays some degree of conscious intent. A special emphasis is placed on altruistic motives in order to justify the carnage that attends their act of sacrifice/murder.

In his essay, “Dying to be Martyrs” the Symbolic Dimensions of Suicide Terrorism,” Mohammed M. Hafez, quotes a statement from a Palestinian suicide bomber: “How beautiful for the splinters of my bones to be the response that blows up the enemy, not for the love of killing, but so we can live as other people live…We do not sing the songs of death,
but recite they hymns of life … We die so that future generations may live” (2006, 72). Suicide bombers commit acts of both real violence and rhetorical violence, the former, by killing innocent civilians, the latter, by asserting that their views are more inherently meaningful than those of the figures they have forever silenced. This is because they understand the cultural logic of our highly mediated society in which the biggest crime is to remain invisible.

In a stable and coherent ecology, well-defined cultural norms demarcate the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. However, as cultural standards grow more diverse and destabilized, shame itself can become a potent media affordance, drawing attention to transgressive behavior in highly provocative, and thus profitable, manner. Savvy tabloid reporters maintain interest in otherwise banal reality stars by encouraging them to both acknowledge and reject shame in a variety of titillating ways. According to Allure magazine, Kim Kardashian was upset and humiliated when her 2007 sex tape emerged. In the same interview, she said she is proud of her voluptuous physique and is working to “change the standards of beauty” (Allure 8/24/10). In another interview, Kardashian confesses she used to be ashamed of her big breasts (Brave Zeenat 12/8/10). She later declares she is “not ashamed of cellulite” (LovetoKnow 1/2/11). She is embarrassed over the release of 25 never-before-seen nude photographs taken of her in 2007 by Playboy Magazine (Radar Online 9/6/10). Nonetheless, she is “not ashamed of her
“Positive” and “negative” qualities reveal what an affordance promises or threatens in relation to a particular medium, whereas “constraints” and “demands” reflect what the culture does and does not
want in return. They are the edicts the medium must avoid violating and the hoops that she must jump through.

Designer Donald speaks of the “constraints” inherent in material affordances. For instance, a doorknob constrains our actions in that we can only turn it in one direction (1988, 87-88). In the case of media affordances, constraints also involve limitations on ritual action, i.e. a rock star must resist behaving in a manner that seems too “mainstream.” Also, media discourses can also be viewed as constraints with elaborate gate keeping mechanisms and narrowly defined rules regarding what counts as legitimate grounds for inclusion and upward mobility.

Because the mass media is overcrowded the constraints for meriting public notice grow higher each day. At the same time, the affordances for symbolic bootstrapping have never been more readily available. This has created a massive wave of homegrown media innovators. Whereas traditional celebrities have dominated media discourse in the past, increasingly, grassroots “reality stars” are commanding the spotlight. And while terrorist acts were once masterminded by al-Qaeda’s central command, in recent years, they have become increasingly decentralized and “home grown” (Sageman 2008, 136).

Affordances not only constrain us, they also “demand” certain behaviors in exchange for perceived benefits. For instance, an individual wishing to attain the upward movement afforded by a staircase must stay
within the confines of a particular path, but he must also climb stair after stair. This notion of demands differs from Gestalt psychology’s concept of “demand character” (Reed 1988, 288). Until the individual elects to step foot on the first step, the staircase *in no way* dictates his actions. However, once he begins pursuing the affordance, the individual is required to act in accordance with certain formal dictates if he wishes to avail himself of the benefits on offer. Likewise, when capitalizing on a media affordance, one must also capitulate to certain formal demands. For instance, “to survive, [global jihad] requires a constant stream of new violent actions to hold the interest of potential newcomers to the movement, create the impression of visible progress toward a goal, and give potential recruits a vicarious experience before they take the initiative to engage in their own terrorist activities” (Sageman 2008, 145). Palestinian suicide bombers are required to make videos describing their motives and thus proving that they are willing martyrs (Pape 2005, 223).

![Figures 134 & 135. Attunement](image)

**Attunement:** the ecological actor’s interest in a particular affordance.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEX TAPER</th>
<th>SUICIDE BOMBER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wanting to shock friends and relations.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Leslie Z. McArthur and Reuben M. Baron introduced the concept of “attunement” to ecological theory, as a means of describing an observer’s interest in a particular affordance (1983, 232). In the case of media affordances this involves more than physical needs, it also relates to ideological values and dispositions, i.e. the belief that garnering media visibility is more important than maintaining the appearance of propriety.

As the name implies, an “attunement” reflects our ability to tune into the existence of particular affordance by finding it meaningful. Just as some radio signals are strong and some are weak, ritual actors can be strongly or weakly attuned to particular media affordances. The relative strength of a particular attunement is related to a number of factors, including the natural aptitudes of the mediums (see below), the relative scarcity or abundance of the affordance, and the amount of viable alternatives. Additionally, a single affordance may have multiple attunements with different levels of salience. For instance, the sex taper may want to be seen as desirable but chiefly long for media visibility.
Also a strong attunement may help a medium overcome his or her resistance to a perceived negative affordance, i.e. the suicide bomber may desire revenge more than he fears death.

Attunements contain a complex ethical dimension related to the many cultural contexts we simultaneously inhabit. For instance, someone may have a strong desire to achieve visibility related to the cultural ecology of the global mediascape. At the same time, they may be attuned to maintaining approval within the ecology of their immediate family. Mediums who lack such constraining attunements, because they are estranged from their families and/or were raised by people who uncritically value media exposure at any price, are more likely to capitalize on transgressive modes of empowerment.

Figures 136 & 137. Aptitudes

**Aptitude:** the ecological actor’s ability to capitalize on a particular media affordance.
SEX TAPER


SUICIDE BOMBER


“Aptitudes” are how we afford affordances. Thus they are reciprocally related to constraints and demands. If an individual has low aptitudes in relation to a particular affordance, the constraints and demands of that affordance will appear higher.

“Aptitudes” are how we afford affordances. Thus they are reciprocally related to constraints and demands. If an individual has low aptitudes in relation to a particular affordance, the constraints and demands of that affordance will appear higher. If an individual has high aptitudes in relation to a particular affordance, the constraints and demands of that affordance will appear lower. In general, the more tenuous the medium’s claim to a particular ritual identity, the more she must struggle to muster the aptitudes necessary to enact it successfully. Thus when ritual actors suspect they lack the natural aptitudes to achieve specific desires, they seek the assistance of ritual. In general, the greater the practical gap between objective circumstances and subjective desire, the greater the leap of faith one must negotiate (see
And extreme leaps of faith require extreme rituals.

Scientific analysis is, on some level, a faith-based enterprise requiring researchers to view their empirical findings in relation to a particular conceptual scheme. Yet, because it has a stronger grounding in observed reality, the rituals associated with affirming the validity of scientific theories (awards, conferences, journal articles) tend not to be socially disruptive. In contrast, the uncertainty underscoring sporting events, religious crusades, and wars is far more pronounced, thus the rituals associated with these phenomena tends to be emotionally charged and elaborate.

In regards to media affordances, aptitudes might include physical abilities, mental capacities, emotional dispositions and other intangibles including insight, intuition, and empathy. The aptitudes we lack also influence the rituals we do and do not enact. For instance, a person who lacks traditional talents such as singing or acting ability cannot effectively capitalize on the media affordances related to these modes of empowerment. If they, nonetheless, have strong attunements for media visibility, they may seek out alternative means of attaining it. Affordances begat affordances, so as more people attain visibility without cultivating

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89 Shaw, Turvey & Mace call the individual’s capacity to capitalize on a particular affordance an “effectivity” (1982). Yet because the familiar term “aptitude” expresses, more or less, the same idea, I resist adopting their neologism.
traditional aptitudes, the motivation for cultivating these talents is necessarily diminished. Why struggle to master a complex skill, when you can become well known by simply behaving outrageously on camera? Of course, not everyone who behaves outrageously in public becomes world famous. Usually, one must possess other compensating aptitudes: famous relations, sexual attractiveness, a highly distinctive appearance, etc.

Aptitudes are never stable. They increase, decrease, appear and disappear throughout our lifetimes. This week’s sex symbol is next year’s old maid. What’s more, aptitudes have different impacts in different contexts. A facial tattoo may be a sign of ritual authority in prison but it can be detrimental in a job interview.

**Role Profiling.**

An effects view can tell us one of two things about the sex taper and the suicide bomber: either an emergent trend is driving their behavior, or determined norms have constructed them to behave in certain ways. In contrast to such sweeping, “across-the-board” pronouncements, the affordance view requires us to perform fine-grained analyses of the ritualized behaviors of particular individuals. A ritual role is not presumed to be wholly consistent. Nonetheless, it is defined by certain identifiable patterns, thus one can perform a ritual analysis focusing on how
faithfully a particular ritualist appears to commit to exigencies of these patterns.

The sex taper and the suicide bomber are both performing shocking, transgressive acts, but they are doing so for different reasons in different ways. Certainly, they have been steeped in cultural milieus that privilege particular modes of empowerment, but others with similar backgrounds have not capitalized on the media affordances they have been drawn to. By considering what these ritual roles afford and require, we are able to see two distinct “role profiles” coming into view. Behavioral patterns related to particular positive and negative affordances and specific attunements, constraints and demands begin to gradually emerge. Because ritual roles are historically contingent phenomena rather than ahistoric archetypes, they are unstable and subject to change. They do, nonetheless, reflect reasonably durable cultural trends and the behaviors associated with them. And unlike more generalized effects theories, they can suggest why certain individuals, and not others, might elect to behave in a particular fashion. They can even identify particular character-traits predictive of specific behaviors. This may, in turn, suggest methods for mitigating more socially disruptive activities via the construction of appealing “counter-roles.”
Of course deciding whether or not a ritual role is culturally problematic may present another type of dilemma. A third wave feminist might argue that appearing in a sex tape is a positive way of celebrating feminine sexuality, whereas a second wave feminist might describe it as a degrading form of objectification. In order to support such claims, these two pundits would need to assume particular ritual roles, deploying some media affordances and eschewing others. To a certain extent, these commitments would curtail and dictate what they could and could not say and how they could and could not act, thus protecting them from certain accusations and laying them open to others.

Media effects purportedly impose the same type and degree of influence on everyone, whereas media affordances appeal only to select individuals who are willing and able to negotiate their meanings via ritual action. This is not a purely reactive process. It is strategic. Thus by rejecting arguments that simplistically suggest that, “the media made me do it,” we relocate cultural engagement at the intersection of the individual and the environment, the realm of the medium.

Next.

Some media affordances are real world, real-time perceptions, some are more contrived abstract conceptions and
some are combinations of the two. The following section provides
tools for grappling with the ambiguous relationship between the
map and the territory by defining three types of media tropes:
“chronotopes,” “mythotopes” and “logotopes.”
Jorge Luis Borges’ shortest short story is one paragraph long. It is titled “Del rigor en la ciencia,” or “On Exactitude in Science.” Written in the form of a literary forgery, it describes an all-but forgotten empire where, long ago, the science of cartography was perfected to an absurd degree. In this ancient land, a map was constructed that was the exact size of the kingdom, matching it point for point and covering it entirely. The original mapmakers were proud of this creation, but subsequent generations found it useless and let it fall into disrepair. Eventually, only a few
tattered scraps remained. These were located in a remote desert and were inhabited by animals and beggars.

Borges vision of a territory-sized map seems surreal because we tend to think of maps as interpretations of physical space rather than physical spaces in their own right. The notion of an actual-scale map seems redundant and pointless. Even if every detail were correct, it would be a mere imitation of the territory it was patterned after. It might match the scale of the real territory, but it could never match its complexity. After all, maps are not meant to mirror reality. They are meant to reduce it. A map *has* to reduce. It needs to establish borders and focus on some features and not others. It is a sort of “terministic screen,” concealing far more than it can ever reveal (Burke 1966).

Yet in Borges’ story, the map valiantly struggles to become territory. A similar thing is occurring in today’s mediascape. When entering a 3D video game, or a virtual reality simulation, we are tempted to believe we can directly perceive an actual environment. We can move through cyberspace much like navigating our own neighborhoods. Real-time feedback loops, viewpoint dependent graphics and interactive media displays all conspire to deceive our senses. At times, these experiences are deeply immersive, but what exactly are we becoming immersed in? A man-made environment is different than a natural environment because it has been founded
on a substrate of ritual intent. Just as the consumerist paradise Disneyland reflects the values of a particular cultural milieu, today’s media environments—from elaborate RPGs to simple Facebook pages—cannot help but echo the ideological biases of the ecologies from which they emerged. Maps have agendas. They help us navigate the territory, but only if we submit to the interpretative frames that they propose.

Exploring a media environment is not the same as taking a walk in the woods. Media worlds are more map than territory, and maps distort perception. They artificially flatten terrain, radically alter physical scale, prominently display invisible borders, enlarge and highlight certain features and completely elide others. They are not physical spaces authored by nature. They are metaphysical texts authored by human beings. When entering a map, we are venturing into a kind of ‘virtual cathedral’ designed to influence not only our sensory perceptions, but our ideological conceptions as well. Technology has not advanced to the state where the copy is indistinguishable from the original, so by and large, we can still distinguish between virtual worlds and unmediated sensory experience. In fact (in fiction?), this may be one of the comforting pleasures these “worlds” afford. After all, in our increasingly mediated environment, such clear-cut distinctions are getting harder to come by. The teenager listening to his iPod, the student
texting a friend, the businesswoman checking her emails, all have one foot in the territory and one foot in some sort of map. So much of our time is spent in this divided state; the line between the territory and the map is becoming extremely blurred. Therefore, as we strive to gain some mastery over new media forms, we must also resist the inventive new ways that they are striving to master us.

This chapter explores complex interplay between map and territory, concept and percept. In order to provide theorists with more productive means of grappling with such complexity, it will define three key terms: “chronotope,” “mythotope,” and “logotope.” Examples will be draw from classical literature, new journalism and pop culture. I will also drawn on scholarship from a number of fields, including media studies (Dyer 1986; Ponce de Leon 2002), Literary criticism (Bakhtin 1986; Campbell 1987), Historical and cultural criticism (Boorstin 1961; White 1973; Baudrillard 2001; Sontag 2003; Shirk 2007), anthropology (Appadurai 1996) social semiotics (Hodge & Kress 1988) and ecological psychology (Gibson 1979).

**Gibson’s Perception.**

According to James Gibson, the philosophers have it exactly backwards. The perceived world will *always* turn out to be
much larger and more complex than the conceived one and for a simple reason: we can perceive without conceiving, but not visa versa. In other words, we can observe the world around us without conceptualizing it, but we cannot conceptualize the world without first observing it. Because the building blocks of conceptual thinking are experiences derived from direct perception, the map can never swallow the territory. This is Gibson’s most radical insight.

The doctrine that we could not perceive the world around us unless we already had the concept of space is nonsense. It is quite the other way around: We could not conceive of empty space unless we could see the ground under our feet and the sky above. Space is a myth, a ghost, a fiction for geometers. All that sounds very strange, no doubt, but I urge the reader to entertain the hypothesis. For if you agree to abandon the dogma that ‘percepts without concepts are blind,’ as Kant put it, a deep theoretical mess, a genuine quagmire, will dry up (Gibson 1979, 3).

Gibson insists that perception comes first. We see the pattern and then draw the conclusion. We make the correlation
then posit the causation. According to this perspective, we do not inhabit two separate realities, the conceptual and the perceptual. Instead, we engage with the conceptual via the perceptual. We don’t construct cultural meaning in some internal psychic laboratory; we engage with it in the world, albeit a highly mediated one.

Gibson’s view is at odds with the theory of cognitive maps, proposed by his contemporary Edward Tolman. While Tolman acknowledged the influence of environmental factors on mental processes, he believed that our minds create internal maps that direct the ways in which we engage with the external world. Gibson felt that this approach was too solipsistic, a mere extension of Cartesian dualism, which foreclosed the possibility of shared perception. He saw that animals often engage in cooperative behavior and concluded that the only way that this could occur was if different organisms are capable of viewing aspects of the environment in more or less the same way. This meant that the persisting features of the environment must have an objective existence independent of the conceptual space inside the mind of a particular individual (Reed 1988, 287).

Building on Gibson’s concept of affordances, I argue that “media affordances” are observable mediation practices, examples of how to mediate the territory and make it more map-like.
Praxism is the study of “ideological cartography.” It examines how ritual mediums attempt to make sense of the territory around them by locating the practice of mediation in the “eye of the perceiver.” Unlike cognitive maps, cultural ecologies and niches can be directly perceived by a variety of ritual actors. This is what makes their various features “media affordances,” which can be exploited in repeatable ways, exerting clear and demonstrable influence on the environment.

Certainly, we can gain and store knowledge, but this occurs via ritual practices that involve mediating available perceptions and remediating available texts. After all, the perceived world is not merely a pasture; it is also a library filled with codified experience, including instruction manuals, social protocols, dramatic performances, policy debates and compositional tropes. This means that rituals that involve assuming the role of author, actor or audience are all public events related to engaging with the perceived world, including its many preconceived (or “meditated”) features.

The map can never swallow the territory, or become the territory, yet it remains very much of the territory. Despite the mapmaker’s most valiant efforts, it will never exist on some exalted transcendent plain. This is fortunate for us. It means we get to view our maps directly, including their flaws. They may beguile
us with lofty themes, poetic language and well-documented empirical proofs, and at times, we may become convinced that they literally define us, but we have to work hard to stay in the map for longer than a minute or two. The territory is always creeping back into view, and then there are all of those other maps vying for our attention. We drift between them, often several at a time, and as long as we don’t become too transfixed by their symbols, they can help us to navigate the more accessible corners of the vast and infinitely complex territory that begat them.

**Media Maps.**

An ecology is a cluster of ritual practices, striving to define a particular ecological domain in a particular way. A media map is a snap shot of this process in action. Just as an electron microscope must kill subatomic particles in order to observe them, media maps must arrest the dynamic flow of ecologies in order to isolate their component features.

Figures 139—141. Chicago Maps
Picture three maps of the city of Chicago created in the same year. All define the city borders and its chief landmarks at the same scale and in the same relationship with one another, but there are also significant differences. The first map displays the subway system. The second focuses on surface streets and highways. The third features local points of interest: restaurants, museums and the like. Although the maps are similar in some respects and different in others, no single one of them depicts the essential nature of the city, its innate “Chicagoness.” What’s more, maps from different eras may define the same the geographical space in a much different manner.

While these maps contain many intricate details, they are not “ecologies.” They are closed systems. Changes in one do not create changes in another. Also, they are not influenced by changes in the actual territory known as Chicago. In contrast, the cultural ecologies that these maps represent are very much alive, existing as constantly evolving patterns of ritual discourse. Changes in one of these Chicago ecologies may well create changes in the other two. And changes in the overall ecosystem known as Chicago will create changes in all three. Additionally, the manner in which various media maps depict the environment may influence the environment itself (for instance, drawing attention to a particular landmark and directing more tourists to that spot). Thus maps and
territories, concepts and percepts are intimately entwined and mutually influential, but hardly identical. Maps are always meaningful in at least two ways. They are a mix of pattern and text.

At first glance, a pattern may appear to be purely nonlinear, yet it is comprised of many edges and contours that can be traced in a linear fashion. Despite this, patterns do favor the nonlinear as they initially confront the eye with a multiplicity of images all at once. They are primarily synchronic.

On the other hand, a textual statement may appear to be a purely linear construction, yet because each word that comprises it can be interpreted in a number of ways, it contains a nonlinear or synchronic dimension. Nonetheless, texts tend to favor linear constructions, directing the eye along a sequential course toward a periodic conclusion. They are primarily diachronic.

Figures 142—144. The United States: Pattern, Text & Map

Patterns and texts favor different modes of cognition. Patterns privilege analogic. Texts privilege logic. What’s more, patterns and texts perform different functions with different degrees of proficiency. The textual abbreviation “U.S.A.” is the most efficient way to articulate the concept of a particular country
in the western hemisphere. Conveying the same idea by drawing a
pattern that resembles the United States is far more time
consuming. On the other hand, if one wants to get a sense of
complex terrain that comprises the territory and the basic relations
of its geographical landmarks, the pattern can do so more
efficiently than the pages of text required to convey the same
amount of information.

In order to effectively navigate the territory, one must strike
a balance between text and pattern. This requires a map. Maps are
inherently ecological, both logic and analogic, both diachronic and
synchronic. By featuring several paths branch in many directions,
they provide a variety of options for exploring a single
environment.

A geographical map gives us a particular perspective on a
particular bit of physical terrain and suggesting how we might
navigate around it. In a similar sense, the patterns I call “media
maps” are snap shots of cultural ecologies, suggesting particular
“paths of view.” Whereas a cultural ecology is a constantly
evolving system of discursive relations, a media map is a glimpse
of key aspects of a particular ecology frozen in time. The details it
brings into relief are media affordances arrayed in both a linear and
nonlinear manner.
Whereas ordinary maps have roads, media maps have rituals, ways of making meaning through ritual practice. \(^{90}\) We study a traditional map in order to learn how to navigate around a physical territory. We study media maps to consider how various cartographers have chosen to make sense of a particular domain.\(^{91}\) The features that crisscross these topographies are formal rites enacted in order to construct specific types of discursive patterns. Media maps are glimpses of particular phenomena viewed in particular ways at particular moments in time.

A media map centering on a famous pop star can be viewed as both a pastiche of nonlinear patterns (photographs, fashion statements, products), as well as a network of linear narratives (biographical anecdotes, promotional strategies, interviews). Media maps are similar to the concept of “semiotic domains,” a term coined by James Paul Gee. According to Gee, the practice of playing video games is a type of “semiotic domain” with its own internal and external design grammars. The internal rules and content of the game serve to inform and influence the external social interactions of the gamer (2001, 36). In a similar respect, the internal design grammar of cultural ecologies (media affordances) can serve to inform and influence social interactions on the scale of the individual ritualist.

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\(^{91}\) Researchers at MIT Media Labs have experimented with mapping online discourses. Warren Sack’s “Conversation Maps” is a Usenet newsgroup browser that analyzes the text of an archive of newsgroup messages and outputs a graphical interface that can be used to search and read the messages of the archive. With the graphical interface one can browse a set of Usenet newsgroup articles according to who is “talking” to whom, what they are “talking” about, and the central terms and possible emergent metaphors of the conversation.
maps may center on an event, an idea, a person, a group, or any other observable cultural phenomenon. While they are informed by linguistic abstractions, their connection to the environment is explicit, historic, and necessarily provisional. They are formalized spaces that suggest degrees of maneuverability within particular cultural domains.

As with real maps, media maps hold our logical and analogical minds in a state of counterpoised mutual tension. Therefore, they encourage “ecological” (critical) thinking. Despite the inevitable distortions, they allow us to strategize. And as long as we stay on the paths that they describe and submit to their view of the cultural environment, we can navigate in multiple directions under our own volition. What’s more, via particularly compelling acts of mediumship, we may occasionally redraw the contours of their very maps we are exploring!

**Tea Party Paradox.**

Being a member of a cultural ecology means negotiating between determined and emergent influences. Consider the “Tea Party Movement.” Members tend to describe the group as a spontaneously emerging grassroots organization fed up with “business as usual” in Washington and committed to “taking the country back” from Beltway insiders (in particular, Democrats).
Yet critics of the group see them as little more than a front organization for the Republican Party. Which perspective is more accurate?

![Figure 145. Tea Party Protestors](image)

I argue that no group, the tea party included, is ever “purely grassroots,” emerging spontaneously from the common clay. A flock of geese may spontaneously take flight, but cultural ecologies are always guided by ideology, which must be, at least partly, determined in advance. An ideology is an aim, an organizing principle that implies an entire structure, including an internal hierarchy, various gate-keeping mechanisms, and a counter-position to oppose.

Pundits often debate whether an organization is truly emergent or entirely fabricated, but such sweeping critiques do not get us any closer to discerning how they actually operate. Some groups are certainly more grassroots than others, and some are almost entirely controlled by powerful forces operating behind the scenes. This is why we need tools for looking at these matters more complexly, discerning how much of a group’s ideological rhetoric is being generated internally, how much is being
manufactured by others, and how much is an ambiguous mix of the two. For instance, some Tea Party members have shown up at rallies carrying weapons, a symbol that they are concerned about retaining their second amendment rights, as well as an implied threat to those who oppose them. The Republican Party has been reluctant to condemn these actions, but there is no indication that they have officially sanctioned them. On the other hand, the “Heritage Foundation,” a conservative think tank established in the Reagan era, regularly posts online talking points that Tea Party members repeat verbatim at their rallies. Finally, through the use of social media, Sarah Palin has become an unofficial “figurehead” of the tea party movement. Her Twitter posts represent an ongoing dialogue with the actions of the group. It is often difficult to tell how much she is leading them and how much they are leading her. In order to address such complexities, media studies needs a way of clearly discerning between determined and emergent behavior in the age of participatory media.

Remixing “The Real.”

In common parlance, a trope is a figure of speech, a way of placing a word in a new context to create a different sort of meaning, as with the metaphor, “the sun was a furnace.” In media studies the word “trope” is defined more liberally. It may apply to
cinematic techniques such as camera angles, blocking, and wardrobe. It might also refer to familiar narrative elements such as a “last minute rescue” or a “villain in a black hat.”

Praxism stretches this fairly elastic term further still. In a praxist context, tropes refer to mediating practices. Tropes, in this sense, are ways of transforming perceived or conceived reality into mediated discourse. The benefit of discussing mediation rites in terms of tropes is that tropes are not concrete objects. They are relationships between objects, ways of organizing texts, and utilizing technologies rather than the texts and technologies themselves.

Because anything human beings can perceive is potential fodder for mediation, attempting to categorize media affordances according to fixed functions or structures is impossible. This is why I have chosen to describe them in terms of their general “tropic” characteristics. At bare minimum, reality can be reduced to two competing contexts: the determined and the emergent, what we conceptualize and what we directly perceive. Concepts and percepts are the raw materials that comprise media affordances. When engaging in a mediation rite, we can snare a detail from our immediate surroundings (percept), or we can conjure a poetic flourish appropriated from a text (concept), or we can exploit a widely accepted conflation that merges concepts and percepts.
seeing them as identical and natural. Here are three general types of tropes:

**Chronotope:** the practice of mediating percepts.

**Mythotope:** the practice of mediating concepts.

**Logotope:** the practice of mediating conflations.

As James Gibson stresses, we view the world around us through our own subjective filters, focusing on some things more than others (1979). This does not mean our view of the world is purely subjective; merely that it is biased toward fixating on certain types of objective features. Thus the tropes I am describing are, at best, “quazi-truths,” each inflected by the subjectivity of the medium articulating them and the objective features of a specific local and historic context.

Praxism bears some resemblance to the field of social semiotics. Both focus on mediation practices. However, they define these practices in different ways. The primary unit of study in social semiotics is what is known as a “modality” or simply a “mode.” A mode is a particular form of mediation, i.e. writing, sound effects, verbal utterances or visual codes (Hodge & Kress 1988). In contrast, praxist tropes are actions informed by the relationship between a particular cultural context and a specific
form of cognition. Here, “multi-media” means “multi-mind,”
different mental perspectives of the world juxtaposed like camera
angles and mixed like daubs of paint. By utilizing praxist tropes,
we can mediate within the territory, within the map, between the
map and the territory, or between the territory and the map. While
we can never neatly disentangle such intimately entwined
phenomena, we can at least attempt to analyze how they
intermingle. Thus, in this section, I examine ways in which the
territory gets onto the map (chronotopes), ways in which map
seeps onto the territory (mythotopes), and also ways in which the
map and territory appear to merge (logotopes).

**Chronotopes.**

A “chronotope” is the practice of transforming life into art.
It is how directly perceived reality invigorates a mediated text.
Chronotopes are always tied to particular places and times and to
immediately observable phenomena. They are emergent, rather
than determined, spontaneous rather than contrived, immediate
rather than inferred. Chronotopes are ways of accumulating raw
perceptions in a manner that allows them to seem as unmediated as
possible. They deconstruct and deformalize the observed world,
dismantling contrivance.
Russian literary critic Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin coined the term “chronotope” to describe the way that “life enters language through concrete utterances” (1986, 63). The name literally means “time/space.” It reflects “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). Bakhtin adds, “The chronotope makes narrative events concrete, helps them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins. An event can be communicated. It becomes information. One can give precise data on the place and time of its occurrence” (250).

Chronotoposes capitalize on the visceral impact of direct perception. As Hodge and Kress point out, modes of communication that are a mimetic match to reality, have strong emotional salience (1988, 130). Thus, in many respects, shooting footage of an actual person in pain is a more emotionally compelling act of mediation than painting a stylized portrait of the same person.

Chronotoposes sample space and time. Those related to specific geographical sites capture local customs including styles of dress, speech patterns and forms of interaction. Those related to the temporal dimension seize on nostalgic touchstones such as hairstyles, slang and trends. All of these modes of mediation can be mixed and matched at will. However, chronotoposes should not be
confused with stylistic flourishes meant to make media seem more gritty and “real.” These might include grainy film stock, shaky camera moves, lens flares and bad audio. Such embellishments are actually “mythotopes”—formalizing media practices—meant to make a bit of footage seem more chronotopic. The footage in question might actually have been shot on a set with actors following a script and hitting carefully blocked marks, so the sense of a spontaneously perceived reality might be little more than a meticulously choreographed affectation. I will discuss mythotopes in detail in a moment, but first, a bit more about chronotopes.

Chronotopes are strategies for mediating emergent behaviors. If a director is shooting a film script, he might allow the actors to improvise and the cinematographer to follow the action with handheld camera. Inasmuch as the camerawork adds a stylistic dimension to the piece, it is a mythotopic practice, but the manner in which it allows the cameraman to move about and follow the action spontaneously is chronotopic. In a similar sense, cell phone cameras lend themselves to chronotopy, as do security cameras, hidden microphones and “bullet-points” extracted from carefully composed speeches. Chronotopes involve interacting, engaging and inventing in the moment. They take things as they come, gather what is immediately apparent and place it in a new context.
Chronotopes are related to “chronicles,” lists of chronologically occurring events that have been observed and written down, but this does not mean they are purely impartial. As James Gibson points out, perception always contains a subjective dimension (1979, 138). Thus we each notice different things about the environment. This is why the same event might inspire one person to laugh and another to take offense, while going completely unnoticed by a third party. The chronotopic is always inflected by the mythotopic because we are constantly constructing ongoing stories about the world around us, making choices about what to focus on, who to trust and when to feel threatened or elated.

The mythotopic dimension introduces the notion of “emplotment,” the tendency to fashion observed reality into a coherent and, hopefully captivating, narrative. Some events are included. Others are excluded. Some facts are placed to the periphery. Others are moved to the center. Some elements are encoded as causes, others as effects. And the sequence is given a discernible beginning, middle, and end. The medium also arranges the events according to various literary tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (White 1973, 1978). In this process, he or she is both providing the audience with a taste of the
“real world” (chronotope) and a taste of his or her own ideological worldview (mythotope).

Sampling the many chronotopes now on offer is similar to being a medieval reader of The Canterbury Tales, yet there are a few key differences. For one thing, the slices of life on reality TV have been co-authored by the people who are actually living them. Moreover, the audience is increasingly able to interact with the text via online polls and blogs, inserting their own chronotopic influence as well. The medium thrives in such a habitat. Rather than agonize over which version of reality represents the “ultimate truth,” he or she creates a pastiche of multiple realities.

Figures 146—148. Confessionals

When we “turn life into art,” we reveal many of our own biases in the process. After all, reality comes in many flavors and often the most flavorful are the most subjective. Reality TV trades on this idea via the on-camera “confessional.” These Rashomon-like sequences feature juxtapose one-shots of cast members intercut with footage of an often controversial event. The cast-members share their unique “takes” on the event in question and the audience is invited to extrapolate among these competing versions of reality and the event itself as captured by the show’s
crew. The appeal of these mythotopically-inflected chronotopes is not that they present viewers with a singular objective perspective, but rather that they pit multiple perspectives against one another. Thus chronotopes should never be viewed as “reality” pure and unadulterated. They are always “reality with a twist.”

    In the mass media era, reality is a spice rack of different ingredients waiting to be combined and recombined to different thrilling effects. In the mid-sixties, a craving for such exotic recipes gave rise to the phenomenon known as “New Journalism,” a style of reportage that blurred the line between autobiographic confessional and “straight,” “objective” news coverage. Mixing bland, more or less, “objective” chronotopes with spicy, highly subjective ingredients was not an entirely new idea. Tabloid reporters had been doing it since the 19th century (Ponce de Leon 2002). But New Journalism added increased respectability to the enterprise, as its chief practitioners were some of the most admired novelists of the day. Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer and Truman Capote were all masters of the form. Their works gave readers an opportunity to see the stories from the newspapers through new eyes, getting the East Coast intelligentsia’s take on the hippy counter culture, the left wing politico’s take on police brutality, and the cosmopolitan homosexual’s take on murder in small town Americana. Adding drug consumption to the mix, Hunter S.
Thompson invented “gonzo journalism,” suggesting that one man’s “reality” may be another man’s hallucination.

Figures 149 & 150. Goethe & Werther

An early master of the chronotope was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, author of the proto-romantic novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which was embellished with many autobiographic details. Late in life, Goethe would write in his essay “Reflection on Werther,” “The decision to let my inner self rule me at will and permit all outside events to penetrate in a way characteristic of them drove me into the wonderful element in which Werther was conceived and written” (1962, 132-33).

As creatures living at the intersection of determined and emergent events, we are all intrigued by the interplay of fictional worlds and observed events. Goethe capitalized on this intrigue by populating his narrative with concrete details appropriated from real life. Bakhtin has this to say about the author’s work: “It contains no inanimate, immobile, petrified places, no immutable background that does not participate in action and emergence (in events), no decorations or sets … In Goethe’s world there are no events, plots, or temporal motifs that are related in an essential way
to the particular spatial place of their occurrence, that could occur anywhere or nowhere (‘eternal’ plots and motifs). Everything in this world is a time-space a true chronotope” (1986, 42).

Goethe saw media affordances everywhere and availed himself of them freely, seizing characters, settings, dialogue and events from real life in a manner more deliberate and aggressive than his predecessors. Readers found this practice irresistible. Throughout his career, the author of Werther would freely merge details from real life with his fictional worlds to powerful effect. Studying some of his unpublished manuscripts, Bakhtin lauds this “chronotopic” tendency, noting, “Time and space merge here into an inseparable unity, both in the plot and in the individual images. In the majority of cases, a definite and absolutely concrete locality serves as the starting point for the creative imagination” (1986, 49). Goethe adds details from current events. Again Bakhtin approves, “The world and history did not become poorer or smaller as a result of this process of mutual concretization and

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92 Goethe explains how the use of chronotopes invited readers to focus of details unrelated to his artistic intentions. “Instead of saying something nice about the book just as it was, all of them wanted to know how much of it was true! This made me angry, and my reply was invariably extremely rude. For, in order to answer this question, I would have had to tear apart and destroy the form of this little book over which I had brooded for such a long time to give it some elements of poetic unity.” Goethe adds that these “embarrassing inquiries” pursued and oppressed him throughout his life. (152-4).
interpenetration. On the contrary, they were condensed, compacted and filled with the creative possibilities” (50).

What Bakhtin is describing sounds a bit like the process of “sampling” whereby recording artists remix sounds taken from field recordings or other songs. This idea of incorporating “found perceptions” into artistic works—freely merging determinism and emergence, Logos and chronos—is a hallmark of the burgeoning ecological mindset, the type of “new mediumship,” or literate ritualism that would come to characterize high modernism. The advent of photography, cinema, sound recording, and radio, allowed technicians to capture “lifelike” glimpses of reality and reproduce them on a mass scale. This inspired artists to dig deeper, exploring internal realities by producing increasingly subjective and expressionistic works. Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway borrowed copiously from their inner and outer worlds, and Jack Kerouac felt “the confessional” was the dominant literary form of the 20th century. As the private and public sphere continued melding into one another, new realities were revealed in surprising new ways.

Figure 151. Reality TV
In order for a plot to command our attention, it must feature transgressive acts, conflicts and polarizing behaviors. Even a “likeable everyman” needs to be confronted by a situation that violates normative expectations. At such moments, the plot thickens and the story takes flight. For life to successfully qualify as art, it needs to challenge the mundane. There have to be dramatic twists. Bad things need to happen. Tabloid culture is trauma culture, and the “reality format” demands trauma on cue, a steady diet of transgressions served up on a reliable basis and shot on a budget. Thus “reality producers” are trauma-generators. If not personally experiencing extreme states in public, they must be inducing others to do so. At the very least, someone should be describing a previous trauma that they somehow participated in, either as a victim or as a perpetrator. That is the formula. Anything does not merit the audience’s sustained devotion in an over crowded, hyper-stimulated marketplace, hence the many images of “reality stars” getting in brawls and getting naked in full view of the camera, not to mention the tell-all bios and confessional interviews clogging bookstores and newsstands.

Most reality TV fodder is fairly banal. The cast of Survivor was fighting over a stolen can of beans as the U.S. was invading Iraq. Yet these petty squabbles provide both a diversion and an emotional outlet for audiences during troubled times. Chronotopes
do more than ground fiction in reality. They also distract us with “the hyperreal.” Most reality programming is highly contrived. People who would probably never cross paths, much less associate in real life, are thrown together in artificial situations and forced to interact in a ritualized manner that compels them to experience extreme emotional states before the camera’s unblinking eye. Viewers are aware of the artificial nature of the scenarios, but watch for moments of slippage, instances where the practiced smiles and the mannered gestures fall away, when something a bit more raw and unrehearsed is revealed in the form of extreme anger, extreme pleasure, extreme pain, extreme anything.

Because televisual texts are, by definition, mediated, the term “reality TV” is a misnomer. This commonly vilified genre is actually reality distorted and amplified. Reality is a man mowing his lawn. Reality TV is a man running over his foot with a lawn mower. This is nothing new. Even in Goethe’s day, the chronotope was a slice of life with the boring bits cut out, life accelerated, contorted and showcased in a manner designed to lend it heightened allure.

Figure 152. Keyboard Cat

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Chronotopes are not confined to mere on-camera confessions and tabloid traumas. They also include “viral videos.” These homegrown spectacles of the absurd offer innocuous diversions and can spread globally in a matter of seconds.

Figure 153. 9/11

Terrorist acts are highly effective chronotopes. After all, what competitive news organization could resist putting an extremely violent terrorist “act” as its top story? “If it bleeds, it leads,” as the journalistic slogan goes. Susan Sontag writes, “In a culture radically revamped by the ascendancy of mercantile values, to ask that images be jarring, clamorous, eye-opening seems like elementary realism as well as good business sense” (2003, 23). This is how capitalism cannibalizes itself. And even if mainstream news organizations choose to play down certain hyper-traumatic chronotopes, these practices will, nonetheless, spread virally online. What’s more, they are bound to grow increasingly transgressive. For as all terrorist groups know, the best way to get media attention is to make the next attack more violent and to focus on even more sensitive targets.
Because chronotopes center on direct perception, they involve real-time emergent behaviors. All social interactions are informed by a degree of ritual (Goffman 1997). However, because less formalized exchanges appear to emerge spontaneously, they are recognized as chronotopic. When we step into view of a camera, or speak on an answering machine, our behaviors are chronotopes as well, coded by various immediately apparent details. We can alter our appearance by dying our hair or wearing different types of clothing and jewelry, but the more chronotopic aspects of our bodies are less mediated. They include things such as height, weight, race, sex, hair color and eye color.

These biological characteristics are all potential media affordances that can be incorporated into particular mediation practices in order to express particular ideas. Because they are recognized as unmediated, they often have high emotional salience for ritualists and their potential audiences. When we are “getting real,” or “keeping it real,” these are the aspects of appearance we tend to foreground.

**Mythotopes.**

An opinion poll is taken regarding the economy. The results are published. This influences public opinion, which again influences the market, which again influences public opinion,
which again influences the market, and so on, and so forth, an
infinite regress echoing over the mountaintops. In this example,
perception is tied to cultural change, but perception can also inhibit
and even counteract change by distorting observed reality. People
are living longer and getting more obese than ever, but so-called
“reality stars” keep getting younger and fitter. We are living in the
most mediated era in history, yet our self-image is increasingly
distorted. As the divide between observed and mediated reality
grows more turbulent and confused, the so-called “objective truth”
becomes impossible to locate. In terms of media studies, this
means there can be no “object of study” in the traditional sense. In
order to navigate the reality divide, we need to focus on the
practice of mediation itself.

A “mythotope” is art becoming life. It is how a mental
concept is transformed into an observable phenomenon.
Mythotopes are acting techniques, poetic flourishes, hairstyles,
narrative strategies, editing patterns, special effects and genre
distinctions. Whereas chronotopes are partly subjective,
mythotopes are partly objective, necessarily influenced by the
historic era and locale from which they emerged. This means, they

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93 The “mythotope” is similar to Claude Lévi-Strauss’ notion of the
“mytheme,” the basic unit of mythic composition. Yet there is a key
different. A mytheme is a kind of narrative element, while a
mythotope is a mediation rite bringing such elements into being.
Also mythemes are assumed to be invariant structures, whereas
mythotopes are mutable patterns of behavior.
are not absolutely fictive. They are, nonetheless, highly mannered and abstract. While they may not claim to be the literal truth, they do assert a sense of “higher truth” aimed at eventually acquiring more concrete status.

While chronotopes capture what is immediately apparent, mythotopes embellish and interpret. They can be employed to enhance observed reality, to stylize it, to transform it, or to entirely belie it. They can be simultaneously deployed, as in a multi-modal composition (Hodge and Kress 1988). They can also remediate preexisting texts, arranging and rearranging them in countless ways, creating remixes, mashups, director’s cuts and alternate takes.

![Figures 154 & 155. Remix & Mashup](image)

These days, people often act as if there is a camera in the room and, in fact, there usually is! Jean Baudrillard speaks of the rise of “anti-theater,” which he describes as “the ecstatic form of theater: no more stage, no more content; theater in the streets, without actors, theater for everyone by everyone, which would merge with the exact unfolding of our lives.” (2001, 19) As we become increasingly aware of the performed aspects of day-to-day
existence, we see that “anti-theater” is everywhere and begin to consciously author roles that allow us to be seen by others—and to see ourselves—in increasingly impactful ways.

Figure 156: Hannah Montana is Miley Cyrus

Miley Cyrus’ fans buy blond wigs so they can portray her portraying Miley Stewart, a character who occasionally masquerades as a famous pop star, Hannah Montana. The series Hannah Montana (2006-2011) centers on the double life of an ordinary girl who is secretly an internationally renowned celebrity. Thus, as Cyrus sings in the theme song, she has “the best of both worlds.” Yet Cyrus inhabits more realities than this. The TV role has transformed her into a “real life” pop star with number one albums and sold out concert tours. As Miley Cyrus becomes increasingly famous, her TV persona, Miley Stewart, remains endearingly grounded and humble while bonding with her fictional brother, Jackson, and her real-life father-slash-TV father, Billy Ray Cyrus-slash-Robby Stewart.

To tune in Disney’s Hannah Montana is to witness Baudrillard’s “vanishing referent” disappear up its own virtual fundament. This multi-platformed marketing juggernaut is a pop culture hall of mirrors in which pseudo realities are shuffled at
such an alarming rate, Hannah herself has a hard time keeping track. Yet despite—or perhaps because of—the hyperreal trappings, it is one of the most popular shows on the Disney Channel.

Another popular kid’s show *I, Carly* (2007-2010), on Nickelodeon, focuses on a teenager who, as the host of her own popular web series, deals with such issues as bad reviews, pushy sponsors, fan mail, and ratings spikes. Also on “Nick,” young viewers can watch *The Naked Brothers* (2007-2009), or they can plug in their Xbox 360 and strum artificial guitars and bang plastic drums along with CGI avatars depicting the “Brothers” playing virtual instruments. This show is, more or less, a knock off of one of the Disney Channel’s other successful franchises, *The Jonas Brothers*, a band of three real life siblings who play themselves playing world famous rock stars in a number of films and TV shows.

Whereas previous generations watched programs about people with a fairly wide range of professional interests—cowboys, soldiers, doctors, ballerinas, firemen, etc.—young viewers are increasingly watching celebrities play celebrities. If “stories are equipment for living” as Kenneth Burke says, what exactly are these “celeb-fantasy” shows equipping young viewers to do?
In the eighteenth century Gothic novels were all the rage, but some social commentators worried that young people—and in particular young girls—were becoming too caught up in these fictional worlds. In *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, Colin Campbell writes, “We can now see how consumption of these [Gothic and sentimental fiction] novels might have helped to bring about a critical change of attitude toward the world, one characterized by a rejection of a traditional pattern of life on the grounds that it was too dull, and a consequent search for the kind of pleasure which could be experienced in the imagination.” Critics blamed these novels for making young women unfit for household duties, disrespectful toward their parents, discontented with their social positions and generally determined to “become heroines by striving for the unattainable” (1987, 176). Campbell suggests that, “the reading of novels was a major factor in the critical break with traditionalism which occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century” (176).

Two hundred years later, American pop culture would prove a new cause for concern. Writing in 1961, Daniel J. Boorstin describes Americans succumbing to a “feat of national self-hypnosis.” He says, “we have used our wealth, our literacy, our technology, and our progress, to create a thicket of unreality which stands between us and the facts of life…[This has] given us
unprecedented opportunities to deceive ourselves and to befog our experience…We want and we believe these illusions because we suffer from extravagance expectations. We expect too much of the world” (3). Boorstin sounded this cautionary note when there were just three U.S. television networks broadcasting in black and white and most children’s programs featured puppets not publicists.

No one is certain how the onslaught of celeb-fantasy programming will influence the behavior of media prosumers in the years to come. Will social networking sites provide enough exposure to satisfy our increasingly “extravagant expectations?”

What if we aren’t content with the pseudo-fame and marginal self-exposure that they afford? Will our desire for celebrity become a threat to the very system that generated it? Warhol gave Valerie Solanis her fifteen minutes of fame, but she wanted more.

On the other hand, young viewers may not be entirely self-deluding. After all, with the help of new media discourses, each of us is becoming a kind of pseudo-celebrity in our own right. In some respects, celeb-fantasy narratives may be imparting valuable

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94 Gunther Kress points out, “Authorship is no longer rare. Of course the change to the power of the author brings with it a consequent lessening in the author’s or the text’s authority. The processes of selection, which accompanied the bestowal of the role of author brought authority. When that selection is no longer there, authority is lost as well. The promise of greater democracy is accompanied by a leveling of power; that which may have been desired by many may turn out to be worth less than it seemed when it was unavailable” (6, 2003).
21st century skills. In the era of participatory media, learning the behaviors of a successful public figure is no longer a pointless idle. It has become a cultural imperative, perhaps even an indispensable survival skill. Young people spending hours each day updating their Facebook profiles, texting, tweeting, sharing files and uploading videos, need narrative tools for conceptualizing what it means to cultivate a positive, appealing and authoritative ritual persona.

Still, the amount of celeb-fantasy programming on offer presents viewers with a tantalizing array of apparent media affordances that may actually be quite difficult to capitalize on. For Hannah Montana becoming famous is as easy as donning a wig, but for her fans gaining worldwide notoriety presents more of a challenge. Certainly, they can make themselves visible by merely posting content online, but getting a mass audience to take notice requires more drastic measures.

**Logotopes.**

Because chronotopes have a subjective dimension and mythotopes have an objective dimension, there is no neat distinction between them. They are more like opposite poles of a continuum. Chronotopes favors the immediate and the apparent. Mythotopes favor the distant and the ahistorical. Yet occasionally,
these two poles come together forming a seemingly immutable conflation of reality and fantasy, AKA the “logotope.”

The logotope is the most difficult and the most important praxist trope to identify. All cultures are founded on these categorical distinctions and they are usually so engrained, they are almost invisible. One of the main goals of deconstructive analysis, or any other “countercultural” act, is to make the logotopes of a particular discourse seem strange, to reveal their mythic origins.

Every culture perpetuates certain key ideological practices. These practices underwrite the policies and structural frameworks of dominant social institutions. Once we successfully glean the logotopes of a particular culture, we can contrive to reject or subvert them. If this fails, we can turn those same practices against the culture itself, using them as ideological weapons. For instance, Israel has a longstanding policy regarding the burial of its soldiers. Any young man or woman who joins the Israeli army is assured that if they are killed in the line of duty, the Jewish State will do whatever is necessary to retrieve his or her body and bury it on Israeli soil. Critics say this policy only encourages militant groups to kidnap and kill Israeli soldiers. And indeed, in 2008, the group Hezbollah took advantage of this Israeli logotope, kidnapping two

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95 The “logotope” relates to Kenneth Burke’s theory of “logology,” the study of language in search of divine Truths (1961). Logology is the analysis of logotopic practices, that is, the conscious and unconscious leveraging of said Truths.
soldiers, killing them and then exchanging their bodies for five live Hezbollah prisoners, including one man convicted of killing a father in front of his four year old daughter with a rifle butt (Yorkshire Post 7/18/08). Non-Israelis may find such bargaining illogical, but according to the cultural logic of the logotope, it makes perfect sense.

Logotopes are so familiar and so deeply enmeshed in the territory, we often mistake them for natural landmarks. They are not merely attempts to stylize reality (as with mythotopes), they are practices relating to the status quo and the way things actually operate. If mythotopes are attempts to manipulate ideological software, logotopes grapple with ideological hardware. They are mediating practices related to established structures such as rules, regulations, Internet firewalls, borders, buildings, stoplights, speed signs, speed limits, political parties, ratings boards, network programming, presidential speeches and social protocols. They are the inner and outer workings of the world’s dominant cultural institutions.

All logotopes were once mythotopes. That is, they were beliefs aspiring to become “social facts.” Mythotopes become logotopes through successful acts of conflation that fuse emergent events with accepted norms and render them hegemonic. While mythotopes demand attention, logotopes are most effective when
we take them for granted. As Colin Sparks points out, citizens in nascent democracies tend to be politically engaged, while citizens in stable and well-established democracies focus on apolitical, pop culture discourses (1988, 380). The most engrained logotopes are difficult to detect. We may nod to their existence by reciting pledges or by taking oaths, but these legitimating acts are only ways of maintaining order. They are not urgent attempts to establish a new worldview.

Logotopes are ways of working within the design-structure of a particular cultural ecology, or working against it. Because different cultures have different social norms, logotopes frequently clash. The deepest and most abiding rifts between cultures are logotopic. These are the behaviors we are most resistant to change and most eager for others to alter or dispense with. The ways in which different individuals conceptualize social norms are often at odds, so logotopes may drive us into feuding and even war. When this occurs, logotopes are deployed against one another. A totalitarian regime declares a media blackout. A western corporation gives the regime’s citizens access to social media sites. These policy-related maneuvers have profound cultural implications.

Leveraging favored logotopes means opposing the logotopes of others. In such instances, containment and subversion
are preferable to open coercion. Overt tactics can backfire and generate an emergent backlash. Logotopes exert more sustained pressure when allowed to subtly maintain or undermine hegemonic status. For example, under capitalism, citizens are often inclined to reject social reforms for fear of increased taxes (hegemonic containment) and under patriarchy women are increasingly entering the work force, commanding higher salaries and more prominent positions (hegemonic subversion).

Whenever counterculture discourses reveal the ideological biases of social norms, logotopes are drawn into the open. Those who have traditionally championed them must continue to defend them, or amend them or admit that they are motivated by self-serving beliefs. For instance, a government may refer to itself as a democracy, but if it quashes political dissent and riggs elections, its credibility is compromised in the eyes of its own citizens and other nations as well. Thus leaders of purported democracies generally prefer to discredit and marginalize those who oppose them without resorting to more draconian tactics.

Because logotopes are most effective when they are invisible, much effort is expended concealing “the man behind the curtain,” hence the conjuring of mythotopes. Operating as rhetorical strategies, mythotopes can be deployed to camouflage particularly unseemly logotopes. For instance, a logotope of
imperialist conquest might be disguised via the mythotopic euphemism, “peace keeping mission,” or a logotope exploiting natural resources might be disguised by the mythotopic euphemism, “Clear Skies Initiative.”

Human beings are inherently complex, so discerning our ideological “bottom line” in all conceivable contexts is impossible. However, by carefully discerning between mythotopes and logotopes, we can come closer to gleaning a general sense of a particular medium’s ideological priorities.

Media titan Rupert Murdoch is an illustrative example. The outspoken CEO of News Corp seldom hesitates to voice his political views. Yet even an arch conservative and political hawk such as Murdoch is never entirely consistent. Because he is torn between ideological commitments that are not always perfectly compatible, he cannot be. As founder of the Fox News channel, the Australian tycoon has promised viewers objective coverage. At the same time, critics accuse Fox of parroting the agenda of the Republican Party. Murdoch is not only committed to U.S. nationalism, his style of reporting plays up polarizing narratives in countries around the globe and some of these narratives oppose U.S. interests. And while Murdoch is a committed capitalist, he has made billions in the age of globalization and this has required him to do business with some whose political ideologies appear to clash...
with his own. Clearly Murdoch is torn between many competing logotopic commitments. So which logotope does he generally value most? The role of unbiased journalist? Republican supporter? U.S. patriot? Nationalist ideologue? Western capitalist? Or cross-cultural diplomat?

To begin with, the notion that Murdoch is an impartial journalist seems particularly questionable. After all, Fox News traffics in inflammatory and racially coded headlines such as “Obama Praises Indian Chief Who Killed U.S. General” and “Obama loves Gangsta rap.” As with the “Clear Skies Initiative,” the network’s so-called “Fair and Balanced” policy appears to be more of a mythotope than a logotope. As with a magician’s sleight of hand, this slogan directs attention away from the right wing pandering that network executives wish to conceal. Fox uses ongoing debates between right and left wing pundits to create the illusion of objectivity. Rather than attempting to actually make their reportage less biased, they have created small highly constrained spaces within their rhetorical universe for a few handpicked liberals to express opposing views in an ineffectual manner. This is what passes for objective journalism on the network, a cursory nod to the opposition that is dismissed by the
right wing pundits and, quite often, the purportedly objective Fox moderators as well.  

In addition to making U.S. airwaves more nationalistic, Murdoch has been repeating this formula for success in China. Phoenix Television is a joint venture founded in 1996 between Murdoch’s Star TV and several Chinese investors, including the government-owned Bank of China. According to Susan Shirk, Phoenix Television is “splashy and nationalistic and favored by its ties with the Communist Party. But it is highly believable to Chinese viewers because it sounds nothing at all like old-style propaganda” (2007, 89). The type of nationalism that sells in China feeds on suspicion of Japan and western powers, in particular, the United States, but this is not Murdoch’s only logotopic inconsistency.

In 2003, his son, James, publically denounced the *Falun Gong*, a spiritual movement persecuted by China’s Communist government. He called them a “dangerous” and “apocalyptic cult” that “clearly does not have the success of China at heart.” James Murdoch also chastised the western media for painting a

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96 In response to this trend, MSNC has offered a liberal news format. Its reportage is slanted to appeal to left wing viewers and the formula has allowed it to pull ahead of rival CNN, which, while leaning increasingly to the left, has resisted going quite as far. Nevertheless, this concept of letting members of “the other side” express themselves, and then rhetorically undermining them at every turn is becoming a common feature of cable news.
relentlessly negative picture of the Chinese government. These comments were an attempt to curry favor with the Chinese government and secure carriage for his father’s Star TV organization in the country (MediaGuardian 11/03).

Figure 157. Rupert Murdoch and Chinese President Hu Jintao

In the age of globalization, such clashing realities increasingly characterize discourse in both the public and the private spheres. As anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai points out, “We live in a world of many kinds if realism, some magical, some socialist, some capitalist, and some that are yet to be named” (1996, 53). What’s more, each of these ecologies can be subdivided into multiple niches with their own competing agendas. Thus we can no longer convincingly speak of global capitalism. We can only speak of global capitalisms, some aligned with western interests, some, ironically enough, aligned with its old foe, communism. Even a free market champion like Rupert Murdoch is not immune to such ideological conflicts. His avowed allegiances are to journalism, the United States, democracy, nationalist politics and capitalism, but because these domains are not neatly commensurable, his “bottom line” can only be located in one of
them. Not surprisingly, his deepest logotopic commitment appears to be the one that has made him a multi-billionaire: capitalism.

**Counter-Troping.**

In the age of reality television, the audience has become the star. This creates a thorny theoretical problem. Despite the lingering allure of the effects mode, most media scholars seek to define that audience as “active” and possessed of real agency (Hall 1980). At the same time, we are leery of myths that valorize supposedly self-determined celebrities, while ignoring the highly constructed nature of their “star images” (Dyer 1986). When audience becomes, to some extent, the co-author of its own narrative, theorists are confronted with a blurring of the frontiers between the personal and the public spheres. Should we consider audience-members-turned-“reality-stars” primarily active? Or primarily passive? Or should we take an altogether different tact, defining them as particular types of ritual actors?

The reality star stands at the intersection of two competing currents. Certainly, some of these figures appear to cultivate particular identities in pursuit of particular ends. But even when a ritual actor asserts some degree of agency, how can we be sure that this is not merely another performance?
Witness Britney Spears in her video for the song *Circus* (2008), hitting her marks, executing choreographed dance steps, singing a highly polished, well produced tune, wearing make-up, clothes and a hairstyle all created by other people, while declaring, “I’m like the ringleader, I call the shots. I’m like a firecracker. I make it hot.”

Becoming the medium means asserting the ability to think and act for oneself. This can create an interesting tension between ritual actions that afford increased status by almost entirely eclipsing any meaningful sense of agency. In some respects, perceived power can be more culturally resonant than the actual thing. The myth of the heroic individual is enormously appealing. At the same time, the public prefers heroes who conform to predictable cultural scripts. The trouble with highly individualistic thinkers is that they are notoriously unreliable, hard to control and thus difficult to relate to and to market.

Spears’ erratic “personal life” is an alarming counterpoint to her highly managed public persona. When left to her “own devices,” she often appears more self-destructive than self-determined. Perhaps fleeing the constraints of a rigidly formal public role, she abandons restraint and invites controversy via pitiable exhibitionist displays. Yet even this apparently erratic behavior—shaving her head, flashing photographers—has become
a type of ritual persona, demanding increasingly outrageous behavior in exchange for sustained public interest.

Figure 158. Britney Spears at the 2007 MTV Music Awards

In 2007, a somewhat bloated and disoriented Spears stumbled through a lip-synched song and dance routine at the MTV music awards, a “performance” that invited much public derision, but also provided a glimpse at what happens when two types of ritual personae—the calculating sex symbol and the erratic reality star—merge.

As Madonna had done before her, Spears began her career by playing up contradictions, the virgin/whore dichotomy at core of feminine gender politics. Yet while Madonna’s on and off stage personae appear highly calculated and controlled, Spears increasingly exhibits an alarming inability to maintain composure. In previous eras, such erratic behavior might generate a brief flurry of interest before derailing a promising career, but in the current media environment, it can create sustained interest. A celebrity who is able to offer such trauma and titillation on a regular basis is
rewarded with ongoing media visibility. This should not be confused with the type of adoration associated with more traditional concepts of fame. The audience avidly watching Britney “flame out” is not what might be described as a typical “fan” base. Rather than affording familiar forms of renown, their morbid fascination provides visibility for its own sake, though a marker of cultural distinction, nonetheless. Media titans consider rating points, and trending “hits” reflections of cultural cache, so reality stars are often willing to maintain audience interest at any cost. In this respect, fame and infamy have become fairly interchangeable. Nonetheless, different types of visibility afford different modes of empowerment.

In addition to being a troubled individual, Spears is also a cottage industry. Two groups of people are currently making a living off of her competing public personae: her close circle of collaborators and the tabloid media. Both groups exert a degree of influence on her behavior, but they have competing aims. Those who collaborate with Spears need for her to summon an, at least marginally, stable public persona, so her viability as a performer and recording artist is not irreparably undermined. Meanwhile, the tabloid media just want more grist for the mill. A substance abusing celebrity being pulled in such polarizing directions, is bound to oscillate wildly between different modes of identification.
Yet it might be possible to suggest a small degree of orientation amid the tumult, if we consider the notion of “counter-troping.”

This neologism refers to the strategy of playing one type of ritual practice off of another. For instance, the emergent chaos of Spears’ personal life is a morbidly fascinating “chronotope.” And the manner in which her behavior is rigidly determined and carefully controlled by others is a slickly produced “logotope.” These competing performances have created two popular narratives. Spears is often described as either entirely out of control or entirely controlled by others. While either of these narratives makes for good tabloid fodder, they are both corrosive to her status as a durable recording artist and performer. Those in her inner circle have a problem. If they don’t want their livelihoods threatened, Spears must be made to appear somewhat stable and self-possessed. She must perform agency.

The “ringleader” persona is a “mythotope,” a bit of image management calculated to play against the two other tropes competing to define Spears. Although she did not write the song, the “Spears Machine” needs her to sing it, to tell us that she is a strong, willful individual who actually does “call the shots.” Ironically, this is being done in order to downplay the very existence of the people who have helped to carefully craft this supposedly self-possessed persona. Because Britney Spears and the
people around her need us to believe that she controls her own
destiny, those in the Spears camp are deeply invested in supporting
this performance. The degree to which Spears is consciously
participating in the construction of this particular role is very much
an open question. Yet there is little doubt that it behooves her
handlers to create the appearance that she has a measure of mastery
over herself and over them as well.

*Polytroping.*

Digital media productions combine sound, imagery and
linguistic signs to produce powerful multimodal experiences
(Hodge and Kress 1988). In a similar sense, ritual practices deploy
many different “tropes” toward a common end. This approach
might be termed “polytroping,” as it involves employing several
different modes of mediation. For example, on May 31st 2010,
an Israeli naval blockade stopped several boats carrying supplies
bound for the Gaza strip (CBS News). After Hamas took control of
Gaza in 2007, Israel instituted an embargo to prevent groups such
as Hezbollah from smuggling weapons into the area. Their naval
blockade prevented the Palestinian populous from receiving

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97 In his essay “Polytropy,” Paul Friedrich considers the ways in
which various literary tropes inform one another and indentifies, “a
major problem for the anthropological poetics of the future,”
namely, “to describe and better understand how the combinations of
tropes interact with each other” (1991, 25).
humanitarian aid, which had plunged the territory’s 1.5 million residents into deeper poverty and raised Mid-east tensions.

The boats that were stopped had embarked from Turkey and contained 700 activists sponsored by an Islamic aid group, *Mavi Marmara* (AP 6/3/10). The large lead vessel contained 600 activists and another 100 activists followed in smaller crafts. Alarmed by the large number of people in the flotilla, Israeli commandos boarded the lead boat. Footage of the incident showed protestors swarming the commandos as they rappelled from a helicopter, hitting them with sticks until they fell to the deck, throwing one off of the ship and hurling what the military said was a firebomb. The commandos eventually gained control of the ship, but the skirmish left nine passengers dead. This incident generated protests across the globe, attracting harsh criticism of the blockade. Yet Israeli vowed to continue searching boats bound for Gaza (CBS News 5/31/10).

In order to protest the blockade, a different group of activists organized an additional high profile shipment of supplies. This team was much smaller than the first, but their tropic strategies were highly sophisticated. In terms of chronotopes, the group sought to capitalize on the newly emergent media focus, which would afford them the ability to draw attention to the ongoing humanitarian crisis. In terms of logotopes, the move was
calculated to draw more negative exposure to the unpopular Israeli policy. Finally, a number of mythotopes were effectively enacted. The ship set out from a western port, Ireland. Only eleven unarmed crewmembers were on board, so they presented no substantial threat to the Israeli navy. A winner of the Nobel Peace prize, Mairead Corrigan, was amongst them, underscoring the crew’s commitment to nonviolence. The ship had been christened “Rachel Corrie” after a U.S. college student who was crushed to death in 2003, while protesting Israeli house demolitions in Gaza. This rhetorical flourish was an appeal to peace advocates in the west, whereas the Cambodian flag that the ship flew under was a sharp rebuke to western imperialism, serving as a reminder of U.S. conquest in the era of the Vietnam War. Finally, the Rachel Corrie was carrying hundreds of tons of humanitarian supplies, including wheelchairs, medicine and cement. This cargo had both practical and symbolic value for the people of Gaza. Perhaps sensing this, the Israeli navy only briefly detained the Rachel Corrie. After the ship was subjected to a thorough search, it was allowed to deliver its supplies to Gaza (Jerusalem Post 6/5/11).

The crew of the Rachel Corrie was able to summon multiple modes of ritual authority by deploying a polytropic array of mediation practices. Rather than merely ship in supplies, they had drawn on a variety of symbolic resources to construct and
defend a particular type of high profile narrative. The many
different tropic frames deployed combined to create a particularly
impactful multivalent symbolic gesture.

Next.

The concluding chapter refutes the idea that society can
ever be entirely “secular” and argues that we are all ritual
media...
Chapter 8

CONCLUSION: WE WILL NEVER BE SECULAR

“This secular world is not so irreligious as we might think.”

- Erving Goffman

Figure 159. Pattern Recognition

The snake in the Garden of Eden was an agent of evil, tempting Eve with worldly knowledge. The Gnostic snake, Ouroboros, was an agent of good, gracing the human race with illuminating insights. But the ritual snake is older than either of these metaphoric creations and far more complex. He hails from the age of animism, when even trees and mountains were thought to possess magical powers. As such, he remains a productive symbol of the ways in which human beings continually draw inspiration from the observed environment in an attempt to cast off our superficial selves, while striving to embody perfect, yet ultimately unattainable transcendence.
Praxism insists that all modes of analysis are premised on some element of belief. This means we can never transcend belief itself, only particular beliefs, and the beliefs we strip away only reveal additional, more firmly attached beliefs. Like a snake shedding one skin after another, we are constantly in the process of rejecting outmoded myths only to replace them with more appealing and, for a time, more flattering “logics.” We are always on the cusp of a more expansive and insightful worldview, yet we never quite arrive, as before the previous skin is entirely shed, the new one has begun to blister and come loose in places.

We possess many different skins, or ritual personae, that allow us to see and be seen in particular ways in particular contexts. We do not slip into these ritual selves as we might a piece of clothing. Instead we reveal them by breaking free of previous personae. For a time, we may relate to the new role so intensely, we mistake it for our true identity. Though, inevitably, we come to realize that it is just another ill-fitting cultural artifact constraining us in far too many ways, and so the process of shedding selves continues.

When no lightning bolt of divine insight is forthcoming, we may eventually glean a more modest revelation. Rather than discovering a single core identity, we may begin to see ourselves as both the authors of our own actions and performers taking on
various socially inflected personae. Arriving at this perspective means recognizing that agency requires an agent. We must adopt specific behaviors that we can then leverage our desires against. This means submitting to the requirements of a ritual role.

In the concluding section, I focus on society’s futile efforts to transcend ideology and consider how this is related to our conflicted view of mediumship, which is considered both a poison and a cure. Mediumship is commonly thought to create social ills and also heal them. What’s more—although we are all potential mediums—we are frequently oblivious to our own acts of mediumship and commonly vilify the mediumship of others. We are fascinated with ritual performance yet we fear the spread of “ritual pollution.” Meanwhile, we savor “guilty pleasures” related to the suffering and punishment of cultural scapegoats, experiencing a complex mix of vicarious identification and moral indignation. To explicate these ancient paradoxes, I draw on the work of anthropologists (Frazer 1922; Girard 1972; Burkert 1987; Hughes 1991; Shore 1996; Bloch 1998;), scholars of classical antiquity (Dodd 1951; Guépen 1968), sociologists (Cohen 1971; Giddens 1991; McRobbie & Thorton 1995) and media scholars (Glynn 2000; Daniel Biltereyst 2004).

Agency.
One of the most seductive things about behaviorist arguments is that they overlook motives. When theorists simply eliminate desire and the capacity for strategic thought, our actions take on impressive clarity. All that we lose in the bargain is our humanity. On the other hand, locating evidence of intent behind the ritual mask presents a real challenge. Human motives are messy, multi-faceted and contradictory things. We behave as we do for all sorts of complicated reasons. Amid the swirling, ill-articulated, half-truths of cultural discourse we often have trouble discerning our own motives, so it's hardly surprising that the intentions of others are even more difficult to discern. Even if someone states outright what their intentions are, how can we be sure that they aren’t lying to us? And even if they think they are telling the truth, how do we know they aren’t lying to themselves? To make matters worse, people do things for many conflicting reason, often at the same instant. A partial list of possible motives includes: the desire to achieve a goal, to punish another, to punish oneself, to avoid commitment, to embrace commitment, to receive acclaim, to stand out, to blend in, to belong, to break free, to dominate, to submit and to merely get by.

The hunt for intentions is not only fraught; it is also inherently flawed (though, hopefully, not fatally so). If we accept that all cultural utterances are ritual rites, then any attempt to
identify the influence of a particular mode of ritual authority is itself a type of ritual performance. The theorist is partly deluded by his own theorizing as he submits to the dictates of a particular role. Even more distressing, like all ritualists, he is blind to his most pernicious biases.98

If this perspective is even partly accurate, we can never arrive at the whole Truth, pure and unalloyed, we can only juxtapose belief with belief, viewing competing ideologies in relation to one another and in relation to specific cultural contexts. Any analysis of ritual authority must be relativistic, though not in any absolute sense. After all, some perspectives are clearly more dogmatic than others. An argument supported by empirical observations and carefully considered analysis is bound to be more plausible than wild speculation, or rote superstition.

While this pragmatic perspective may not be much to hang one’s hat on, it is at least something more than a blind leap of faith.99 If intentions cannot be definitively pinned down, they can

98 In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes confesses his own inability to transcend belief as he seeks to analyze mythological dogma. “Is there a mythology of the mythologist? No doubt, and reader will easily see where I stand” (Barthes 2005, 12).

99 James W. Fernandez says, “in my view, anthropology is essential a pragmatic and not a platonic or idealistic enterprise. It is the kind of study primary concerned with how humans in real situations get things done such as living together with some sense of fulfillment and satisfaction, mastering an environment, providing food,
at least be teased out and delicately suggested. In this way, we can learn something about the price we pay for attempting to portray a particular facsimile of ourselves. Intentions matter because ideology is not just something that is done to us; it is also something we do. As the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce argues, hewing to belief is not enough. We feel the need to prove that our beliefs are irrefutable facts and this drives us to defend them as a bridegroom defends his bride (1997, 25).

Consider a reality show contestant being interviewed by a magazine reporter insisting that her televised behavior was a calculated performance, or that scheming producers manipulated the footage in order to portray her in an unflattering light. In both cases, she is asserting agency, claiming authorship of her own televised role or rejecting a performance supposedly contrived by the show’s producers and, in the process, authoring a new role, that of outspoken media pundit. Of course, claiming the ability to self-determine and actually doing so is not necessarily the same thing. Often people insist that they are expressing something unique about themselves when they are actually falling back on rote behaviors and familiar cultural scripts.

So why bother? If agency is largely in the eye of the beholder, and that eye is always befogged by self-deception, if clothing and shelter, creating some sense of ultimate meaning to life’” (1986, ix).
ritual roles are often more culturally significant *regardless* of individual intent rather than because of it, chances are we will never be able to glean anything more than a vague semblance of true agency. Still, without this glimmer, who are we?

*Pharmakoi.*

The two prisoners are being dragged from their cells. For hours, the crowd outside has been chanting, eager for them to appear. Coarse ropes attached to long tethers bind their hands. They have been stripped of their robes. The guards produce two garlands made of figs: one white and one black. As the black garland is placed around the younger prisoner’s neck, the older prisoner issues a small sigh of relief. Next the white garland is placed around his neck. A large guard seizes the tether attached to his hands and drags him toward the door.

After years of confinement, the two prisoners step into the open. The summer wind blows hot, yet they tremble with fear. As the old man’s eyes gradually adjust to the bright Aegean sunlight, he can see that the guards have begun to drag his fellow prisoner ahead of him down a long dirt path lined with people. Seeing the black figs draped around the young man’s neck, several men emerge from the crowd and set upon him, whipping his genitals with switches made of fig tree branches as well as squills.
The choice of these bulbous roots is symbolic. A potentially lethal medicine called the “pharmakon” is commonly extracted from them. In small doses, it can cure minor ailments. In large doses, it is lethal. The squills indicate that the two prisoners have become “pharmakoi,” a variation on “pharmakon,” the name also means both poison and cure. As the captured members of a foreign state, they are considered a threat to the community, and the presumed cause of the latest crisis—a recent plague that has claimed the lives of several citizens. At the same time, they are viewed as the best means of resolving this dilemma.100

100 Just as the pharmakon can be viewed as either a cure or a poison, affordances have a double-edged quality. The same affordance can be seen as either “positive” or “negative” depending on the subjectivity of the perceiver. James Gibson draws our attention to “substances that afford ingestion.” He points out, “Some afford nutrition for a given animal, some afford poisoning, and some are neutral.” Then he says, “Consider the brink of a cliff. On the one side it affords walking along, locomotion, whereas on the other it affords falling off, injury.” He continues, “Consider a detached object with a sharp edge, a knife. It affords cutting if manipulated in one manner, but it affords being cut if manipulated in another manner. Similarly, but at a different level of complexity, a middle-sized metallic object affords grasping, but if charged with current it affords electric shock.” Finally, he says, “Consider the other person. The animate object can give caresses or blows, contact injury, reward or punishment, and it is not always easy to perceive which will be provided. Note that all these benefits and injuries, these safeties and dangers, these positive and negative affordances are properties of things taken with reference to an observer but not properties of the experiences of the observer. They are not subjective values; they are not feelings of pleasure or pain added to neutral perceptions” (1979, 137). Gibson resists locating the significance of the affordance solely in the individual or the environment, as he his striving to break with such dichotomous thinking altogether. “Affordances are neither in [one] world or the
Presently, some of women spot the white figs draped around the old man’s neck and begin lashing him with fig branches and squills as well. They shriek, hurl insults and spit on him. All the while, the guard pulls him deeper into the crowd. Next, comes a hail of stones, hurled by people on both sides of the long road. They shout insults at both pharmakoi, blaming them for the deaths of their kinsmen, while cheering for their expulsion. They know that the pharmakoi are not merely a threat to the community; they are also its greatest hope, figures whose banishment is the best means for returning Athens to a state of peace and prosperity.

By the time the pharmakoi reach the crossroads at the edge of the city, they are staggering, bloody and disoriented. A large stone strikes the old man on the forehead. As he falls to his knees, a cheer rises up from the crowd. Now, the guards begin dragging his limp body through the dirt toward the border.

At this point, the story must end. For even though scholars concur on details involving the expulsion of the Athenian pharmakoi (Frazer 1922; Girard 1972; Hughes 1991), the exact culmination of the rite remains a point of controversy. Some maintain that the pharmakoi were executed by being thrown onto flaming pyres or driven off sea cliffs (Burkert 1987; Girard 1986).

other inasmuch as the theory of two worlds is rejected. There is only one environment, although it contains many observers with limitless opportunities for them to live in it” (138).
Others believe the pharmakoi were simply pelted with stones and then permanently banished from the city (Hughes 1991). Yet whether the pharmakoi were sacrificed or merely banished, the nature of their ritual authority is the same. They were mediums with the ability to stabilize and/or modify culture in two ways, by representing both a poison and a cure. First they would embody the antithesis of society’s dominant norms, performing the role of a social threat. Next, they would be punished and shunned for their transgressions, an act of expulsion thought to heal the community.

Hegemony requires the illusion of coherence, but ritual demands paradox. Like the double-headed sacrificial axe that was commonly employed in Greek times, it cuts two ways, evoking the sacred and the profane, pleasure and pain, death and rebirth, corruption and purity, poison and cure. Rituals do different things in different ways for different people. This is why functionalist arguments are inherently flawed. Bronislaw Malinowski believed ritual was primarily a means of alleviating cultural anxiety, but Alfred Radcliffe-Brown challenged this perspective, arguing that rituals often have the opposite effect, giving rise to increased anxiety (Giddens 1991, 148). The trouble with the pharmakon is he is not a single person. He is a “complex,” a living/dying paradox. To some, he is a demon who must die in order reunite social factions (Girard 1972, 102). To others, he is a martyr who has
sacrificed himself for the greater good (Burke 1950, 266). To still others, he is a sacrificial offering allowing the community to experience a sense of spiritual transcendence (Bloch 1998, 176).

By insisting that rituals have no single consistent function, praxism draws our attention to their irreducible complexity. It focuses on how particular mediums believe they function in particular contexts. While this tends to undermine totalizing assumptions, it also draws our attention to the source of ritual’s dynamic power.

The medium is a pharmakon because ritual itself is contradictory. Its greatest strengths are tied to its greatest weaknesses. Unlike scientific methods, ritual practices privilege intuition over analysis, instinct over observation (Arno 2003). This makes their conclusions impossible to verify and also impossible to disprove. Because rituals promise to address emotionally charged issues, the incentive for verifying their claims is high, but the means of effectively doing so is low. In order to compensate for this disparity, ritual mediums fiercely commit to the modes of identification most likely to assist them in attaining a particular end. This means embracing complexity.

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101 Andrew Arno states, “rituals are often observed to have important practical meaning outside of language.” What’s more, “practical meaning systems can also constitute metaphor and accomplish reference in ways that are parallel to, yet distinct from, verbal and gestural language functions” (2003, 807).
The Trouble with Mediums.

Standing astride the chasm between determined and emergent influence, the medium is always at risk. He has the ability to save society, or to destroy it, so our feelings toward him are profoundly ambivalent. He earns our respect and our fear. He also earns our identification. After all, we are all potentially him—though we often work hard to deny this. The medium reminds us of our own potential “Otherness,” the source of our own ritual authority and the greatest threat to our bid for inclusion.

Dead mediums are more reliable than living ones, who are notoriously fickle figures often regarded with suspicion and even outright scorn. This is why communities tend to closes rank against living difference, exalting it post hoc and in absentia. We are deeply invested in Othering the medium, locating him anterior to ourselves. This is the chief value of “effects arguments.” They allow us to distance ourselves from our darker cultural obsessions, to drive them outside the sacred circle, beyond the borders of the community.

According to effects arguments, we do not personally circulate violent and sexual discourses, the media does. We do not objectify others and ourselves, the media does. We are not guilty of fetishizing dysfunction, the media is. Rather than holding
ourselves responsible, we blame texts, technologies and vaguely defined groups, i.e. journalists, corporations, politicians.

Because the medium has some ability to celebrate or resist change, his power cuts two ways. He can re-imagine culture by actively modifying its symbols, or he can affirm the validity of established norms by submitting to their dictates. The scapegoating mechanism relates to the latter practice. It is a means of absolving a sense of collective guilt and sanctifying the status quo. Because the scapegoat must suffer painful and highly public torments, he is not always a willing victim. Then again, many famous scapegoats appear to have deliberately martyred themselves in the name of an ideological cause.

In any event, the moral panic associated with a specific instance of scapegoating often reveals more about the persecutors than the persecuted. For instance, after the civil war, a moral panic gripped the southern United States and white Klansman began lynching freed black males. For hundreds of years, slave owners had been sexually assaulting back woman. Once black men

102 While they may or may not be triggered by actual normative transgressions, moral panics always accomplish something for the “high minded” individuals who instigate and perpetuate them. A puritan male attracted to an unmarried female may seek to burn her for the crime of “bewitching him.” And in the 1980s, the outbreak of AIDs led to a moral panic that justified reactionary homophobic rhetoric and greatly undermined the burgeoning gay rights movement, which was becoming an increasing threat to heteronormative values.
were free, they feared retribution. I believe that the scapegoating of black males accused of “dishonoring” white women had less to do with any actual transgressions then with the projected guilt of ritualists in the grip of a moral panic. After all, persecutors do not attack just anyone, they go after specific targets in order to dissociate themselves from what those targets are thought to represent. Scapegoating is a means of self-absolution, but—when more carefully considered—it is also a form of self-incrimination, a fairly transparent process of projecting ones own guilt onto another and then treating them as a moral purgative. The finger of accusation points in order to direct attention away from itself.

The public does not merely panic in reaction to social trends, as Daniel Biltereyst explains, new media technologies, formats and genre innovations can also create unrest, as with the backlash against horror comics in the 1950s and contemporary fears about Internet pornography. Biltereyst calls this phenomenon “media panic” and explains that new media are often perceived as “a threat to dominant cultural and societal values” (2004, 106).

Technical and aesthetic innovations do change culture but not by imposing positive or negative effects. They do so by offering affordances. For instance, in the age of the Internet, media users can increasingly adopt new modes of identification. By
affiliating with a wide variety of online groups, we become less narrowly defined by a single social milieu. This affords us a “meta-perspective” that can lead to a degree of disenfranchisement from traditional communities and may even invite an open rejection of once uncritically accepted social values.

As McRobbie & Thorton argue, “society can control effectively only those who perceive themselves to be members of it” (1995, 267). Thus, as new media discourses afforded opportunities for new mediums to question longstanding social affiliations, we are likely to witness an amplification of behaviors traditionally viewed as deviant. When this occurs, the outrage circulated by a moral panic may actually generate more transgressive behavior. McRobbie & Thorton elaborate, “The media coverage of deviance acts as a kind of handbook of possibilities to be picked over by new recruits” (267).

In a world in which media visibility at any cost is considered a highly desirable marker of cultural status, many people are likely to seek attention by challenging taboos. As Stan Cohen reminds us traditional sociology assumes that the exposure of deviance automatically leads to social control. However, in a multi-centered social world, the reverse is often true. In many instances, social control may actually foster and even exacerbate deviance (1971, 33).
Then there is the issue of power. As self-serving individuals break with norms in greater numbers, institutions must increasingly contain and quash these behaviors. Dominant institutions are threatened by the pharmakos but also need the pharmakos to justify their consolidated power. The more potent the perceived “poison,” the more justifiable the measures taken to transform it into a “cure.” A truly threatening pharmakos needs to be located in the center of the social field. Thus, in Athens, the pharmakoi were always jailed in the middle of the city. This was ritually significant as it identified them as a threat within the heart of the body politic to be carefully contained and eventually expunged (though not before other pharmakoi were captured and contained therein). Today’s urban centers are also teaming with pharmakoi, poor young men, usually black and Latino, who are considered a threat to the affluent suburban enclaves surrounding them. Thus, Los Angeles, one of the wealthiest cities in one of the wealthiest countries in the world is the site of horrific street violence that has claimed the lives of tens of thousands. As with its ancient antecedent, contemporary scapegoating involves containing a threat at the heart of the community, accompanied by acts of ritual expulsion via death, banishment and incarceration. Therefore, when a gang member tags “his turf,” he is not only claiming ideological terrain for himself, he is also assuming a
ritual role that serves to justify the very oppression that perpetuates his disenfranchisement, subjugation and persecution. Meanwhile, the celebration of “thug life” characteristic of rap music is a collection of media affordances, offering potential pharmakoi heightened cultural significance, though at a steep price.

**Guilty-Pleasure and Empathic Engagement.**

Natural ecologies are open chaotic systems, yet they do exhibit some forms of spontaneous self-organization, moments when increased chaos gives rise to order with the aid of naturally occurring negative feedback. For instance a fixed amount of grasslands places a natural limit on the number of grazing animals. This reduces the chance that they will over-populate and drive other species into extinction.

Cultural ecologies are also constrained by negative feedback in the form of guilt and shaming mechanisms. These naturally emerging “damping forces” operate as an organic array of checks and balances that helps to mitigate social disequilibrium by curtailing disruptive innovation. Such feedback loops are only effective if they can simultaneously trigger revulsion and fascination, hence the term “guilty pleasure.” A guilty pleasure is a media affordance experienced as simultaneously negative and positive. The adjective “guilty” indicates the negative aspects of
the affordance, which, generally tends to discourage certain behaviors. The noun “pleasure” refers to the sense of morbid fascination associated with such rites, as well as the delight viewers can take in adopting stances of moral superiority and vicarious identification in relation to the ritualist.

In his essay “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” Fredric Jameson described the double-edged nature of media, which simultaneously acknowledges and manages social anxieties with an implied promise of ideological utopia. He calls this phenomenon “the fantasy bribe” (Jameson 2007 30). Building off Jameson’s concept, Dana Cloud considers a paradox at the heart of much reality TV. This is defined as “the irony bribe.” Cloud describes it as follows: “a strategic mechanism of a cultural text that invites audiences to identify with the pleasures of the reaction against the taking seriously of a patently ideological fantasy (such as faith in true love as a source of women’s agency). Ironically, the irony bribe naturalizes the worldview of a hegemonic text in the process of denaturalizing it.” It is a type of “investment through disinvestment” (Cloud 2010, 415). As with “the fantasy bribe” and “the irony bribe,” the concept of “guilty pleasure” cuts two ways. Yet it is less about investing in utopian fantasies than constraining them.
There is a thin line between envy and admiration, and often we both respect and resent mediums who invoke modes of ritual authority unavailable to us, or those who invoke our favored modes of authority more effectively than we do. When this occurs, we are likely to have mixed feelings about our fellow ritualists. In the present era, the enticements of fame are immense. Few things are prized as much as celebrity, yet few people hazard the committed and sustained efforts commonly associated with the attainment of cultural renown. This is because the barriers to actually achieving fame are extremely high. The competition is fierce and the inevitable criticism and rejection can be withering. While dreams of fame are certainly appealing, the actual pursuit of fame is daunting, even terrifying. Negative affordances are forms of self-justification, cautionary tales that assure us that actually striving for the stardom that many of us secretly dream about is far too risky, too degrading, and simply too hard.

Figure 160. *American Idol*

*American Idol* (Fox 2002-2011) is promoted as a type of Horatio Alger story about talented unknowns bootstrapping their way to success. Certainly, this is one of its allurements. But the
show also operates as a powerful and compelling negative
affordance, repeatedly assuring viewers that attempting to become
famous simply isn’t worth it. Much of the airtime involves the host
ruthlessly berating aspiring singers with critiques far more scathing
than any they would likely receive in a traditional audition setting.
This public humiliation occurs before millions of viewers,
underscoring a message that is one of the chief “pleasures” the
program affords.

Because human beings are complex, we may take pleasure
in viewing a particular program for multiple reasons. *American
Idol* may justify our fears about actually pursuing celebrity status,
but it also placates us with a taste of vicarious fame. Thus, when
the *Idol* judges aren’t subjecting hopefuls to shaming taunts, they
are holding out the promise of apotheosis. By voting for an
*American Idol* contestant, we can actively participate in the
creation of a star. This allows us to safely project our desire for
stardom onto a courageous surrogate who becomes a stand-in for
our own nascent potential. This is an effective means of eliciting
audience loyalty. Cheering for the outcome of a sporting event or
voting for the contestants in a reality show allows us to invest in
the success of particular participants. This emotional commitment
continues beyond the individual game or performance. *American
Idol* has launched more viable careers than its predecessor *Star
Search (1983-1995). This may be related to the concept of “empathic engagement” (Shore 1996), the idea that viewers are able to vote on the show’s outcome. Once an “Idol” has achieved celebrity-apotheosis, viewer-stakeholders can continue facilitating his or her success by purchasing CD’s, magazines, books, video games and movie tickets. In this way, we can continue our identification with the celebrity and feel invested in their ongoing success, a part of their stardom, without ever leaving the safety and comfort of our homes.

Cultural innovation is inherently disruptive, so the psychological state commonly called “guilty pleasure” performs a valuable social function, shaming people into adopting more cooperative behaviors. However, in a mass-media ecology, high profile transgressions also serve as media affordances, blueprints for aspiring innovators who crave large-scale visibility at any cost.

Defining what does and does not count as legitimate innovation is challenging. There is no consistent behavioral standard for all people in every conceivable cultural context. Also, an individual may have one set of standards for herself and another for her fellow mediums. In terms of how others behave, actions that help to maintain the status quo may be prized, whereas actions that challenge norms may be considered negative and maladaptive. In contrast, the medium herself may seek unconventional modes of
empowerment even if this means challenging the status quo. To further complicate matters, the same media affordance may strike one person as positive and another as negative. For example, when a culturally enfranchised young man accustomed to a comfortable middle class existence watches a gangster film, he may consider it a cautionary tale. When the protagonist is gunned down in a hail of bullets during the climactic sequence, he may even experience a sense of catharsis. On the other hand, a more disenfranchised young man might consider the same character a type of cultural hero, or even a role model to emulate. His mimetic reaction involves seeing the actions of the protagonist as positive rather than negative affordances. Because he personally has few options for legitimate social empowerment, he considers the criminal character’s meteoric rise and fall a type of inspirational success story.

This response is not an effect imposed by the film, nor is it a form of psychological gratification freely available to all viewers on equal terms. Instead, it is a media affordance tied to the way a specific individual relates to a particular ritual role. The reaction in question is linked to his own preferred modes of identification as influenced by the social milieu that such perspectives have emerged from. What's more, because people are complex, a single individual might view the same media affordance in two different
ways. For example, a celebrity might agree to reveal some details of his personal life in exchange for heightened publicity. This type of cultural “trade off” is what occurs when an affordance is considered simultaneously positive and negative.

**Ritual Pollution.**

Popular rituals must serve up a steady diet of transgressions in order to command sustained audience attention. However, transgressive behaviors can also spread virally and disrupt the body politic, as when instances of school shootings, or teen suicide suddenly spike. In tribal cultures, this type of viral behavior is tied to the notion of “ritual pollution,” a type of moral contagion unleashed at the moment of sacrifice. Ideally, this free-floating toxin merely dissipates freeing the community from the evils that have plagued it (Guépen 1968, 59), but under certain conditions, it can spread throughout the community and wreak havoc.103

No one stands to gain more from a successful ritual than the ritual-conductor or “priest” who oversees it. By first condemning, then sacrificing, then finally praising the ritual scapegoat, he appears to restore social order, and, in the process,

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103 In Plato’s *Laws*, he advocates drafting legal rules to enforce mythical prohibitions related to ritual pollution. For instance, an animal, or even an inanimate object, which has caused the death of a man, is to be tried, condemned, and banished from the State because it is thought to carry a corrupting “miasma” (Dodd 1951, 223).
affirms his status as an ideological leader. But such benefits entail a risk. If the priest allows the ritual to grow too chaotic and unsettling, he puts the whole tribe at risk. Rather than containing cultural anxiety, he is unleashing it, threatening to corrupt onlookers with new feelings of shame and inadequacy. Concerns about “ritual pollution” protect us from recognizing that we too are capable of becoming the medium. This is why the priest risks being seen as corrupt, contaminated by the very pollutants he has sought to remove from the community. In fact, there are many accounts of priests being attacked by their own congregations and even stoned to death by ritual participants hoping to evade the risk of becoming tainted as well. Elaborating on this point, J.P. Guépen explains, “It appears that the close connection between rite and myth here presents a new problem: the sacrifice meant to propitiate the murder is itself a similar murder. It looks like an imitation of the original crime” (1968, 59). In some instances, “The slayer had to flee: he had killed Dionysus, or something very close to him. The sacrifice was therefore interpreted as a crime, which set the machinery of talion [penalty corresponding to crime] in motion: the killer must be killed; the slayer is stoned and has to run for his life” (32-3).
This is perhaps why the ritual conductor often feels compelled to project a pious air. A contemporary example of such a figure is tabloid TV pioneer Rupert Murdock, whose logotopic commitments were analyzed in the previous chapter. Murdoch has been relentlessly pilloried in the press, described as everything from “a barbarian, to Dr. Frankenstein, to the Antichrist of Professional Journalism” (Glynn 2000, 28). He has deflected such criticism by assuming the ironic role of “moral paragon.” His Fox News Network features the ethical castigations of self-described “culture warrior,” Bill O’Reilly.

Ritual Blindness.

What does it mean to live in a “secular society?” The name suggests that we have somehow transcended ideology. Other cultures have belief and ritual. We have truth and reality. Okay, sure, we may dabble in mythological narratives—celebrating superheroes and sports figures in colorful costumes, but we don not actually consider them gods, do we? No, we’re above that. And yes, we may go online and vote for a contestant in a reality show,
but that isn’t *really* engaging in a type of primitive rite, is it? Of course not! These are just diversions, light entertainments, fun and frivolous, eminently trivial. After all, we’re rational now, reasonable and utterly non-dogmatic. Like all true believers, we are privy to the whole Truth and nothing but…at least this is what we keep telling ourselves.

Some lament the “loss of the sacred,” some celebrate it, but most accept that postmodern life is primarily secular. Anthony Giddens writes, “Much has been made by social observers of the decline of ritual activities in relation to major transitions of life: birth, adolescence, marriage and death. The relative absence of ritual in modern social contexts, it has been suggested, removes an important psychological prop to the individual’s capacity to cope with such transitions (1991, 148). As Giddens indicates, traditional rituals such as weddings, baptisms and ceremonial rites of passage are practiced less frequently and with a diminished sense of moral conviction. To many, this has signaled a loss of ritual significance. I disagree.

In an era in which media discourses have become highly fragmented and multivalent, it stands to reason that the ritual practices that produce and sustain such discourses must be growing
equally complex.\textsuperscript{104} Thus what we are currently experiencing is not a loss of ritual, but a sense of “ritual complexification.” Salome is dancing faster than ever now, shedding more and more veils, just as the animistic snake is shedding skin after skin with no ultimate revelation in sight. Even if we wished to abandon ritual, we could not, for we can’t begin to make sense of the world without it. The ritual medium is a pharmakon, neither good nor bad, merely inevitable. So rather than attempt to transcend belief, or bemoan the loss of traditional ethics, we must instead strive for a more complex and comprehensive worldview, seeking a dynamic if highly contingent balance between rigidly determined hegemonic norms and emergent chaos. In so doing, we must attempt to juxtapose traditional ethics and the ethics of invention to create a new “ethics of equilibrium.” If this is to occur, it will necessarily be accompanied by a flowering or ritual awareness, a growing acceptance of the promise and the threat of media affordances. We need to unflinchingly consider the nature of the opportunities such behavioral models provide for doing good or ill. Before we can

\textsuperscript{104} In the essay “Against Ritual,” Jack Goody complains that ritual has too many conflicting definitions. (27). In contrast, Erving Goffman defines all formalized human actions and interactions as “rituals” (1997). Along with Goffman, I argue that, this broadness does not make ritual meaningless. To the contrary, it makes it the necessary precondition for the emergence of culture.
begin to consciously model our own beliefs, we have to understand
the ways that they are already being modeled for us.

We have not transcended ritual, I argue, so much as turned
a blind eye to it. Ritual blindness is the blight of our age, a
destructive force disrupting cultural equanimity while our backs
are blithely turned. This work is not as an uncritical celebration of
mediumship, nor is it an effort to illuminate any kind of universal
truth. It is simply an attempt to draw attention to an all-too-
common lie, the belief that we can ever be truly “secular.” For it is
this destructive illusion that too often prevents us from more
cautiously considering the implications of the beliefs we are
ceaselessly impelled to challenge, circulate, and invent.

Ultimately, praxism is not just a theory of practice; it is a
theory as practice, a reminder that attempting to make sense of the
world is a mode of active engagement, which always entails
embracing some mode of belief, though hopefully, not too
zealously. The history of western rationalism is a litany of
cartographical failures. Again and again, the mapmakers have
promised to create an explanatory scheme big enough and clever
enough to swallow nature whole, yet we are always disappointed
with the end product. The promise of transcendence turns out to be
an undercooked soufflé. So along comes another mapmaker ready
to debunk the frauds that came before him and finally unveil the
grand conceptual scheme that we have been waiting. We may actually want to believe him and, for a time, we almost do, but then a small thread comes lose, then another, and another. Soon the whole marvelous contrivance is unraveling. After a time, the mapmakers become nothing but a parade of targets in a shooting gallery. We amuse ourselves by picking them off, one by one. Yet the idea that debunking frauds is better than getting duped by them is cold comfort. We may take cynical pleasure in tearing down false prophets, but in the end, we only love the things that we create.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Bradford Gyori is an instructor with the Film and Media Studies program at Arizona State University. He teaches critical analysis of television and film and also conducts workshops focused on screen and television writing. His primary research interest is the ritualized nature of participatory media, including reality television, social networking, file sharing and interactive gaming. For twenty years, he worked as a television writer and producer for such networks as FX, MTV, VH1, and E! For ten years, he was the head writer of the Emmy award winning Talk Soup. He has been nominated for five Emmys.