



Play, Art, Myth, and Ritual

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Key Points

1. **Play** is a generalized form of behavioural openness. Play can be thought of as a way of *organizing* activities, not merely a set of activities. We put a frame that consists of the message “this is play” around certain activities, thereby transforming them into play. Play also permits **reflexive** consid-

eration of alternative realities by setting up a separate reality and suggesting that the perspective of ordinary life is only one way to make sense of experience.

2. The functions of play include exercise, practice for the real world, increased creativity, and commentary on the real world.
3. The fate of national sports teams can come to represent the nation itself, and the devotion of sports fans becomes a way of affirming patriotism. When sports are translated from one culture to another, they are frequently transformed to fit the patterns that are appropriate to the new culture.
4. The research of Edward T. Hall focuses on the cross cultural differences in how we sense and use space and time. His theory of proxemics explores the ways in which we are surrounded by culturally specific temporal and spatial dimensions. Play, art, myth, and ritual share such symbolic dimensions.
5. **Art** is a kind of play that is subject to certain culturally-appropriate restrictions on form and content. It aims to evoke a holistic, aesthetic response from the artist and the observer. It succeeds when the form is culturally appropriate for the content and is technically perfect in its realization. Aesthetic evaluations are culturally shaped value judgments. We recognize art in other cultures because of its family resemblance to what we call *art* in our own culture. Although people with other cultural understandings may not have produced art by intention, we can often successfully appreciate what they have created as art by appropriation. These issues are addressed in ethnographic studies that call into question received ideas about what counts as “authentic” art.
6. **Myths** are stories whose truths seem self-evident because they do such a good job of integrating personal experiences with a wider set of assumptions about the way the world works. As stories, myths are the products of high verbal art. A full understanding of myth requires ethnographic background information.
7. **Ritual** is a repetitive social practice composed of sequences of symbolic activities such as speech, singing, dancing, gestures, and the manipulation of certain objects. In studying ritual, we pay attention not just to the symbols but also to how the ritual is performed. Cultural ideas are made concrete through ritual action.
8. **Rites of passage** are rituals in which members of a culture move from one position in the social structure to another. These rites are marked by periods of separation, transition, and re-aggregation. During the period of transition, individuals occupy a **liminal position**. Those in this position frequently develop an intense comradeship and a feeling of oneness, or *communitas*.
9. **Ritual and play** are complementary. Play is based on the premise “let’s make-believe,” while ritual is based on the premise “let’s believe.” As a result, the ritual frame is far more rigid than the play frame. Although ritual may seem overwhelming and all-powerful, individuals and groups can sometimes manipulate ritual forms to achieve non-traditional ends.
10. **Play, art, myth, and ritual** are often experienced together. They can be seen as complementary expressions of the common core of human symbolic behaviour.

Key Terms

Art “Play with form producing some aesthetically successful transformation-representation” (Alland 1997: 39).

Communitas An unstructured or minimally structured community of equal individuals frequently found in rites of passage.

Framing A cognitive boundary that marks certain behaviours as “play” or as “ordinary life.”

Liminal period The ambiguous transitional state in a rite of passage in which the person or persons undergoing the ritual are outside their ordinary social positions.

Metacommunication Communicating about the process of communication.

Myth A representative story that embodies a culture’s assumptions about the way society, or the world in general, must operate.

Orthodoxy “Correct doctrine”; the prohibition of deviation from approved mythic texts.

Orthopraxy “Correct practice”; the prohibition of deviation from approved forms of ritual behaviour.

Play A framing (or orienting context) that is (1) consciously adopted by the players; (2) somehow pleasurable; and (3) systemically related to what is non-play by alluding to the non-play world and by transforming the objects, roles, actions, and relations of ends and means characteristic of the non-play world.

Reflexivity Critically thinking about the way one thinks; reflecting on one’s own experience.

Rite of passage A ritual that serves to mark the movement and transformation of an individual from one social position to another.

Ritual A repetitive social practice set off from everyday routine and composed of a sequence of symbolic activities that adhere to a culturally defined ritual schema and are closely connected to a specific set of ideas central to the culture.

Sport An aggressively competitive, often physically exertive activity governed by game-like rules that are ritually patterned and agreed-upon by all participants.

Transformation-representation The process in which experience is transformed as it is represented symbolically in a different medium.

Review Questions

1. Thinking about the definitions of art and play in this chapter, how would you categorize graffiti? Why?
2. List the rites of passage that you have been, or will go, through in your life. Do these rites of passage include the three stages (separation, transition, reincorporation)?
3. How does “child’s play” work toward socialization and enculturation of children?
4. What does it mean to say that sport is embedded in social relations?
5. Think about sport in Canada. What is the relationship of a particular sport to nationalism? To identity? To the values of our culture?
6. Consider and discuss some of the symbolic similarities that can be found between ritual, drama, and sport.
7. Considering Edward T. Hall’s research on proxemics, discuss how people might share space in an elevator or when cueing for a movie. What do we communicate by how close or how far we position ourselves from others?
8. What characteristics differentiate art from play?
9. Discuss some of the modern informal “rites of passage” that teenagers and young adults might experience today.
10. Do Canadians have national myths that act as charters for particular social actions?

Additional Resources

Films

- *Aeroplane Dance*. Directed by Trevor Graham. Icarus Films. 1994.

This documentary looks at the changing lives of the Yanyuwa of Papua New Guinea, and how a World War II aircraft crash created a new cultural event.

- *Keeping it Real*. Directed by Sunny Bergman. Icarus Films. 2004.

In *Keeping it Real*, filmmaker Sunny Bergman explores the nature of authenticity by participating in paid events that aim to provide people with “real” experiences.

<http://icarusfilms.com/new2004/kee.html>

Annotated Video Links

- Symbolic Action and The Power of Ritual
This video begins with a condensed presentation running through the basic concepts of symbolic anthropology and the application of these ideas in different contexts.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUimhdfZ61A>
- What is Ritual?
An enthusiastic explanation of the various ways one can understand ritual.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_URgZf01hU
- Why Are These 32 Symbols Found In Caves All Over Europe?
Very interesting tour through Paleolithic rock art that demonstrates great symbolic sophistication.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJnEQCMA5Sg>

Websites

- Creation Stories from around the World, University of Georgia
The “Summation” section contains some analysis of the recurring themes in the various creation stories.
<http://www.gly.uga.edu/railsback/CS/CSIndex.html>
- Bradshaw Foundation
This site contains multimedia collections of rock and cave art from around the world. The Bradshaw Foundation supports research into prehistoric art.
<http://www.bradshawfoundation.org/>
- Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
This interactive site allows you to explore the history of art by region and time period.
<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/>
- Right to Play
This Canada-based international humanitarian organization implements sport and play programs in areas affected by war, poverty, and disease.
<http://www.righttoplay.com/>

A Critical Look

BY ROBERTA ROBIN DODS

Transitions

We all undergo transitions, great and small, throughout our lives. We experience “the coming-into-being, completion, and attenuation of personhood,” and through this experience “life and death are attributed, contested, and enacted” (Kaufman and Morgan 2005: 317). In this context, we can consider “two basic anthropological models of cultural representations of death”:

The first is the journey model, in which death is considered to be a long-term transformation. In many societies, death is imagined as a continuation of the journey begun in life. Death as a journey is usually contrasted with the Western model of death as “punctual” and, insofar as it is rooted in biological understandings of death, a terminal end. (Dernbach 2005:120–1)

Both models present ways of comprehending the altered circumstances within the social fabric where the dead once lived.

Swiss anthropologist Marc-Antoine Berthod (2005) speaks of the tension that is evoked as a moment of suspended silence when the “being” of the dead or near-dead is in a state of redefinition. Our silence at such times affirms what Berthod sees as our embarrassment at asserting the radical otherness of the deceased or the nearly deceased (535). Our preoccupation with this radical otherness is emphasized by the enduring popularity of zombies in movies (e.g., *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and *Zombieland*), television shows (e.g., *The Walking Dead*), music videos (e.g., Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” video), novels (e.g., *World War Z*, also a popular film), and other forms of entertainment. Even with the scientific discussion of zombification (see, e.g., Davis 1985, 1988), we are still left with this realm of otherness.

We seldom confront the cultural issues of the “life of the dead” (Berthod 2005: 521) during funerary rituals and mourning. In North America, these rites may be insignificant (straight and swift disposal of the corpse) or elaborate and detailed (a state funeral), but they are rarely drawn out in the fashion found in some other societies. Indeed, in some cultures, the end-of-life transition may move and change through time and be deeply integrated into the world of the living. Consider the case of

the Trobriand Islanders. “Trobriand mortuary rituals, which extend over a period of five to ten years, represent an effort to deconstruct the total social person by separating elements of the body, artifacts, and spiritual essence, so that each element is reinvested in the world of the living. . . . [D]eath . . . is a process of continuity and change, a journey and an ending, mourning and memory work, an uncontrollable happening, and a complex social achievement” (Dernbach 2005: 121). In some cases, rituals even invite the deceased to actively participate, albeit in spiritual form. Among the Chuukese people of Micronesia, for example, funerary rituals involve the spirits of the recently deceased appearing to and even possessing their living relatives (Dernbach 2005). The Chuukese believe that the spirits of the dead linger in the world of the living for a period of time before moving on to the world of the dead. The purpose of this liminal phase is believed to be twofold: it provides comfort and guidance to the living, and it gives the spirit a chance to grow accustomed to its new circumstances.

Mortuary rituals of some form are universal, if only in the fulfillment of government regulations. However, in our culture, these things can become prolonged in instances where biomedical technology can project the cellular life of a body long past the point at which the individual as a social being can be defined as dead. Here we have the “modern” concept of the irreversible death of the brain. In the biotechnical world, we face the challenge of developing rites and rituals that support the living through the process of stages of death as it is variously defined in medicine and law.

For the dying, death is about departing from everything; for the remaining, it is about contemplating the space left empty by “the departed” and the ultimate destination of “the departed.” Ultimately, death is a *social event*—an occurrence that has shared meaning that we mark through various rituals. These rituals reaffirm life by declaring that there was, and perhaps remains, a “beingness” of the dead. Thus rituals, whether religious or medical, benefit the living in various ways, mainly by providing comfort in a time of loss and support in the contemplation of our finiteness. Ultimately, ritual confirms our place in the fabric of life—the life of our family, our community, and our world.