




## Broadening the Concept of Media Rituals: Tabloids as “Low Holidays of Television”<sup>1</sup>

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*The concept of ritual communication, originally formulated by James Carey, introduced the self-reflexive, identity- and community building aspect of the media. No one did more to further elaborate and specify this concept than Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz in their Media Events. However, I also argue that their interpretation of media events as “high holidays of mass communication” raises many questions. Should scandalous and negative events be omitted from the concept of ritual communication? Or, can their classification be extended to the tabloids, those ordinary but pleasurable events, which could be called the “low holidays” of television? In this paper I show three different media rituals of the present day popular media. I refer to them as “Therapy” (exemplified by the Oprah Winfrey Show); “Trial” (exemplified by reality shows); and “Exposure” (exemplified by the Jerry Springer Show).*

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Rituals can be defined as the symbolic construction and dramatization of exceptional social experiences. They constitute a form of communication that uses mythic stories to reconnect and mediate between seemingly disparate but actually related elements such as past, present and future; individual and community; empirical reality and symbolic world. Durkheim saw the essence of rituals in their ability to create collective emotional states and moods, while Gennep put the emphasis, not on the construction of harmony, but on the processing of differences. (Durkheim 1915; van Gennep 1960[1909]) Finally, Turner considered rituals as anti-structures that presented alternatives to the dominant structures of society. (Turner 1966)

Rituals are commonly divided into three distinct phases: Separation, Liminality, and Re-incorporation; but of these, Liminality or Transition is the most important. Separation refers to the pre-ritual state, showing the beginning of the dissolution of structures; while Re-incorporation refers to the aftermath of rituals. Through the performance of symbolic stories that represent anti-structures, rituals interrupt and generalize the existing space and time in which participants live, temporarily transposing them into a different, alternative spatial and temporal system. The anti-structure of liminality allows participants for a short time to see themselves and the world around them differently, even though at the end of the story they end up reintegrating the difference within the dominant ideology.

According to the most general categorization, there exist positive or ceremonial rituals such as national and personal anniversaries, whose anti-structures strengthen the cohesion of community; and negative or purification rituals such as scandals, which publicly enact values deemed dangerous or unacceptable to the community. There is, finally, a third type of ritual, represented by inversion rituals such as carnivals and masked performances, which make fun of the exalted and elevate the comic.

If we accept the thesis that rituals use mediation, remediation, performance, mirroring, transformation and transfiguration in order to link the fragmented spaces, times and symbolic boundaries of modernity, then we could expect an increase in the number of rituals in late-modern societies. After all, the characteristic feature of modernity is instability, dispersion, and fragmentation. Ritual, however, is not a concept commonly accepted in modern social theory. While generally applied to archaic societies by anthropologists, the category of rituals has evoked instinctive resistance among Europeans going all the way back to antiquity. Burke saw the essence of this resistance in the fact that Europeans did not find the effects or the religious meanings of rituals sufficiently convincing. Rituals placed emphasis on the collective, predetermined and symbolic aspects of actions, in opposition to individual motivations, autonomous actions, and causal explanations, which were gaining in importance in European philosophy. He went on to point out, however, that resistance to rituals did not mean that they disappeared from modernity:



If most people in industrial societies no longer go to church regularly or practice elaborate rituals of initiation, this does not mean that ritual has declined. All that has happened is that new types of ritual - political, sporting, musical, medical, academic and so on - have taken the place of the traditional ones. (Burke 1987: 223)

In order to make the concept of rituals more acceptable to contemporary social investigators, Turner drew a distinction precisely between traditional and modern rituals, calling the transitional phase of the former Liminality, and of the latter, Liminoid.


Liminal experiences, tend to be collective, centrally integrated into the total social process, structured by collective symbols, and ultimately eufunctional. Liminoid experiences, on the other hand, are often individual, develop apart from central political process, are more idiosyncratic, and often contain social critique, exposing the injustices, immoralities etc. of the mainstream economic and political structures and organizations. (Larsen & Tufte 2003: 93)

### **Media rituals**

Interestingly, even though the historical and anthropological literature on rituals very rarely mentions the media as an example; since the 1970s, media rituals have played a significant role in the work of media theorists (Alexander 1989; Carey 1989[1975]; Couldry 2003; Csaszi 2002; Dayan & Katz 1992; Holmes 2004; Lull & Hinerman 1997; Real 2001). It is not my intention to discuss these often conflicting theoretical approaches in detail; what I wish to do instead is simply illuminate the cultural significance of the concept for contemporary media scholarship.

The media, as a cultural institution enmeshing the entire society, functions as a mythical centre in modernity. Its power rests on the fact that everyone accepts it, that it represents the collectivity (Couldry 2003). Media rituals can be regarded as symbolic acts, whose elements, on the one hand, are tied to the formulae of stories narrated through different media genres such as Separation - Liminoid - Re-incorporation; and on the other, point to a transcendental realm. In the course of this process, which is partly unconscious and partly conscious, individuals enter into active interaction with society's fundamental values and prohibitions, and transcending the isolated habits of the media consumer, become members of an imaginary community.

The concept of ritual communication, originally formulated by James Carey, introduced this self-reflexive, identity- and community building aspect into media theory (Carey 1989[1975]). He distinguished between two kinds of communications, - the "transmissive" and the "ritual" - as different forms of mediation of values. He suggested that "both definitions derive, as with much in secular culture, from religious origins, though they refer to somewhat




different regions of religious experience” (Carey 1989[1975]: 14). He also specified, however, that in our modern, industrial culture, the dominant type was transmissive communication, which “sends”, “imparts”, “transmits” information to others. This view of communication, which is based on a spatial metaphor of geography or transportation; has its moral origins in the desire to establish and expand God’s kingdom on earth. By contrast, the ritual view of communication is more archaic and usually goes unnoticed in modern life. Ritual communication is associated with the act of “sharing”, “participation”, “association” and “fellowship”; and evokes the common roots of “community” and “communication”.

A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs. (Carey 1989[1975]: 18)

He took the case of news as an exemplary case. According to the transmissive view of communication, the news reflects our hunger for information and novel experiences that go beyond the already known. However, according to the ritual view, “news is not information, but drama. It does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exist solely in historical time; and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it” (Carey 1989[1975]: 21). During this symbolic drama, meaning is given to unknown events and the original chaos of life is transformed into order. Carey’s chief merit is that he opposed mechanistic and positivistic approaches to communication, reminding us that it also included social, aesthetic and moral components, which can best be understood through the holistic concept of the ritual.

### **Media Events as ceremonies**

The concept of ritual communication was elaborated and pushed further by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz in their celebrated book, *Media Events* (Dayan & Katz 1992). They did not talk about rituals in general. As the title of their book indicates, they used the analytically specific concept of significant media ceremonies or *Media Events*, as the focus of their study. Dayan and Katz conceded that in contemporary society the media was an integrative cultural force. At the same time, they specified that it was not the media and the news in themselves, but the broadcastings of outstanding and significant national events, that played a central role in building organic solidarity. At this point they turned to Durkheim’s theory of the division of labour and applied it to the media. According to Durkheim, modern, highly differentiated societies have specialized institutions and rationalized work through which they integrate their members in what he called “organic solidarity”. Durkheim believed, however, that modern institutionalization and professionalization could not




completely replace the more archaic forms of social integration, what he called “mechanic solidarity”, which included everyone, irrespective of social status or economic position. Durkheim saw modern ceremonies and rituals as ways to counterbalance the conflicts stemming from the process of ongoing differentiation and as a means to return to the basic collective values of community.

As conceptualized by Dayan and Katz, „media events” were different not only from ordinary news, but also from other interesting, unexpected or important news. In their view, media events were restricted to broadcasts of extraordinary, exceptional, or breathtaking moments of history. They drew their example from the live broadcast of the first walk on the Moon, which interrupted not only all the other programs, but the ordinary rhythm of everyday life as well. This particular television broadcast, they pointed out, functioned like a “civil religion”, where the audience could participate in one of the most momentous achievements of humanity. But the wedding of Diana and Charles, Prince of Wales, had the same extraordinary meaning for millions of television viewers, who were enabled to be present at the wedding ceremony. These examples show that media events have two layers or components. They are, on the first level, important social ceremonies, which are limited by time and space. But, on the second level, they are media broadcasts, whose special significance is that they enable everyone to participate in these ceremonies irrespective of their physical or temporal distance. The question that often arises at this point is whether it is possible to speak about the substitutive effect of the media in these cases? Does not media substitution mean a withdrawal from, rather than the enhancement of, community?

In their answer, Dayan and Katz joined those media scholars, who saw television not just as a social power, but also as a family member, which made it possible to engage with the external world through the mediation of the home (Newcomb & Hirsch 1987; Morley 1992). In other words, Dayan and Katz did not consider the home a private sphere that was withdrawn from the public realm. For this reason, they could regard the television in the living room as a new form of participation in public affairs. Instead of talking about the disappearance of the public sphere, the authors suggested the need to study the rapidly changing meaning of the public and the private spheres.

Dayan and Katz saw media events as reactions to extraordinary collective happenings or crises and their classifications were based on the specifics of the social organization of these reactions. They distinguished three major types of rituals: Competitions, Conquests and Coronations. Competitions included the broadcasting of political campaigns and sports events and were defined by the formal rules of the triumph of the hero. Conquests were exemplified by such events as the walk on the Moon and focused on charismatic heroes, who transcended the former limits of mankind and created new rules. Finally, Coronations were represented by events such as the wedding of Diana and




Charles, which emphasized the connection between past and present and celebrated the heroic traditions of the past. The audience played a different role in the different kinds of media events. During Contests they were fans or referees; during Conquests they were admirers; and during Coronations they were respectful citizens.

According to this scheme, media rituals - both structures and antistructures - could be regarded as symbolic performances, located between the real and the imaginary. In media events, news ceased to be news in the sense of being the definers of reality and the antithesis of entertainment. Instead, they became a mixture of news and entertainment and created a new symbolic reality that was sometimes considered news, sometimes entertainment. This was due to the fact that media events were not simply the transmissions or replicas of the original events, but autonomous symbolic rituals. Media events did not only present actors to the audience, but also included their own comments about the drama being broadcast. In this way, they were able to express the personal and social meaning of the events as well. Media broadcasts superimposed themselves onto the actual social events, radically transforming and reinterpreting them into a new genre, the media event. For the viewers, broadcasts of a local event created a mixture of “physical non-presence and symbolic presence”. In the form of interviews, archive pictures, or studio talks, television added “extras” that were not available to those who were attending the original local ceremonies. As the authors summed it up: “Modern television spectators are offered unexpected ways of participation in the ritual experience” (Dayan & Katz 1992: 110).

### **The critique of *Media Events***

*Media Events* is a unique achievement in media studies, which demonstrated the enormous power of ritual communication in the life of communities. At the same time, it failed to anticipate future developments and left several problems unsolved. Perhaps most strikingly, it did not account for the historical decline of the formerly omnipotent role of public television as a result of rapid social and technological changes in the media. Secondly, it omitted rituals of degradation and excommunication from its classification of media rituals (Carey 1998). Finally, its definition of media rituals as “high holidays of outstanding community events” is too narrow and exclusionary in the age of tabloid television, which devotes just as much time to “smaller events” (Scannell 1995).

I will begin my critique of *Media Events* with the decline of public television, since Katz himself recognized the challenges that technological and social changes posed for the integrative role of television (Katz 1996/a, 1997). Retrospectively, it is ironic that by the time the theorization of the cultural and social role of television was completed in the early-nineties, the theory



itself had become obsolete. Video, cable television, the Internet, and privatization had changed dramatically the former scene of national television broadcasting. Television ceased to be the “main source” of information and it reached only the segmented audiences of the individual channels, rather than every member of society. Consequently, it could not be considered an integrative cultural forum for the whole community (Ellis 1999). Even nationalist governments gave up their broadcasting monopolies and sold television channels to those who offered more financial rewards (Katz 1996a). The changes were profound and dramatic; they completely brought into question the 1980’s rosy picture of television as the new symbolic integrator of the nation.

In 1996, only four years after the publication of *Media Events*, Elihu Katz desperately put on paper these words:


With the rapid multiplication of channels, television has all but ceased to function as a shared public space. Except for occasional media events, the nation no longer gathers together. Unlike the replacement of radio by television as radio underwent a similar process of segmentation, there is no new medium in the wings to replace television that is likely to promote national integration [...] the cohesion of the nation-state itself is in jeopardy. (Katz 1996a: 22)

He continued with the observation:

one of these tendencies is toward increasing atomization, such that communication will be increasingly tailored to the measure of its individual consumers. The other tendency is toward globalization, such that everybody, everywhere, will be viewing *Dallas* or *Dynasty* or the Olympics at the same time. Neither of these tendencies matches the requirements of the participatory nation-state. (Katz 1996a: 26)

He finished his argumentation with a statistic about the changing rate at which Israeli audiences watched the news. In the eighties, he wrote, when there was only one national public channel, 65% of the population watched the news on public television. By the mid-nineties, the old public and the newly introduced commercial channel, recruited less than 35 % of the population. Katz concluded that because of the changing relationship between television, democracy and community, media studies had to revise its vision of the exclusive integrating role of the media in society.


Obviously, Katz was right to maintain that national public television was no longer a “power container”, which could simultaneously represent communication, collective identity, and citizenship. Today, the national has been partly replaced by the global and the individual as the new levels of communications. As a result, television has ceased to be the ultimate cultural integrator of the political nation. At the same time, however, I think Katz’ evaluation of the changes was both too radical and too pessimistic. The



national and local frames of news continue to be important and the integrative role of “high holidays of media events” are still valid. In spite of the decline of public television events in the nineties, the broadcast of Yitzhak Rabin’s funeral in Israel, or Diana’s funeral in England, or the tragedy of 9/11 in the US, prove that media rituals can still bring together a whole nation - and a global audience - at a time of national grief. However, the rarity of these occasions and the decreasing importance of the news does call for a more inclusionary theory of media rituals. It is hardly coincidental that theorists of the public sphere increasingly concentrate not on the nation, or the news, but on cultural citizenship even within media theory (Dahlgren 2005; McKee 2004; Hermes 2005).

As mentioned earlier, James Carey already raised the objection that *Media Events* fails to focus on scandals or negative, desacralizing, exclusionary media rituals (Carey 1998). He argued that excommunication becomes public and visible through the same media rituals as celebration and tribute. Using the example of degradation ceremonies, Carey emphasized the important role that humiliating, excommunicating rituals played in society. What is more, he continued, negative rituals surpassed in number affirmative rituals. Although not every degradation was public and ceremonial, he noted, in modern societies the most important excommunications were highly visible and almost always ritualized in the media. Since the end of the 1990s, the analysis of media scandals has become an important field of media theory (Lull & Hinerman 1997; Thompson 2000).

The lack of degradation rituals in *Media Events*, however, is part of a wider theoretical problem that has to do with the omission of „smaller” events from the conceptualization of media rituals. Concentrating exclusively on the significant “high holidays” of communities, *Media Events* disregarded the common, everyday rituals of television that found expression in tabloids and which I call “the low holidays” of communities. I use the term “tabloid” very broadly to refer to talk shows, reality television, reports, and docu-dramas about all kinds of personal and collective deviances, disasters, crimes, accidents, diseases, rescues, and escapes (Glynn 2000; Langer 1992, 1998; Shattuck 1997; Sparks & Tulloch 2000). Compared to the elevated, nationally significant subjects of media rituals, the contents of tabloids are usually trivial and personal in nature. While the former is traditionally seen as based on the news, the latter cannot be seen as news in itself. In this new genre that represents the essence of recent changes in television broadcasting, the meaning of the private and the public has become blurred. News has become entertainment and formerly private affairs have been transformed into public concerns. As Schudson noted, “Many observers of the media have complained that serious news institutions have been turning news into entertainment, but the larger trend is that entertainment has turned into news” (Schudson 1995: 179). In other words, tabloids make it especially clear, that media rituals include not only positive rituals, but also negative and inversive rituals as well.



Katz saw this change as the end of the integrative role of the television. I argue, however, that tabloids signal the emergence of a new public sphere where public news are no longer separated from private activities; information from entertainment; formal events from their symbolic significance, affirmative actions from scandals and carnivalistic events. Given the magnitude of these changes, is it not reasonable to suppose that they also play an integrative role in the community and cultural citizenship comparable to the outstanding media events, the “high holidays” of television, do (Hermes & Dahlgren 2006)?

Traditional intellectual and cultural elites have looked down on popular culture, even though, as Illouz pointed out, its impact on society is larger than that of politicians, university presidents or religious leaders. She elaborated:

Popular culture is not only about entertainment. It is also, more often than is acknowledged in cultural studies, about moral dilemmas: how to cope with a world that consistently fails us and how to make sense of the minor and major forms of suffering that plague ordinary lives. (Illouz 2003: 4)

According to her view, in an age when the truly authentic self has become a visual concept, popular culture constitutes a symbolic tool that is no less powerful than high art:

The practice of ethical criticism demands that we think differently about the distinction between the 'highbrow thought' embodied in philosophy and the realm of unreflective entertainment embodied in popular culture. (Illouz 2003: 15)

She considers pop culture as the integral Other of high culture.

Broadening the concept of media rituals to include entertaining tabloid programs has important theoretical implications as well as practical consequences. It means, first of all, the rejection of the so-called “cultural divide” between high and low cultures and the separation, common in media theory, between public and commercial broadcasting. It also suggests a continuity of functions between the tabloid media and public broadcasting. In other words, the „rituals of low holidays of television”, like the “high holidays of media events,” play an equally inseparable role in the democratic constitution of emerging social norms and in debates about the concept of cultural citizenship (Hermes 2005; Illouz 2003; Lundt & Stenner 2005; van Zoonen & Aslama 2006).


## Tabloids and the new public sphere

Jon Dovey called the new tabloid television programs based on real life events that became immensely popular during the nineties “freakshows” and “Real TV” (2000). He argued that the essence of Real TV was the public restaging or narration of extraordinary events that happened to ordinary people, represented through different television genres like talk shows, confessions, or docu-dramas. What united the terrible accidents and miraculous escapes, the unknown diseases and mystical cures, depicted in these genres, was the first person narrative. As Dovey reminds us, mainstream news has traditionally condemned the personal subjective perspective as unreliable and non-objective information, unfit for public consumption. Thus, when the new tabloid genres relied on personal reports, confessions, and subjective recollections as their basic format, they broke this earlier contract between the media and audiences. The success of the new genre was described in a television trade magazine in 1998:

It's a fact: Reality-based programming is a main course in the diet of North American television viewers, who are still hungry for true-life melodrama. Relatively inexpensive to produce, infinitely diverse in content, sufficiently interesting to attract stable, core audiences and global enough to appeal to international television buyers, this year's new reality-based shows continue the trend to inform, titillate, gross out and fascinate audiences with real-life stories. (Dovey 2000: 17)

Media scholars are divided on the question of how to evaluate the proliferation of tabloids. On the one side, there are those who see in them the degeneration of the rational bourgeois public sphere. Following Habermas, they describe the process as one of “refeudalization”, which began in the mid nineteenth century (Habermas 1989). On the other side, there are those who consider tabloids as the sign of the emergence of a new, fragmented cultural public sphere characteristic of late modernity (Hartley 1999; McKee 2004). The problem with these positions is that they create a distinction between the social and the cultural aspects of the media, assuming the existence of two independent spheres that have no relationship with each other. The ritual approach to tabloids is a solution to this crisis precisely because rituals mediate between the institutional and the interpretative and temporarily unify the social and cultural aspects of the media.

To clarify this agenda, I turn to the latest theoretical debates about the public sphere, especially to the seminal article by Michael Warner (1993). Warner raised a number of objections to Habermas's well-known concept of the rational or bourgeois public sphere, which was based on participation, information and the power of public opinion (see also Calhoun 1992). According to Warner, Habermas' version of the public sphere was a retrospective reconstruction of a universalistic and normative idea, which failed to take into consideration the historical realities of the eighteenth-century bourgeois




media, which was full of sensationalist news, miraculous cures, not to mention popular novels, like Fielding's *Tom Jones*, and numerous pornographic publications. These examples, insisted Warner, were in conflict with Habermas' idealized bourgeois public sphere and pointed to a plebeian public realm, defined by sensationalism and spectacle. A further attack on Habermas' universalistic model came from scholars who pointed out Habermas also represented the private sphere in a one-sided manner (Carpignano et al. 1991; Lunt & Stenner 2005). In reality, the rational, interest-free and universal public sphere was based on, and presupposed, the emotional intensity of the private bourgeois family, which remained invisible to public view. As Warner summarized it, the concept of the bourgeois public sphere was an empty abstraction, which disregarded its own particular and specific preconditions. Although the universalistic bourgeois media formally addressed everybody, in reality it represented no one specifically. The generalized public "We" replaced and repressed the particular "I".

Based on these new perspectives on the public sphere, one could argue that the first person experience of contemporary television tabloids represents, not so much narcissism, as the radical transformation of the bourgeois public sphere. What is at stake here is not the psychological personality, but rather the construction of a mediated personality (Couldry 2004; Lunt & Pantti 2007; Shattuck 1997; White 2004). In contrast to religious or medical confessions, which are private; media confessions are by definition public. The "exceptional situations" created by the media do not mirror the participants' inner life, but neither do they represent a consensus view. The distinctive character of popular culture is that it "emphasizes difference and conflicting representations and it is the playing through of these differences and conflicts that constitutes the challenge to the contemporary public sphere" (Lunt & Pantti 2007: 173). In other words, subjectivity in popular culture is not the expression of a psychological state, but a drama played out before the structured environment of the public sphere.

Warner called this new public sphere the "mass subject public sphere", in which the subjective mode of address did not mean the restriction or degeneration of the universalistic bourgeois public sphere. On the contrary, he assumed that this new public could be seen as an expansion and liberation from taboos. Referring to the viewers' emotional and imaginary identifications with news and to the admiration, disgust, imitation and indignation they provoked in them, Warner suggested that "the publicity of the public sphere never reduces to information, discussion, will formation" (Warner 1993: 236). Moreover, he saw this new public sphere as a place where the formerly repressed mass public desire becomes visible and dominant in consumption. In his words,

the visibility of public figures, for the subject of mass culture, occurs in a context in which publicity is generally mediated by the discourse of consumption. It is difficult to



realize how much we observe public images with the eye of the consumer. (Warner 1993: 242)

Warner's argument that the recent changes in the media should be seen as the democratic expansion of the bourgeois public is a useful conception. It provides a framework for historically distinguishing the first person public sphere from the stylized representations of the feudal ruling elite and the rationalizations of the national bourgeoisie. It addresses the flesh and blood consumer/citizen and it provides space for the extraordinary experiences of everyday life in late modernity. My only objection is to Warner's use of the term, "mass public sphere", because it is too closely tied to the pejorative, impersonal connotations of "mass culture", and "mass society". Instead, I would use the term "popular public sphere", which implies the democratic representations of popular desires, whether their object is consumption or community.


This modification of usage is in agreement with Hartley's suggestion that there is a shift in television programs from news as a discourse of power to news as a discourse of identity. "News was once about security (national security - defense and war, policing and civil order) and was based on conflict. Now it is about personal comportment and is based on confession" (Hartley 1999: 159). In this context, we can view tabloid testimonials, disclosures, and "coming outs", as experiments by the new popular personal subjectivity to publicly test new identities and lifestyles. The result is the broadening of the traditional concept of the public sphere, as well as of the concept of media rituals.

### **The rituals of the new public subject**

The triumph of personal public narratives is especially visible in American commercial television, where it has become a meta-language and has transformed every program in its own image. This unparalleled spread of tabloids in the U.S. is explained by the lack of a powerful state-sponsored public television there, which could claim to represent national collective identity (Corner 2004). The absence of the institutional power of a traditional national public sphere makes the American media an ideal case for studying tabloids as rituals, which carry a new kind of personal public identity.

As discussed earlier, the transitional (liminoid) stage of rituals presents a transcontextual mimetic answer for unknown situations. In contrast to the spontaneous reporting of news and information, which attempts to reflect events as objectively as possible, the stories of the media are ritualizations, which are stylizations of everyday events. They do not change the external world, but by the help of their unique dramatic plot, they change the symbols and the feelings people attribute to their world.


Tabloids are rituals because they are always symbolic re-enactments of the extraordinary experiences of ordinary people or, in the case of celebrities, of



the ordinary experiences of extraordinary people. The main difference between tabloids and media events as defined by Dayan and Katz is that in tabloids the ordinary man is not just the audience, but also the protagonist of the ritual (Langer 1992, 1998). According to Langer, while the rituals of media events put the emphasis on heroic actions, tabloids focus on the dilemmas of ordinary people, who get into trouble and become victims though no fault or intention of their own. People can easily identify with the victims of tabloids and participation in the re-enactment of unexpected events provides the means for ritual transformation, leading from evil to good, from chaos to order. While the “high holidays of media rituals” are ceremonies, which symbolically represent and restore the universal moral values of communities; the “low holidays” of tabloids can be regarded as “secular rituals”, which depict the encounter with the deviant, the unexpected and the restoration of order within the frame of everyday life (Moore & Meyerhoff 1977).

The parallels between high media events and tabloids can be pushed even further. It could be argued, for instance, that Katz’s classification of rituals as Contest, Conquest and Coronation, have their analogies in the world of tabloids, which produce their own types of rituals in the form of Therapy, Trial, and Exposure. “Therapy” is associated with conversions and self-help rituals exemplified by the Oprah Winfrey Show. “Trial” imitates the management and overcoming of difficult environments typically presented in docu-dramas and reality shows such as Survivor, The Apprentice or Big Brother. “Exposure” uses parodies and coming unmasked exemplified by the Jerry Springer Show or Candid Camera type programs.

It is true that these types are not easily differentiated from each other, since in practice their boundaries tend to be blurred. There are, for instance, grotesque situations in Oprah, while there are therapeutic happenings in Jerry Springer. Finally, docu-dramas and reality shows commonly introduce grotesque elements reminiscent of freak shows as well as motifs of religious rebirth characteristic of therapy. Despite these overlaps, it is useful to distinguish between the types, since developments within genres often result in the combination of formerly separate types into new formulae. Many reality shows, for example, display a synthesis between the older talk show format and the soap opera, as well as the suffering and competitiveness of trials (van Zoonen & Aslama 2006). At the same time, none of these types can be regarded as pure freak shows, since none feature only deviants. Rather, the deviant and the everyday are featured side by side, with the extreme being normalized and the trivial exaggerated. When tabloids bring the marginal into the centre of society, they end up decentring middle class culture (Hartley & Green 2006; Illouz 2003; Lundt & Stenner 2005). They simultaneously celebrate everyday morality when they preserve the middle class perspective, but they also incorporate elements lacking from the bourgeois public realm such as emotion, the grotesque, sex, violence and repressed desires (Gamson 1998).




The changes in media forms are themselves reflections of social transformations, as the self and morality become part of everyday life, the family and the workplace in modernity. Tabloids dramatize the moral aspect of the everyday, the familiar, the ordinary (Giddens 1992; Taylor 1989). Thus the central role of intimacy in the media is a function of the nature of modern identity, of the contradictions of everyday life, and of the lack of an unambiguous moral code. Emotions replace morality as an alternative cultural code, allowing them to speak about moral and social relations through subjective and emotional categories. The moral authority of the middle classes and the experts has been evacuated; a plurality of voices and perspectives has found simultaneous expression; the boundaries separating purity and impurity, silence and speech, have disintegrated. The tabloid media reflect these new conditions. In the words of Illouz,

Talk shows are a symbolic pollution of the 'pure' categories of liberal political philosophy as reason, objectivity, neutrality, for they bring to the public sphere the spectacle of tears, heartbreaking reunions, diseased bodies, broken families, addictions, self-destructive behavior, uncontrollable drives, anger, revenge, illicit lust. (Illouz 2003: 120)

Everyone is equal in these programs, if not in the political or social realms, at least on the moral level.

These programs are praised or attacked because of their cultural implications, but they are not realistic or mimetic representations in the traditional sense, for they incorporate actions within themselves. Culture, Illouz (2003) reminds us, is not an abstraction in people's heads, but a living experience that finds concrete embodiment in stories, symbols, objects, actions and rituals. These help organize reality into intelligible structures that allow participants to actively interact with their world. Media rituals make it possible for people to transform their environment, together and for each other, in the same way that ancient myths and rituals did. The difference, of course, is that modern rituals do not function as a fundamentalist code, even though they are also involved in the remedialization of morality. In the late modern age, when realistic representation has been declared an impossibility, the "media rituals of low holidays" nevertheless render morality visible, precisely through the stylization of impure, hybrid events. The daily act of television viewing is in part a suspension of everyday life, and in part a reflection on it (Silverstone 1994). Rather than being spatially and temporally separated off from the everyday, as is the case with churches, carnivals, even the "high holidays of media events", this kind of television watching is an integral part of the home. Jensen referred to this kind of partial suspension of reality through the concepts of "time in" and "time off" (Jensen 1995 quoted in Larsen & Tufte 2003: 94). The former refers to periods when the ritual is integrated within everyday life; and the latter to those when it breaks and suspends the



continuity of the everyday, allowing the viewer to step out of his own environment and start to think reflexively about it. This practical approach to rituals avoids the sentimentalism often ascribed to them.


### Therapy, Trial and Exposure

The therapeutic function of the media does not, of course, refer to a literal therapeutic situation. It simply emphasizes the similarities, even while recognizing the differences, between traditional psychotherapy and media programs that are an important component of consumer culture. Mimi White has provided a precise description of how to understand the therapeutic nature of television:

The new therapeutic dynamics of consumer culture embrace a wide range of strategies, encouraging people to manage problems, emotions, and fantasies. In conjunction with new technologies, a new sense of social subjectivity begins to emerge. Therapeutic discourse involves negotiating and working through social subjectivity and does not necessarily involve achieving a specific transformation or effecting a 'cure'. (2002: 313)

The most frequently cited and thoroughly analyzed example of the therapeutic ritual is associated with the talk show queen, Oprah Winfrey, whose program is considered by both feminist and poststructuralist media scholars, despite their reservations, of central critical importance in contemporary television (Illouz 2003; Shattuck 1997; White 2002; Wilson 2003). The therapeutic validity of Oprah Winfrey's conversation-based talk show is the basis for its broad cultural acceptance. It features therapeutic histories about recovery from illnesses, about weight loss, about knowing how to say no, about liberation from abusive relationships, the function of which are not to convey factual information, but rather to provide emotional support. An important feature of the Oprah Winfrey show as media ritual is its meticulous construction of the liminoid state through confessions, which bring about a transitional state and makes possible the development of a new kind of subjectivity. The critical turning point is always reached through reference to female empathy and solidarity: "It is important to note here that in the guests' narratives, self-realisation and self-esteem mark the movement from victim to survivor" (Wilson 2003: 4).

Since these conversations take place with real people, who discuss personal, often sexual, issues; critics have frequently accused both the genre and its audiences of participating in "voyeuristic pleasures" and "gloating on others' problems." The reason why this is only partially true is that the act of listening to and viewing the life and sexual secrets of others is always mediated by the talk show host, who, after an initial voyeuristic phase, invariably sets in motion a therapeutic program. At the beginning, the program leader is the central instigator of this process, but gradually others also join in on the "group



therapy.” Ultimately, as Mimi White pointed out, the model of group therapy wins out over the model of voyeurism: “As interlocutors, even viewers who do not speak are implicated in this process [...]. [...] [And] all viewers suddenly find themselves positioned, via the performative linguistic and visual address of the apparatus” (2002: 317).


“Exposure,” the other subtype of “low events of media rituals”, differs considerably from Therapy. Exemplified by the Jerry Springer Show, this is a kind of media circus that performs as a comic inversion ritual (Springer & Morton 1998). The origins of the show go back to the mid-90s, when Oprah reorganized and made her previously scandalous program more compatible with the rules of mid-culture. The function of the Jerry Springer Show was to display everything that Oprah left out or suppressed in her own therapeutic, new age remediating of everyday life. “What is going on, in Springer”, wrote Silverstone, “if not the ritual proclamation through personal testimony and dramatic interpersonal conflict of the unsaid and unsayable in social life” (1999: 102).

As Lunt and Stenner characterized the program:

The Jerry Springer Show is a brash, in-your-face talk show. It seems to revel in the excitable, and is always on the edge of taste and public decency. Participants curse and swear, and physically and verbally threaten one another. Fights break out, in-house bouncers are called in, and the studio audience go wild. This provocative show creates entertainment from the emotions that emerge during the real-time presentation of personal conflict and the on-screen exposure of emotive secrets. The Jerry Springer Show is flagrantly and self-consciously trash television, refusing to take itself seriously, constantly challenging the censors. (2005: 63)

It continues the practices of former freak shows that displayed aberrations and questioned rational, neutral roles. It naturally presupposes that such roles exist and brings these into play when it creates emotional, not logical conflicts. What is more, it creates these effects more theatrically and more self-consciously than the 19<sup>th</sup> century melodramas had done (Shattuck 1997). The comedy is more than simply an attack against good taste or an anti-bourgeois provocation (though it is that too); it is also a ritual gesture whose function is to humorously introduce dysfunctional family and sexual social relations, at a time when it is no longer possible to publicly reflect on these:

The Jerry Springer Show is organized so as to encourage emotional expression and to guard against the potentially disruptive influence of rational critical discussion [...]. The idea is that the problems of human relationships can be helped by the oxygen of publicity in a controlled space where people can express their deepest conflicts, fears and secrets in a way that has become difficult in everyday life. (Lunt & Pantti 2007: 167-168)




The ritual sequence of the dramaturgy passes through stages such as expressions, claims, questionings, arguments, counter-claims, interrogations, and denials; during which each side provokes each other but also transforms the relationship between participants and actors. The ritual ultimately makes it possible to express both personal experiences and dominant opinions, even though this is done through the reversal of the hierarchy of customary argumentation.

The Jerry Springer Show inverts the principles of the bourgeois public sphere. Rather than avoiding the potentially polluting effects of personal and institutional interests, the Jerry Springer Show embraces them and inverts of the hierarchy between argument and feeling. (Lunt & Stenner 2005: 70)

“Trial” constitutes yet another subtype of media rituals, which are based on docu-dramas, reality shows, and various accounts of disasters. Their central feature is the perpetual testing that people endure in everyday life. They offer people multiple possibilities to reach their goals through the transgression of social rules or moral codes. Much of the moral consequences depend on how individuals and society react to these trials, which could take the form of different kinds of obstacles or temptations. Probably Big Brother constitutes one of the most frequently discussed Trial type reality shows (Couldry 2002; Couldry 2004; Hartley 2004; Mathijs 2004; Ouellette & Murray 2004; van Zoonen & Aslama 2006, etc.). Elemer Hankiss applied to the Hungarian version of the show the striking title of “Garden of Eden and Kiss of Judas” (2003). The participants, he wrote, live in idyllic surroundings, but they are forced to betray each other, since the alternative is for others to betray them. The fundamental suspense of the script of Big Brother derives from the fundamental duality of the modern world, which forces people to simultaneously conform to two incompatible normative systems; that of cooperation and competition. According to this interpretation, the founding narrative is biblical in nature and the composition of the house where the action plays out is also ritually determined, since it is temporally and spatially separated from the outside world.

What are the nine weeks in the Big Brother house if not a space of ritualization, where inmates’ banal, everyday routines are tested for their appropriateness to a mediated space. (Couldry 2004: 62)

Characteristic of all “low events of media rituals” is the tendency to focus not on exceptional happenings favoured by traditional media rituals; but rather on the trivial actions of everyday life that may have therapeutic, exposure- or trial-like implications. Accordingly, the participants of these rituals are expected to behave not only altruistically and heroically, but also egotistically and pragmatically. Moreover, it is also important that they perform their roles



convincingly in the social realm. There thus exist two criteria on the basis of which the actors are evaluated: their sincerity and their performativity. In other words, are their performances true to their own feelings and can they influence the attitude of the audience (Myers 2001; van Zoonen & Aslama 2006). In the final analysis, however, the ultimate goal is identical with that of the exceptional media events: to provide symbolic meanings for the world. The everyday events of the “low holidays” of media rituals are destined to expose the invisible, moral rules of society in the same way as the “high holidays” of media rituals.

Typifying tabloids leads us back to the question of participation in the media rituals. In *Media Events*, Dayan and Katz argued that although media ceremonies cannot offer actual personal participation in the way that festivals do, they are, nevertheless, more than pure visual spectacles. They chose the term “ceremony” for such media events as a compromise between actual participation and mere spectatorship. Katz explained this concept through the concept of “viewers’ work”, by which he meant that the viewers actively positioned themselves before the screen. As he wrote:

New theories of the audience maintain that viewers add values to what they view (e.g., Morley, 1989: 23). Going far beyond functional theories of media use, they proclaim the competence and creativity of the individual. They suggest that viewers do work - not just by staying awake, but by investing efforts, by being critical, by making ‘public’. (Katz 1996b: 19)

In the case of the “low holidays” of tabloids, the question of participation is even more important, since their audiences are more often accused of being passive and arrested at the level of sensationalism, spectatorship, and entertainment. In place of a sharp differentiation between participation and sensationalism, it is useful to keep in mind that the exceptional nature of the ceremonies of “high holidays” also have these amplifying ritual elements. In the case of the secular rituals of tabloids, sensationalism and spectatorship are necessary tools to intensify emotions in the context of the ordinary circumstances of modern life. Mimi White called these devices, “televisions of attractions”, which create through technological means the illusion of immediacy, presence, reality effects, and intimacy, in the midst of the banality of modern life (2004). In opposition to what Carey described as ritual communication, White argued that the dominant elements that create the liveliness of tabloid television are not the urgency, extensiveness, or memory of the catastrophe, - in other words, not the temporal elements that Carey stressed, - but rather the banality and spatial extent of the event. What is involved here, she emphasized, is not representation, but collective experience and co-presence.

Holmes also argued that the spectacle and the resulting development of collective participation were indispensable aspects of the ritual effects of



tabloids:

Broadcast mediums, are not simply conduits for messages, but facilitate institutionalized spectacle as well as constitute enclosed worlds of representation which may become self-referential. These two aspects: the spectacle and simulacrum properties of broadcast media are active in constituting worlds of representation which attain ritual status for media audiences, and indeed become sources by which audiences acquire the symbolic and semiotic materials with which to construct a meaningful identity and a world-space of personal object meanings. (2004: 2)

Through their different positioning of the viewers in relation to the victims: - empathy in the case of Therapy, rejection in the case of Exposure, and witnessing in the case of Trial - tabloids produce powerful emotional effects and are able to increase personal involvement and social responsibility in relation to other people. In the case of “Therapy” in the Oprah Winfrey Show, the audience plays the role of the confidante; in the case of “Exposure” in the Jerry Springer Show, that of the judge; and in the case of “Trial” in reality shows, that of the witness.

The “low holiday of media rituals” can be regarded as a sort of cultural assembly line, where “audience communities” continuously re-assemble, re-interpret, and reconstruct the changing forms of moral values, which, under modernity have become objects of choice and mediation. The fact that tabloid media is dominated by freaks, in contrast to the heroic rituals of public television, is not the sign of some kind of decadence. It is, rather, an indication that chaos has become the common experience of society and choice its master code. Tabloids cannot be called amoral just because they fail to impose one specific moral perspective. They offer many possible moral choices in a historical context when neither conventional wisdom nor competing abstract norms provide orientation and when only the symbolic narratives of joy, struggle and suffering can help make sense of everyday life (Illouz 2003).


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