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The Disappearance of Rituals

A Topology of the Present

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polity

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First published in German as *Vom Verschwinden der Rituale* by Ullstein
Buchverlage GmbH 2019

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Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
101 Station Landing
Suite 300
Medford, MA 02155, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-4275-8
ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-4276-5 (paperback)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11.5 on 15 pt Janson Text by
Servis Filmsetting Limited, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon

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The Compulsion of Authenticity

The society of authenticity is a performance society. All members perform themselves. All produce themselves. Everyone pays homage to the cult of the self, the worship of self in which everyone is his or her own priest. Charles Taylor credits the modern cult of authenticity with a ‘moral force’:

Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity, and to the goals of self-fulfilment or self-realization in which it is usually couched. This is the background that gives moral force to the culture of authenticity, including its most degraded, absurd, or trivialized forms.¹

The creation of self, however, must not be self-centred; it has to take place against the backdrop of a social horizon of meaning that gives the act of self-creation a relevance that transcends the self:

Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands.²

From this perspective, authenticity and community are not mutually exclusive. Taylor distinguishes between the form and content of authenticity. Self-referentiality only concerns its form, namely the form of self-fulfilment. According to Taylor, its content, by contrast, must not be self-centred. Authenticity only proves itself insofar as the identity created contains an explicit reference to a community and so is able to hold true independent of one's own self.

Contrary to Taylor's assumptions, however, authenticity is in fact the enemy of community. The narcissism of authenticity undermines community. In terms of its content, what is crucial is not its reference to a community or some other higher order but its market value, which effaces all other values. Thus, the form and content of authenticity coincide: both concern the self. The cult of authenticity shifts the question of identity from society to the individual person. Within the cult of authenticity, the production of self becomes

a permanent activity. Authenticity thus atomizes society.

Taylor's moral justification of authenticity ignores that subtle process, within the neoliberal regime, by which the ideas of freedom and self-realization are transformed into vehicles for more efficient exploitation. The neoliberal regime exploits morality. Once it is able to present itself as freedom, domination becomes complete. Authenticity is a neoliberal form of production. You exploit yourself voluntarily in the belief that you are realizing yourself. In the cult of authenticity, the neoliberal regime appropriates the person himself and turns him into a highly efficient site of production. The whole person is incorporated into the production process.

The cult of authenticity is an obvious sign of the decay of the social:

When some one person is judged to be authentic, or when society as a whole is described as creating problems of human authenticity, the language reveals one way in which social action is being devalued in the process of placing more weight on psychological matters.³

The compulsion of authenticity leads to narcissistic introspection, a permanent occupation with one's own psychology. Communication is also organized psychologically. The society of authenticity is a society of intimacy and exposure. The nudism of the soul into which we are encouraged lends society a pornographic character. Social relations are more genuine and authentic the more intimate they are, the more they reveal what was private.

The society of the eighteenth century was still domi-

nated by ritual forms of interaction. The public space resembled a stage, a theatre. The body also represented a stage. It was a dressed puppet without soul, without psychology, that had to be draped and decorated and fitted out with signs and symbols. The wig framed the face like a painting. The fashion itself was theatrical, and people were properly in love with scenic presentations. A lady's coiffure was also designed as a scene, representing either a historical event (*pouf à la circonstance*) or an emotion (*pouf au sentiment*). These emotions, however, did not reflect conditions of the soul. The emotions were mainly *played* with. The face itself became a stage on which various characters were represented with the help of beauty spots (*mouches*). If they were placed at the corner of the eye, they meant passion. Placed on the lower lip, they indicated the frankness of the wearer. The face understood as a stage is utterly remote from that *face* we find presented today on Facebook.

The nineteenth century discovered work, and play became increasingly distrusted. There was now much more work than play: the world resembled a factory rather than a theatre. The culture of theatrical presentation gave way to the culture of interiority. This development can also be seen in fashion. Stage costumes and ordinary clothes began to differ more and more. The theatrical element disappeared from fashion. Europeans started to wear work clothes:

Never had an age taken itself with more portentous seriousness. Culture ceased to be 'played'. Outward forms were no longer intended to give the appearance, the fiction, if you like, of a higher, ideal mode of life. There

is no more striking symptom of the decline of the play-factor than the disappearance of everything imaginative, fanciful, fantastic from men's dress after the French Revolution.⁴

In the course of the nineteenth century, men's clothes became increasingly homogeneous. They became standardized, like work uniforms. If the condition of a society can be read off its fashion, then the increasingly pornographic nature of fashion reflects an increasingly pornographic society. Today's fashion has obvious pornographic traits; more flesh is displayed than form.

With the rise of the cult of authenticity, tattoos have also become fashionable again. Within a ritual context, they symbolize the alliance between individual and community. In the nineteenth century, when tattoos were very popular, especially among the upper classes, the body was still a surface onto which yearnings and dreams were projected. Today, tattoos lack any symbolic power. All they do is point to the uniqueness of the bearer. The body is neither a ritual stage nor a surface of projection; rather, it is an advertising space. The neoliberal hell of the same is populated with tattooed clones.

The cult of authenticity erodes public space, which disintegrates into private spaces. Everyone carries their own private space with them wherever they go. In public space, one has to leave aside the private and play a role. It is a space for scenic presentations, a theatre. The play, the drama, is essential to it:

Playacting in the form of manners, conventions, and ritual gestures is the very stuff out of which public rela-

tions are formed, and from which public relations derive their emotional meaning. The more social conditions erode the public forum, the more are people routinely inhibited from exercising the capacity to playact. The members of an intimate society become artists deprived of an art.⁵

Today, the world is not a theatre in which roles are played and ritual gestures exchanged, but a market in which one exposes and exhibits oneself. Theatrical presentation gives way to a pornographic exhibition of the private.

Sociability and politeness also make major contributions to theatrical presentation. They play with the semblance of beauty, and thus require a scenic, theatrical distance. In the name of authenticity or genuineness, the semblance of beauty, the ritual gesture, is today discarded as something purely external. But this genuineness is, in truth, crudeness and barbarity. The narcissistic cult of authenticity is partly responsible for the increasing brutalization of society. We live in a culture of the affect. Where ritual gestures and manners decay, affect and emotion gain the upper hand. On social media, too, the scenic distance that is constitutive of the public sphere is reduced, and the result is affective communication without distance.

The narcissistic cult of authenticity makes us blind to the symbolic force of forms, which exert a substantial influence on emotion and thought. We may imagine a *ritual turn* that re-establishes the *priority of forms*. It would invert the relationship between inside and outside, spirit and body. *The body moves the spirit, not vice versa. Body does not follow spirit, but spirit follows body.* We may also say: *the medium produces the message.* This is the *force of ritual*.

External forms lead to internal changes. Thus, ritual forms of politeness have mental effects. The semblance of beauty produces a beautiful soul, not vice versa:

Polite behaviour can strongly influence our thoughts. And miming graciousness, kindness and happiness is of considerable help in combating ill humor and even stomach aches; the movements involved – gracious gestures and smiles – do this much good: they exclude the possibility of contrary movements, which express rage, defiance, and sadness. That is why social activities, visits, formal occasions, and parties are so well liked. It is a chance to imitate happiness; and this kind of comedy certainly frees us from tragedy – no small accomplishment.⁶

Politeness is an *as-if ritual*. Culture as such is made up of *as-if rituals*. If we remove the as-if gestures in the name of authenticity or genuineness, we destroy the element of civilization:

Again, in order to feel kindly towards a person to whom we have been inimical, the only way is more or less deliberately to smile, to make sympathetic inquiries, and to force ourselves to say genial things. One hearty laugh together will bring enemies into a closer communion of heart than hours spent on both sides in inward wrestling with the mental demon of uncharitable feeling. To wrestle with a bad feeling only pins our attention on it, and keeps it still fastened in the mind; whereas if we act as if from some better feeling, the old bad feeling soon folds its tent like an Arab and silently steals away.⁷

A ritual of politeness is not an expression of subjective feeling; it is an objective act. It resembles a magical invocation that produces a positive mental state.

The culture of authenticity goes hand in hand with the distrust of ritualized forms of interaction. Only spontaneous emotion, that is, a subjective state, is authentic. Behaviour that has been *formed* in some way is denigrated as inauthentic or superficial. In the society of authenticity, actions are guided internally, motivated psychologically, whereas in ritual societies actions are determined by externalized forms of interaction. Rituals make the world objective; they mediate our relation to the world. The compulsion of authenticity, by contrast, makes everything subjective, thereby intensifying narcissistic tendencies. Today, narcissistic disorders are on the rise because we are increasingly losing the ability to conduct social interactions outside the boundaries of the self. The narcissistic *homo psychologicus* is captivated by itself, caught in an intricate inwardness. What results is a poverty in world, with the self simply circling around itself. Thus, *homo psychologicus* falls into a depression.

In a culture of raging narcissism, playfulness disappears, and life loses its cheerfulness and exuberance. The culture retreats from that holy sphere of play. The compulsions of work and performance intensify the profanation of life. The holy seriousness of play gives way to the profane seriousness of work.

James Bond movies also reflect this development. They have become more serious and less playful over time. The most recent ones even forgo the depiction of rituals of carefree love at the end. The final scene of *Skyfall* has a disturbing effect in this regard; Bond, instead of

dedicating himself to amorous play, simply receives his next assignment from his superior, M. M. says to Bond: ‘Lots to be done. Are you ready to get back to work?’ A stern-faced Bond replies: ‘With pleasure, M. . . . with pleasure.’

The ritual spaces that make possible playful and ceremonial exuberance have been eroded. They have become spaces of excess and extravagance that stand out against profane everyday life. Culture has been made profane. Films like *La Grande Bouffe* would today only be met with incomprehension. Transgression is a general feature of celebratory ritual:

It [i.e. culture] orders and creates exceptional celebratory situations in which what may usually be denied now suddenly seems called for and can be experienced in ceremonies of transgression as cheerful sociability, as joyful triumph, or even as wild enthusiasm. Totemistic societies that prohibited the eating of certain animals provide a striking example (one with which Freud was familiar). On a particular day of the year, the prohibition is lifted and instead it is commanded that, on that day, the totem feast must be held – a joyful occasion.⁸

The profanation of culture brings about its disenchantment. Today, the arts are also increasingly rendered profane and disenchanting. Magic and enchantment – the true sources of art – disappear from culture, to be replaced by discourse. The enchanting exterior is replaced with the true interior, the magic signifier with the profane signified. The place of compelling, captivating forms is taken by discursive content. Magic gives way to *transpar-*

ency. The imperative of transparency fosters an animosity to form. Art becomes *transparent* with regard to its meaning. It no longer seduces. The magic veil is cast off. The forms do not themselves *talk*. The language of forms, of signifiers, is characterized by compression, complexity, equivocation, exaggeration, a high degree of ambiguity that even reaches the level of contradiction. These suggest *meaningfulness* without immediately being reducible to meaning. All these now disappear, and instead we are confronted with simplified claims and messages that are artificially imposed on the work of art.

The disenchantment of art makes it Protestant in nature. It is de-ritualized, as it were, and stripped of its splendid forms:

Until the end of the 1980s, the spaces in which art was displayed still looked like Catholic churches, full of colourful forms and exuberant shapes. Since then, art societies seem to have become deeply Protestant, focusing on content and the spoken or written word.⁹

Art is not a discourse. It produces its effects through forms and signifiers, and not through the signified. The process of internalization destroys the arts, bringing them closer to discourse and forsaking the mysterious outside for the profane inside. The disenchantment of art is a symptom of narcissism, of narcissistic internalization.

Collective narcissism reduces Eros and disenchants the world. The erotic resources of culture dry up. These resources are also the forces that hold a community together and inspire it to play and to hold festivals. Without them, society becomes atomized. Rituals and

ceremonies are the genuinely human acts which allow life to appear to be an enchanting, celebratory affair. Their disappearance desecrates and profanes, transforming life into mere survival. We might thus expect *a re-enchantment of the world* to create a healing power that could counteract collective narcissism.