



REFLEXIVITY

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From a common, conventional, and pre-theoretic point of view, 'ritual' tends to be conceptualized as being of a non-reflexive and non-reflective nature. Even some of the most prominent approaches to the study of ritual implicitly seem to subscribe to that view. This is so because it is, or was, assumed that rituals

- merely 'act out' a given (mythic) structure;
- simply reaffirm the common ground of societal consensus by evoking effervescent emotions;
- represent a form of compulsive action with an excessive attention to details;
- are a form of pure, meaningless activity that is concerned with, if not obsessed by, following explicit rules;
- are a species of typically 'mute' form of practice characterized by a misrecognition of what they 'really' are doing;
- are ecstatic, or traumatic, events; or
- are fixed, standardized, formalized, and repetitive acts.

Whatever option one prefers, it seems evident that rituals are diametrically opposed to reflexivity. More recent theoretical approaches, however, have challenged that view. Once more, possibly influenced by Richard Schechner, it was Victor Witter Turner who took important steps in new directions, followed by some of his students, who elaborated on those lines and provided a body of literature full of fresh theoretical insights.¹ This development is part of a wider trend in the humanities, where 'reflexivity' has turned from an avant-garde notion into something akin to an intellectual dogma.² Many of the

¹ See the items provided with the keyword RFL in the annotated bibliography.

² For useful surveys, see G.E. Marcus, "Reflexivity in Anthropology", *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (2001), 12877–12881; M. Ashmore, "Reflexivity, in Science and Technology Studies", *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (2001), 12881–12884; M. Lynch, "Against Reflexivity as an Academic Virtue and Source of Privileged Knowledge", *Theory, Culture, and Society* 17 (2000), 26–54. Reflexivity played a crucial role in early ethnomethodology, but

moral and epistemological claims of the stronger versions of the 'reflexive programs' and their rhetorical *mise en scène* have in the meantime been strongly criticized³ and occasionally even ridiculed.⁴

The term 'reflexivity' is by now standard fare in a wide range of discursive settings, including literature and the visual arts, and in such academic disciplines as sociology, social theory, anthropology/ethnology, science and technology studies, philosophy, and cognitive neuroscience.⁵ While the wide range of applications of the term has been commented upon,⁶ the question of whether the different ways in which it is used merely mirror different 'varieties', 'versions', or 'styles' of reflexivity⁷ or whether they instead attest to different underlying concepts has rarely been addressed. In other words, do the different phenomena referred to by the term in different discursive contexts point to one single concept of 'reflexivity',⁸ or do we actually encounter different 'reflexivities'⁹ that eventually turn out to have very little in common?

Like 'ritual', 'reflexivity' has therefore become

... an odd-job word; that is, it serves a variety of more or less disparate uses, yet we are tempted to describe its use as though it were a word with regular functions . . . It cannot be relied upon for any precise task of identification, interpretation, or comparison . . . but this does

that changed once ethnomethodology became a more established branch of sociology; see M. Pollner, "Left of Ethnomethodology. The Rise and Decline of Radical Reflexivity", *American Sociological Review* 56 (1991), 370–380.

³ See, e.g., Lynch, "Against Reflexivity".

⁴ P. Pels, "Reflexivity. One Step Up", *Theory, Culture, and Society* 17 (2000), 1–25, e.g., comments that "[r]eflexivity often parades in a show of confessional virtues . . ." (1) and he comments on "[t]he romance of reflexivity" (2).

⁵ In the study of religion, however, reflexivity as yet has a shadowy existence. The exceptions confirming the rule are B.A. Babcock, "Reflexivity", *The Encyclopedia of Religion* 12 (1987), 234–238; G. Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology. Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London, 1999), 35–38.

⁶ See Babcock, "Reflexivity", 234: "The term is problematic because it is so popular today; it is used in several different disciplines to refer to a wide variety of mental, verbal, and performative phenomena".

⁷ For an analysis of different 'styles' of reflexivity, see G.E. Marcus, "On Ideologies of Reflexivity in Contemporary Efforts to Remake the Human Science", *Poetics Today* 15 (1994) 383–404; reprinted in G.E. Marcus, *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* (Princeton, 1998), 181–202.

⁸ Babcock, "Reflexivity", 234–235.

⁹ For a useful "inventory of reflexivities", see Lynch, "Against Reflexivity", 27–34 (1. "mechanical reflexivity"; 2. "substantial reflexivity"; 3. "methodological reflexivity"; 4. "metatheoretical reflexivity"; 5. "interpretative reflexivity". There are sub-categories for each of these categories.)

not mean that it can have no serious use. What follows, rather, is that it has a range of uses, not a strict application corresponding to some peculiar character in the phenomena that it denotes.¹⁰

From this observation, Needham infers the necessity of constructing a polythetic definition¹¹ of the concept in question ('ritual' in his case, 'reflexivity' in ours). This is not the aim of the present chapter, however, because taking that approach would imply a decision of the issue in question. And this is not intended here. In contradistinction to the bulk of the existing literature, this paper will not try to, implicitly or explicitly, impose one reading of the term. The ambition of the present chapter is much more modest: it is to create awareness of some of the various ways by which 'reflexivity' has been, and can be, employed in ritual theories and theorizing rituals. This is, in turn, what may characterize a 'reflective' and 'reflexive' attitude to ritual theory. The latter remark paves the way to a reflection on the semantics and etymologies of these terms.

Between Reference and Reflection

Contrary to most, if not all, of the scholarly terms and concepts discussed in this volume—'ritual' to begin with—'reflexivity' does not have much of an emic prehistory to build on (or to move away from). In other words, 'reflexivity' is not a part of common, 'ordinary' language, and even such a major dictionary as the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* (www.m-w.com) has nothing to say about the term apart from its pronunciation and the fact that it is a noun. The main entry here is 'reflexive', an adjective that is assigned four meanings.¹² Two of these refer to grammatical categories.¹³ The fourth meaning listed by *Merriam-Webster* is: "characterized by habitual and unthinking behavior". This refers to behavior as a knee-jerk,

¹⁰ Needham 1985, 156 (on ritual).

¹¹ For the difference between nomothetic and polythetic definitions, see the paper by Snoek in this volume.

¹² Dictionaries tend to treat 'reflexiveness' and 'reflexivity' as synonyms. This chapter will mainly follow that usage.

¹³ "2: of, relating to, characterized by, or being a relation that exists between an entity and itself <the relation 'is equal to' is *reflexive* but the relation 'is the father of' is not>; 3: "of, relating to, or constituting an action (as in 'he perjured himself') directed back on the agent or the grammatical subject".

an automatic reflex, as it were. It is evident from the list of generally held assumptions about 'ritual' sketched at the outset of this paper that 'rituals' have actually been perceived to exemplify this kind of behavior. As a matter of fact, ritual events and performances can be designed in such a way that they trigger reflexive reactions among the participants, for example, by means of spatial and aesthetic arrangements, such as exposure to strong light (or extreme darkness) and music (or noise).

As self-evident as this understanding of 'reflexivity' appears to be, this application of the term runs in the opposite direction of the many ways in which ritual is understood and in which the term 'reflexivity' is used in ritual studies in particular and the humanities in general. For this wide range of applications of the term, meaning 1 in the list from *Merriam-Webster* is relevant:

a: directed or turned back on itself b: marked by or capable of reflection

It is exactly in these shadings between the semantic poles 'a' and 'b'—between instances of self-reference and (self-)reflection—that much of the terminological conflation prevalent in different contemporary discourses can be located.

While self-reference may be considered to be the obvious aspect of 'reflexivity', what about 'reflection'? Is 'reflexivity' a form, style, degree, or variety of 'reflection'; is it just the inverse; or are these two (entirely) different processes? The available literature points to different solutions.

Barbara Babcock, who did much to establish the concept within anthropology, the study of literature, and comparative religion,¹⁴ proposes the following distinction (which will serve as a starting point for the subsequent discussion):

To be reflexive is to be reflective; but one is not necessarily reflexive when one is reflective, for to reflect is simply to think about something, but to be reflexive is to think about the process of thinking itself. In its present usage, *reflection* does not possess the self-referential and second-level characteristics of reflexivity.¹⁵

¹⁴ A seminal paper is B.A. Babcock, "Reflexivity. Definitions and Discriminations", *Semiotica* 30 (1980), 1–14.

¹⁵ Babcock, "Reflexivity" (1987), 235.

Babcock casts these distinctions in terms of mental operations,¹⁶ and the way it is phrased seems to recall a well-established figure in Western philosophical thought, the ‘thinking of thinking’ (or ‘reflection on reflection’; Greek *noesis noeseos*).¹⁷ In the way Babcock states her argument, ‘reflexivity’ is a “second-level” reflection. At first sight, then, the difference between ‘reflexivity’ and ‘reflection’ appears to be merely one of degree, not of kind, in different forms of self-reference.

When it comes to the subject matter of this book,¹⁸ this distinction can be applied in the following terms: While ‘ritual theory’ typically *reflects* on (the properties of) ritual and hence is a *reflection* on ritual (discursively and rhetorically framed and marked in the parameters of ‘theory’), as a *reflexive* project ‘theorizing rituals’ is a second-order reflection on theories—including their value, use, implications, modes of construction and operation, etc.—with the point of reference shifting from ‘ritual’ to ‘ritual theory’. More than a mere disinterested meta-reflection, however, reflexiveness can easily radicalize itself and turn into a critical instance questioning the very rule of the game.¹⁹ Before exploring this a bit further, it is worth recalling that the relevance of the concepts ‘reflection’ and ‘reflexivity’ (and their different shadings) is not restricted to the realm of theory/theorizing alone, for reflection and reflexivity are also inherent in the very objects of the study—in rituals.

¹⁶ See M.D. Lieberman, R. Gaunt, D.T. Gilbert, and Y. Trope, “Reflexion and Reflection. A Social Cognitive Neuroscience Approach to Attributional Inference”, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 34 (2002), 199–249, for a recent attempt to distinguish “the phenomenological features, cognitive operations, and neural substrates of two systems that we call the X-system (for the ‘x’ in *reflexive*) and the C-System (for the ‘c’ in *reflective*). These systems are instantiated in different parts of the brain, carry out different kinds of inferential operations, and are associated with different experiences. The X-system is a parallel-processing, subsymbolic, pattern-matching system that produces the continuous stream consciousness that each of us experiences as ‘the world out there’. The C-system is a serial system that uses symbolic logic to produce the conscious thoughts that we experience as ‘reflections on’ the stream of consciousness. While the X-system produces our ongoing experience of reality, the C-system reacts to the X-system. When problems arise in the X-system, the C-system attempts a remedy.” It would be tempting to take this approach into account in ritual theory, but that shall not be attempted here.

¹⁷ On the history of this concept, or conceptual figure, in the history of (Western) philosophy, see H.J. Krämer, “Noesis Noeseos”, *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* 6 (1984), 871–873.

¹⁸ See the introductory essay.

¹⁹ In social anthropology, this is what has happened in the context of the debate on ‘representation’ and ‘reflexivity’.

Reflection and Reflexivities within Ritual Settings

To begin with, there is much reflection on rituals going on in rituals. Rituals may be designed in such a way as to inhibit reflective processes, but one should not underestimate the aptitude for reflection among ritual participants, even if they (seen from the outside) may appear to mechanically/reflexively act as a mass of people. Against a tendency in ritual studies and ritual theories to describe rituals as essentially attractive, even thrilling and emotionally dense events, everybody knows that many rituals can be boring.²⁰ When attention is diverted from the ongoing process or event, it may be vested in reflections of different kinds and on different things, including details of the ritual (such as the color of the clothes or the music). While reflection can emerge from performative boredom by accident, other rituals are clearly designed to stimulate reflection, for instance, by the use of 'deep' symbols that require decoding and 'make people think'. Other rituals integrate explicit instances of reflection in the sequential order of the public event. In a sermon, for example, the preacher may comment, and indeed reflect, upon the meaning and significance of the very ritual performance. This form of reflection is self-referential and thereby comes close to reflexivity.

Rituals can also contain different sorts of *reflexive* instances—that is, elements that (implicitly or explicitly) turn the actors, participants, and spectators (listeners) back upon themselves.²¹ This can be achieved by linguistic means, for instance, when performers refer to their own ritual performance in ritual formulae ("We perform this ritual"; "By performing this ritual we . . .") or short self-referential accounts;²² or

²⁰ Cognitive theories of rituals have devoted some attention to what they refer to as the 'tedium effect'; see McCauley and Lawson 2002; H. Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity. A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transformation* (Cognitive Science of Religion Series; Walnut Creek, 2004), 130–135.

²¹ For this meaning of the term, see also Babcock, "Reflexivity" (1980), 2: "The terms reflexive, reflexivity, and reflexiveness have been used in a variety of disciplines to describe the capacity of language and of thought—of any system of signification—to turn or band back upon itself, to become an object to itself, and to refer to itself. Whether we are discussing things grammatical or cognitive, what is meant is a reflex action or process linking self and other, subject and object."

²² For an example see C.K. Højbjerg, "Inner Iconoclasm. Forms of Reflexivity in Loma Rituals of Sacrifice", *Social Anthropology* 10 (2002), 57–75, here 66: "The true agent of the causal agent is revealed through a divination ceremony. Referring to the sick child for whom the sacrifice is carried out, the sacrificer explains: 'We have asked the diviner about the child's illness. The diviner answered that it is nei-

when a communicative ritual such as prayer refers to its own communicative structure,²³ when the very performance is itself verbally addressed in the chanting (and thereby transposes the position of the chanter to a different level);²⁴ or in cases in which divine partners (counterintuitive agents) are held to perform rituals on their own behalf, such as the gods who are held to sacrifice to themselves or even to sacrifice the sacrifice itself (e.g. Ṛg-Veda X,90,16 *yajñēna yajñam ayajanta devās*—“the gods sacrificed the sacrifice with sacrifice”).²⁵

One ‘obvious’ self-referential, reflective visual medium that can be employed in rituals is the mirror, in which actors can watch themselves and perceive themselves as being part of the respective ritual event/process. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty once remarked:

The mirror itself is the instrument of a universal magic that changes things into a spectacle, spectacles into things, myself into another and another into myself. . . . The mirror appears because I am seeing visible [*voyant-visible*], because there is a reflexivity of the sensible; the mirror translates and reproduces that reflexivity.²⁶

ther witchcraft (*motaiti*) nor sorcery (*saleiti*), but *angbaī*.” Højbjerg refers to such sequences as “ritualised, autobiographical accounts”. The self-referential account continues by spelling out the reasons for the ceremony (p. 67, a passage I would hesitate to call a “ritual prayer”, as Højbjerg does). The self-referential accounts, it seems to me, serve the purpose of repositioning, performatively restructuring, and determining the relationship between the human subject/objects and non-human agents in the ceremonial set-up.

²³ Prayers often comment on the relationship between the person who prays and his or her deity, or the deity’s attitude towards him or her. Ritual communication such as prayer can itself be made the object of further (preparatory) acts. This reflexive twist is nicely commented upon in the following anecdote of the Rabbi who, when asked what he would do before praying, replied that before praying he would pray that he would be able to pray in the right manner; see R.-E. Prell-Foldes, “The Reinvention of Reflexivity in Jewish Prayer. The Self and Community in Modernity”, *Semiotica* 30 (1980), 73–96, 78, quoted from A.E. Millgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia, 1971), 29 (non vidi).

²⁴ I am here alluding to Lévi-Strauss’s famous analysis of a (Cuña) shamanic chant of incantation describing the voyage of the shaman-healer to the inside of body of the (female) patient, all the way into her vagina and uterus, unfolding a ‘mythic anatomy’—without ever physically touching her body. The chant is reflective since the shaman performatively refers to/reflects on the very act of chanting. See C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (1958), trans. C. Jacobson and B. Grundfest Schoepf (New York, London, 1963). The reflective dimension of the event has recently been stressed by Severi 2002.

²⁵ K.C. Patton, in “Juggling Torches. Why We Still Need Comparative Religion”, K.C. Patton and B.C. Ray (eds), *A Magic Still Dwells. Comparative Religion in the Post-Modern World* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, 2000), 153–171, 158, calls this phenomenon “divine reflexivity”.

²⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological*

Merleau-Ponty here points to several issues relevant to theoretical approaches to ritual. One is the fact that all social action places the agents simultaneously in the situations of (passive) objects and (active) subjects (and as objects for themselves as subjects); obviously, rituals can build on that kind of ‘reflexiveness’²⁷ and play with the taking and inversion of the roles of the self and the other, thereby constructing social worlds in their own right. Secondly, and related to the first issue, Merleau-Ponty refers to the transformative power of the rituals. As a matter of fact, there are several examples of rituals that achieve transformations by making use of mirrors, such as the painting of the eye (and final act of vivification) of a statue in Sinhalese Buddhism and the neighboring Hindu tradition: this final act is not performed eye to eye by the artist; rather, he has to turn his head and achieve enlivenment of the artistic object (which then turns into a ritual subject) with the help of a mirror, and his own eyes will be bound subsequently.²⁸ Another telling example is an initiation ritual of the Fang in Central Africa. Here the candidate is given a hallucinogen, and when the drug starts to have its effect, the candidate is taken into the forest, where he is placed in front of a platform on which one places the skulls of the ancestors. Thereafter, the candidate is brought to consciousness, and one holds a mirror in front of him—in such a manner, however, that he does not at first see himself, but the skulls. This transposition of the self into the other, and the other into the self, gains a reflexive dimension, when the candidate afterwards plays his part in the washing of the skulls.²⁹

These observations further resonate with several relevant issues in

Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics, edited and with an Introduction by J.M. Edie (Evanston, 1964), 168 (from the essay “Eye and Mind”).

²⁷ This is the term G.H. Mead uses in order to refer to “the turning back of the experience of the individual upon himself”, as the foundation of the social process and the development of mind; see G.H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society. From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, edited and with an Introduction by Ch.W. Morris (Chicago, 1934), 134.

²⁸ The classical study is R. Gombrich, “The Consecration of a Buddhist Image”, *Journal of Asian Studies* 26 (1966), 23–36; see also I. Nācakāmi, C. Patmanātaù, P. Schalk, and Ā. Vēlupī^oai, *Buddhism among Tamils in Pre-Colonial Tamī^oakam and Ī^oam. Part 2: The Period of the Imperial Cō^oar. Tamī^oakam and Ī^oam* (Uppsala, 2002), 746.

²⁹ For this ritual and further illuminating reflections on the use of mirrors, see J.W. Fernandez, “Reflections on Looking into Mirrors”, *Semiotica* 30 (1980), 27–39. For the use of mirrors in Masonic rituals (which are an interesting example for the processes described here), see J.A.M. Snoek, “De spiegel in de tweede graad. Een historisch overzicht”, *Acta Macionica* 8 (1998), 359–386.

recent ritual theories. To begin with, there is the concept of ‘framing’: More often than not, a mirror is framed, and rituals are likewise framed events. This leads to the question of the relations of what is inside the frame to its outside and to the permeability of the frame: while there may be clear-cut (linear) distinctions, there may also be fuzzier, intersecting frames,³⁰ and in like manner it may be difficult to ascertain what is ‘real’ and what is in the mirror—and what ultimately ‘mirrors’ what. Does a sacrifice ‘mirror’ the sacrifice of the gods *in illo tempore*? Or is it the other way round? To what extent does a public event ‘mirror’ its context? Here it should be recalled that the act of ‘mirroring’ is more than a mere duplication or ‘representation’ of the event, for it simultaneously achieves an (almost invisible) transformation of the world—without the latter “being turned upside down”,³¹ even when the horizontal plane is inverted.

A well known form of (reflexive) inversion is found in such playful or dramatic public events as festivals and carnivals and such cultural performances as parody, satire, masking, clowning, and theater that give rise to reflexivity in that they re-modulate and counterpose different sets of object-subject relations.³² A ‘masking’ of a different kind also appears in instances of simulation that can occur in ceremonies.³³ In initiations among the Gbaya Kara in Central Africa, the day after they had officially left their village, the candidates are seemingly executed within the range of vision of their (female) relatives (mothers), before they are entrusted to the initiators. The novices are not told what is going to happen with them, but they are instructed that they must act as if they were dead—and that they may ‘really’ die should they not do so. A complex *mélange* of uncertainties and ambiguities arises that brackets ontological certainties:

³⁰ See also Handelman’s chapter on framing in this volume.

³¹ Fernandez, “Reflections”, 32.

³² See, e.g., V.W. Turner 1977; Turner 1988; Turner 1990; D. Handelman, “Reflexivity in Festival and Other Cultural Events”, M. Douglas (ed.), *Essays in the Sociology of Perception* (London, Boston, Henley, 1982), 162–190. Handelman’s basic interpretation of the ‘freeing of the self’, however, fails to convince, for the ‘self’ is invariably constructed in between different object-subject relations, and while the ‘self’ is freed from the strictures of one order, it is subject to the rules of another order. On the reflexivity of clowning, see Ohnuki-Tierney 1987, 228.

³³ For a fuller account of the following, see Houseman 2002 (who also introduces a second category: ritual ‘dissimulation’, or perhaps more to the point, manipulation).

the candidates are dead and they aren't, the uninitiated women know that and they don't, the candidates know that the women know it and at the same time they don't. The 'real' effects are achieved by apparent 'falsehoods'—and it is only by carefully keeping up appearances that the 'real things' happen.³⁴ The social set-up of the ceremonial arrangement is based on reflexivity: different modulations of "the recognition of another's perception of oneself".³⁵ Reflexive performance assures the performativity of the event.³⁶

All this having been said, however, the impression should be avoided that reflexivity/reflexiveness only occurs in such extraordinary ceremonial settings as initiations, festivals, and parodies. For, with Rappaport³⁷ and Schechner,³⁸ it can be argued that, rather than being restricted to special occasions, reflexivity is part of the very logic of performance of each and every ritual that is based on some sort of script or prototype.³⁹ In these cases, the practitioners need to appropriate, in one way or the other, the respective models, scripts, roles, or 'strips' of prior or ideal performances for the upcoming or current performance that they are undertaking. There is a wide range of possible modes of appropriation, including attempts to copy prior or ideal performances as closely as possible, and quotations from or allusions to heterogeneous materials that are rearranged in new performances. Be that as it may, the fact remains that the performance (inter-ritually) 'reflects' other performances; the ritual and its practitioners reflectively refer thereby to something else.⁴⁰ Moreover, every performance is invariably reflective because the practitioners are well aware that they are not merely the subjects of their own performances, but that their performances are the objects for other subjects—

³⁴ For a similar case of ritual deception and unveiling (with reference to masks) see Hojbjerg, "Inner Iconoclasm", 69, who likewise stresses the "belief-generating effecting" of "the reflexive stance intrinsic to ritual action". Furthermore he argues: "In this case, reflexivity consists in the capability of recognising a mask or a shrine, as an artefact, but also as something more when circumstances may so require."

³⁵ This is the 'definition' of reflexivity proposed by Houseman 2002, 78 n. 1.

³⁶ While Houseman's example may strike the reader as rather 'bizarre', one should not forget that milder versions of this model are to be found in quite common ceremonial elements, such as the 'kidnapping' of the bride in weddings.

³⁷ Rappaport 1980.

³⁸ Schechner 1982.

³⁹ The following argument is loosely based on Schechner, whereas I find Rappaport's approach unhelpful, and even questionable. For Rappaport's theory see also Kreinath's chapter in this volume.

⁴⁰ On 'ritual quotations', see Gladigow 2004, 60–63.

that they are heard or seen by an audience, even if that audience is not empirically verifiable (such as those deities or spirits who are addressed in prayers and other rituals).⁴¹

Apart from reflexive media, reflexive ceremonial and behavioral patterns, and the reflexivity inherent in the practical logic of performance, rituals may take other reflexive turns. To name but two examples: In cases of ritual boredom, participants may not only start to reflect on the rituals (see above), but they also can develop a reflective understanding of their situation—see themselves as ‘others’ (object-subjects), be turned back upon their own participation, performance, and commitment. That generates a space for ritual criticism⁴² and critique. Other instances of developing reflexive attitudes include situations of participant observation in fieldwork, or any participation in ‘other’ rituals (“what the hell am I doing here?”).⁴³

Types of Self-Reference

Niklas Luhmann has advanced an instructive attempt to distinguish ‘reflection’ and ‘reflexivity’.⁴⁴ Luhmann distinguishes between three types of self-reference:⁴⁵ basic forms of self-reference, reflexivity (*Reflexivität*), and reflection (*Reflexion*).⁴⁶ In what follows, the third form will be ignored, since it is not strictly relevant to the concept under discussion here.

The first form of self-reference refers to elements within systems, or processes. For a chain of (e.g., ritual) actions to proceed as a fixed chain of actions, for example, it will need to refer to itself as such (otherwise the later steps would not be understood as belonging to the same sequence of events in the first place). Hence, self-reference

⁴¹ With Fernandez, “Reflections”, 35, this obtaining “a sense of ourselves as object—as something to be seen by others” can be termed “self-objectivation”.

⁴² See Grimes 1990.

⁴³ See also Grimes 1988b.

⁴⁴ Luhmann understands self-reference as a property of all social systems. He regards ‘reference’ as an operation designating (‘referring to’) something in the context of distinguishing it operationally from something else; see N. Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie* (Frankfurt, 1987 [1984]), 596.

⁴⁵ According to Luhmann, self-reference is a form of reference in which the very operation of referring (or referencing) is included in that (something) what is being referred to (or designated); see Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, 600.

⁴⁶ On what follows, see Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, 599–623.

is elementary for the very operation, constitution, and further development of any unit (system, process, etc.), including rituals. However, this form of self-reference operates on the level of elements and their interrelations—and not yet on the level of systems. This is what distinguishes this form of self-reference from the other two.

Luhmann devises ‘reflexivity’ as a kind of self-reference in which the ongoing process itself becomes the target of the operation. In communication, for example, one can now communicate about why something has remained unsaid (not communicated about); or having power, one can decide not to employ it. That makes ‘reflexivity’ potentially disruptive to these ongoing processes. At the same time, it is an agent of controlled change. The question arises as to how much ‘reflexive’ communication (that is, communication about communication) a communicative process can possibly cope with without losing its efficiency? To prevent an overflowing of ‘reflexivity’ (which may turn out to be a burdensome affair), there may be techniques of inhibiting ‘reflexivity’. Interestingly, Luhmann regards rituals as such a technique of curtailing the beginnings of reflexive communications.⁴⁷ According to Luhmann, rituals fulfill this function because they are rigidly fixed sequences that can neither be modified nor questioned; hence, they represent a form of communication that avoids communication about communication.⁴⁸ As Luhmann acknowledges in a footnote, this view of ritual is informed by the theories of Mary Douglas, Roy Rappaport, and Maurice Bloch.⁴⁹ Luhmann’s approach thus mirrors a rather narrow understanding of ritual that was prominent in the early 1970s, but is no longer generally shared today. Luhmann’s view of ritual is a typical example of theoretical

⁴⁷ For an application of Luhmann’s theory of communication to ritual theory, see the paper by Günter Thomas in this volume; Thomas—like Luhmann—also draws heavily on Rappaport. For an attempt to apply Luhmann’s notion of ‘system’ to ritual theory, see Stausberg 2003.

⁴⁸ See Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, 613: “Man kann *Rituale* begreifen unter dem Gesichtspunkt des Coupierens aller Ansätze für reflexive Kommunikationen. Die Kommunikation wird als fixierter Ablauf versteift, und ihre Rigidität selbst tritt an die Stelle der Frage, warum dies so ist. Die Elemente des Prozesses und ihre Reihenfolge werden unauswechselbar festgelegt, Worte wie Dinge behandelt, die Gegenwart zählt und ist weder im Hinblick auf die Zukunft noch an Hand jeweils angefallener vergangener Erfahrungen korrigierbar. Das Risiko des Symbolgebrauchs wird so gering wie möglich gehalten. Rituale sind vergleichbar den fraglosen Selbstverständlichkeiten des Alltagslebens.”

⁴⁹ Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, 613 n. 34. See the abstracts to Douglas 1970, Rappaport 1971, and Bloch 1974 in the annotated bibliography.

discourse on 'rituals' that makes no attempt to look at them in their own right, in their own terms, from their own premises, but rather uses them to exemplify a point in a different discursive setting.⁵⁰ Rituals are dealt with as a special case, as something that is simultaneously familiar and 'other'.

From a theoretical perspective, Luhmann's perspective may possibly be employed more fruitfully when turned against his own premises. Luhmann states that despite all ritualizations, it will hardly ever be possible to avoid the occurrence of communication about communication. As a matter of fact, there are cases regulating this process within functionally specialized spheres of communication, and reflexivity may have been a factor in the functional differentiation of these spheres. 'Love', for example, has in Luhmann's view become a reflexive process: there are no proofs for the occurrence of 'love' apart from communicating about love (and that includes bodily behavior). Another example cited by Luhmann is education: As soon as education becomes a functionally differentiated social system (of communication), even the educators have to be educated.⁵¹ The question arises as to whether we can (pace Luhmann) observe the occurrence of similar processes with regard to rituals? While it may be claimed that rituals communicate about culture or society—Geertz's Balinese cockfight, to quote/cite the most famous modern example of that theoretical stance, "provides a metasocial commentary", is "a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves"⁵² (and already in that sense are reflexive!)—it may also be maintained that professionalized rituals tend to become ritualized affairs; rituals may not only in themselves be rigid, fixed, rule-governed behavior (if we were to adopt that position for a moment), but the way in which one deals with rituals—for example, in preparing for a performance—may also require ritualized forms. When ritual turns into a differentiated sphere, the life of the

⁵⁰ I propose calling this sort of theoretical instrumental appropriation of a subject/object 'hetero-discourse': theoretical 'hetero-discourse' is not primarily interested in the matter at hand, but merely uses it to illustrate a point within a specific theoretical setting. Further examples of theoretical 'hetero-discourse' include theories of evolution that assign ritual an importance for specific stages of the evolutionary process. This type of theoretical appropriation of the topic ('ritual') has not yet reached the stage of ritual theory.

⁵¹ See Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, 614–615.

⁵² Geertz 1973, 448.

professional practitioners has to become ritualized. Moreover, to what extent is communication about rituals (in theory and practice) ritualized?⁵³

Reflexive Theories and Reflexive Theorizing

Luhmann's analysis of reflexivity leaves room for the investigation of reflexivity in science, and that is an issue that has been debated to quite some extent in sociology. Here a few selective remarks will have to suffice. A seminal study by Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar investigates the way, how 'facts' are "constructed in the laboratory" and how a sociologist can "account for this construction".⁵⁴ Apart from introducing several main concepts for their arguments that illustrate how 'facts' are fabricated, Latour and Woolgar advance their basic "notion of the construction of order out of disorder"⁵⁵ as the main feature of what goes on in a scientific laboratory. Consequently, this leads them to the observation that this notion "applies as much to the construction of our own account as to that of the laboratory scientists."⁵⁶ Their knowledge is "neither *superior nor inferior* to those produced by the scientists themselves."⁵⁷ This is the lesson of reflexivity (in this sense): to remind the reader "that *all* texts are stories",⁵⁸ including those that propose this very message. The claim "that scientific facts are not so much reflections of the world as persuasive texts",⁵⁹ and that there is a 'politics of explanation', has led some sociologists (who came to be known as the 'reflexivists') to produce full-blown reflexive texts that experimentally explore the prac-

⁵³ Interestingly—now we again move on the reflexive level of theorizing—it has been argued (with respect to Mauss, Durkheim, and Bourdieu) that the observation (study) of rituals proceeds in ritual forms: W. Gephart, "Rituale der Ritualbeobachtung. Von Emile Durkheims 'effervescence' über Marcel Mauss' 'fait total' zu Pierre Bourdieu's 'acte d'institution'", *Forum Ritualdynamik* 6 (2004); accessed on January 24, 2005, from <http://www.ritualdynamik.uni-hd.de>.

⁵⁴ B. Latour and S. Woolgar, *Laboratory Life. The Construction of Scientific Facts. With a New Postscript and Index by the Authors* (Princeton, 1986 [1979]), 40.

⁵⁵ Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, 252.

⁵⁶ Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, 254.

⁵⁷ Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, 257.

⁵⁸ Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, 284.

⁵⁹ St. Woolgar, "Foreword" to M. Ashmore, *The Reflexive Thesis. Wrighting Sociology of Scientific Knowledge* (Chicago, 1989), xvii.

tice inherent in their own production of 'knowledge'.⁶⁰ In retrospect, while it has become clear that reflexivity is a useful "corrective to a kind of methodological overconfidence",⁶¹ one of the main exponents of the group frankly admits that "[r]eflexivity gets you nowhere. It is not a useful thing to do and its results cannot be used. It is impractical."⁶²

Ritual theory, it seems to me, is in serious need of reflexive theorizing. Attempts in that direction, such as Catherine Bell's "analytical exploration of the social existence of the concept of ritual",⁶³ and her reflexive analysis that "talk about ritual may reveal more about the speakers than about the bespoken",⁶⁴ did well to stir some attention, but it seems that it did not succeed in giving pause to the machinery of the theorists (and to some extent that holds true of her own theory). Occasional critiques of the epistemological value of the category and concept of 'ritual' seem to have effectively trailed off—and our volume will possibly do its humble share to create the

⁶⁰ Ashmore, *The Reflexive Thesis*, plays with the genre 'thesis' and Ashmore, "Reflexivity, in Science and Technology Studies", plays with the genre of writing in encyclopedias. An important collection of essays from prominent 'reflexivists' is S. Woolgar (ed.), *Knowledge and Reflexivity. New Frontiers in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London, 1988). The essay by T. Pinch ("Reservations about Reflexivity and New Literary Forms or Why Let the Devil Have All the Good Tunes") in that volume (178–197) discusses these new literary form—and does so in a reflexive fashion (in the form of a dialogue, which is why the name of the author is duplicated as Trevor Pinch and Trevor Pinch). In the vein of the so-called writing culture debate, reflexive modes of writing have also been extensively explored in social anthropology. An early classic is V. Crapanzano, *Tuhani. Portrait of a Moroccan* (Chicago, London, 1980).

⁶¹ Ashmore, "Reflexivity, in Science and Technology Studies", 12883.

⁶² Ashmore, "Reflexivity, in Science and Technology Studies", 12883. By contrast, the version of reflexivity in the study of science provided by Pierre Bourdieu is much more confident and result-oriented. It is a critique from within, an auto-analysis, that, by objectifying the subject that objectifies 'facts', i.e. by reflecting on and sociologically analyzing the social preconditions of the respective scholarly praxis, aims at improving the quality of the scholarly work. Its aim is to go beyond the scholarly bias and to avoid the danger of confusing one's own way of thinking with that of those whose actions and behavior are being analyzed. See P. Bourdieu, *Science de la science et réflexivité. Cours du Collège de France 2000–2001* (Paris, 2002). A concise summary of his position is P. Bourdieu, "Narzistische Reflexivität und wissenschaftliche Reflexivität", E. Berg and M. Fuchs (eds), *Kultur, soziale Praxis, Text. Die Krise der ethnographischen Repräsentation* (suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft 1051; Frankfurt, 1999 [1993]), 365–374. For a (reflexive) critique of this model of reflexivity, see Pels, "Reflexivity", 11–15.

⁶³ Bell 1992, ix.

⁶⁴ Bell 1997, xi.

impression that there is *something* out there that is worthy and in serious need of being theorized. But how are these ‘facts’ produced in the first place? The modes of the (theoretical) construction of the very ‘fact’ of ritual are most effectively passed over in silence.⁶⁵

Most (but far from all!) theoreticians still seem to operate with the category of ‘ritual’ as a means of othering in their discursive narratives: ‘ritual’ is the non-ordinary *par excellence*. ‘Rituals’ are mostly homogenized in a general category that leaves room for very little internal differentiation. Statements to the effect that “rituals are” and “ritual does”—as if they were the agent(s)—generally presented in the timeless present and based on one key example (paradigm) are still the order of the day. Moreover, much of the current theoretical impasse may be the result of the semantic extension and diffusion of the concept, and theoretical discourses about ‘ritual’ seem to have reached a stage where everything can at the same time be included and excluded: everything can be perceived as if it were ‘ritual’, and since ‘ritual’ can be anything, there is an abundance of examples and counterexamples for everything.

Rituals under the Conditions of Reflexive Modernity

Catherine Bell has made some pertinent observations on the consequences of the reification of ritual achieved by theoretical discourse for contemporary ritual practice.⁶⁶ Among others, she notes that “the concept of ritual has influenced how many people . . . go about ritualizing today.”⁶⁷ Moreover, “scholarly studies of ‘ritual’ that demonstrate the evolution and variation of ritual practices over time have been used by components of the larger public as authoritative justifications for making fresh changes in their traditional practices.”⁶⁸ Bell convincingly describes this as a two-fold process.

On the one hand, the study of ritual and the emergence of RITUAL (as a reified, ontologized meta- and mono-category)⁶⁹ may have

⁶⁵ See also Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, 240: “The result of the *construction* of a fact is that it appears unconstructed by anyone”.

⁶⁶ Bell 1997, 253–267.

⁶⁷ Bell 1997, 262–263.

⁶⁸ Bell 1997, 263.

⁶⁹ See also Handelman’s chapter on conceptual alternatives in this volume.

“the effect of subordinating, relativizing, and ultimately undermining many aspects of ritual practice, even as they point to ritual as a powerful medium of transcultural experience.”⁷⁰ This observation points to the more general fact that modern scholarship by nature, as it were, challenges traditional authorities, and no study of any ritual will ever be able to avoid this inherent challenge. To be sure, that does not exclude the opposite effect: that the study of ritual occasionally also has the effect of bolstering traditional authorities, even if unintended—this support of traditional authorities, however, is always valid only until revoked by further scholarship. The design of any study of any ritual has therefore to take account of its feedback on the subjects/object of its study, for it can no longer be ignored that “the observer becomes part of the object he is describing.”⁷¹

On the other hand, Bell observes the emergence of “a new ‘paradigm’ for ritualization.”⁷² Among other things, this new ritualistic paradigm is characterized by “rather nontraditional ways” of locating its authority: “Most common, perhaps, is an implicit appeal to the authority lodged in the abstract notion of ritual itself.”⁷³ The very belief in the primal social and psychological importance and efficacy of ritual “gives ritualists the authority to ritualize creatively and even idiosyncratically.”⁷⁴ These creative or idiosyncratic processes are ‘reflexive’ because the new ‘rituals’ (or ‘ritualizations’) are designed as ‘RITUAL’—act(ion)s are projected onto the conceptual frame of ‘RITUAL’, and these ‘rituals’ are thus held to achieve ‘effects’ or ‘functions’ that ritual studies and ritual theories ascribe to ‘RITUAL’ (such as the creation of *communitas* or emotional comfort).

In a previous paper,⁷⁵ I have tried to link the emergence of some of these new forms of ‘reflexive’ rituals to the ongoing debate about ‘reflexive modernization’ in sociology.⁷⁶ This debate introduces further concepts of reflexivity. For Anthony Giddens,⁷⁷ the fundamental trait of modernity is its radical turning away from and its inherent

⁷⁰ Bell 1997, 263.

⁷¹ Houseman and Severi 1998, 8.

⁷² Bell 1997, 264.

⁷³ Bell 1997, 263.

⁷⁴ Bell 1997, 264.

⁷⁵ M. Stausberg, “Reflexive Ritualisationen”, *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 56 (2004), 54–61.

⁷⁶ See, e.g., U. Beck, S. Lash, and A. Giddens, *Reflexive Modernization. Politics, Tradition, and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Cambridge, 1994).

⁷⁷ See A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge, 1990).

antagonism towards 'tradition' (and, intimately connected to that, religion and ritual). In modern societies, Giddens argues, all social practices are constantly reviewed and improved in the light of incoming information about these very practices, for example, by modern institutions. The knowledge produced (mostly by experts) under the prevailing circumstances of modernity is no longer 'certain', but merely valid until cancelled. This knowledge of the world contributes to its instability. Moreover, the knowledge that is produced and processed by the (observing) experts returns to the fields of knowledge themselves which are thereby constantly transformed. This (risky) circulation of knowledge is what Giddens describes as modernity's reflexivity. While he regards ritual as part of the routine of tradition that is antagonistic to modernity, Giddens's theory can nevertheless—contrary to its own premises—be read as a fairly accurate description of some elements of the process described above: the knowledge about rituals is no longer vested in traditional authorities, but possessed and processed by experts (many of whom contributing to this volume), whose knowledge leaves imprints on and contributes to changes in the field of ritual practice.⁷⁸

While Giddens claims that reflexivity is part and parcel of modernity as such, Ulrich Beck (and colleagues) has come up with a theory of 'reflexive modernization', namely a second phase of modernization that undermines the very structures of (first/simple) modern society: "Simple modernization becomes reflexive modernization to the extent that it disenchant and then dissolves its own taken-for-granted premises."⁷⁹ 'Reflexivity' is not an instance of mastery, but instead points to a loss of control.⁸⁰ This is not a planned development but

⁷⁸ Perhaps the most prominent example of the conscious dissemination of knowledge about "the power of rites" by "a major scholar who has spent years writing and teaching about ritual" and who will now "help us reclaim the power of rites and understand their effect on our lives" (all quotes from the dusk-jacket) is R.L. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone. Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2000).

⁷⁹ U. Beck, W. Bonss, and C. Lau, "The Theory of Reflexive Modernization. Problematic, Hypotheses, and Research Programme", *Theory, Culture, and Society* 20 (2003), 1–33, here 3.

⁸⁰ Therefore, 'reflexivity' in this sense is on the opposite side of 'reflection', for the latter implies a situation of hegemony and control: "To reflect is to somehow subsume the object under the subject of knowledge. Reflection presumes apodictic knowledge and certainty", S. Lash, "Reflexivity as Non-Linearity", *Theory, Culture, and Society* 20 (2003), 49–57, here, 51.

is rather induced by unintended side effects (= consequences) of 'simple' modernization.⁸¹

Reflexive modernization seems to be producing a new kind of capitalism, a new kind of labour, a new kind of global order, a new kind of society, a new kind of nature, a new kind of subjectivity, a new kind of everyday life and a new kind of state.⁸²

The classical institutions retreat. To read the theory once again against its own (hidden) premises: Does 'reflexive modernization' also give way to new kinds of rituals (or 'ritualizations') in Western society? As we have seen above, this may in fact be the case. It may have to do with the positioning of the (quasi-) subject and the public institutions in reflexive modernization. For when reflexive modernization, on the one hand, points at the outsourcing and globalization of institutions and at the same time at "an offloading of functions onto private instances",⁸³ this clearly has an impact on the institutional frameworks of ritual practice: as much as Yoga as a 'spiritual practice' can be employed in a wider range of social organizations, the churches have (albeit unwillingly) offloaded many of their ritual functions (such as burials) onto more private bodies. The field of ritual practice has not been spared the "de-normalization of roles".⁸⁴ And as much as the second-modern subject is 'nomadic', he or she is so with respect to the ritual tradition he or she is part of. As Lash puts it: "Now the subject must be much more the rule-finder him- or herself."⁸⁵ That is exactly what many contemporary ritual practitioners do.⁸⁶ Second-modern biographies "become the biography of the 'self-employed' in every sense of the term"⁸⁷—and this again holds true of many a 'self-employed' contemporary 'ritualization'.

⁸¹ Beck, Bonss, and Lau, "The Theory of Reflexive Modernization", 8: "Our central thesis is that side-effects of modern Western society eventually put its touchstone into question."

⁸² Beck, Bonss, and Lau, "The Theory of Reflexive Modernization", 2–3.

⁸³ Lash, "Reflexivity as Non-Linearity", 53.

⁸⁴ Lash, "Reflexivity as Non-Linearity", 53.

⁸⁵ Lash, "Reflexivity as Non-Linearity", 53.

⁸⁶ In his fieldwork Grimes has encountered "two models for ritual creativity", which he calls "the ritual plumber's model" ("Someone needs a divorce rite? Well, you sit down with a couple and find out what needs doing"; "a committee commissioned to revise a liturgy") and the model of the ritual diviner (waiting for "the moving of the spirit") respectively, Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone*, 12.

⁸⁷ Beck, Bonss, and Lau, "The Theory of Reflexive Modernization", 25.

*Inconclusive Conclusions*

This chapter has (in a conventional literary form) briefly introduced and worked with different concepts of ‘reflexivity’—different reflexivities as it were—and it has sketched their range of applications to the realms of ‘ritual’ and ‘ritual theory’. The suspicion that the ubiquity of the term ‘reflexivity’ in current discourses obstructs our insight into the fact that there are actually fundamentally different concepts of ‘reflexivity’ at work seems to be the more likely option. Experience predicts that attempts either to ban the term or to index its usage are doomed to failure. Probably it will be used as long as it helps people to reflect on rituals and on reflecting on them—and possibly even after it has ceased to fulfill these functions. The reader and future students of rituals will have to decide if that stage has already been reached.

