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THE RITUAL MANIFESTO

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I highlighted the title with an Alt F4 key and hesitated a moment: should I underline it with the F8 key? I also thought of using italics with the Control F8. But no, it had to be Bold - F6. Of course. Bold is right for a manifesto. Underlining is for more common practice, when you need to make a survey of the data collected and then to put special emphasis on something. I want to do the opposite. I want to start with the most striking material. It's not my intention to make definitions but to issue a manifesto of **ritual**.

Ritual means rules, signs (pure signs), gestures, actions, detachments, initiates. It exists only at the moment it is performed and therefore it is reinvented again and again.

If **ritual** is no longer reinvented, it automatically regresses to tradition. It becomes part of the cultural heritage you carry with you, that weighs heavy on your shoulders, like the law. What is more, in this case **rituals** *are* effectively the law. They are justified then in terms such as: "it happened to me, and it will happen to you too". The formula, "it has to be done that way because that's how it always has been done", is exactly the same language of imperatives in which the law is couched.

We should however be quite clear in our minds that practising **rituals** is something quite different from living according to the law.

An example of a **ritual** rule is: "touch, but don't take anything away". Mohammed's rule states the overt characteristics of **ritual**. It is a gesture, an act. It allows for a degree of detachment. In itself the words "touch, but don't take anything away" is an instruction and thus a

proposal for action: do something, but don't get too close. It even means: do something; do nothing.

The misunderstanding begins with the notion that people should make the rules of **ritual** their own, appropriating them as though they were behavioural or social norms. This notion undoubtedly forms the basis of the law and this is even endorsed in the law: *Every citizen is expected to know the law* (Wet Algemene Beginselen)

Ritual rules however are prescribed or written down as instructions for the priests, the ministers, the magicians, the protagonists in the **ritual** - the masters of the ceremony. These are people who possess the gift and the experience to put the rules into practice. They are appointed and initiated by a sovereign or father, an uncle or magician, a priest-aunt or mother. It comes as no surprise then that it is not always possible to find successors or preceptors who are equally gifted.

Supposing someone lacks the talent to reinvent the **ritual**, to carry it out with charisma, to simulate in such a way that the illusion appears in all its perfection...; supposing she lacks skill with the knife, that she doesn't have any original idea for a special sign (adornments such as tattoos)... it is not surprising then that under her regime we have to make do with a circumcision procedure.

As the Italian conductor Maestro Arturo Toscanini once said, "tradition is the last bad performance".

My thesis is that some traditions have failed to produce a Toscanini, a Rembrandt, a Houdini, a Mozart or a David Copperfield, just as other traditions - fortunately for them - have had their First Master, their Big Bear and their Canoe. They understand the art of giving a sign. This is not the same as knowing how to give something a meaning.

We should realize that what is involved is "pure signs", nonsense signs or empty signs that preserve their full signifying magic. In other words **ritual** signs cannot meaningfully be derived from anything. They would then be transformed into meanings. When this is the case, the discourse of hygiene, education, communications etc., replace **ritual**.

Let's stick with **ritual** then.

The master who gives the sign, wears a sign himself. A master thus is never faithful to a tradition but to a talent: a gift from God, from the gods or the ancestors.

We should describe Sunna, Mishna, Adat, Tao, Zen and tradition (all of which have at one time or another been described in legal terms) as the gift of God that is reserved for initiates.

It is not given to every studio to produce works of art. We know that not all art can be called "art". The same goes for play - not every game is a game.

For the same reason there is no question that not every **ritual** is a **ritual**.

Ritual is artificial and sacrificial. What sacrifice or offering is involved? Is it a case of finding the scapegoat? Is it the rule that the patron for whom the **ritual** is performed must be sacrificed or does he/she have to abstain? As already mentioned, the rules are instructions for the person administering the **ritual** rather than behavioural norms to which ordinary people are condemned.

We should appreciate then that the master of ceremonies who will produce both *ars* and *sacer* has to sacrifice something.

A splendid example of this can be seen in the Taoist rite that the French sinologist Kristofer Schipper describes in *De goden voor het gerecht* (The gods being prosecuted): "... the patient [is then] given a doppelganger (a doll as substitute), which he clasps to his breast together with his share of the capital (a sort of monopoly money). At this moment the rite of the *jiao* (the word literally means "transfer") takes place. This rite is of course carried out by the master. He takes the patient's substitute and holds it in his right hand. He then begins to stroke the body of the patient with the doll: he passes it three times over the front of his body and four times along his back. As he does so he appeals to his own masters asking them: "help me to transfer the ailments of this patient to his substitute". Thereupon he names all possible ailments according to a set formula that corresponds to an enumeration of virtually all imaginable complaints. The ailment from which the patient suffers will surely occur in this list. After the patient's body has

been stroked seven times, the master places the doll over the mouth of the patient and tells him to say "ahh!". The patient's breath then enters the doll. The master drops it immediately. Presently someone will come with a brush and pan and sweep up the substitute. It is then thrown into a bowl filled with water; the bowl together with the water in it is put in a brook or river and sails away."

The substitute plays a crucial role. Schipper shows that it not only takes on the patient's identity, but also that of the complaint, of the demons that are causing the sickness, of the person who according to the tradition was sacrificed once upon a time and... of the shaman or monk who sacrifices himself. His conclusion is that "the substitute is not only consecrated by the master and given by him to the patient but that, due to this act of separation, the substitute in the end is the master himself."

With a master who disappears like that it is impossible to found a church. Moreover the founding of a religious institute or governmental body is the last thing we should be thinking of with **rituals**.

If the **ritual** does not affect or involve ordinary people or the general public, what happens to you when - as a lay person - you do in fact participate or even play a central role in it? Here is another rule of **ritual** as described by Rabbi S.P. de Vries in his book on Jewish **rituals** and symbols.

"Having reached the age of thirteen, the time of puberty, and thus the religious age of majority (Bar Mitzvah) the youth goes up in synagogue for the first time as one of the required number of persons called up for the Torah. He then reads his *parashah* (portion) to the congregation. You realize, of course, that this has been thoroughly rehearsed beforehand. (...) The person who has the honour of reading the final portion of the Holy Law on Simchat Torah (Rejoicing of the Law) and the person who on that same day has the honour of starting afresh with Genesis, they too are permitted to read their portion from the Scroll of the Pentateuch. (...) Yet these texts are read a second time by the reader (koré), "in order that nobody should be put to shame". For a person's reading may be so bad and so full of mistakes, that an expert reader would be required to reread the whole portion. So this is how it is done: whether the recitation was good or bad... the koré always

rereads the portion". (Rabbi S. Ph. de Vries) The **ritual** rule, which begins with the formula, "So this is how it is done..." provides for an element of imperfection in a **ritual** act even if this did not occur: the reader reads the text over again.

So we see that applying this rule is not a question of exorcizing any elements of imperfection. In repetition there is no fear of a lack of completion, of a perfection that is not realized. The possibility of repeating this **ritual** rule provides likewise for the possibility of its perfection. And of course imperfection is also provided for. It is respected.

What is the situation now with the layman in the centre? The young boy however who has become thirteen, has vanished from the centre. He has long since undergone a metamorphosis and himself become an initiate.

In the royal justice of Togo - according to the films of the legal anthropologist and film maker, Van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal - the Speaker literally repeats what was said during the session no matter who was speaking - the Paramount Chief or one of his counsellors, the plaintiff or some other party to the dispute. If one of them breathes, the calm voice of the Speaker can be heard pausing at exactly the point where the spokesman's voice faltered, beginning with the word that he could tell from the rhythm of his breath that the latter has started to say. He is called *fèmèdyòdyòfò*, a word that is composed of the words *fèmè* meaning "chief" or an honourary title for the chief plus the word *dyò* that is repeated twice and which means "word" and *fò* which means "person". By repeating them literally the Speaker prevents the words from becoming the words of a specific person so they could be interpreted as suggesting the interests or wishes of a plaintiff or the defendant, a judge or counsellor. Each person thus gets the opportunity to disappear from the centre of the conflict and solely as an initiate to be a witness.

Witness to the fact that the Speaker immerses the whole event in a cyclic circuit of words, in a superficial, rhythmic development without any depth.

The screen of pure signs that **ritual** is composed of conceals and reveals the fact that all there is is void. European law has done away with this

screen (perhaps this is the sole cause of the transition that occurred from an inquisitorial to an accusatorial penal system, from traditional to modern law). The void that was then exposed was suppressed in order to make way for a whole legal system and the universal truth of the individual.

One **ritual** rule in the realm of signs is: "respect for the void"; by respect **ritual** is meant.

Let us rename the *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes' book on Japan and call it "the first **ritual** manifesto" and let's think of it as the forerunner of this manifesto.

"The other politeness [of Japan], by the scrupulosity of its codes, the distinct graphism of its gestures, and even when it seems to us exaggeratedly respectful (i.e., to our eyes, "humiliating") because we read it, in our manner, according to a metaphysics of the person - this politeness is a certain exercise of the void (as we might expect within a strong code but one signifying "nothing"). Two bodies bow very low before one another (arms, knees, head always remaining in a decreed place), according to subtly coded degrees of depth. The salutation here can be withdrawn from any humilation or any vanity, because it literally salutes *no one*; it is not the sign of a communication -closely watched, condescending and precautionary - between two autarchies, two persona; empires (each ruling over its Ego, the little realm of which it holds the `key'); it is only the feature of a network of forms in which nothing is halted, knotted, profound. *Who is saluting whom?* Only such a question justifies the salutation, inclines it to the bow, the obeisance, and glorifies thereby not meaning but inscribing[1] and gives to a posture which we read as excessive the very reserve of a gesture from which any signified is inconceivably absent. *The Form is Empty*, says - and repeats - a Buddhist aphorism. This is what is expressed, through a practice of forms (a word whose plastic meaning and

[1] The English translator Richard Howard, whose translation I gratefully used, says `the inscription of meaning' instead of `inscribing'. Barthes, however, emphasised - as becomes clear further on in the same sentence - the fact that meaning is absent in this salutation. The original French text reads: "[une telle question] fait triompher en lui, non le sens, mais le graphisme".

worldly meaning are here indissociable), by the politeness of the salutation, the bowing of two bodies which inscribe but do not prostrate themselves."

We should reserve **ritual** for the gesture by which we spin the prayer wheel, while leaving religion to those who believe in it and who therefore wish to express their belief in the form of a prayer.

The prayer wheel as a **ritual** object displays all its signs on the outside, on the surface. Under the surface, or rather on the inside all there is is a piece of mechanism. Nor do the people who give it a spin carry the prayer in themselves; they leave it to the wheel to display the prayer. That which they might carry in themselves is masked by their gesture: the hand that with a carefully observed indifference brushes against the cylinder, passing on automatically to the next cylinder, producing no more than a muted rattle and a gentle current of air. The procession of gyrating prayer cylinders is duplicated by the circumambulation of the pilgrims.

Did you know that in former ages the Court of Amsterdam (bailiff and civic magistrates or *eschevins*) made a so called *panding* (old Dutch), that is a ceremonial walkabout of the city, thus setting the law in motion without actually administering justice at all - just as our Tibetan pilgrims did with their prayers?

The honour fell to the bailiff of inscribing the court of justice in the map of the city. He traced out the territory for holding a "vierschaar", meaning four-square (an old Dutch word for the court or tribunal), and he did this in the form that corresponded to it - that of a square. Time and time again he advanced with his retinue.

The **ritual** of the circuit only exists by virtue of the fact that a walkabout is carried out. Afterwards the law can accumulate in the City Hall, with judgements piled on judgements and ordinances being collected; at the same time in the streets the **ritual** is accomplished in the exclusive moment of its performance. Afterwards it can be repeated over and over again. Preferably the **ritual** is repeated according to a **ritual** rule: the bailiff does the round four times, sealed in a circuit that he completes in four days. Then he begins a new cycle. Four of these cycles correspond precisely to the sum of the year. The bailiff does not only have the honour of

circumscribing the **ritual**'s own space, he also circumscribes the time of the **ritual** and adorns the year with a complete juridical calendar.

In keeping with this allegoric way of seeing the world this manifesto spreads out a map over the different parts of the world.

Having considered rules from the Middle and Far East, from Africa and from Europe ancient and modern, issued by leaders of Islam, Judaism, Taoism, Hinduism and Zen Buddhism it is now time for a rule from the New World, from America with its noteworthy puritanism.

We include America not because we feel obliged to lend credence to its holy war against possible discrimination, such as that of women or ethnic minorities, thus avoiding any suspicion that we might not be "politically correct". We are not concerned to provide a mere reflection of a world that is obliged to do justice to plurality and diversity. The Diversity Principle (Heather MacDonald) requires businesses, universities and schools, libraries and governmental bodies, the bar, the world of journalism and of medicine - in short, America as a whole - to be a "reflection of America". If a situation exists where the percentage of women and people from minority groups does not correspond to that of the demographic composition of the country, then it is racist, according to the Puritans. But they are not aware that their struggle is not a struggle against racism but against the allure of difference. The "diversity managers" and "change agents" who want to see the whole of reality reflected in a single particle of that reality, create identical worlds in which the difference between their suburbs, their aerobic studios, their freeways, their jobs and shops, their sensitivity training centres, their State and their America are abolished. The question "where are you from" can henceforth only be answered in "bar code", because the answer alluding as it does to a separate, distinct and exotic place is censored by the legal quota rule. What the diversity movement ends up achieving is not some colourful mixture of all levels of human activity but a purged and colourless banality.

There can be no doubt that this is reality taking its revenge. Reality does not tolerate all this interference and responds by concealing itself behind human practices which one after the other become shallow

and trite through the ceaseless rubbing in of the diversity principle.

All this meddling produces a situation that shows a remarkable similarity to that of **ritual**. **Ritual** also creates a sort of parallel world with a life of its own that operates purely on the surface without interfering with the claims of reality. It is never in fact the purpose of **ritual** to be a faithful reflection of reality. It makes use instead of a distorting mirror by which it reinstates the difference with reality - even though it may well be in reality that it found its pretext. So it is not some reflection or other of reality but rather a distortion of it that gives America the right to appear in this manifesto.

The pretext for an American **ritual** lay in a pronouncement of the Supreme Court of the United States in the case "Miranda v. Arizona" about the acceptability of evidence. America would not be America if a pronouncement like this were not straightaway put into practice everywhere. The aim was to provide a carefully defined code of instructions for the arresting officers that would rid police behaviour once and for all of the censured practice. The law's desire for perfectionism however brings with it the possibility of a **ritual** arising. Thanks to District Attorney Peter Winn we possess a description of this **ritual**: "The Miranda decision set out a prescribed litany that a police officer was required to recite to a person immediately upon taking him into custody; 1) that he is under arrest, 2) that he has a right to remain silent, 3) if he gives up the right to remain silence, any statement he does make may be used as evidence against him, 4) that he has the right to the presence of an attorney and 5) that if he cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for him. Unless and until these warnings were given, no evidence obtained in the interrogation may be used against the accused." The instruction that is addressed to the police and which has moreover become an everyday routine practised by the police appears to have begun to lead a life of its own. It has as it were been hijacked from its context and come to serve as a sign or crowning glory in the arrest procedure. An arrest may no longer be carried out in a manner that is too abrupt or casual; the application of the "Miranda warning" turns it into a special event requiring special attention. Winn: "Before Miranda, one might be dragged off to jail without ceremony. (...) Miranda has been so dramatic

and effective a **ritual** that it quickly has become associated in the public mind with the very nature of being arrested, appearing repeatedly in television and film accounts of police work."

The content of the Miranda instruction was addressed to the police; in the form in which it is recited however it serves purely as a sign of the arrest that is experienced by the person arrested and the people in his vicinity as an event. In an unguarded moment, in an extremely threadbare, staccato and grumpy form, it has been given star status in many TV series and films. Via mysterious routes and by means of a loophole the Miranda warning has ended up as a sign that is famous amongst signs, being acclaimed as a manifestation of **ritual**.

We will never be able to trace to our satisfaction the point where routine undergoes a metamorphosis and becomes a **ritual**. Metamorphosis as we know does not occur as an evolutionary transition. When **ritual** flies through the window, routine has already fled through the door.

It is worth knowing that instead of this circuitous, mysterious route by which (unexpectedly) one ends up with **ritual**, the Aborigines of Australia, the last discovered continent, have taken the shortest possible cut to arrive at the ceremony. In the film *Two Laws* they inform us of their rule: "their law is their ceremony, their dreaming place, their land." They state this rule in all possible sequences and variations: "their ceremony is their dream time, in their ceremony they learn their law, their land is their dreaming place, i.e. the place of their ceremony."

By the word "dreaming" that the Aboriginals have been lumped with by the English we should not understand the normal meaning of the word for modern English speakers. Modern English no longer has any idea of the omnipotence of thought; in its stead it believes in the real world, following Frazer in treating everything else as supernatural or Freud in regarding it as dreams or the unconscious. But the Aboriginals know that the world was thought up, that it was "dreamed" in the sense that the 16th century Spanish dramatist Calderón used the word. The plot of *La vida es sueño* takes place in the traditional ceremonial Europe and deals with Sigismundo's ability to make use of the divinatory art of dreams.

The dreaming specialist of modern Europe, Sigmund Freud, has

stripped dreams of their divinatory power of preceding events, giving them instead the task of testifying to events that occurred long ago - at one's birth or even before. It comes as no surprise then that his contemporaries and competitors in the fifth continent were relegated by him (and many other of his fellow Europeans) to a distant past from which they were supposed to bear witness to the earliest developments of humanity. Due to the tardy discovery of the Australian dreaming specialists Freud thought he was right to treat them as the most primitive among the primitives (*Totem and Taboo*).

Maybe we can use the denigratory name as a sobriquet and think of the Aborigines as the first and the best people who in their `songlines' (see Bruce Chatwin's book) tracked down the artificiality and signifying power of **ritual**. For this very reason they are fated to inhabit our dreams, our horror stories and thrillers (see Peter Weir's film *The Last Wave*) or else they depict our gloomy prophecies of environmental disasters (see the film *Where the Green Ants Dream* made by Werner Herzog).

Literature only by request.