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Gordon Coonfield & John Huxford
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News Images as Lived Images: Media Ritual, Cultural Performance, and Public Trauma

Gordon Coonfield & John Huxford

This article considers the relation between news images—images captured, selected, written about, printed, and distributed in the course of the news process—and cultural performances—those everyday embodied modes of expressive enactment by which individuals meaningfully and collectively create their worlds. While scholarship on media from a ritual perspective has contributed a great deal to understandings of the cultural dimensions of the production of news images, it remains focused on the sites and practices of encoding. This article calls upon the concept of performance to explore those sites, relations, and practices in which the decoding of news images obtain. After a review and critique of the literature on news as ritual and a definitional overview of the performance concept, it considers two cases which explore the ways news images of September 11, 2001 became lived images through specific cultural performances.

Keywords: Ritual; Performance; Photojournalism; News; Visual Culture

“...we become what we behold” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 19).

Introduction

In Watching the World Change: The Stories Behind the Images 9/11, David Friend (2006) expresses what has become the orthodoxy of our visual culture:

I believe ... in the power of pictures. I believe that the digital age, as no period before it, has turned ours into a world awash in visual information. I believe that in
this era of political spin, agitprop, Photoshop, and made-for-TV reality, we still regard the photograph . . . as conveying a kernel of truth. And I believe that deep in our psyches we are constructed like cameras (Friend, 2006, p. xiv).

If this orthodoxy is accepted, it is unsurprising the events of 9/11 would be conceived to create a “symbolic image” (Richard, 2002, p. 211), that terrorism would demand “frightened eyes,” and that photographing the events of that day would replace “seeing” as the necessary correlate to “believing” (Friend, 2006, p. xi). And it is little wonder that “the pictures meant everything.”

We wish to challenge, if not the orthodoxy of our visual culture or even the power of pictures, at least the belief that they are “everything.” We maintain that, if we are anything “deep in our psyches,” we are not cameras but performers. This paper considers the relation between news images—photographs sought, captured, selected, written about, printed, and distributed in the course of the news process—and cultural performances—everyday embodied modes of expressive enactment by which individuals “constitute and sustain their identities and collectively enact their worlds” (Conquergood 1983, p. 27). This intersection raises important questions: What happens when the broadcast is ended or the newspaper recycled? How do news images relate to the cultural collective during periods when it feels itself traumatized by events which the overwhelming majority witnessed only insofar as they were photographed? Precisely how do we “become what we behold?”

To address these questions, this paper considers the scholarship concerning news as ritual. While it has contributed a great deal to our understanding of the cultural dimensions of the news process and the images that process produces, such studies remain focused on what Hall (1993) terms the “codes of encoding”: the material conditions of news images’ production. The ritual effects of news images are “read off” (Hall, 1985, p. 91) their appearance, which is elaborated in terms of the practices which cause them to appear. This focus on the encoding of images pulls up short of considering what Hall describes as the “codes of decoding,” the “articulation” of language and images “in real relations and conditions” (p. 95). This study seeks to shift the focus from the sites and processes of visual production to the sites of news images’ “audiencing” (Rose, 2001), and the practices through which images are interpreted, their meanings negotiated and enacted, and their affective potentials appropriated into everyday life.

To that end, this study looks to the concept of performance to explore those practices and sites of decoding. After a definitional overview of the performance concept, we consider the ways news images of September 11, 2001 (hereafter 9/11) were appropriated in specific cultural performances. Because of the extent and impact of news coverage of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and the pivotal role they played (Cottle 2002, Jamieson & Waldman, 2003), news images of the events of 9/11 offer particularly fertile ground for this exploration. In mapping the post-9/11 visual landscape, we explore two case studies involving the ways in which news images were appropriated and transformed into lived images through cultural performance. The first case considers how multiple elements of patriotic iconography were combined with the two towers of the World Trade Center
(hereafter WTC), into community celebrations of Independence Day, 2002. The second concerns a particularly iconic news image which came from the aftermath of 9/11: Tom Franklin’s photograph of firemen raising the American flag over the WTC ruins. We theorize the process through which news images are granted an afterlife in the everyday through an analysis of the ways these images were appropriated into cultural performance.

**News Image As Ritual**

The news media’s use of striking images in reportage has long been an area of interest for media scholars (Hall, 1977; Edelman, 1989; Graber, 1990; Griffin, 2004). This research has centered on contesting claims about the indexical nature of news photographs. Claims of indexicality align the journalistic “rite of objectivity” (Robinson, 2006) with the technology and techniques of photography which are promoted as an unperturbed, “codeless” window on the world of newsworthy events (Barthes, 1977, p. 17). However, scholars have pointed to the connotative properties inherent in the news process, and thus to the use of photographs in news as a social practice that thoroughly reflects the ideological values that serve as their *mise en scène* (Hall, 1973; Sontag, 1973; Zelizer 1995; Griffin, 2004). Both the press and broadcast media rely on visual symbolism to supply photographic validation of “abstract issues and qualities that cannot, in the normal sense, be validated visually” (Huxford, 2001, p. 45). Past news and historical events can be deployed to frame present, otherwise insensible events (Robinson, 2006). Moreover, as Zelizer (1998, 2002) has shown, even the aesthetics of composition and the cultural frames or “templates” which organize spectatorship in past news images can directly influence the composition, editorial selection, and textual framing of current images.

Such examples of the ideological and symbolic properties of the news photograph move the focus away from the issue of indexicality and open up an alternative approach to the study of images in the news. This move highlights the *ritual* work of journalism in cultural life and its special role in the creation and maintenance of collectivities and identities. As initially defined in anthropology and the study of folklore, ritual involves the “periodic restatement of the terms in which [people] of a particular culture must interact if there is to be any kind of a coherent social life” (Turner, 1968, p. 6). In viewing communication as “a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed,” rather than as the processes by which information is transported from sender to receiver, ritual approaches to the study of mass communication have as their focus the “actual social processes” within which “symbolic forms are created, apprehended and used” (Carey, 1989, pp. 23, 30). Thus, investigations into the ritual aspects of journalism have emphasized the importance of viewing news not as the transmission of information, but as what Turner (1981) termed social drama. In the words of Carey (1989), news does not describe the world but “portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action” in which a reader joins “as an observer at a play” (p. 21).
From this perspective, journalism’s central task is to “construct” a cultural collective, “to put flesh on” the otherwise vague concepts and themes which underlie collectivity and thus “help make them real” (Gans, 1979, p. 19). The unifying work of ritual—and of ritualistic journalism—becomes particularly crucial when death or destruction threatens the social order. As Myerhoff (1984) argues: “Ritual is prominent in all areas of uncertainty, anxiety, impotence and disorder. By its repetitive character it provides a message of pattern and predictability.” In the case of death, perhaps the apogee of uncertainty, ritual enacts a “transformation of a natural biological event into a cultural drama, shaped to human purpose until it becomes an affirmation rather than a negation of life” (p. 150). The ritual work of news becomes particularly clear in those key ceremonial moments in which journalism works to consolidate and perpetuate communal identity (Handelman, 1990; Ehrlich, 1996). Research into the role of journalism in these times of “high drama” has centered most frequently on the live news coverage of what Dayan and Katz (1992) describe as media events: the contests, conquest, and coronations which have relevance for one or more of the core values of society (p. 199).

While scholarship on news-making as ritual has proven a productive alternative to the “transmission” view of news, it nevertheless displays a tendency to focus on the sites and practices of production, or what Hall (1993) describes as the moment of encoding. As in Carey’s (1989, p. 21) analogy of “an observer at a play,” the audience that views a news image (be it broadcast or print) is relegated to the largely passive role of spectator. For example, while Dayan and Katz (1992) insist media events require our “active involvement,” it is difficult to see what—beyond gathering together to “witness” the event as it unfolds in live broadcast—an audience actually does. In such accounts, audiences serve as mirrors emotionally and psychologically reflecting the rites of passage which their “heroes” undergo. But the extent to which audience participation is registered is heavily regulated by that reflection. There seems little difference between the “erotic semi-consciousness” of normal television viewing and viewing, and viewing that transforms one’s living room into public, ritual space (p. 121). Viewing is seen as simply reproducing the wider public space in which the ritual occurs—the living room becomes “as if” it were that ceremonial space. In other words, any audience response is understood in terms of the range of responses deemed appropriate for those who are actually present for the event being reported. Considered in this light, what constitutes a good media performance would be any instance in which media coverage more or less comports with the rituals they broadcast. Such media coverage simply reflects the form and contents, meanings and values encoded in the ritual in question. Even when a viewer is aware of the media presence, so long as coverage aligns with the technical and social norms of the situation and doesn’t call attention to itself, it remains unremarkable.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from scholarship taking ritual approaches to the news coverage of 9/11. Discussing the ritual processes of redemption and recovery in news narratives after 9/11, Kitch (2003) observes that America seems capable of
imagining itself as a community almost exclusively in times of nationwide bereave-
ment. This communion, Kitch argues, is achieved via the media “which can create 
and convey a feeling of (temporary) national consensus” (p. 213). In this, the news 
coverage—and the news media—become sites for enacting civil religion: “news media 
themselves enacted [religious] ceremonies and expressed [religious] sentiments.” 
Whether through framing, through use of symbols, through the narratives they 
deploy, or through rhetorical strategies, news—not readers—forges a community by 
performing a ceremonial function that “helps to unify society at key moments” (p. 
214). This ritual effect is regarded as uniform and occurs somehow simply because 
the news is viewed or read.

Ritual and the Lively Possibilities of Performance

Analysis of what journalistic media are doing when they are making the news is 
significant in its own right, and there is merit to an approach which reads ritual off 
the news product. However, while journalistic ritual may be read off the news, any 
socio-cultural effect of news—such as collective and personal healing in cases of 
public trauma—cannot. To suggest otherwise is to presume that the moment of 
encoding is all powerful in determining a delimited set of socio-cultural effects. When 
the moment of decoding is collapsed into the moment of encoding, it follows that 
those who read or view news live out their lives as mere functions or reflexes of the 
news process. They are mirrors held up to news’ ritual reality.

However, there is more at issue than the presumption of a more-or-less passive 
reader or viewer. First, reading socio-cultural effects off the news presumes a static 
view of the relation between media and society. As Cottle (2004) notes “whether 
approached as essentially consensual (Dayan and Katz), conflicted (Hunt, Fiske) or 
spectacular (Kellner), the discussion of ‘media events’ . . . too easily grants self-
sufficiency to the media phenomenon” (p. 420). The media are themselves seen as 
sufficiently effectual—considerations of other kinds of “social action” to which they 
may be related become superfluous. Cottle, quoting Durkheim (1915), offers a 
reading of ritual as society in action: “society cannot make its influence felt unless it is 
in action, and it is not in action unless the individuals who compose it are assembled 
together and act in common” (Cottle, 2004, p. 414). While the “media sphere” is one 
increasingly prominent stage on which a society’s enactment occurs, it is far from the 
only one. Furthermore, Durkheim gestures at the importance of considering the role 
of “the individuals who compose” society. Perhaps this leads Cottle to conclude that 
“performativity,” as it applies to the enactment of society, “is not confined to the 
performative ‘doing’ of the media producers but includes the ‘doing’ of ‘spectators’ as 
well, who actively enter into (‘commit themselves to’) the proceedings and who can 
identify themselves and their sentiments within them” (pp. 428–429).

As with much writing on ritual, this comes to the threshold of performance as we 
conceive it, yet without stepping across to embrace its potential. While the efficacy or 
agency of the media are more clearly spelled out, that of the spectators continues to 
be limited to “commitment” to and identification with the proceedings of mediated
rituals. Here, too, despite the insights, there remains a tendency to confine participation to its spectatorial mode. We argue it is a small but significant step from ritual to performance. As Rappaport (1989) notes, ritual is “not simply one of many modes of communication,” but “the one that has made other sorts of human communication possible, particularly those resting on language” (emphasis added). Moreover, if ritual is the mode underlying all others, then performance is a *sine qua non* of ritual: “If there is no performance, there is no ritual; performance itself is an aspect of that which is performed” (p. 467). Failing to acknowledge the multiply-layered performances implicit to any media ritual—the performances of principles, of those reporting and recording, of those attending—is a failure to apprehend the significance of performance to ritual, one which seriously undermines claims concerning the ritual work of news images.

This leads to a second critical point. Accounts of media ritual tend to presume the superiority of text over other, arguably more fundamental aspects of a ritual’s iteration. Worthen (1995) notes that such textocentric logics are deeply invested in “the stabilizing, hegemonic functioning of the Author itself” (p. 14). Textocentrism is thus bound up in the dominant epistemologies of Western societies, which “link knowing with seeing” (p. 147). Conquergood similarly opposes the “hegemony of textualism” to more performance-centered ways of knowing. The latter involve “a view from ground level” and constitute an understanding “anchored in practice and circulated within a performance community” (p. 146). Expanding the focus to include performance thus directs attention to cultural forms of meaning-making which, while perhaps more “ephemeral” than textual forms, can nonetheless help the critic become “attuned to meanings that are masked, camouflaged, indirect, embedded, or hidden in context” (p. 146).

One important benefit of embracing the concept of performance is that it provides a focus precisely on those ephemeral elements of media ritual that have often been neglected. In doing so, it not only offers an alternative form of knowledge and communicative practice, but also approaches media ritual in a way that resists a static view of media-society relations. Furthermore, it supplies a theoretical openness to the potential for expressions of meaning other than those favored by the “codes of encoding” (Hall, 1993). As Turner (1988) argues, the relationship between a “social system” or its “cultural configuration” and genres of cultural performances is not “unidirectional.” Cultural performances do not simply “reflect” or “express” the socio-cultural matrix within which they occur. Rather, the relation is “reciprocal and reflexive,” in that “the performance is often a critique, direct or veiled, of the social life it grows out of, an evaluation (with lively possibilities of rejection) of the way society handles history” (p. 22).

To pull Turner’s parenthetic remark to the fore, no matter how strictly regulated and structured, a performance is always a site of “lively possibilities.” The space of such possibilities of performance—for critique, for evaluation of a society and culture—seem to be precisely of the sort Hall (1993) sought to defend in his encoding/decoding model of mass communication. While a society’s meanings may certainly be reproduced when audiences decode televisual messages, Hall argues such
messages also may be resisted and negotiated. It is unwise to overlook such “lively possibilities” in any sort of work that moves beyond the production of news images to a concern with their cultural effects. It is in defense of these possibilities that we turn to a brief summary of the performance concept, before offering case studies of the cultural performance of news images.

The Concept of Performance

The cultural phenomena to which scholars of performance attend are seldom the “global” sort that are mass-produced and mass-consumed. Rather, the focus has tended toward those lived, local cultural meanings and practices that both constitute and punctuate the everyday—local ceremonies, events, and experiences that often have little to offer in the way of news value, but which from a performance perspective are crucial for how individuals “constitute and sustain their identities and collectively enact their worlds” (Conquergood, 1983, p. 27).

Given the variety of phenomena which scholars of performance engage, it is unsurprising that the concept is “essentially contested’ (Carlson, 1996, p. 1) or that this flux in the concept is one of its salient features. Nevertheless, we undertake here an inclusive definition of performance derived from anthropology (Turner, 1979), communication (Conquergood, 1983, 2002), folklore (Bauman, 1974), cultural studies (Pollock, 1998), philosophy (Butler, 2004), sociology (Goffman, 1959), and theater (Schechner, 1973a, b). We do so in order to suggest its relevance to media studies, while also recognizing that other contexts will call upon those interested in the intersection of performance, media, and culture to contest even this ecumenical definitional effort.

The first commonality across this literature is the idea that performances are embodied. While it is perhaps better understood as the body one does than the body one is (Butler, 2004), a performance requires the presence of bodies for its accomplishment. While Chvasta (2004) insists the body need not be valorized at the expense of texts, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge the significance of embodiment—for both principles and others who variously attend to acts of performance—as an important component of performance, even in technologically-mediated environments. Embodiment is thus understood for our purposes as the presencing or “presentation” of selves to others in communicative interaction in the broadest sense (Goffman, 1967).

The second commonality is that performances are expressive. Perhaps the most succinct articulation of this comes from Schechner’s (1973a) assertion that “performance is a kind of communicative behavior” (p. 3). However, a performance is not a passive conduit for the transmission of informational messages, nor is it a simple reflection of a script. Rather, performance is simultaneously a way of being in and knowing the world (Conquergood, 2002; Chvasta, 2004), one that, in contrast with the “paradigmatic” and objective knowledges associated with textualism, permits access to “ephemeral” knowledges and meanings (Conquergood, 2002, 146). Performance is thus constitutive of human experience and expression and is
fundamental to all other forms of communication. It is in this sense that Turner’s aphorism—performance is “making, not faking” (cited in Conquergood, 1983)—can be understood. To perform is neither simply to mimic or ‘fake’ oneself (Goffman, 1959). Even when one is being deceptive, a performance demands tacit knowledge and acceptance of the “social text” (Conquergood, 1983, p. 30) that scripts the performance and belief in the role one is playing (Goffman, 1959). Performance is thus imbued with a communicative impulse, one that invokes and implies others—even if the audience is oneself.

The kind of embodied communicative experience involved in performance points to a third commonality. Whatever its effect—whether it “excites emotions” or “arouses us to action,” whether “ecstatic, therapeutic, confrontational,” or “instructive”—a performance is an enactment (Stem & Henderson, 1993, p. 4). Insofar as performances “carry something into effect,” their study concerns the processes whereby meanings are “enacted” (Kapchan, 1995, p. 479). A performance elicits and resonates with other expressive acts carried on in other bodies within a scene or situation. Like a stone dropped in a still pool, performances are “events” (Schechner, 1973b, p. 8) with the acts that take place in both performers and audience radiating outward and reverberating back—often in altered form.

The fourth characteristic of performance is its radically contextual nature. Kapchan (1995) explains that performances “situate actors in time and space” (p. 479). Schechner’s (1973) definition of performances as “the whole constellation of events” occurring “from the time the first spectator enters” to “the time the last spectator leaves” captures their temporally and spatially bounded quality (p. 8). But a performance is enveloped in other respects as well. Edensor (2000) observes that performances are “culturally and socially located as well” (p. 325). Butler (2004) suggests the embodied locus of gender performance is a “situation” enveloped in interpretations and actions, all of which comprise the scene within which the project of gender is undertaken. Goffman (1959) similarly describes situations as interaction frames, the social-semiotic envelopes which serve as resources for performers who reciprocally define them. Conquergood (1983) in fact emphasizes the significance of scene to the sense-making aspects of performance: “the expressive and consequential force of an act cannot be experienced or understood apart from the scene of its enactment” (p. 31, original emphasis).

In as much as it concerns radically contextual, embodied, expressive enactment, performance focuses attention to precisely the spaces and practices we wish to highlight—the spaces of Turner’s “lively possibilities,” and the practices of Hall’s (1993) moment of decoding, in which language and images are articulated “on real relations and conditions” (p. 95). Focusing on performance in connection with the ritual of news directs attention to the material practices through which news images are taken up from screens or pages and lived out in the everyday acts by which a people “become” what they “behold” (McLuhan, 1994, p.19).

As suggested above, those news images which become lived images serve as scripts rather than texts. This distinction constitutes a final, important characteristic of performances, one that distinguishes them from new images. As Schechner (1973b)
explains, scripts are “something—not necessarily a text—that pre-exists any given enactment,” and which serves as a blueprint for and “persists from enactment to enactment” (p. 6). Like the script of a play which remains an unrealized range of possibilities until someone appropriates it and in doing so enacts some of those possibilities, we argue that news images can be viewed as blueprints that can be appropriated in the performative spaces and practices of everyday life.

This understanding of scripts as iterative blueprints from which particular performances always both derive their sense and deviate, actively resists tendencies to encourage performances’ reduction to or conflation with texts or images. For example, in arguing that iconic photographs are “civic performances,” Hariman and Lucaites (2007) compare performances and photographs in a problematic manner. Viewing photos as mundane, mechanical, and endlessly reproducible is, they argue, inaccurate since photographs capture single/singular events. Conversely, viewing performances as singular, specific and special is inaccurate, they claim, because a performance can be reproduced thousands of times. However, this argument confuses different notions of “repetition.” The first notion of repetition is of the mechanical and textual sort, and may be described as a repetition of the same. The second sort of repetition typified by performance can be distinguished as a repetition with a difference (see McMahon, 2005). In the first sense of repetition, mechanical means make it possible to mass produce identical copies—however singular the event originally photographed (and, of course, even iconic photographs can be staged by the photographer, the subjects, or both). It is in the second sense of repetition-with-a-difference that Schechner (1985) describes performance as repeated or restored behavior. As Roach (2003) explains, “the paradox of the restoration of behavior resides in the phenomenon of repetition itself: no action or sequence of actions may be performed exactly the same way twice; they must be reinvented or recreated at each appearance” (p. 125).

Performing Trauma and Healing: News Images as Lived Images

In order to consider the implications of the shift of focus advocated here, this article turns to some examples which illustrate the potential of this approach for the study of news media. Our examples are drawn from Houghton, Michigan (USA) in the year following September 11, 2001 (9/11 hereafter). The home of Michigan Technological University, Houghton is in the Upper Peninsula, a region once renowned for its copper mines but now more well known for its natural beauty and isolation. On the afternoon of 9/11 and in the days and weeks following, the local paper, the Daily Mining Gazette (DMG hereafter), carried images captured from broadcast footage of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City, as well as the damage wrought on the Pentagon in Washington, DC. Despite the distance from the Upper Peninsula to New York City the “effects” of the attack were “felt in the Copper Country,” as one headline for a story on local reactions put it (Drake, 2001).

Just as rapidly as national news images shifted from the event, to the chaos it wrought, to individual and collective reactions and responses (Zelizer, 2002), images
and stories in the DMG almost immediately attended to local responses to 9/11. As many throughout the nation engaged in “performances of display” involving the U.S. flag and its famed colors (Coonfield, 2007), one front-page DMG article remarked that “hundreds of (area) residents displayed American flags in a sign of solidarity and patriotism” (Olson, 2001, pp. 1, 8). A photograph in the same issue showed city workers lowering a flag in a local park to half mast. In addition to these kinds of performances, area residents engaged in ritualized performances of mourning such as holding vigils at area churches—much like those occurring around the Nation. Other local events, including a Veterans of Foreign Wars ceremony and the observation of public holidays, became opportunities for people to gather, reflect and express their feelings in response to the events of 9/11.

As this overview suggests, local print news certainty looked to national news for many of its themes—as well as its images. But as this overview also suggests, it is important to consider the significance of performance outside the news process and sites of production and encoding, to focus on the local conditions under which images are appropriated and lived. As one DMG reporter put it, the variety and range of local performances in response to the attacks moved people “from a state of disbelief at seeing the attacks on television to a sense of sorrow and regret” and “helped many people adjust to the events” of 9/11 (Olson, 2001, p. 8). Simply watching news images move from representing the shock and disbelief that results from public trauma and toward healing—or even watching local news report these moves—pulls up short of fully engaging the cultural processes at work. For it is in radically contextual, embodied, expressive enactments—from public performances of mourning and religious reflection to performances involving displays of newsprint American flags—that collective trauma registers and healing occurs (Coonfield, 2007).

In sum, while local news looked to national news for its content and themes, it looked to local rituals and performances for ratification of its purpose, for validation of its coverage, and for confirmation of local news’ relevance and responsiveness to local cultural life. Perhaps it is this that sets 9/11 apart for the American cultural collective: unlike most other traumatic news images, the images of 9/11 were lived, not simply viewed. Even if one were to resort to deterministic and abstract schemas like ideology and national or public culture to argue that local culture merely “mimics” or reflects hegemonic meanings and values transmitted via news (again, rendering the moment of encoding determinant, effectively homogeneous, and largely uncontestable), we suggest it is through performance in the context of everyday life that such abstractions have any material existence or descriptive power at all. As Edensor (2002) argues, culture is “not a monolithic set of ideas adhered to by everybody” but a “seething mass” of elements lived out in mundane, quotidian forms and practices (pp. vi–vii). Emphases on “‘high,’ ‘official’ and ‘traditional’ culture” tend to exclude from consideration “popular and everyday cultural expression,” the “quotidian” often “unreflective acts by which people inscribe themselves in place” (pp. 2, 69).

In the interest of exploring the performances in which national identity is “grounded” (p. vii) and news images are adapted and lived, we extend the
implications of our argument in the following sections. We focus on two local events that featured the combination and adaptation of news images with local cultural performances. The first, involving a parade float and the image of the twin towers, occurred on Independence Day, 2002. The second, concerning an impromptu shrine erected at the site of a tragic fire, occurred in August, 2002.

The Twin Towers

Broadcast live and then in seemingly endless repetition, images of the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center were among the most indelible to emerge from 9/11. Watched by viewers across America and around the globe, these images came to serve as a kind of cultural epicenter of the day’s tragedy, making New York the site most featured in broadcast coverage of the day’s events (Mogensen et al., 2002). In the weeks that followed, these images filled front pages both in the United States and elsewhere (see Zelizer, 2002; Debatin, 2002). The DMG was no exception. Its front-page photographs on 9/11 were devoted entirely to the WTC attacks. As Richard (2002) suggests, it was in fact “the aim of this destructive terrorist attack” to create “a monumental image” (211).

The images of the twin towers collapsing into a billowing fog of smoke and dust had long drifted from the front page by Independence Day, 2002, when a front-page article titled “July 4: More Patriotic than Ever” reported that on the first Independence Day celebration since 9/11, thousands throughout the area gathered to “show their patriotism” (Olson, 2002). One float entered by a local Cub Scout pack seems to strike this patriotic note in a manner that deeply resonated with the images of 9/11 (see Figure 1). The stage is comprised of a flat-bed trailer trimmed with small U.S. flags and red, white and blue balloons and bunting, pulled along the parade route by a pickup truck which was similarly festooned. At the back of this stage stand two props, the tallest and most prominent elements on the float. As indicated by the large “WTC” in capital letters (see Figure 1), these figures are representations of the twin towers. A black cap and tee-shirt with “POLICE” printed in white lettering are arranged tombstone-like at the foot of the “north” tower. In the mid-ground, a young woman in a toga and sporting the famous torch and crown of the Statue of Liberty stands and waves at bystanders. The central foreground is dominated by a pair of black wall-like structures reminiscent of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial “wall” in Washington, DC. White lettering at the top confirms it is a “MEMORIAL WALL*” — with the white text underlined and “wall” further emphasized by white stars. Below this appears a list “bulleted” by stars, indicating in capital letters the patriotic nature and scope of the “memory”: “WORLD WARS,” “KOREA,” “VIETNAM,” “GULF WAR,” and “PEACTIME.” The memorial wall is “guarded” by two young men: one is dressed up in “jungle” fatigues, the other in the helmet, turnout, and boots of a fire fighter.

Parades are “self-consciously enacted” (Marston, 2002, p. 375) performances that produce a “set of symbols” which make visible and tangible a range of influences which may normally go unnoticed (Goodwin 1998, p. 215). As Blehr (1999) explains,
parades serve as “communicative vehicles” composed of complex sequences of ritual actions that cause the routines and space of the everyday to stand apart. In this instance, these claims can be taken literally: the everyday space of state Highway 26 has been transformed into a route for the display of the Cub Scout float, literally a communicative vehicle that brings together and “manipulates” a particular set of symbols (Lawrence, 1982, p. 158)—in this case, key images from the news.

If the destruction of the WTC is the most potent of 9/11 images, it is because unlike many of the other images, it has become relatively immobile. While an image like the U.S. flag can quite fluidly move us “elsewhere”—historically, semiotically, affectively—the towers seem to take us only to 9/11. When they are visible in the New York City skyline in still images, films, or televisions shows predating 9/11, they simply fast-forward us to that inevitable future, our past, in which the towers are spectacularly destroyed. Their presence is eclipsed by their future, inevitable absence. Where once they may have signified the “glory” of globalization and world-capitalism (Hankiss, 2001), they now symbolize destruction and loss. The Scout float enacts a paradox that circulates less obviously in post-9/11 visual culture. For the float to make sense—for it to perform 9/11 by organizing an affective terrain around the events of that day—the WTC really must be present again. By reconstructing the towers, the float re-presences them in order to signify their destruction and absence.

More importantly, we note the way news coverage of 9/11 is at once both resisted and embraced in this instance. A mimetic approach to news coverage—which presumes a straight-forward “mirroring” of news images by relatively passive spectators—would have required producing the cardboard twin towers painted

Figure 1. Photograph of Cub Scout float in Independence Day Parade, July 4, 2002 (Photograph by Patty Sotirin, used by permission).
with flames or in ruins, or more symbolically, the float might have borne a cross
dedicated to those who died or a gravestone marking the burial of the “deceased”
towers. Instead, we see the twin towers are here rebuilt.

The performance is not without its ambiguities. Including the twin towers within
the parade is a direct reminder the towers were destroyed, and thus the WTC model
inevitably marks absence rather than presence. However, it is equally clear that the
performance constitutes a transformation of the news image of crumbling stonework
into something more hopeful: an attempt to adapt visual culture and utilize cultural
performance to repair the affective rupture that 9/11 induced.

The vulnerability of this balance between destruction and resurrection, presence
and absence, is underscored by the flurry of symbolism that forms a protective ring
around the towers. Arguably the float’s ambition is to perform an emergent set of
associations meant to contain and commemorate the loss of human life, the loss of
property, the destruction of a symbol and the resulting trauma inflicted on the
cultural collective. First, there is the emergent association of the civilian victims of the
WTC attacks with the deaths of veterans of foreign wars. By juxtaposing the re-
presented World Trade Center and the Memorial Wall with the civilian victims—
inscribing on the latter “PEACETIME” so as to linguistically assert that connection—
the float links dying in 9/11 with the rituals of patriotic memory reserved for military
veterans. This connection is reiterated by the performance of the young man in jungle
fatigues, who stands alongside the Memorial Wall with the one dressed as a fire
fighter. But this association points to another element of the emergent meanings
performed in the float. The fire fighter and the absent “POLICE” indicate the
inclusion, perhaps for the first time in a systematic way, of rescue personnel into the
pantheon of celebrated patriots. Independence Day typically celebrates the former
colony’s declaration of emancipation from British rule in 1776, the ensuing War of
Independence (not listed on the Memorial Wall) through which that “liberty” was
secured, and by extension those who have sacrificed their lives for similar National
causes since. However, in this case the celebration and commemoration of sacrifice
for the “cause of liberty” is extended to those who, whatever their nationality or
feelings about patriotism, simply showed up to work that day. This is not to denigrate
the loss of life or question the motives or sacrifices of those in the emergency services.
We simply note that this set of associations was undertaken in cultural performances
like this one.

The connection of rescue workers to war veterans is strongly linked to other
potent, patriotic symbols. The bunting and flags that enshroud the float, together
with the performance of the young woman dressed as the Statue of Liberty, reinforce
the connection to patriotism. These symbols of national pride resonate with those
implicit in the “memorial wall” to enact a set of meanings that were important to the
creation of this post-traumatic space. Presented by themselves, the two towers would
likely be taken as ambiguous or, less generously, macabre. By rooting the towers in
other signs that help to fix their meaning, their traumatic signficance is figuratively
and literally contained. While the float offers to resurrect the WTC, it does so in a
frenzy of signification that seems to demonstrate the obduracy of the towers as a
symbol of growing national significance. The other images pulled from news coverage of 9/11, as well as those borrowed from the historical and popular imaginary, encircle and contain the float’s towers.

It is important to note that this float does not reproduce any one image. And it in no way aims to re-present specific images. If anything, the float might be better thought of as a play whose script or “blueprint” is the entire cluster of images associated not only with 9/11 and its aftermath, but also with those associated with patriotism—from war films too varied and voluminous to list to the Statue of Liberty, to the U.S. flag and its colors. The relation of this cultural performance which bring together and manipulate a wide range of symbols is taken to reflect “dominant” meanings and connections or not, this example demonstrates a phenomenon linked to news but extending far beyond the reaches of the news process. News images—and no doubt many others—here become lived images, images appropriated (not simply seen, interpreted, or displayed, and certainly not by culturally or politically significant individuals) in the expressive and ritual enactment of connection and healing. Our second case extends this observation further.

**Raising the Flag**

Next to the destruction of the WTC towers, Tom Franklin’s photograph of firemen raising the flag over what came to be known as “the pit” was one of the most iconic images carried in the news in the aftermath of September 11 (Hariman & Lucaites, 2002, 2007). The firemen’s poses, the cant and positioning of the flag, and the framing of Franklin’s photograph evoked Joe Rosenthal’s famous World War II photograph of U.S. Marines raising a flag at the battle of Iwo Jima. Though it did not appear on the pages of the *DMG* until the 2002 anniversary of September 11, Franklin’s image was widely reproduced (Jamieson & Waldman 2003; Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). Like the shots of the WTC towers, the Iwo Jima photograph was drawn from an event infamous for death and destruction (Ross, 1985; Wheeler, 1980). Rather than holding explicitly to the context of the event from which it was taken, the Iwo Jima image became emblematic of a series of positive attitudes and emotions connected with the endurance of the human spirit and triumph over adversity, as well perhaps as post hoc moral justification for the “good war.” Arguably, it is, as Hariman and Lucaites claim, this affective terrain, as much as the aesthetic, which framed Franklin’s image.

In the early morning of August 13, 2002, a fire destroyed the local Phi Kappa Theta fraternity house in Houghton, Michigan (Drake, 2002; Neavling, 2002). Firefighters arrived on the scene to find fraternity members standing nervously outside as the kitchen and upstairs were ‘fully engulfed’ in flames (Neavling, 2002). Tragically, Andrew Maas, a second-year engineering student at Michigan Technological University, died in the fire. In the days that followed, fraternity members sifted through the rubble found and displayed personal items belonging to Maas, including a mug bearing his fraternity nick name, the paddle he pledged with, his driver’s license, and a fraternity shirt (see Figure 2). These were joined by other items
retrieved from the rubble, several bouquets of flowers, candles from a night-time vigil, even what might be interpreted as offerings of half-finished sports drinks.

More importantly, several days after the fire, as fraternity members continued to sift through the demolished structure, there appeared atop the wreckage a display of the American flag and a flag bearing the Phi Kappa Theta insignia on a single pole (see Figure 3). The resemblance to Franklin’s photograph of the flag raising at the World Trade Center site is striking. It might be argued that this is simply a matter of photographic aesthetics or the reproduction of a template circulated via this recent iconic photograph. But as the police tape in the foreground indicates, the sidewalks and alley surrounding the site were cordoned off from public access. Figure 3 offers a view from the only publicly accessible vantage point, that of the main street from

Figure 2. Spontaneous shrine at sight of Phi Kappa Theta fire, taken August 19, 2002 (Photograph by author).
which the flags were visible to passers by. The photograph is framed not only by the photographer, but by police and by those who performed these acts of display.

Thus, while this photograph is certainly no less subject to the vicissitudes of the medium than a news photograph, the point we are making goes beyond the referentiality of images. The figures we offer here should by no means be construed as representing a reality. Rather, each moves and draws us—or as Wittgenstein put it “reaches”—toward the multiple layers of performances, and along with them toward the events which always elude the camera. As Kennerly (2002) observes of roadside shrines, this shrine is an arrangement of expressive elements in a time and a space specific to them. The artifacts organized in this spontaneous shrine “mark several interconnected layers of performance” which charge this space, making it a “performance (vortex)” (p. 233).

First, there is a rich layer of performances of grieving and mourning. These arguably take as their blueprints images of what Grider (2001) terms spontaneous shrines. These emerged at all three sites of the terrorist attacks, but especially in the vicinity of the World Trade Center in New York City. They have been well-documented both in news coverage and in photographic exhibits like Jonathan Hyman’s “9/11: A Nation Remembers” at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, PA. While these responses to 9/11 are hardly the first time such shrines have made the news (see Jorgensen-Earp & Lanzilotti, 1998), Grider notes that news coverage of the September 11 shrines “attracted the attention of viewers and mourners throughout the world” (p. 1). These memorials often included photographs, items belonging to individuals being mourned, as well as notes, patriotic memorabilia, votive candles and other “offerings.” As Grider suggests, they emerge as “communal and spontaneous performances of grief,” serving as “a way for people to work out a personal connection to an otherwise numbing catastrophe”
The fraternity house shrine shares more in common with the roadside shrines Kennerly studies than with those that appear as responses or precursors to other, official national memorials (Jorgensen-Earp & Lanzilotti, 1998). This shrine seems neither to simply resist nor reinforce hegemonic meanings and values, so much as it “strain(s) against an either/or dialectic, enacting instead a dynamic, complex relationship with/within these forces” (Kennerly, 2002, p. 232).

This layer of performances serves as both an aesthetic and affective mise en scène for a second layer. These involve the displaying of the flag. Like the shrine, the flags are organized in an aesthetically sensitive manner. What is more, they organize the site, conferring a sense of direction and frontality upon what is otherwise simply chaos. The flags were positioned such that a passerby, whether on foot or in a vehicle, would see them—and arguably see them correctly, as a display-performance scripted by the Franklin photograph. But there was no terrorism here, only a tragic accident. No police or rescue workers were killed, and no military personnel were involved—only a fraternity member. The event has nothing like the magnitude of 9/11. Yet, compositionally, aesthetically, and more importantly affectively, the site takes the news photograph as its script. The fact of the fire and the presence of firemen on the site, recorded by local media, offer an implicit connection to the photo. And this connection is strengthened by the links to victim-hood, destruction, and tragic loss of life, as well as spiritual endurance and triumph over adversity—in other words, the whole affective terrain circulating alongside both the Franklin and Rosenthal photographs.

There is a third layer that might go unnoticed, but which is no less important. These displays are meant to elicit other acts of performance. The passerby is invited to recognize the aesthetic script, to mourn the student’s life as well as his death, to glimpse the multiple ways in which the student was connected to the lives and activities of others, to acknowledge their loss, to meditate on the tragedy, and, most important, to remember. Whether it is a passerby or a photographer, an academic or a reporter, the site is organized to position those who see and experience it with respect to its subject. These performances hail an audience as more than voyeurs or interpolated subject and compels that audience to perform in turn—even if that is to perform indifference.

**Conclusion**

This third layer invites concluding reflection on the special conditions underlying this assemblage of performances, conditions which throw light on the relationship between mass mediated rituals and performances. In a sense like (though quite different from) Rosenthal’s or Franklin’s photographs, the movements of bodies and materials in particular spaces and moments which constitute the flags’ raising and the shrine’s making as events are frozen. As performance hotspots (Kennerly, 2002, p. 232), shrines are perdurable. They involve acts of raising and displaying flags, acts of searching through rubble, collecting and arranging memorabilia, even of laying flowers, burning candles and praying together—all shared, communicative, local, and...
evocative of the many emotions experienced as these gestures were undertaken. They remain there for a time, persisting in the space of their occurrence, even as they contract the movements of bodies and the duration of moments in which those movements occurred. They are insistent, indicative of “the determined nature of vernacular expression” (Jorgensen-Earp & Lanzilotti, 1998, p. 166). But unless they are recorded (described, photographed) or preserved (monumentalized, memorialized), these performances cannot be experienced and known in other places or responded to at other times. Such performances are fragile, radically contingent, and though filled with lively possibility, easily effaced.

These perdurable performances mediate time, but continue to mark and hold space, calling from there to those who pass through that space. Recording that perdurable performance in a photograph freezes its moment and lifts it from its space so that it may be made to circulate “elsewhere” as “news” (Sontag, 2003, 21). Yet news images, as we have argued, may hold their own lively possibilities for their audiences. For all that the camera “preys” upon the world, freezing the time of an event and wresting it from its time-space particularity (Flusser, 2000), the decoding of a photograph, and the assimilation of that image into life, opens richly complex and unpredictable potentialities. Much as Hall (2006) explores the relationship between images and memories in processes of subject formation, and as Munoz (1999) argues for examining strategies of re and mis-appropriations of cultural objects and discourses, we suggest that news images may be not the final determinants so much as cultural resources utilized in, and adapted for, rituals related to public trauma.

Acts of individual and collective performance are central to the process of freeing captive moments from photographic stasis. However, the line between photograph and performance is more fluid and more permeable than might first appear. The local performances that we have discussed in this article—which clearly link to the news and the images that news circulates—are themselves often fed back into the news process. The Cub Scout float makes this dynamic visible. News images were taken up, adapted, lived. They were articulated into cultural performances that associated them with other, older rituals. The meanings which emerged from this set of symbols and associations performed in the public space of a parade became news images in turn featured in local print and broadcast media. From there they can potentially find their way—via wire service—to a national stage. As such, they become more visual material for still other appropriations—appropriations which are outside the circuit of the news process as traditionally understood—inspiring others to engage those images through performances that respond to local conditions of their own.

Considered from the direction of this analysis, news becomes both a cultural storehouse and a stage where the lively possibilities of performance can be held, shared, enacted, contested, even set aside for still other, future use. While news images and lived images are not reducible to one another, this analysis suggests the intricacies of their relationship and offers a shift in emphasis. For events and performances are first local and particular before (perhaps as a necessary condition) they can become global images. When we read off news images the ritual effects they claim to record and we claim they have, we dangerously grant media self-sufficiency by contravening
their socio-cultural contexts; we erroneously assume any effect (however understood) as merely cognitive, linear and predictable, a meaning uniformly reflected in the mind of the audience that simply mirrors what it is we think they see there; and we ignore all the richly ephemeral, “lively possibilities” from which the journalistic ritual emerges and into which it continually returns.

Notes

[1] We mean here to resonate with Stuart Hall’s (1987) argument against the notion that different kinds of cultural phenomena appearing at different “levels” of a social totality are mere reflections of economic reality. That is, the belief that culture simply can be “read off” the relations and mode of production (the economy “in the last instance”). While we do not intend to conjure the specter of “ideology” as such, we find a similar logic at work in writing about news images: the notion that the moment of their “production” determines in the last instance their appearance and meaning at any given level of social practice. Contesting this logic and elaborating one alternative is the goal of this essay.

[2] As Turner (1981) defines them, social dramas involves four stages: breech (violation of a norm or rule), crisis (a “momentous juncture” between social actors precipitated by that breech), redress (formal or informal ritual mechanisms for resolving the crisis), and recognition (either of social reintegration of irreparable schism) (pp.145–147).

[3] Because we broach similar subject matter (photojournalism, the Franklin photograph) and use similar language (appropriation, performance), the work of Hariman and Lucaites (2001; 2002; 2003; 2007) on iconic rhetoric deserves some comment. While their interests are not unrelated to our own, there are at least two important points of distinction we wish to make here. First, they focus on public culture and the role of iconic images in providing a “civic education” for “liberal democratic citizenship” in “large, heterogeneous states” held together “by mass communication” (2007, p. 17). Their analysis of particular iconic images and their catalog and critique of heterogeneous appropriations of these images focuses largely on various actors on the mass-media stage. We view their analysis as consistent with the ritual approaches discussed above. In contrast to their “global” interest in a dispersed and diffuse “imagined community,” we are interested in the ways images are incorporated into performances as local acts of individual and collective sense-making. Lived images may or may not ever involve or become iconic images, but they are, for a moment, profoundly important in a particular (rather than dispersed and abstract) time and place. Thus, as a second point of distinction, rather than place particular iconic images at the center, our theoretical framing and the consequent analysis place particular performances at the center of attention. We connect these to the peripheral mass mediated images which we argue these performances appropriate. We discuss below differences in our understanding and use of the term performance.

[4] Such mechanical repetition characterizes what Baudrillard (1994) terms the age of simulation, a hyperreality involving “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (p. 1). In a different but related sense, McLuhan & Fiore (1967) described such repetition as the basis of modem, mass production: “Printing, a ditto device confirmed and extended the new visual stress. It provided the first uniformly repeatable ‘commodity,’ the first assembly line” (p. 50).

[5] On the afternoon of 9/11, the front page of the DMG was dominated by a triptych depicting: (1) the explosion immediately following the second plane’s impact; (2) the second plane approaching its target; and below these (3) a landscape view of Manhattan as the first tower collapses into a billowing fog of dust, smoke, and debris. A smaller, fourth image separated
from these at the very bottom of the page, depicted New Yorkers fleeing in the wake of the collapse.

[6] Edensor’s turn to performance is welcome, and, while he insists his use of performance is metaphorical (see Edensor, 2002, p. 69; 2000, p. 322), in both spirit and practice his concern over the inflexible and abstract nature of much theorizing of national identity lies close to the concerns regarding media studies addressed here.

[7] The inclusion of victims of 9/11 in the pantheon of patriotic heroes was reiterated in a memorial ceremony held after the parade in a local park. Before a display of the U.S. flag accompanied by a color guard and representatives of the local Veterans of Foreign Wars post, a poem inspired by 9/11 titled “One” was read. The poem, which has been posted on some 800 web sites (see Sawyer, 2003), makes similar patriotic connections through a subjunctive celebration of National unity.

[8] Hariman and Lucaites argue that the Franklin photo is particularly unusual in this respect. It is, they explain, the first (and thus far only) time that a new iconic photograph (the Franklin photo) has drawn upon the template of an earlier iconic photograph (the Rosenthal photo) (2007, p. 131). The significant elements in the performance we discuss here—the tangle of debris, the police tape and evident presence of rescue personnel on the site, as well as the temporal and affective proximity to 9/11—suggest it is more reasonable to connect the shrine to Franklin’s, rather than Rosenthal’s photograph.


[10] Notable precedents of news coverage of such spontaneous shrines include coverage of Princess Diana’s tragic death and funeral and the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal building in Oklahoma City, OK.

References
News Images as Lived Images: Media Ritual, Cultural Performance, and Public Trauma


