

Review for *Anthropological Theory* (February 2004) of Couldry, N. (2003) *Media Rituals: a Critical Approach*, London: Routledge.

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Recently, a number of anthropologists have taken an interest in the relationship between ritual and media. Some of this work can be found in a 1998 edited volume entitled *Media, Ritual and Performance*. In her introduction, F. Hughes-Freeland's engages with the problem of defining ritual. In post-structuralist fashion, she does so by eschewing 'essential' definitions in favour of an ad-hoc, relational approach. The term ritual becomes 'an odd-job word'. In stark contrast, *Media Rituals*, by the media theorist Nick Couldry, pursues a stable definition of 'media ritual' from beginning to end. Couldry describes his approach as 'post-Durkheimian' and 'anti-functionalist'. His starting point is Victor Turner's understanding of rituals as actions that embody and betoken transcendent values rather than as texts that 'express' cultural ideals (Geertz). Media rituals are actions that reproduce the 'myth' of the media as privileged access points to the centre of society – the 'myth of the mediated centre'. This mythical reproduction takes place through tacit categories (e.g. media v non-media person) as well as values that engage and direct our attention. Media rituals 'condense' these implicit categories and values into frames of performative action (Goffman). For instance, in the presence of a celebrity most ordinary people will act in extra-ordinary, ritualised ways. Another example of a media ritual would be clapping when directed by staff at a quiz show, or having pictures of oneself taken when on 'pilgrimage' to a soap opera set. This extensive mesh of rituals helps to sustain the myth of the mediated centre.

Couldry applies the concept of media ritual to three main media research areas: media events, reality television, and media pilgrimages. He takes issue with Dayan and Katz for subscribing to the myth of the mediated centre in their influential book, *Media Events* (1992). Describing their assumptions as functionalist, he doubts that media events such as the funeral of Princess Diana really enhanced social cohesion in Britain, let alone abroad. Instead he redefines media events as occasions when 'particularly intense' claims about accessing the social centre are being made. He then analyses reality TV as another genre that sustains the myth through its promise of taking audiences 'live' to the social centre with a minimum of fuss. The chapter on media pilgrimages reworks Turner's theory of pilgrimage. It offers a superb example of the media v non-media person categorisation at work. While the attempts by an ordinary person to locate and visit all the sites of an old television series were derided by a British tabloid as a costly addiction, the pilgrimage of a TV 'personality' to the set of *Star Wars* was lavishly celebrated on the pages of *OK* magazine.

The one element of *Media Rituals* that troubles me is the thesis that the mediated centre is a myth. My experience in Malaysia, Spain and elsewhere tells me that rural residents are well aware of the concentration of political, economic and cultural resources not in a single 'centre', but rather *in a few urban centres* – a concentration that Couldry himself stresses. Are they deluded in assuming that media professionals have better access to the nation's 'central' organisations, i.e. those which allocate strategic resources? I don't think they are. Since the mediated centre – or better,

centres – is no myth, perhaps a more enabling definition of media rituals would be *rituals that reproduce the media's privileged access to society's central organisations*.

Media Rituals is a timely contribution to anthropological, sociological and other efforts to elucidate the relationship between ritual and media. These efforts are still to achieve general recognition. In this respect, it is significant that two recent media anthropology readers, Ginsburg et al's (2002) *Media Worlds*, and Askew and Wilk's (2002) *The Anthropology of Media*, make between them but three passing references to ritual, none of them in the introductory discussions. Given also that both media studies and the sociology of media have made ample yet inconsistent use of the term ritual, Couldry's clarity of thought and expression is no mean achievement (a thorough survey of this erratic usage can be found in Günther Thomas' [1998] *Medien, Ritual, Religion*, alas in German).