

“Uncovering understanding in mediated realities:
Engaging video in teaching ritual, and engaging ritual in teaching video”

Mary E. Hess
Luther Seminary
Presented to the AAR at the Ritual Studies section
Tuesday, November 25, 2003, Atlanta, GA

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Introduction:

Ritual, whether understood broadly, or in a more narrow and technical sense as “liturgy,” is generally a human practice that is deeply sensual. It is difficult to imagine a ritual that does not in some way engage the body. As Anderson and Foley note, “ritual is embodied expression” (27). Yet many of the higher educational settings in which ritual is taught have a peculiarly disembodied character to them. Students in undergraduate classes read anthropological observations of rituals, seminary students explore the specific worship book rubrics for a ritual, and so on, in the process utilizing their verbal/linguistic skills, or exercising their capacities for logic, but it is difficult not to wonder if in learning ritual in these ways they might be missing something essential.

One response to this dilemma has been to introduce multi-media presentation of ritual into a classroom. Many teachers work with video, for instance, using films in VHS format to illustrate particular aspects of ritual. Video has proven to be a particularly evocative medium in which to work because it can elicit a variety of responses beyond the merely cognitive. Yet what are students learning when we teach in this way, and what might be critical questions to keep in mind in engaging video as a means of teaching ritual?

I have written elsewhere about the necessity of taking student’s affectivity and their psychomotor involvement into account when teaching in areas that pertain to liturgy, but in this essay I would like to focus more explicitly on specific ways in which to invite such learning.¹ What follows grows out of my very specific context as a professor in a Lutheran seminary, but I hope that it will prove evocative beyond that location. My primary assertion is that there is a strong reciprocity present in using video to teach ritual. In order to engage any kind of video well, it is necessary to understand the multiple ways in which people engage video materials in meaning-making. Indeed, recent scholarship suggests that one of the primary metaphors for describing that process of meaning-making is in terms of ritual. Thus the very elements it is important to explore in relation to video – namely, the dynamics and consequences of identity creation in ritual – are also the dynamics and consequences under consideration more generally in working with ritual. If one does *not* actively and critically reflect on the “framing” involved in any kind of video engagement, than it is difficult, if not impossible, to use video materials to

¹ “Rich treasures in jars of clay: Christian graduate theological education in a postmodern context,” in *The Conviction of Things Not Seen*.

explore ritual because the implicit learning taking place will likely overwhelm any explicit direction on the part of the teacher.

Uncovering understanding...

Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe have outlined a clear and substantive rubric for “understanding.”² In theological school contexts, a “rubric” is usually understood to be a framework of authoritative rules for liturgy, but in the educational context it is a “criterion-based scoring guide that enables assessors to make reliable judgments about student work and enables students to self-assess” (workbook, p. 281). In some ways the two uses overlap, particularly in the ways in which an educational rubric “identifies the key traits or dimensions to be examined and assessed,... and provides key features of performance for each level of scoring....” (workbook p. 281) – just as a liturgical rubric outlines the key elements of a particular liturgical celebration.

Why raise these definitions in an examination of the uses of video in teaching ritual? Precisely because the rubric that Wiggins and McTighe have outlined for facets of “understanding” is a particularly helpful one for assessing the uses of video in teaching ritual, and the uses of ritual in teaching video. Wiggins and McTighe argue that there are six “facets” involved in understanding: explanation, interpretation, application, perspective, empathy, and self-knowledge. Most teachers who work in higher education, whether in university or seminary settings, are familiar with the first three facets of this rubric. We are adept at identifying ways to examine and assess whether or not our students can explain the materials we’ve been working with, whether they are capable of sufficiently grounded interpretation of such materials, and – particularly in the seminary context – whether they are able to apply the materials under consideration to a range of situations.

What has generally proven to be far more difficult, however, has been arriving at measurable, appropriate guides for examining and assessing student learning in terms of perspective, empathy and self-knowledge. Indeed, in some ways we have not even begun to recognize that such elements of understanding are a necessary element of the learning we seek to invite. Under the element of “perspective,” for instance, Wiggins and McTighe note a spectrum that stretches from an “uncritical” stance which is “unaware of differing points of view, prone to overlook or ignore other perspectives; prone to egocentric argument and personal criticisms” all the way to an “insightful” stance that “effectively critiques and encompasses other plausible perspectives; takes a long and dispassionate, critical view of the issues involved” and so on. Under the element of “empathy” their rubric extends from “egocentric,” a position in which the student evidences “little or no empathy beyond intellectual awareness of others, sees things through own ideas and feelings,” all the way to “mature,” in which a student is “disposed and able to see and feel what others see and feel; unusually open to and willing to seek

² For a complete table of this rubric, see either ? or visit:
<http://pages.cpsc.ucalgary.ca/~becker/Main/Reference/Rubric%20for%20the%20Six%20Facets%20of%20Understanding.htm>

out the odd, alien, or different,” Finally, they argue that deep understanding includes “self-knowledge,” which can be “innocent” – “completely unaware of the bounds of one’s own understanding and of the role of projection and prejudice in opinions and attempts to understand,” or which can be stretched all the way to “wise,” or a position in which the student is “deeply aware of the boundaries of one’s own and others’ understanding, able to recognize his [sic] prejudices and projections; has integrity....” (77).

I have only my teaching experience to go on at the moment, but in my own practice it is generally these elements of understanding – perspective, empathy, self-knowledge – that are lacking when I sense my students not “getting” something about a specific form of ritual practice. I teach within a Lutheran seminary, so the forms of ritual I am most often engaging are Christian and liturgical in their shape and content. Much of the challenge I face with many of my students lays in inviting them to consider ways in which these traditional forms of liturgical practice might be powerful and meaningful to them, even if they also *feel* alien or “weird” in some manner.

I have found video a helpful medium in which to work on these elements of understanding, but I have also found that I can not work with this medium without at the same time inviting my students to reflect critically on video itself. In other words, as I note in the title of this essay, I try to work on uncovering understanding through engaging video in teaching ritual, and engaging ritual in teaching video.

Catherine Bell has noted three principles by which a practice study of ritual proceeds, and it is these three I will use to organize the remainder of this essay. She writes:

“first, ritual should be analyzed and understood in its real context, which is the full spectrum of ways of acting within any given culture, not as some a priori category of action totally independent of other forms of action”

“second, the most subtle and central quality of those actions we tend to call ritual is the primacy of the body moving about within a specially constructed space, simultaneously defining (imposing) and experiencing (receiving) the values ordering the environment.”

“and as a third feature, ritualization is a way of acting that tends to promote the authority of forces deemed to derive from beyond the immediate situation.” (82)

My argument will proceed as follows. First, “analyzing and understanding ritual in its real context” – at least in the United States – must of necessity include thinking about the ways in which it is embedded in, and constructed through, media culture. Doing so at the same time evokes useful elements of ritual analysis, because it is ritual studies theory to which contemporary scholars are turning in thinking about mass media.

Second, engaging what Bell terms the “primacy of the body moving about within a specially constructed space” requires helping students to acknowledge and reflect upon their embodiedness, a pedagogical task that is both supported by and made problematic through the use of video recording.

Third, and finally, studying video – particularly in its mass mediated forms -- is an excellent way in which to uncover an understanding of the ways in which “ritualization is a way of acting that tends to promote the authority of forces deemed to derive from beyond the immediate situation.”

One: Understanding ritual in the US context, and understanding media as ritual

David Morgan writes:

“The practice of visual piety, ensconced as it is in everyday life, belongs to the world-making activity of human culture. At the heart of this process is the construction of the self and its social habitat. Hardly reducible to a single performance, the formation of the self in everyday life makes use of popular images in surprising ways. Contrary to the grim cliché of mass-culture automatons, the self in modern mass society still retains the capacity for self-determination. ... this process remains a social enterprise, and fundamentally a historical one.” (207-208) in visual piety.

This is a definition that takes seriously a “social construction” notion of “culture.” As Sheila Grave Davaney notes, “culture is the process by which meaning is produced, contended for, and continually renegotiated and the context in which individual and communal identities are mediated and brought into being.”³ (5).

It is virtually impossible, in the United States, at least, to absent oneself from cultural spaces in which mass mediated materials contribute to this process of “producing, contending for and renegotiating” meaning. Indeed, the advent of digital technologies has made it possible to embed visual and musical elements in just about every space of daily life (including bathroom door stalls, grocery cart handles, telephone screens, and so on).

Past media scholarship in the United States focused almost entirely upon the “effect” or “impact” of mass media, but in recent decades that instrumentalist focus has shifted instead to explore mass media in terms of their contribution to and shaping of the cultural databases upon which we draw to make sense of ourselves. In this newer research, it is still clear that there are indeed effects, but they are understood in much more diffused ways. One such effect is that of narrowing the channel of attention, framing issues in such a way that little is asked about what is “outside” of the normal frame. Televised violence may contribute to “actual” violence in certain ways, for example, but not in a direct cause and effect relationship. Rather, viewing a steady diet of representations of human being that posit violence as the primary implementation of anger, may indeed lead to a lack of imagination, and thus to contexts in which violence begins to seem a natural outgrowth of anger.⁴ Similarly, although people’s actual, material experiences of living in a specific context may suggest that random violence is not something to fear, a steady

³ (*Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, edited by Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney and Kathryn Tanner. Oxford University Press, 2001.)

⁴ article on violence

diet of images of random violence, honed to a fine edge with accompanying music, may lead people to fear violence far more than might be otherwise be appropriate.⁵

What is at stake in understanding how media “work,” then, is not so much the actual “content” of specific television shows, for instance, but rather the practices by which people engage in meaning-making using elements from such shows. It is precisely at that moment that ritual studies theories become so evocative, because many of the descriptions of the ways in which audiences “receive” the meaning of various mass media has strong analogies to the ways in which rituals shape specific meaning, to the ways in which specific rituals “produce” meaning. The question is not “what” the meaning is, but “how” the meaning is constructed.

Media educators, for instance, have developed a variety of exercises for inquiring into such constructions. One of my favorites is what I have called in my classes the “video reality” exercise. It involves showing a variety of video clips to students and asking them to place the clips on a “reality” spectrum. In discussing the various criteria students use, it becomes clear that these issues – to what is our attention drawn, how is the clip “framed”, what is included and what is excluded, what kinds of experiences are presumed, and so on – showcase “the real principles... the flexible sets of schemes and strategies acquired and deployed by an agent who has embodied them.” (82, bell)

In many cases these schema and strategies are directly tied to personal experiences. Frequently my students will list as criteria “it felt real to me,” “I have had such an experience unfold like that,” or “it had an authentic ring to it.” There is resonance here to Boomershine’s comment that in our contemporary cultural contexts we “reason more by means of sympathetic identification than by philosophical argument.”⁶

It is precisely this notion of “sympathetic identification” that can be so nicely engaged by bringing video into a classroom. It provides a route by which “sympathetic identification” is immediately evoked, particularly if the video in question constructs any kind of narrative flow.⁷ Yet at the same time, mere “sympathetic” identification is not the goal in my classroom, and such an exercise invites reflection on the differences between “sympathetic” and “empathetic” identification.

In the contexts in which I teach, students often argue that “it feels real to them,” and there the argument ends. In other words, one is not allowed to reflect critically on an experience, but must accept it as presented. This is more often what is invited in sympathy, whereas deep empathy can lead – and often does – to painful learning that

⁵ See here Glassner’s book, or for a more humorous approach, *Bowling for Columbine*.

⁶ Find a reference for this

⁷ Note Anderson and Foley’s comment that: “.. ritual and narrative are analogous to our own existence, which is mediated by body and mind, flesh and spirit, touch and imagination. Ritual is embodied expression, and narrative springs from the human imagination.... Rituals shape our stories, and our instinct to perceive life as a narrative urges us to rehearse that narrative through our bodies.” (27)

directly confronts difference. Thus Wiggins and McTighe's rubric defines understanding as requiring a facet of "empathy":

"Empathy, the ability to walk in another's shoes, to escape one's own emotional reactions to grasp another's, is central to the most common colloquial use of the term *understanding*. When we try to understand another person, people, or culture, we strive for empathy. It is not simply an affective response or sympathy." (workbook, p. 22)

Part of what is fascinating to me in engaging the video exercise is that it places in front of students a discrete set of examples that they can play with, and in working over their differing responses to the media being engaged, they can begin to step outside of their own responses enough to hear someone else's.⁸

At the same time, the exercise also provides me with a discrete set of examples from which to assess differing responses. One of the elements of "uncovering" learning that Wiggins and McTighe emphasize, is the ability and capacity to "design backwards," by which they mean first identifying desired outcomes from a specific learning unit, determining acceptable evidence that would substantiate such outcomes, and only then planning the specific experiences or instruction aimed at eliciting such evidence. (p. 39 of the workbook). One of the enduring understandings I hope to achieve with students in my "video reality" exercise, is that reality is "constructed" in a variety of ways that have both individual and more broadly social elements to them. Over time I have begun to develop a sense of what constitutes evidence for such understanding, based on the specific criteria they can elicit from the video examples placed in front of them.

Thus far I have been describing exercises that point at the ways in which "ritual" is an evocative metaphor to use in analyzing media more generally. This is an important first step in exploring the use of multi-media, and more specifically, video, to engage religious ritual, because it is always important to understand the frame that students bring to the process in the first place. It is important, as Bell notes, to study and analyze ritual "in its real context, which is the full spectrum of ways of acting within any given culture, and not some a priori category of action totally independent of other forms of action." (81)

Far too often students' previous experiences of the use of video in teaching have been of "illustrative" or "didactic" examples. Video clips, used, that is, to make a very specific and discrete point. Most of the time when teachers are using video in this way they are *not* considering the meanings that students are bringing to the video, or the meanings they may be constructing in engaging the video. Instead, they are assuming that a specific video is a "nice" illustration of a very specific point. While it is obvious that any time we bring something in to the classroom, teachers hope to engage specific kinds of materials, we need to also understand the variety of meaning-making students may bring to such materials.

So, to pose a hyperbolic example, simply bringing in a song by *Eminem* to document the depraved nature of popular culture will often backfire as students find it particularly

⁸ See here George Lipsitz's comment

meaningful. Or, alternatively, bringing in a clip from an Ingmar Bergman film to illustrate the depth of Protestant theology may instead illustrate the deep abyss of that lies between the meaning made by student with such a clip and that made by teacher.

Both of these examples illustrate what Wiggins and McTighe might label a level of perspective that is merely “aware” of different points of view, but not much able to recognize the worth of a different perspective, let alone an ability to critique one’s own. Or similarly, in the arena of “self – knowledge,” only an “unreflective” ability – one in which one is “generally unaware of one’s specific ignorance; generally unaware of how subjective prejudgments color understandings.” These are earlier levels of development on the rubric of understanding.

I find their rubric so useful because it points clearly to the ways in which neither students nor teachers have thought beyond the use of video as an “explanation” “interpretation” or “application” of a specific idea. I would like to hypothesize that part of the reason why teachers are often so reluctant to engage popular culture materials, particularly those that are embedded in multi-media formats, is that they so readily evoke affective elements of understanding – but we so rarely have developed ways to teach in that key. If we are truly going to evoke understanding, regardless of the content area in which we work, we must incorporate all six elements of understanding into our learning designs.

Two: the “primacy of the body moving about within a specially constructed space”

As I noted at the beginning of this paper, it is often difficult for educators to engage students deliberately and reflexively on psychomotor levels in the higher education classroom. In the seminary settings, one of the most fruitful contexts for such deliberate attention to embodied gesture comes within the teaching of liturgical leadership. Many courses in worship include some kind of “workshop,” “lab,” or “precept” associated with the class that includes instruction in specific body postures for use in worship.

The goals of such workshops generally tend to cluster around helping students learn to convey meaning through the postures in which they hold their arms in prayer, for instance, or the ways in which a certain manner of holding one’s head or walking can contribute to or detract from ritual meaning. While students are generally eager to engage these practices – they are often the most tangible evidence that a student is beginning to inhabit a role reserved for those who will be ordained, or, at least those who will lead worship – it can be very frustrating to support active reflection on embodied gesture.

Part of the challenge comes from wanting students to become aware of their specific, personal body language and use it well within the grammar of the ritual. The students themselves, however, have been socialized in learning settings that at best ignore, and at worst repress, consideration of performative practice. When they come to lab settings, they often attempt simply to replicate whatever the teacher is doing, becoming

uncomfortable and self-conscious in the process, and in fact “losing” whatever gestural fluency they may have begun with.

One way seminary educators have struggled to engage this challenge is to utilize videotaping of students as a way to help them “see” themselves. In our institution it is standard practice to require students to be videotaped as they “perform” as leader in one or more of the standard liturgical services of the denomination. Then the videotapes are discussed with the teacher and students in the workshop setting. On the face of it, such an assignment would appear to be a very useful one, providing a means by which embodied gesture can be studied.

In reality, however, several obstacles occur. First, these videotapings are generally done in the very artificial setting of the lab or workshop, not in the midst of a worshipping assembly. That is, a few students will sign up to use the empty chapel, “run through” the liturgy with the camera on, and then take that tape to the lab for discussion.

Second, the students spend very little time rehearsing in advance of the taping, and no time at all observing a variety of performances of the liturgy in question to imagine what might be the gestures most appropriate to their own contexts.

Third, and most significantly, the tapings themselves – while purporting to represent fully embodied reality – in effect “flatten” the performance to the two-dimensionality of a single, still (that is, on a tripod) camera.

Thus the students replicate some of the worst aspects of video production – ascribing reality to a two-dimensional still angle done in isolation – in the very process of attempting to study their embodied gestures. Liturgy is not liturgy done as a “run-through,” just like “teaching” can not be reduced to a person standing at a podium lecturing. Even in a lecture setting there are students responding directly to the presentation (which is one reason why putting lectures online poses such interesting challenges). Similarly, liturgy is an assembly of people gathered in an embodied way to celebrate a diachronic event.

So while we are asking them to inhabit embodied gesture and to reflect upon it, we are doing so in a way that manages to separate them from their bodies in yet a different manner. Our explicit or intentional curriculum is being overridden by the implicit, or incidental, learning taking place.

Videotaping of embodied gesture can be a very useful learning exercise, but in the limited times we have available in worship labs I would much prefer to have students working on gesture in front of mirrors, in a context in which music is easily accessible and lighting is not constrained in the way in which videotaping often requires it to be. A dance studio, for instance, is one setting which provides an appropriate context in which to learn embodied gesture. It is also a setting in which one can experiment with various elements of gesture, and observe “in real-time” how those elements shift the meaning one makes with them. “Rehearsing” such movement in a large, mirrored room with a number

of other people also makes it possible for students to observe a variety of interpretations of similar gestures, opening up the range of even the most “similar” kind of posture. Too often, however, seminaries have spent huge sums of money making video production available, but have not found a way to create a dance studio space/classroom.

How might we continue to work productively with video given these constraints? Well, to begin with, we can work to invite students into videotaping of their practices within actual liturgies. The advent of digital camcorders has made it possible to bring cameras into actual ritual events with some ease, and without as much disruption. In that setting our students are much more aware of the interaction between their embodied gesture and that of the community gathered. While their self-consciousness may still be heightened, there are other elements that conspire to draw them into the communicative event at that moment. The very real way in which meaning is created in the “in-between” – that is, in the process of “the body moving about within a specially constructed space, simultaneously defining (imposing) and experience (receiving) the values ordering the environment” – to return to Bell’s language – becomes more apparent and readily accessible to description and analysis after the event.

Students can ponder their own feelings within the process, and attempt to describe what they “caught” of other people’s feelings “then,” and what they observe upon viewing the videotape “now.” They can be asked to explore how they participated, through their body language, in “framing” the ritual interaction – and how the video recording, the small window that is available for view, “frames” the experience now. Moving back and forth between their memories of the experience and that which is captured in the recording provides practice in moving between different perspectives of their own, and potentially, then, being able to move between their own and other people’s perspectives.

Wiggins and McTighe’s rubric suggests that at later stages of development of the various facets of understanding (particularly those of perspective, empathy and self knowledge), a student will be able to demonstrate that s/he “knows and feels that others see and feel differently” and that s/he “knows the strengths and limits of one’s understanding.” This kind of awareness and sensitivity can be assessed in terms of the responses students make in reflecting upon the videos. Does a student demonstrate an ability to separate her memory of the feelings present at the time the ritual was recorded, from her current response to the tape? Can a student take in appropriately, without defensiveness, another student’s response to his movements? Does a student demonstrate sufficient “differentiation” in the process? That is, can the student “effectively critique and encompass other plausible perspectives”? Is the student “able to recognize the boundaries of her own and others’ understanding”, can he “recognize his prejudices and projections”⁹?

It is important to recognize, even in pointing out how such an exercise can provide appropriate assessment opportunities, that these abilities are on the upper ends of the rubric, and like any educational rubric, most students will not be able to perform at the

⁹ These are all elements of the rubric.

upper end very often, if at all. That being the case, how might it be possible to provide adequate scaffolding for the student to work on developing such levels of understanding? To respond to that question I'd like to move into Bell's third feature of ritual, that which recognizes that ritualization "is a way of acting that tends to promote the authority of forces deemed to derive from beyond the immediate situation." (82?)

Such a description of authority often tends to point towards various kinds of "supernatural" or "transcendent" power in religious ritual, but part of why ritual studies theories have become so useful in studying mass mediated forms of popular culture is precisely because there has been a general trend in such studies to note the ways in which people cede various kinds of authority to media. Media educators have as one crucial element of their work helping people to regain some self-critical imagination about the ways in which authority is socially constructed in mass media, and how to reclaim more decentralized or diverse notions of authority.

Engaging the construction of authority through video/ritual practices

Most of my previous experiences as a student in classrooms where video was in use to teach ritual was constituted by videos used to display or represent particular rituals. I have been present in classes where videos were used to represent "enculturated" rituals – liturgies done in an African context, for instance – and in classes where videos were used to represent specific "best practices" of standard liturgical ritual (eg. the Easter vigil). In all of these cases the videos were presented as "shining" examples of ritual practice. They were videos that had been produced in the "documentary" format – complete with overarching narration, specific long shot and close-up shots, and very little engagement with the participants in the ritual. In other words, the videos "framed" specific rituals by "showing" them to us, but did not invite either participation on our part in the specific video, or reflection upon the participants' experiences themselves.

In all of these cases the rituals shown were defined as religious by historically grounded institutions of one kind or another, generally representations of explicitly named liturgical ritual. It wasn't until I began to move into the scholarly conversations currently ongoing within the international conferences on media, religion and culture, did I begin to encounter video representations of, and discussion thereto, of rituals in which people constructed religious meaning absent religious institution. Or the converse, in which people constructed non-religious meaning from explicitly religious representations.

In all of these instances, teachers were attempting to teach specific kinds of information, evoke specific interpretations of ritual, and support intentional application of the material so conveyed. And in most of these instances, the "implicit" level of meaning I made with these materials far overpowered that which my teachers intended explicitly. As I have reflected back upon my own experiences as a student in those classrooms, and since then as a teacher working with digitally mediated materials, I have begun to ponder the frames students – myself included – bring to their engagement of materials. In other words, as a student engages a video representation of a specific ritual s/he is not doing so as a "blank slate," but rather from a deeply contextualized location. Human beings inevitably seek to

make sense of new experiences by comparing and contrasting them with past experiences, and this process is no different with ritual learning.

Part of what needs to be engaged, is to bring to conscious reflection the so-called “implicit” and “null” curricula embedded in such experiences. Part of the learning challenge is helping students to “see” the construction of such experience, in part by seeing how the specific construction of a specific video representation pulls on their previous frames of reference and experience, and draws such frames into the service of the particular event being represented. It is this kind of inquiry into ritual practice – one that emphasizes the ways in which engagement with various media, for instance – “construct” relationships of authority and submission that has become so useful within media studies. [list some examples here]

At this point a clear example is in order. At the risk of evoking multiple layers of interpretation in a medium not given to such (that is, at the risk of engaging video in a print medium), I’d like compare and contrast two televised rituals that occurred in the US context and use that exercise to note several principles for engaging the “implicit” frames that students might bring into the classroom.

In the days following September 11, 2001, there were two highly publicized “rituals” that played forth on broadcast and cable television in the U.S.. One was the “day of prayer and remembrance” that took place on September 14, 2001 in the National Cathedral and was organized by President Bush. The second was the Hollywood fundraising telethon known as “A Tribute to Our Heroes,” that aired on September 21, 2001. The first was an event that in some ways clearly typified sociologists’ conceptions of “civil religion.” Held in a church, hosted by institutionally recognized religious authorities, drawing on texts and music that are clearly recognizable as “sacred music,” this event had all of the obvious markers of religious meaning-making in the civil context. The second event had none of these markers. Its spokespeople were Hollywood celebrities, and its explicit purpose was fundraising. Yet in speaking with many people in multiple venues over the last few years it has become apparent to me – at least anecdotally – that it was the second event that held profound religious power for them, while the first was often “read” as a blatant attempt to ignite nationalist, patriotic sentiment. Why the apparent paradox?

Again, there are no doubt many reasons for it, but at least some of them can be drawn from an understanding that the first event was “framed” by broadcast television as a gathering of the political and military elite of the U.S., an event to which most observers were not invited, and through which voyeurism was the primary means of participation; while the second event was a loosely connected set of performances of popular songs, rich in meaning-making potential, offering people a direct route to participation through both their personal interpretations of the songs, as well as contribution of funds. Further, the first event was broadcast with the interpretation of television newscasters, while the second event was displayed directly, with so little interpretive narration that individual celebrities were not even identified.

The first event was encoded with markers of institutional religious authority, while the second was encoded with markers of personal religious authority. This distinction is crucial to keep in mind when working with students in studying religious ritual, since notions of what constitutes “religious experience” are constantly shifting. If institutional religious authority is most often experienced with such encodings – linked to power elites, lack of direct participation, and narrowness of meaning-making – while personal religious authority is linked to direct experience, affective responses and decentralized interpretations – than the “implicit” meaning many students might construct in relation to particular kinds of religious representation might vary quite dramatically from that their teachers propose to portray.

So, then, the first principle: *when engaging a videotaped ritual, what meaning do you, the viewer, make of it, and what do you know of the meanings the participants themselves made of the ritual?*

This question links to all three of the later elements of understanding in the Wiggins/McTighe rubric – perspective, empathy and self-knowledge – and invites students into a consideration of their interpretative frameworks.

A second principle follows from this first: *when engaging a videotaped ritual, what kind of framing is used, and how does the production itself seek to frame the ritual?*

In other words, how did you make the meaning you did, and what kinds of elements in the production invited you into that meaning? Here elements of framing – what is “in” the picture, what is “left out” of the picture become particularly relevant, as do the genre of the piece in question. Is it a “news broadcast” – like the Cathedral service noted earlier, with its overarching narration and sense of voyeurism? Or is it a music video, an invitation to participate in moving to the music and images, not necessarily tied to a specific meaning? (like the fundraising telethon). Technical details become useful here – are long shots, medium shots, or close-ups used? How are participants identified, if at all? How is the soundscape structured? Students arrive in our classrooms with complex interpretive schema buried in their experiences with mass mediated materials, particularly film and video. Yet few of them have brought those schemas to consciousness, let alone reflected upon the assumptions buried in them. Students can usually identify within the first 30 seconds, for instance, whether the videoclip they are watching is drawn from a documentary, a news cast or a soap opera. But in my experience they are less immediately articulate about the values embedded in those judgments, let alone critically aware of their own interpretive stances.

A third principle: *what circumstances enabled the production of this video, and in what way do those circumstances circumscribe the meaning-making?*

Many religious rituals are not open to filming. Others can only be “captured” in single camera angles, because the intent is to keep the camera from intervening as much as possible in the actual experience of the ritual. Still other productions are “staged” on elaborate sets, with significant forethought as to the conception and implementation of

the ritual. While such a staging may make possible a more “complete” viewing of the ritual, the ritual’s intensity or continuity may be broken for its participants in the very process of the videoing. In the case mentioned earlier, the Cathedral service utilized a “pool” of cameras that had fixed access, so that editors at each news station could only draw on what was available at any given time from those cameras. This led to many of them interposing their own narration and subtitles on the event, editing in images from cameras outside the event that they controlled (like images of people weeping before flower strewn fences), the better to make the case for people to watch “their” network, rather than any other. That very “branding” may have been one element that distanced participation for many viewers, yet it is a quite typical element of newscast framing.

In the case just explored, the “authority” of forces was not immediately described, but could be intimated from experience, just as the criteria used to develop that authority could be explored and articulated in a flexible interpretive framework.