

Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual

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Abstract for „Ritual dynamics (general editor: Axel Michaels et al.) by Harrassowitz,
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The Use of Ritual in Contemporary (Drama-) Therapy

This paper presents and discusses the results of a multi year theatre research project in which the relations and implications of ritual and healing have been explored and examined through practical theatre work.

The research project was inspired by the Polish theatre researcher Jerzy Grotowski, who was constantly searching for and working with the archetypal dimensions of theatre. In recognition of his work, the described project focused on developing concrete practical forms of expression and training for body and voice who could facilitate access to very basic and deeply human dimensions that all cultures share.

In order to transfer this approach to an application that would work in (drama-)therapeutical settings today it was crucial to identify the factors that are significant for an impact/effect that is experienced as “healing“.

The initial question was, if and how rituals can be developed by a group in a contemporary context when no external culture specific ritual structures are given.

Further research questions were:

- Does there exist some kind of innate “body knowledge“ (body/action archetypes) that induces ritual structures? Like N. Chomsky’s underlying “deep structures” in the human mind by which the varying “surface structures” of language are generated?
- Do the developed structures resemble ritual actions that had been developed in other cultures (past and present)?
- What physical, psychological and social factors are essential for a “ritual ability” of modern human beings who are not integrated in a culture specific ritual context? Or to parallel Chomsky’s approach: How are “deep structures” generated?
- What characterizes ritual experiences that are described as “healing”?
- How can internal and external factors for this impact be identified?
- What are the external signs for internal transformations?
Transformations/changes of the body system/body movement?
Changes in social interaction?
Changes in self –perception and how others perceive you?

RITUAL - LABATORY – FINDINGS

Here a typical sequence that evolved in the work over and overagain:

- body-play around the phylo- and ontogenetic “evolution”
- body postures of dominance, submission, opening to the earth (“grief”) and to the above (“pray”)

- movements synchronize: coming together
- intense rhythmic movement: "trancing" (ekstasis)
- the group as "dreaming body", enacting collective themes

What is healing in contemporary ritual inventions??

In the given examples it is

- creating a liminal space
- using ritual structures to synchronize and direct/secure chaotic "psyches"
- transform personal emotions in public/collective expressions
- finding back to / healing the life-force
- finding back to a "clan"
- find a new place in the world - and the cosmos!
- WHO AM - I?

CONCLUSION

On one hand it is possible to describe single components of the inner work of a ritual-happening, but the impact/"efficacy" of rituals can't be fully captured by isolated factors. A healing experience can only be created through a very specific interaction and cooperation of various components and the de- and reconstruction of identity seems to play a crucial role for this to happen.