

Performance of utopia in media events
Working Group 21 Visual Narratives and the constitution of the Social in Mediated Societies

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Intro

On May 14, 2004 Danish crown prince Frederik married Ms Mary Elizabeth Donaldsson in The Church of Our Lady in Copenhagen, Denmark. Special trains from all over Denmark were arranged for people from all over the country to be able to take part in the festivities in the streets of Copenhagen that were immensely adorned and with people from mainly Denmark but also from Australia and Tasmania (Mary's home countries) performing music and dancing and other kinds of more spontaneous celebrating activities.

The two national TV stations, of course, each had their direct coverage of the event: beginning very early on the Saturday morning covering all kinds of preparations for the wedding represented by interviews with flower decorators, the priest, all kinds of officials and shop owners on the route of the tour that the golden coach would take the wedded couple after the church ceremony etc but also interviews with private people about how they had planned to celebrate the day. All kinds of little girls planning to dress up as princesses to groups of friends who had arranged temporarily out-of-the-house-activities for their husbands and children planning to share the day with girlfriends and delicious pastries dressed up in gala

dresses in front of the television screen. The number of viewers May 14 was 2.8 millions and the enormous amount of energy put into the event is astonishing.

As the two tv stations broadcasts moved through the day 'expert' panels in festively decorated studios would answer questions on customs, royal celebrities, dresses, history etc and these experts (historians, experts on etiquette, sociologists, journalists, military personel etc) would continuously comment on the pictures transmitted live during the events and thereby connecting the actual event in Copenhagen and the Danish citizens¹ making sense of every detail of the event and also broadcasting all kinds of private greetings from citizens to the newly-weds.

This kind of media event is interesting for several reasons. In this paper we focus mainly on three interrelated aspects: 1) The royal wedding as a media event 2) The *ritualizations* inherent in the event connecting private rituals, public rituals and media rituals and 3) the *will to community* reflected in these ritualizations. In dealing with these aspects we are constructivists and using basically theories on performativity and on affective communities in order to argue that the event and the social, cultural and medialized interactions reflected in it represents different kinds of utopian modes and representations.

The Media Event

Our claim in this paper is that instead of discussing the transmitting or the constructivist character of the symbolic centre (Couldry 2003) in the media event we say that the medias stage a community around a symbolic centre that is no longer there

Dayan & Katz defines the event-character of the media events as the following: they are both staged and live and they break the routines of the everyday life. They divide the events in three levels: the *syntactic*, the *semantic* and the *pragmatic* level which are levels of interpretation and sociological investigation for the researcher: the syntactic level is the level of *the framed representation* (in-crowd actors, visual and audible framings, the sequences of events etc.) the semantic level is the level of *narrative coherence and matrices used* in the telling of the event. D & K enumerate

¹ Not only were the event broadcasted in Denmark but in many counties – among them Egypt!

three types of media events: The *Coronation* (as in our case), the *Contest* and the *Conquest*, but besides these subgenres we often have different narratives structuring the event: the wedding between Prince Charles and Diana in Great Britain was delivered as a Cinderella-story while the wedding between Danish Crown Prince Frederik and Mary Donaldsson more had the character of contesting between equal partners (the frame around their first meeting was the Olympic Games in Sydney in 2000, echoed in the Match Race 9 May 2004 between the two and the character of Conquest of the »savage Tasmania« echoed through a series of three travel programmes *Signe* (a pop-singer) and *BS* (a soldier from the Ranger Corps) in *Mary-Land* and the identity of the Prince as being a conqueror of fierce territories (The Sirius expedition for 4 months in 2000 in northern Greenland) and him having a solid military education. The final pragmatic level has to do with the fact that media events are three-dimensional – they only become events if the spectators actually *take part in* the event.

Dayan and Katz discuss whether media events are necessarily conservative and restoring of the symbolic centre of the society, and come to the conclusion – which Couldry disputes (Couldry 2003, an elaboration of Couldry, see below) – that some are restoring, some are transforming (in Couldry's opinion they are always conservative). They introduce a concept which we find very useful – '*the suspension of disbelief*' (inherent in the post modern consciousness) and '*the subjunctive mode*' – we use the concept to qualify the community resulting of these events: it is a what-if community without inherent or essentialist consequences for the momentary members who only share the feeling of the moment and who momentarily perform the community-to-be on a reflexive nostalgic mode: they or we know that this community is imaginary or illusory (what we would have liked it to be) and in this sense we have a post-national coming together around national media-events, we deal with the momentary media construction of a symbolic centre that is no longer there (Knudsen 2004, 2007).

Ritualizations and liminality

The idea that rites conserve and consolidate social reality has its primary expression in Émile Durkheim. The notion that rites can also transform social reality has its most articulate spokesperson in Victor Turner [...in

that...] real ritual effects transformation, creating a major “before” and “after” difference (Grimes 2000: 264)

Recent years’ Durkheim-inspired approaches to media rituals and ritual medialisations has been developed by various media scholars (see for instance the work of Silverstone 1994, Sumiala-Seppänen, Lundby & Salokangas (eds.) 2006 and Couldry 2000, 2003) developing important theorizing be it Neo- or Postdurkheimian. In the work of Nick Couldry Durkheim’s classical notions of rituals’ cohesive power and the relations of the ritual and the social are developed into a post-functionalist theory on media rituals defined by Couldry as “[...] *formalized actions organized around key media-related categories and boundaries, whose performance frames, or suggests a connection with, wider media-related values*” (Couldry 2003: 29). Although we are not interested in the royal wedding event *as a media ritual* but as a medialized stage for individual inscriptions in all kinds of ritualizing activities Couldry is a good point of departure. As Couldry we are interested in moving beyond the neo-Durkheimian focus on social integration as an inherent quality of media rituals (cf. his criticism of, amongst others Dayan & Katz and of *the myth of the centre*). On the other hand his Marxian, Bourdieuan focus on powerstructures and values and who’s in control of who in the media representations is, in our view, restraining. His re-description of *the myth of the centre* in relation the media events: “[*media events are*] *those large-scale event-based media focussed narratives where the claims associated with the myth of the mediated centre are particularly intense*” (Could 2003:67) does not solve this problem because he isn’t moving beyond the issues of who is doing what to whom.

Instead we turn to a neo-Turner perspective and suggests that the concept of *liminality* is the right one to turn to in order to characterize the ritualizations reflected in the royal wedding event. Let’s move into this line of thinking: In the 1960s and 1970s the original ideas of Arnold van Gennep (*Les Rites de Passage* 1909) on a certain group of rituals which he isolated as *rites of passage* were elaborated on immensely by British anthropologist Victor Turner. For Turner the liminal phase of any given ritual were so inspiring that it became the center of his theorizing in that he did not as much (as did van Gennep) see the liminal phase as the center of ritual “but [as] a creative “space” resulting in a temporary state known as liminality” (Grimes 2000: 264). Liminality through his work came to be seen as a “generative, therefore

primary, principle of ritual in particular and culture in general” (ibid) and following from this it became a space for possible transformation, reflection and thereby also a contrast to the Durkheimian cultural conservation factor making new beginnings possible.

During his later writings Turner engaged himself in theoretical elaborations on the liminal by turning his interest away from small-scale African religion and culture to European and American culture especially performance theatre and other cultural factors with strong elements of play, spontaneity, creativity and improvisations. Although such cultural practices were to Turner a natural extension his earlier observed cultural practices, he saw important differences that made him introduce a new term, *liminoid*: “*The liminoid is constrained by no particular type of ritual [...] so the liminoid is virtually synonymous with cultural creativity, imagination, actively rendering the world a more habitable place*” (Grimes 2000: 266). For Turner, as for us, this development had certain implications:

First, liminality among indigenous African people are compulsory and social per se while engaging in liminoid practices in Western culture is subjunctive and something the individual chooses for herself to take part in. However, we will stress the fact, that the fact that e.g. the practice of ritualizations on the day of the royal wedding is not socially enforced it has strong social implications. Not in the Durkheimian sense but in a more volatile Maffesolian sense. The sense of community established need not have any permanent socially cohesive effect for society as a whole but can facilitate the here and now sense of neo-tribal, affective communities argued for by Maffesoli which is much more temporary.

Second, the social transformation effects inherent in the liminal rites of initiation are less obvious. In fact, one might argue as does Grimes that many a rite do not actually facilitate change but celebrate the possibility of change or celebrate a transformation that has already occurred (Grimes 2000: 266). This seems to become crucial in regard to the royal wedding because one might argue that for ordinary people engaging in the ritualizations no actual change occur. The social changes occur to the young couple, Mary and Frederik since it is their rite of passage we were engaged in acting out in all kinds of celebrations but it would be as wrong to argue that we hereby engaged in actual transformations of our own lives as it would be – in line with Couldry – to argue that what was going on was only a conservation of monarchy and a sense that in the end we are all Danes and fellow human beings (the

myth of the centre). At this point it is important indeed to supplement the classic notions on community with Maffesoli's more suitable theories on transient communities.

Affective communities

Maffesoli states his sociological law as follows: »In formulating a sociological 'law', I will state as a leitmotif that less weight shall be given to what each individual will *voluntarily adhere to* (contractually or mechanically) than to that which is emotionally common to all (sentimentally and organically).« (Maffesoli 1996: 18).

Tribes and affective alliances are not stable, they are momentary, the ties between the members are emotional, and one of the most significant qualities of this community is the *proximity* between the members. Tribes are rooted in locality, they establish communities on emotions and perceptions (communities without a purpose so to speak) and an individual can be member of several tribes at one and the same time. The community is primarily aesthetical, *the intensity of the feeling* replaces the truth of the common narration. The proxemic character of this community can signify mediated proximity (Tomlinson 1999) and spatial closeness (rave parties, sports-games, underground film- or video communities) but it can also just signify emotional closeness (those who share this feeling are members). The emotional closeness is not abstract (as in the contractual community) but always a very concrete and embodied feeling due to themes, formal visual characteristics, body-genre-use in news programmes to the degree they use eye-witnesses, endangered bodies in order to move the audience (Williams 1991, Knudsen 2003).

The levels that Maffesoli uses in his description of the post modern societies are the individual, the mass and the tribes. Being part of a mass de-individualizes the individual, being part of a tribe – or more exactly different tribes – intensify the feeling of being alive. And exactly here we can bring in cultural geographer Nigel Thrift (2004) who also seems devoted to a theory of de-individualization in post modern (post national) societies: » Rather, in line with my earlier work, each cleaves to an 'inhuman' or 'transhuman' framework in which individuals are generally understood as effects of the events to which their body parts (broadly understood) respond and in which they participate« (:60) and further on »*affect understood as a form of thinking*, often indirect and non-reflective, it is true, but thinking all the same«. When we put together the knowledge that »body practices rely on the

emotions as a crucial element of the body's apprehension of the world (:67) and that »the technical form of modern media tends to foreground emotion« (:65) we end up with these affective or tribal communities characterized by the proximity in feeling.

Such an understanding of the social seems inevitable taking into account the mediatized politics that we live in nowadays. It seems fairly obvious that to construct moods can become a highly manipulative tool. Certain perspectives of this affective thinking is truly scaring and highly political dangerous but others can be seen as more innocent releases of affect in staged spaces. Post modern community-making, according to Maffesoli, takes place on a *subjunctive* mode: »But by 'pretending', we are participating magically in a collective game which reminds us that something like the 'community' has existed, does exist or will exist«. (Maffesoli: 49). *We hold that the post modern community-making not only affects small alternative networks and underground groups, but also re-intensifies the traditional communities. Our claim is equally that the traditional communities are not only re-intensified, they also change qualitatively.*

Grossberg has very early (1988) launched the idea of affective alliances as post modern communities. The affect is an effect of the relation between the material world (a text, an image, a re-enactment, a site) and a body and therefore considered synonymous to intensity. The affective alliances lack stability, the relation between members is casual, time-limited and their purpose is nothing but affect. Grossberg claims: »What matters is how much you care (I'd rather feel bad than not feel anything at all), not how you care, or about what you care« (Grossberg 1988, 1992: 163). Cultural differences are marked according to the degree of bodily and emotional investment not according to the laws of social distinction (in which identity-formation of social classes work through the disliking of the taste of the others (Bourdieu 1979)). Grossberg points to post modern moods – and we can add the sociologists at the end of the 19th Century Tarde, Le Bon, Simmel, who through concepts as contagion, virus, contamination, and imitation merge the social and the biological as an alternative to modern desires, that operate through imaginary identification.

Moving images

Media theorist John Dovey's (2000) concept of emotional democracy is applied upon confessing documentary genres in television and on the internet, concerns the relation between the confessor and the viewer. Although there are several viewing positions

possible regarding these media texts, the proto-type relation is the one between the face of the suffering/narrating/confessing and the viewer either in the position of judgement through the topic of denunciation either in transmitting the sociable from interiority to interiority (Boltansky: 82). Dovey states that in general witnessing and confessing create a sensibility and a *sense of difference* in the audiences – because of the otherness of the persons confessing (among others victims of abuse, abusers) which widens up democracy to the otherness within. Emotional democracy is created around a moved face (in tears, in pain, in grief etc.) and a viewer moved and eventually moving.

Even if the interest of Boltansky revolves around what he calls 'Politics of Pity' that is how emotional relations are established between unfortunate anonymous victims (the distant sufferers) and viewers we can all the same use his analytic tools in order to describe how – on a syntactical and semantic level – the viewer is affected, touched emotionally. 1) A benefactor has to appear in the scenario (like the fire fighters in the catastrophe of 9/11), in our wedding scenario the benefactor is the Mary, the bride to be. 2) Emotion has to show itself as an externalisation of the interior in order to »spreading« the emotional contagion 3) the camera has to be tactful and not sensationalist and the scene must be authentic and not staged 4) the reporting of the interiority is discursively established through different narratives and genres (melodrama, the diary, etc.) 5) The tears that the viewers shed are always tears of redemption 6) the emotional community created here is a universal emotional democracy.

Our claim is that media events offer the possibility of celebrating of a symbolic centre that we do not have to believe in but that we emotionally are affected by. The symbolic centre is reconstructed as an illusion that we all indulge in on a subjunctive mode.

One of the most emblematic images in recent media events in Danish television is the image of our crown prince crying in the church at the sight of his bride to be, coming towards him in the church. Syntactically we have two parallel scenes that the viewer at home follows (a privileged eyewitness position that distinguishes from the more restrained viewing positions within the church and outside the church of both the main characters in the scene and the bystanders/participants). The culmination of the crescendo is naturally the bride and groom meeting in front of the altar orchestrated audibly by the piece *Zadak the Priest*

(C.F. Händel) performed beautifully by the Copenhagen Boys Choir. Inside the church the television viewer is confined to three positions: a long shot of the whole church behind the groom and his best man to the entrance, or a close-shot of Queen Margrethe and the prince, or a close shot of the groom and his best man (his brother). At two occasions we see a close-up of Frederik's face. When the music begins the voice-over speak breaks, a sign that the professional broadcasting team of this event is also part of the event and not above it. This intensity-moment is highly formally constructed but also very authentic in the boltanskian sense of it being able to communicate between fervours.

The crown prince reacts adequately (and private) according to the situation and the viewer reacts adequately according to the aesthetic framing of the moment.

The image of the crying prince negotiates the limits of traditional masculinity. But because the masculinity of the prince – as well known in the cultural context – is very manifest through his military career, his accomplishments into sports, his conquest-character and his *male* James Bond-like taste of fast cars and beautiful women, it is not threatened by a little moment of emotion.

We have else where argued that the modern Danish monarchy has become a media monarchy in the sense that the Danes meet and see the royal family through the media and that this mediated meetings has to keep or even increase the popularity of the members of the royal family. They can only legitimize themselves through their popularity in an even more »empty« way than icons as Beckham, Madonna, who exercise professions. Thus on the one hand modern monarchs such as the Danish crown prince has become celebrity icons. On the other hand they still possess a small residue of the symbolic power it once had, enough to become the symbol of the centre that we celebrate on an illusory, subjunctive mode.

In his book *Understanding Celebrity* (2004) cultural analyst Graeme Turner reflect on the roles of celebrities in postmodern popular culture. He suggests that one of the crucial roles of celebrities is to reflect both cultural and individual identity. Socially speaking celebrity is partly filling the gap that organised religion left (Turner 2004: 25, see also Rojek 2001: 58) by organizing belonging in secular society (a real good neo-Durkheimian argument). According to Rojek royal celebrity rise above other celebrities in popular culture because they are no subject to fashion: there celebrity is determined by blood and thereby also rising over simple factors of identification with them and their acts. However, in the case with the young couple

Mary and Frederik, it might be a crucial factor that young career woman Ms Mary Elisabeth Donaldsson by marrying Frederik became Princess Mary. By celebrating her liminal transision from ordinary to celebrity to super-celebrity we come to celebrate the utopic possibility of becoming princesses ourselves or, more subtle, to be happy with the man of our dreams. This is another reason not to turn to the theorizing that promotes ideas of media rituals being about promoting certain ideas and values to its viewers. One of the reasons why media events like the royal wedding are so popular might be that they facilitate a liminal space where each individual can co-perform and ritualize the event by means of their own individual representations.

What then were all these people actually engaged in performing on May 14 2004? On what level is this ritualizations and of what? We suggest that it is the performance of affective utopian communities where conservative factors as tradition and history are being entertained by media and individual practitioners respectively and fused with dreams, personel longing and nostalgia in the performance of liminal ritualizations which plays with the possibility of transformation not as something to be actually carried out in upsidedown turning social re-orderings of people's lives or in the social cohesion of society but as crevices in reality into a fairytale, a utopian world were we can all be happy, pretty princes and princesses for a day. We were acting out the prince or princess inside many of us. The ordinary girl suddenly meeting the prince on the white horse and marrying him, having half the kingdom and living happily ever after. The beauty. Individual prospering. Happiness. The good life.

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