

# Reading Ritualized Space

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## Abstract

Scholars from various disciplines think of “ritual” as performatives that serve to set apart some events from other events. The spatial settings of rituals not only are constructed deliberately through the application of aesthetic sensibilities but they can be “read” or interpreted through aesthetic means. Persons responsible for constructing the ritual’s settings include and exclude items, and arrange the setting’s *mise en scene*, specifically to enhance the aesthetic character of the setting, to contribute to the aesthetic experience of those who are participating or observing the ritual, and to increase the aesthetic worth of both the event and the experience of it. This paper is about how to interpret and appreciate that “stage-setting.”

## Reading Ritualized Space

Scholars from various disciplines think of “ritual” as performatives that serve to set apart some events from other events – and in setting them apart imbue them with special significance and, normally, special importance. This paper is about the settings of such events and relevant aesthetic considerations. Though on occasion one might think of the setting of a ritual as integral to the central performative(s), and on that basis think of this as a paper about ritual, given that the performatives are not what we will explore, perhaps it is best to think of this paper rather as just about the contexts – the spatial contexts – for rituals.

When discussing film theory, it is common for those analyzing film form to break the concept into various parts, one of which is the contents of the visual field. This is called the *mise en scene*, and it includes everything that is within that visual field: the settings, the props, how deep the field is and how many planes are involved in constituting that depth, and even the actors, their costumes, their makeup, and sometimes even their behaviors. (It does not include the photographic aspects; that’s something else.) What we can see in film we can also easily see in theater plays, in opera, in dance, and an argument might be made for the symphony as well. This paper is about *mise en scene* – not the *mise en scene* of works of art but rather of rituals.

My thesis is that the spatial settings of rituals, thought of in the broadest possible terms and along a continuum from the most grand to the most modest, not only are constructed deliberately through the application of aesthetic sensibilities but they can be “read” or interpreted through aesthetic means. Certainly this is a case of form following function, and the primary motivation of constructing ritual settings is to support, foster, and enhance the ritual in terms of its functions and goals, but how this is done, I believe,

is through aesthetic means. By “application of aesthetic sensibilities” and “aesthetic means,” I mean that those persons responsible for constructing the ritual’s settings include and exclude items, and arrange the setting’s *mise en scene*, specifically to enhance the aesthetic character of the setting, to contribute to the aesthetic experience of those who are participating or observing the ritual, and to increase the aesthetic worth of both the event and the experience of it. This paper is about how to interpret and appreciate that “stage-setting.”

### **Ritualized Space**

Let’s begin with some examples. There are a virtually infinite number of rituals; the list below is meant to illustrate some of the most common as well as illustrating a spectral continuity of grand to modest.

- *A Coronation.* In 1953, Elizabeth II was crowned Queen Regnant of the United Kingdom and parts of the Commonwealth. The coronation was the first that was televised, and audiences around the world watched as Elizabeth, in Westminster Abbey, was crowned. The spectacle was likely the grandest that anyone watching may have seen or perhaps may ever see in terms of the setting of the Abbey, those present and their attire, and especially those participating and their attire. One might argue that the coronation was an event that stretched from Buckingham Palace to the Abbey, but whether the setting was just the Abbey or the Abbey and a particular (not lengthy) stretch of London, it is easy to think about the setting as bounded in space.
- *A Wedding.* Whether a wedding is conducted before a church’s altar, under a chuppah in a synagogue, or while taking seven steps around a fire in India, settings, decorations, and the attire of the bride and groom (supposing that sort of wedding) as well as family members and attendants are all special to the ritual.
- *A Religious Worship Event.* Temples and other houses of worship are special places, imbued with special symbols, overseen by ritual experts in special garb, and attended by others who often wear special garb as well.
- *A Graduation.* Even when a university graduation is held in a school’s basketball arena, the space is made special by those participating and those attending. Academic attire in the European style is odd – the sleeves on gowns are odd, square caps are odd, hoods are odd – but the oddness of the attire signals that the ritual of graduation has a special significance that connects to traditions hundreds of years old.
- *A Birthday.* Balloons, streamers, banners, a cake with candles, and a pinata all contribute to transforming an ordinary room or back garden into a space for remembering the anniversary of one’s entry into the world.
- *A Holiday Event.* A home well cleaned and decorated with *diyas* and *rangolis*, inhabited by family members wearing special clothes, sets the traditional context for the five days of Diwali.
- *A Dinner Party.* In an iconic middle-class American fashion, a dining room is opened; a table not used for everyday meals is decorated with linens, plates, glasses, flatware, flowers and candles; lamps that are infrequently used are lit; hosts dress up and await guests who bring bottles of wine.

In all these cases, “stages” are set to provide contexts for rituals. Consider perhaps the most modest of all ritual-focused stage-settings: when one first moves into a new space – a first room, a first apartment, a first house – job one is to make sure the space will function properly. One needs furnishing, and a list of the basics is drawn up: bed, chair, table, etc. The second job is to make certain that the space, that the items on the list of basics that will inhabit the space, are comfortable. The third job – and this is where we come in – is for the new occupant to ensure that, to the extent that resources of time, talent, and treasure will allow, the space reflects an aesthetic taste to which the new occupant aspires. What color will the walls be? What colors will the sofa and curtains and rugs be? How will objects be arranged? What will decorate the walls? What will be the style of the dishes and flatware? It is only after these matters of necessity, comfort, and aesthetics are decided that one begins to plan excursions to IKEA or wherever the objects to be purchased presently reside.

It is intuitive to think that the daily task of simply living is not a ritual, and that setting up a first living space is not the creation of a setting for ritual, but there are definitely elements of ritualization that are relevant here. First, the living space, by its very nature, is set apart from the outside world and the living spaces of others. Second and more importantly, the living space very likely will be the setting of future rituals, grand and modest, and so getting a basic palette, a basic *mise en scene*, in place as a working backdrop for those future events is important. On the list above I included “the dinner party.” This is a common modestly ritualized event that takes as its backdrop one’s ordinary living environment – but these environments are transformed, sometimes simply, sometimes elaborately, for the event. In addition, special manners of dress and comportment may be employed. The goal of this ritual – if we can think of a dinner party as a kind of modest ritual – may be thought of in a variety of ways (fun, social bonding, career enhancement, and so forth), but the event bears a set of aesthetic markers and an aesthetic character that is repeated across such events within a culture or a region. Dinner parties are but one ritual performed in one’s living space, but that living space, as simple as it may be, will normally be arranged and decorated to allow for easy transformation for special occasions like holidays, birthdays, and dinner parties.

### **Interpreting a Ritualized Space**

Interpretation of art objects and events incorporates a variety of different activities, and these activities are theoretically and practically approached in a variety of different ways. In this section, let’s briefly review the matter so we may proceed with applying it later in the paper.

The work of artistic interpretation seems to consist in three things: discovery of meaning, bridging the descriptive and the evaluative, and working out the logic of the formal relationships among the elements of the work of art.<sup>1</sup> These items easily transfer to the interpretation of ritualized space.

By “discovery of meaning” I mean that part of the work of interpretation deals with understanding, and this work of understanding is akin to translation from an unknown language into a known one. If a speaker of a language I do not understand uses a phrase I wish to understand, a translation must be made. This language-translation metaphor can only go so far, but the goal with both language-translation and interpretation of a work of art is understanding: “what does this art object mean?”

By “bridging the descriptive and the evaluative” I mean that while works of art come with properties that are perceptual or, in the case of literature, arise from the linguistic meaning of what is perceptual – all that we are likely to call “objective” – the ascription of aesthetic properties to the object are made only through the application of taste<sup>2</sup> and this necessarily adds value or valuing to what is “objective.” That is, aesthetic properties are bearers of value; we use them to speak of a work’s artistic virtues and faults; we use them as evidence of our judgments of a work’s artistic value. The movement from the purely objective – say, the lines and colors of painting – to the judgment that the composition is balanced, elegant, or harmonious is a movement from the descriptive to the evaluative. This application of taste in order to achieve ascriptions of aesthetic properties is an interpretative project. The audience member must interpret the objective properties as underwriting value-carrying aesthetic or artistic properties.

By “working out the logic of the formal relations” within a work of art, I mean that the audience member, as yet another instance of interpretive work, must consider how the various aspects of the object fit together, puzzle-like, into a single coherent whole that exhibits an internal integrity that some (like Clive Bell<sup>3</sup> and Suzanne Langer<sup>4</sup>) have described as significant form. I invoked “film form” earlier in talking about *mise en scene*. Let me invoke it again by saying that if film form consists of a film’s *mise en scene*, its photographic aspects (cinematography), its narrative, its sound elements, and its editing style, it is up to the viewer of the film to determine either or both of the meaning of the film and the quality of the film through consideration of how those aspects fit together into a unified coherent whole. This is the structure, form, or logic of the work of art.

How these projects are carried out differs on the approach one takes toward interpretation. For the sake of brevity, let’s take a lofty view and consider just six large scale approaches.

- One should avoid interpretation. This is the position of Susan Sontag who argues that especially recently both the world of art as objects/events and the world of audience members and critics have emphasized approaches to art and the consideration of art that have privileged cognitive engagement to the exclusion of engagement characterized as emotional or spiritual or even purely aesthetic in the sense of simple sensory appreciation of the properties of objects. Cognitive engagement is only one sort available, but an over-focus on interpretative engagement with art objects can over-emphasize this sort of engagement. The answer: let the art speak as it will and do not force a reduction to mere cognitive appreciation. One way to concretize this approach: avoid interpretation.<sup>5</sup>
- One should focus on the intentions of the artist. The most famous proponent of this view is E. D. Hirsch. He argues that within each art object is both a set of rules that govern the meaning of that work and the “data” (the aesthetic properties and features) that allow application of those rules. Where there is ambiguity in either figuring out those data or the rules that are meant to govern discovery of their meaning, one should appeal to the artist and her stated intentions concerning what she meant to convey. This is how communication works intuitively; when one speaks to us, we are keen to understand what she means by the words she uses, and if there are misunderstandings, we appeal to the speaker to clarify what she meant.<sup>6</sup>
- One should focus strictly on the object itself. William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley famously argued that artist intention is irrelevant to understanding the meaning of a

work of art. Like Hirsch, they believed that works of art carry within them elements that allow for interpretation in the same way that words on a page carry meanings. If we know the language, we know the meanings not only of the words but of the entirely literary work; the same goes for any work of art.<sup>7</sup> One need not appeal to anything external to the object to understand its meaning; the object alone is sufficient for that so long as the audience member attending to it knows how to “read” it.

- If there are, as a matter of fact, a plurality of possible interpretations of a given art object, one should focus on that interpretation (or those interpretations) that enhance the value of the experience of the work.<sup>8</sup> While an ideal might be described where each art object possesses only one possible interpretation, the likelihood is rather than a given work will inspire a plurality of different interpretations. Those that enhances audience members’ experience of the work, that enhance the value of the art object or enhance the experience of the object, are those that are deemed legitimate.
- Stanley Fish is likely the best known of those theorists who argue that works of art do not carry within themselves enough that establish their meanings in settled ways.<sup>9</sup> The same word, sentence, paragraph or whole literary work may mean very different things to different people. Fish is known for saying that it is specific schools of interpretation, specific interpretative communities, who offer interpretations that are legitimate. As there are a plurality of such communities, so there will be a plurality of legitimate interpretations – and the more communities, the more legitimate interpretations. These interpretative communities can include all sorts of different perspectives: Marxist Socialist-Realism, Freudianism, Jungianism, Critical Race Theory, Feminism, Queer Theory, and so forth.
- At the furthest end of the spectrum are those who believe that interpretations are matters of individual engagement with art objects and who believe that so long as the individual interpreter finds her interpretation meaningful and revelatory, there should be no interference with that. There should be no suggestion that one should settle for a more formalized or restrictive view – one that might actually diminish for the particular viewer the quality of her engagement with the work. If the goal is the enhancement of the individual art experience, then any interpretation, no matter its content or how it was derived, is legitimate if indeed the individual experiencer finds it useful or insightful or otherwise valuable. This sort of interpretation can carry within it personal associations and personal identifications with the work; these cannot be adopted experientially by any audience larger than the person having the experience.

This brief review is about what it means to “read” an art object; we will return below to discussing its application to ritualized spaces.

### **The Aesthetic Form of a Ritualized Space**

At the start of the paper and once more just above I invoked the notion of *mise en scene* as an element of film form. Removing the notion from film form and applying it to ritualized space provides us with a framework for understanding the elements of the aesthetic form (or structure or logic) of the ritualized space. Below are discussed nine elements of that form.

*The Perspective of the Participants.* Participants in a ritual have a specific place or set of specific places they occupy as part of the ritual. In a traditional Hindu wedding, the

bridge and groom take seven steps around a ritual fire. As they do, they occupy seven different positions, and they have seven different perspectives of the space they occupy. Those different perspectives will render different visual phenomena for the bride and groom; in occupying different spaces and in seeing the space from different vantage points, their visual perspectives alter and so their registration of their occupation of the space alters. Each perspective is a separate uptake of the aesthetic form of the space. Perspective is important as the location we occupy within a space constructs that space differently for us; we understand the space differently with different perspectives. This is important to understanding and appreciating its aesthetic character and virtues.

*The Perspective of the Observers.* It is common in many rituals to have a set of people who are merely observing and not participating. Their positions are usually fixed. They take their seats or their places at the start of the ritual and they tend to stay there for the duration – not always of course but commonly. So their perspectives will be fixed (or largely so) as well. Furthermore, as they are not participants, their perspective is likely to be of a wider field and from a more distanced vantage point than the participants. That farther-away, wider-field perspective is important to get just right, as one aesthetically constructs the space, as it changes so little and takes in so much.

*The Depth of Field.* Each time I visit Westminster Abbey, I find myself seated within the center of the cruciform structure. No matter how many times I visit, I cannot help but let my eyes wander higher and higher along the rising architecture. The depth of field for those European medievals who designed and created the space was important; it had symbolic significance in referencing the expansiveness and greatness of the divine. The same depth of field is present when one looks from the doorway to the Abbey through to the altar (which can only be seen ideally as there is a massive screen in the midst and the space is immense). Not all ritualized spaces are as grand or are meant to be; some are meant to be small and intimate. Consider a Native American sweat lodge, where the canopy is just large enough to contain the inhabitants and the fire in the center. Intimacy and closeness are important there, and so “depth of field” should not always be taken as encouragement of massive space. Sometimes the opposite is true.

*The Enclosure.* Most ritualized spaces will be enclosed in obvious ways, with walls that define the space and limit the visual expanse. This is not always the case, but it does seem always the case that even when the space is not obviously enclosed it is nonetheless bounded according to a human scale – that is, according to an aesthetical sensibility that accords to how humans define “a space.” Take for instance a Christian baptism that is done outside in a lake or a river. Here one might argue that there is no enclosure – and there is not – but the space is still bounded. It is either the space of the lake, or it is a subset of that space that has been “adopted” as a sacred space for the ritual to take place. It has a special importance or significance, and so it cannot then extend out indefinitely. It must be bounded according to its ritualized purpose.

*The Items Present.* Every ritualized space will have objects within it whose inclusion is understood to be purposeful and deliberate. They may only be present to define the space, but most times they are present as symbols and instruments of meaning. A birthday party may have balloons, streamers and a cake – all of which not only enhance but focus the activity on celebration of an enthusiastic and upbeat nature.

*The Items Used.* Not every ritual makes use of objects but many do. Not only are these objects bearers of aesthetic value, how they are used – the manner in which the performance of the ritual is carried out – is also an aesthetic matter.

*The Auditory.* Film theory makes a distinction between “diegetic” and “non-diegetic” sound. “Diegetic” refers to all those elements that are part of the film’s world – in other words, that would be real if the film world were real. “Non-diegetic,” particularly in reference to sounds like music, refers to sounds that are not part of the world of the film but that nonetheless are heard by the audience. It is common for a musical score that assists in the creation of mood, focus, and other values to be employed in a film. This filmic distinction again is useful when it comes to ritualized space, and even though sound *per se* is not a part of a film’s *mise en scene*, we can still think of it as part of the aesthetic fabric that constitutes the contextual setting of a ritual. It is difficult to imagine a ritual that does not incorporate sound of some sort.

*The Olfactory.* The fire in a Hindu wedding has a distinctive smell. The incense in a Roman Catholic mass has a distinctive smell. Even the peppermint smell of the candy cane that is handed out by the Santa Claus at the American Mall – if such a visit has a ritualistic quality – can form part of the indelible atmosphere of such an event.

*The Taste.* Many rituals incorporate consumables like food and drink. Again the Roman Catholic mass comes to mind, and the stereotypical taste of the somewhat watered-down sweet wine, along with the papery texture of the eucharistic host (the wafer), are aesthetic matters. Generally when it comes to taste, we call these aesthetic components “gustatory,” but that suggests “good” and “bad” tastes. Here, especially given the Roman Catholic example, I simply mean any taste.

It may well be that there are more than nine aspects to the aesthetic form of the setting of a ritual, and ideally this list should be comprehensive. It is through analyzing the setting of a ritual in terms of its form that we can interpret – that we can “read” – that aesthetic form. The reason why such a “read” is important is that through such an interpretative project, we can appreciate not only the aesthetics of the setting *per se* but we can see how the setting’s aesthetic elements work together toward the success of the ritual, to the quality of the efficacy of the ritual. Or how they fail to – which is to say that “reading” the aesthetic setting allows us also to build the case for evaluating it, for determining whether it is sufficient or exemplary or whether it fails.

In all the approaches to interpretation that are sketched above, there is an element of the normative. The facilitation of understanding, of achieving meaning and/or communication, is a value. But some of the approaches sketched above go well beyond this in emphasizing value-focused goals for interpretation – goals that are largely cashed out in terms of the quality of the experience one has in attending to the art object under consideration.

When discussing above the generalities of interpretation, I mentioned “significant form” as a name that at least two art theorists used as they attempted to capture the internal integrity of an aesthetic object. That “internal integrity” – how the pieces of the aesthetic puzzle fit together to create a seamless organic whole, one that demonstrates maximum coherence among all its various aspects – goes by several names, “significant form” being only one. This same aesthetic character likely was at the heart of what Immanuel Kant

understood as the “purposeless purposiveness,” the character of an object that, while it serves no instrumental function *per se*, still has a quality that strikes the one attending to it as purposeful and purposive.<sup>10</sup> John Dewey, who we will talk about once more at the end of this paper, describes experiences that have maximal aesthetic quality – each of which he refers to as “*an* experience” – as having the same internal coherence, as being bounded and having a recognizable beginning, middle, and end (what I would call a “narrative arc”).<sup>11</sup> All of these approaches and likely many more focus on the experiential registration by the audience member of the puzzle-like quality of aesthetic objects when all the pieces lock in and the puzzle is revealed. The project of working this out, as I mentioned above, is one of the key ways of understanding the nature of interpretation.

Through an analyzed form of the setting of a ritual – toward which the list above means to present a start – we can know the puzzle pieces. Once we know the puzzle pieces, we can begin the task of considering their individual character, but even more importantly we can see how the puzzle pieces go together to form whatever degree of coherence they all together form. This allows us to evaluate that aesthetic setting, but more importantly it allows us to understand it and to understand how it contributes to the ritual meeting its goals as a ritual. And this leads us to the next section of the paper.

### The Goals of a Ritualized Space

Why do we engage in these aesthetically-focused “stage-setting” exercises? The answer to this question can be expressed in a single word: focus. But in asking “focus on what?” we occasion an opportunity to unpack the answer.

- First and foremost, the setting must enhance focus on the significant performatives of the ritual as well as the overall function or goal of the ritual. The setting must focus attention on the ritual as ritual. This was mentioned toward the top of the paper.
- Second, the setting must assist in emphasizing the “set-apart” nature of not only the ritual and those participating in the ritual but also the space in which the ritual is performed. The setting must be bounded in space (and in time) on a human scale, so that anyone appreciating the setting will appreciate its boundaries and “set-apart” nature.
- Third, the setting must focus attention by psychically bracketing off the ritual from the ordinary, from daily worries and distractions. Whether inspiring of calm or of gregariousness, the setting must focus attention “on” and “away from.”
- Fourth, the setting must invite the appropriate behaviors for those performing, those participating in, and those observing the ritual. Voices are modulated (lowered or raised) appropriately; respect is demonstrated; *esprit de corps* is demonstrated.
- Fifth, the setting must uplift the mood and elevate the spirit. It must feel special; it must make one feel honored and eager to do honor.
- Sixth, the setting must convey to all present the value of the ritual and the time and effort spent on the ritual.

What do we mean to achieve in concentrating focus? I want to suggest a slate of six goals that the aesthetic character of the ritual’s setting contribute to meeting. Before going into these, though, I need to point out two things. First, not all rituals have the same goals, no



matter how generalized the goals may be articulated; so no list that represents itself as expressing necessary and/or sufficient conditions for an event being a ritual, or for a ritual to be a successful ritual, is likely to be successful. Second, part of the (non-physical) context of a ritual is its cultural setting; we are not discussing this aspect of the context of rituals in this paper, but as rituals are necessarily set in cultures, so their goals are as well. And, furthermore, their aesthetic virtues must be understood as necessarily set within a cultural context as well. As the aesthetic property of “balance” differs significantly between European Renaissance paintings and Japanese Ikebana, so all the aesthetic aspects of ritual settings may only be fully understood within their cultural contexts – and for some rituals their historical, regional, religious (and so forth) contexts as well. The value of creating a list of goals is to help us organize our thinking about what the aesthetic features of a ritual’s setting contribute to that ritual, but any more ambition than that may be disappointing.

*Expressing Culture.* As all rituals are culturally bound, it seems to follow that we can gain insights into the culture of which the ritual is a part through considering its setting. The aesthetic features of those settings express their cultural contexts, and to the degree to which a culture is expressed in a ritual, we can appreciate that culture all the more. This is a circuit. As we appreciate the cultural context, we can appreciate the significance of a particular ritual and its components all the more, as well. A ritual that might seem strange to one from outside that ritual’s culture, with the education that comes through understanding the particular cultural context of that ritual, may be illuminated for that spectator. And in turn that spectator may appreciate that culture in ways that are new and revelatory.

*Continuity with Tradition.* While this paper is not engaging with contextual matters beyond the aesthetics of a ritual’s setting, the reality is that the aesthetic elements of that setting will cast light back on the traditions and history of that ritual. This is cross-fertilizing insofar as analyzing the aesthetics of the settings will illuminate other contextualities relevant to the ritual.

*Establishment of the Sacred.* I have been fairly careful to talk about rituals rather than talking about the sacred. The reason is that while I see no reason to think that a ritual cannot be private and individual, most are not. Most are communal. “Ritual” is a name for a class of events, but “the sacred” is not. “The sacred” is an attitudinal state of an individual or group for a thing, a place, or an event; it is usually an attitudinal state characterized by holding that thing, place, event as possessing a special value. So it is cleaner and safer for me to talk simply about rituals. That said, the aesthetic aspects of the setting of a ritual through defining a certain space and a certain time as “set-apart” allows us to see a mechanism through which one may come to regard that ritual or its space or its time as possessing the special value that commonly accompanies a thing, place, or event identified as being sacred.

*Signaling A New Navigation of the Reality of the Ritual.* When one is an observer or a participant in a ritual, it is common for one to behaviorally comport oneself in a manner fitting taking on that role in a ritual. The same is true for dress. The reality of the everyday and the ordinary gives way to a new reality, the reality of the ritual, and the respect that the ritual commands – again whether that respect is characterized by serenity or by boisterousness – is integral to that new reality. Observers and participants,

in entering the new world of the ritual, act and dress in ways consonant with that new world and its expectations and rules. The aesthetic aspects of the setting not only encourage recognition that one has entered a new world, they also suggest and signal the character of that new world and the logic and rules that govern it.

*Reinforcing Community.* As I just mentioned, I have no reason to think a private ritual is impossible, but most rituals connect to histories and traditions than transcend the individual and put us in contact with others, both past and present. As we are connected with others, our sense of being in community and the importance of being in community is enhanced. Just as in the case with the item directly above, an aesthetic consideration of the setting, through the fact that this establishes the boundaries in time and space of that ritual, makes us aware of the boundaries of that community and this in turn makes us aware of our place in it and our particular connections to those within it.

*Reordering Hierarchy.* Finally, many rituals reorder the roles and functions of those participating in them. A wedding for instance places both the bride and groom in a new position *vis a vis* their families. It is not surprising that English royals have titles bestowed on them only at the point of their marriages; the marriage concretizes and symbolizes their new position, which in turn is further concretized and symbolized through the conferral of a new title. What happens explicitly in this rarified case happens emblematically, though perhaps subtly, through all marriages at the point of the wedding. We see the emblematic nature of this change aesthetically, through the clothes the bride and groom are wearing, to where they are located during the ritual, to how they are the focus of all eyes during the ritual. What happens in a wedding happens in many other rituals; positional change is not only achieved through the ritual but the trappings of this change are expressed, usually very clearly, through the aesthetics.

## Conclusion

Every ritual, as a matter of metaphysical reality, has a context. In addition to histories, traditions, associations and other contextual matters, each ritual has a physical context, a setting. That setting can be read and understood in terms of its aesthetic form. It can not only be interpreted, which is the primary focus of this paper, but it can be evaluated in terms of its efficacy at bringing focus to the central performative goals of the ritual. Understanding and evaluating the aesthetic aspects of a ritual's context may seem a project in over-intellectualizing events that are common to our everyday lives, but the significance of these intellectualized projects is to gain a deeper insight into the nature of these everyday events. That is, in understanding their contexts, we can understand more deeply how they function in our lives, why they are important to us, how they achieve their defining goal of setting apart some events from others and imbuing those set-apart events with special importance and significance.

There are additional lessons to learn as well.

I stated above that I would mention the work of John Dewey again. Dewey believed that every event we experience has something of the aesthetic about it. He said that an event that is maximally aesthetic – has the most of this aesthetic quality – we call, as I mentioned, “an event” and he described this aesthetic character in the way I briefly sketched above. Dewey's view that all events are on an aesthetic spectrum fits nicely the fact that rituals can be common everyday events but they are still, by their nature, “set-

apart.” The way Dewey characterizes the aesthetic is a means for us to approach and consider what assists in making these events both “continuous-with” and “set-apart-from” the ordinary and everyday.

If we can indeed read through aesthetical analysis the settings of rituals and can gain deeper insight into the nature of those particular rituals and ritual as a general kind of event, then we can, in complement, also gain, through considering these matters, deeper insight into the nature and importance of analyzing all settings in aesthetic terms. That is, if through unpacking the aesthetic form of a ritual’s setting we gain insight into that ritual, we also gain insight into the nature of all settings as being analyzable and understandable through aesthetic analysis. All physical staging can be thought about in aesthetic terms, and very likely projects of this sort will lead to meaningful insights. The enhancement of our facility for such analysis likely will contribute to understanding all human events more deeply.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> XXXXXXXXXXXX, “Mapping Approaches to Interpretation,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Sibley, “Aesthetic Concepts,” *Philosophical Review* 68:4 (1959), 421-450.

<sup>3</sup> Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1914).

<sup>4</sup> Suzanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribner, 1953).

<sup>5</sup> Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Against Interpretation* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966).

<sup>6</sup> E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (Yale University Press, 1967).

<sup>7</sup> William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” *Sewanee Review* 54 (1946), 468-488.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Goldman, “Interpreting Art and Literature,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48:3 (1990), 205-214, and Alan Goldman, *Philosophy and the Novel* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 1934).