

On the Mythic Qualities of Television Culture

In-Sung Whang
College of Communication
Sogang University, Seoul, Korea

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to discuss the mythic qualities of television culture. The basic assumption for the study is that to enrich our understanding of television culture in terms of its mythic qualities will be helpful to those who are interested in the production and the studies of television contents in developing their creative ideas. The study discusses the theoretical conceptions of myth and ritual and their applicability to the study of television culture from the multi-disciplinary perspective. So, it deals with significant theoretical works by a number of great contemporary social or cultural thinkers including Carey, Cassirer, Durkheim, van Genep, Turner, and Eliade. After all, the result of the study identifies three key features of mythic qualities of television culture including 'commonsensicalness,' 'emotionalness,' and 'mediatorialness.'

Keywords: Television, Contents, Culture, Communication, Myth, Ritual.

1. INTRODUCTION

There has been a quite long period of struggles between two paradigms in the study of communication in general. It seems true that an alternative paradigm, which has emerged especially during the 1970s against the traditional behaviorist paradigm, has not yet exerted its influence in the field of media studies. In American context, it seems that the alternative paradigm, in contrast to the traditional one, has started drawing its attention from scholars since the 1970s and its tradition has been also introduced into Korea approximately during the late 1980s as some of Korean communication scholars imported this theoretical tradition mostly from the West. James Carey, a prominent communication scholar, calls this new tradition the 'ritual' view of communication, which seems opposed to the 'transmission' view of communication. [1] The major difference between these two traditions seems that the ritual view stresses the ritualistic aspect of media communication phenomena, whereas the transmission view sees that communication simply as a process of information exchange. While the major concern of the latter lies in, so-called, 'effect' studies such as studies of persuasion, attitude change and behavioral change, the former is concerned with better understanding of communication in general in relation to its cultural context and of the unifying role of mass media in particular that helps us maintain our society in balance.

It is during this transition period that communication scholars have showed their interest in a variety of academic fields such as anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, sociology, and so on. There also have been two different directions within

that newly emerging paradigm for the study of communication. Regarding mass mediated culture in particular, Breen and Corcoran point out that these two different directions could be categorized into the mythic perspective and the ideological one. [2] While both show their common interest in the dynamic relations between the diverse cultural forms and the formulation of mass consciousness, they differ in focus they are concerned with in relation to the role of mass media. Generally speaking, those who go after the mythic (symbolist) perspective seek to establish theories that stress the unifying role of cultural forms for the maintenance of society. On the other hand, those who follow the ideological perspective are interested in revealing some hidden ideological expressions made by relatively privileged groups than minor ones.

From this point of view, the present study attempts to draw the mythic qualities of television communication as a cultural ritual on the assumption that such a theoretical exploration will contribute to the enhancement of our understanding of television medium and it will lead us to develop more efficient methods of producing quality contents. The study discusses the theoretical conceptions of myth and ritual and their applications into the study of the ritual culture of television from the multi-disciplinary perspective covering various academic disciplines such as communication studies, mythology, sociology, anthropology, etc. In this respect, the following discussion, above all, will review some of major contemporary theorists in myth studies that would contribute to enriching our understanding of the communication process of mass media in general and that of television in particular. To put it more concretely, the purpose of generating such a discussion is to have a better understanding of how television can be successful in creating and maintaining meaningful social orders of things for the public. So, this study does not have to do much with

* Corresponding author. E-mail : inwhang@sogang.ac.kr
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specific television contents themselves but with their particular 'forms' of communication. Now, the following discussion will be done basically on the theoretical level by reviewing some of the most significant conceptualizations of myth for the present study first, and it will explore the concepts of some constituent elements of mythic ritual in general and their possible applicability to the study of television culture.

2. THEORIES OF MYTHIC RITUAL

According to Cassirer's contention in his *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, [3] the mythical symbol is not an ideal representation of something but a self-contained form of interpretation of reality in which no distinction is allowed between the real and the ideal. In the magical shamanistic rituals, for instance, all participants including the hosts (if any) and the guests regard themselves not merely as imitating but as 'becoming' the characters in the story. The stories employed in rituals become actualized in reality, and the languages that are used go beyond the level of mere description of objects and thus become the 'essence' of the things and exert its magical power.

In his later works, notably in *An Essay on Man* [4] and *The Myth of the State*, [5] however, Cassirer tends to shift his concern from the metaphysical way of discussion to the sociological one and it seems evident as he sometimes refers to sociological thinkers such as Durkheim and Malinowski. So, it seems quite natural that he has developed the thesis of pragmatic function of myth. He stresses that myths are originally based on the emotional and thus that the practical and social function of myths is to promote a feeling of unity or harmony between the nature and the life and moreover among the members of society. [6]

Cassirer argues that the origin of myth cannot be identified with emotion itself because it is only the expression of emotion. The expression of emotion is then 'emotion turned into image'. [7] He stresses that a 'unity of feeling' is what myth gives us and this is compared to a unity of intuition provided by art and a unity of thought comprised by science. [8] In other words, mythical symbolism objectifies human feelings such as fears and hopes and metamorphoses them into other type of cultural forms, in which visual works such as painting, photography, film and television are certainly included.

In sum, for Cassirer, myth is not a product of our conscious creativity but a result of our spontaneous expression of the feeling of unity among the members of a society and of human being's constant struggle for harmony with the nature. Any mythic symbol then is not to be considered merely as something representational of reality but identical with it, and it is metamorphosed by itself into a variety of cultural forms. In this respect, the following discussion will rethink the valuable ideas provided by some of other contemporary thinkers who share the similar ideas of myth with Cassirer. Among these thinkers are Emile Durkheim, Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner and Mircea Eliade, whose works have exerted tremendous impacts on the development of the theoretical tradition regarding the ritual view of communication later on.

To begin with, central to Durkheim's sociological thinking

is, as Collins [9] reads, his belief that society is understood as having both conscious superficial and unconscious non-rational levels. The symbol and ritual on the surface level is determined by the deeper unconscious structure. Durkheim, thus, stresses the importance of emotional forces, morality, the sacred and the religious as the essence of the social. Therefore, ideas do not determine social structure, but the other way around, and the efficacy of ideas is possible because ideas are always social. In this respect, ideas, as 'collective representations', are only partially autonomous.

In his work *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, [10] Durkheim observes the relationship between the mundane aspects and the sacred elements of social life. His intention was to provide answers to the questions of the bases of knowledge itself by means of observing the most primitive ways of ordering man's view of the world and relating them to the other types of knowledge. Pertaining to Durkheim, first of all, the religious rites particularly in the primitive society have less to do with the idea of God or gods. Religious representations are just 'collective representations' expressing 'collective realities'. Durkheim divides religious phenomena into two categories: beliefs and rites. While the former are 'states of opinion' and consist in representations, the latter are 'modes of action' by which certain states of consciousness among the group members are maintained or recreated. As Durkheim argues, all religious beliefs presuppose the specific nature of their object, which is generally translated by the words 'profane' and 'sacred'. So, all religious thoughts such as 'beliefs', 'myth', 'dogmas', and 'legends' express the relationship between the sacred and the profane. Within this perspective, the function of such primitive belief system as totemism was to bind clan members together through its corresponding 'rites'.

Van Gennep [11] also sees a recurring typical pattern, the pattern of 'the rites of passage', which is then to be found beneath a multiplicity of cultural forms. This pattern is very similar to Durkheim's deep conscious structure in that it, as van Gennep asserts, underlies all kinds of rites or ceremonies including birth, marriage, death, etc. He thus distinguishes three major stages of movement going on in these rites of passage. Among these stages are 'preliminal rites' (rites of separation—e.g. funeral ceremonies), 'liminal rites' (rites of transition—e.g. pregnancy and remarriage), and 'postliminal rites' (rites of incorporation—e.g. marriage). At the heart of the ritual process is the movement into and out of the 'liminal' stage.

Van Gennep's notion of 'liminal' is particularly important so as to be applied to the study of the process of television communication. From a similar viewpoint, Turner adapts van Gennep's notion of 'liminal' into his study of cultural forms experienced not merely in the complex modern but also in the traditional pre-industrial societies. According to Turner, [12] like in van Gennep, the characteristics of the ritual subject during the 'liminal' period are ambiguous and indeterminate since the ritual subject (the 'passenger') passes through a cultural space that is expressed in a variety of symbols and its attributes are not to be normally perceived. Therefore, liminal entities are, in Turner's words, 'neither here nor there' but 'betwixt and between' the positions. [13] In other words, the subject is neither totally in nor out of normal positions. It

implies the state in which 'normal constraints' are released, 'uninteresting constructions of common sense' are deconstructed, and the 'meaningfulness of ordinary life' is achieved. To put it simply, as Turner states, the state of liminality implies the realm of the 'interesting' or of the 'uncommon sense'. Moreover, he brings in the notion of 'communitas', 'community' or 'communion'. Turner's concept of 'communitas' suggests a society that emerges within the 'liminal' period. It is the type of community that is 'unstructured' or 'rudimentarily structured' and 'relatively undifferentiated'. [14]

3. THE MYTHIC QUALITIES OF TELEVISION CULTURE

Pertaining to the nature and functions of myth and its rites as have been discussed so far, despite some of their delicate differences, some shared attributes of the mythic can be generated. The worldview of mythic thought is not to be easily explained by the scientific thinking and common sense. It is more like dreams. It is a state of mind and thus a world of the unconscious rather than of the conscious. In any case, the mythic tends to be accepted as such taken for granted within the domain of commonsense and accordingly not questioned by mundane people. The mythic then conditions and sets the limit of people's social consciousness. Given such an operational definition of myth, the nature of television culture will be discussed in terms of its mythic qualities in the following. To understand the mythic qualities of television as its most essential feature is important for those who are interested in the production or the study of television contents since it gives them creative ideas regarding how and what aspect of television communication draws the audience's concern.

First of all, it can be argued that the mythic nature of television works on the commonsensical dimension. On one hand, the mythic nature of the process of television communication seems not likely to be explained by the commonsensical or logical way of thinking. Once it is explained to someone, it is no longer mythic then. On the other hand, however, the mythic television also presupposes and works by the existence of people's commonsense. Television is mythic only to the extent that it is understood and accepted by the audience in terms of commonsense. Therefore, as Silverstone argues, [15] television must come to terms, both in its content and its forms, with commonsensical knowledge if it is to achieve any efficacy at all. In this sense, television today is practical as much as myth of traditional society. The flexible and mobile characteristic of commonsense easily allows television for resulting in its effects. Commonsense, according to Gramsci, continually transforms and enriches itself both with scientific and philosophical information that has entered the realm of ordinary life. [16]

Secondly, mythic television, like myth, relates itself to the emotional dimension. The importance of feeling in myth has been already discussed in the review of Cassirer's thought. Eliade [17] also shows the same sentiment regarding the emotional aspect of myth. According to him, the mythic grows out of our response to feelings of the terror of history derived

from ambiguity and uncertainty of life. Myth provides people a way to get out of such negative feelings through symbolic and emotional mechanisms. This is also the case even for the television culture in the present post-industrial society. It seems that the tension or drive that arises from the feeling of alienation or deprivation in modern society leads people to watch television everyday and get relieved. This is, for example, why we are sometimes fascinated especially by fantasy fiction television series. This emotional exposure to the symbolic machine again leads to the release of such negative feelings as fear, danger, horror, etc. This reduction of fear or terror is achieved through the process of identification and harmonization among people and furthermore between the human and the nature.

Thirdly, as a consequence, it seems to be the most important attribute of mythic television that the function of myth takes the role of bridging our mundane life with the sacred, unfamiliar world. The mediating role of myth is highlighted particularly in Turner's theory of 'liminality' as mentioned before. It is through participants' passing through a 'liminal' transition state that the rituals, arising out of conflict situation, make possible the achievement of resolution of conflict. Turner stresses the pure potential power of 'liminality' in which a limitless, symbolic freedom is brought to light. Myth then provides a site of conflict between chaos and order, emotion and reason, past and future, and the profane and the sacred, and a site of resolution as well. [18]

Mythic television suggests a model of society after all. This model then gains its meaning and significance among the members of society when people perceive, practice and reinforce the values, moral standards, beliefs, and so on that the model has suggested. The proposed model of society then penetrates into the deep cultural level of society through the repetitions of various everyday mundane rituals including television culture.

What is critical to the understanding of television viewing as a significant cultural practice seems to lie in the firm grasping of the underlying structural basis of television viewing rituals, not in the mere understanding of the meanings of particular television contents. Within this perspective, this study suggests that the structural characteristics of shamanism ritual be used as an analogy for the development of the model of television communication on the assumption that television as well as shaman plays the role of mediumship between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the unfamiliar, and the profane and the sacred worlds. Generally speaking, shamanism ritual presupposes three steps of process consisting of before-ecstasy, ecstasy, and after-ecstasy. It also assumes shaman's role as a mediumship that connects the supernatural and the natural, and the ideal and the real.

According to Eliade [19], shamanism is defined as 'a technique of ecstasy' that is 'characterized by trance flight to spirit worlds', and 'trance' is understood as a state of simple change in consciousness, while ecstasy as a state of soul loss. The similar sentiment with 'ecstasy' is also found in van Gennep's notion of 'liminality' and Turner's 'the liminal' as mentioned earlier, or Campbell's 'initiation' of the hero [20] All of these seem to represent a particular state of mind in the

mythic ritual, in which the distinction between truth and falsity is blurred, the separation between the profane and the sacred disappears, and emotion and reason converge into one dimension.

In short, this state of 'ecstasy' in shamanism ritual presupposes before- and after- stages in terms of linear order. The three stages in turn relate to each other in a circular movement whereby after-ecstasy becomes before-ecstasy again. The term 'ecstasy' is preferred to the term 'present' since the linear (secular) concept of time is not available during the state of ecstasy. During the state of 'liminality', as indicated in the previous discussion, the secular conception of time sequences (past, present, and future) is displaced with a new conception in which linear time sequences are dissolved into a sacred conception of time that is characterized by its circular movement. The states of 'before' and 'after' may correspond to the notions of 'preliminality' and 'postliminality' in Turner's terms, and to those of 'departure' and 'return' in Campbell's terms.

In the ritual of television culture, like in the shamanism ritual, people engage themselves in the before-ecstasy/liminal/initiation-after process, a rite of passage (van Gennep), or a hero's journey (Campbell). The moment when we turn on the television set corresponds to the moment of transition from the ordinary, taken-for-granted and meaningless life into the other world of illumination and freedom, in which conflicting feelings of fear, anxiety and uncertainty momentarily disappear and the secular scheme of temporality and spatiality is demolished. The mythic power of television would not exist if its audience, during experiencing the reality of ecstasy, is too rational to consider the television stories as something real.

Both rituals of television and shamanism are alike in that they all serve as mythic mechanism that allows its audience, its clients to overcome the spatial and the temporal boundaries and thus leads them to the state of communion. As implied in the discussion of Cassirer's myth as symbolic form of thinking, the audience members identify themselves with the characters in the television programs as they are 'becoming', not merely imitating them. The audience members return to their ordinary lives after all as the television set is turned off. Though it seems equivalent to the 'after' stage of ritual, it is the very moment after all filled with refreshed feeling and meaningfulness, in which the unfamiliar, the uncertain is no longer perceived as so and such negative feelings as fear, horror, alienation, repression, etc. are all gone.

4. CONCLUSION

Thus far I have showed what the proposed communication ritual model could tell about the television culture itself that may belong to a relatively macro level. The sequential division of three steps of ritual proposed in this paper, however, could be also utilized and adapted into the analysis of television contents on the relatively micro level such as the analysis of specific stories or specific small episodes within a story for instance. In this respect, the units of analysis could be seen multilayered varying in accordance with the level of individual

analysis, ranging from the level of a small episode of a television program to that of entire program. The proposed model, unlike the traditional approach that focuses on persuasion, attitude change, etc., has strength in that it could tell us about how the mythic system of television communication works as it provides us with a kind of framework, by means of which the deeper, structural pattern of television communication is able to be understood.

While the result of this paper may help us recognize the mythic process of television communication, many limitations are left to overcome in this study. Above all, understanding television communication would not be complete until the symbolist and the ideological studies are conducted in combination. It seems obvious that the mythic model of television communication does not look into other problematic issues such as contextual analysis, the concrete validity issue in applying the theories of myth into the study of television communication, and the ideological issues involved in the process of writing and producing actual television contents. In other words, it tends to ignore social, cultural and historical variables that could reveal more about the ideological and power-related issues of television communication. Before everything else, however, audience reception research will be useful if we want to see if the audience members today really perceive television in the same way as people of traditional society perceive the mythic ritual and if the audience really feels refreshed and released from such repressed feelings as fear, terror, and so forth.

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In-Sung Whang

He received his B.S. and M.A. degrees in Mass Communication from Sogang University, Korea in 1980 and from Wayne State University, U.S.A. in 1986 respectively. He also received his Ph.D. degree in Communication from The Ohio State University, U.S.A. in 1993. He is currently a professor in the College of Communication, Sogang University, Korea. Among his main research areas are visual culture studies, media studies, and cultural studies.