formance context which could be viewed as one of esthetic distance.

2. I would stress, more than Scheff does, the importance of taking a cognitive orientation, despite the fact that, as Scheff argues, the cognitive approaches of such ethnographers as Geertz and Malinowski have led to a neglect of the role of emotion in ritual. Sinhalese, for example, have complex theories concerning emotion and the behavioural indications of various types of emotion. It is critical for analysis that these be grasped for an adequate interpretation and understanding of the meaning of activity in ritual to be achieved. This aside, however, the separation of individuals from their fears and terrors, an important element of catharsis on which its therapeutic effectiveness to some extent rests, is dependent on the manipulation of cognitive frames of reference. Possession might produce emotional discharge but not necessarily separation, although it might be a useful device preparatory to separation. Sinhalese consider major exorcisms to be potentially the most therapeutically effective, and it is only in such rituals that extended sequences of drama occur.

I would suggest that the dramatic sequences enacted in the closing period (morning watch) of major exorcisms constitute a further elaboration of a situation of esthetic distancing, which to some extent is introduced in the midnight watch period. Understanding how this esthetic distancing is achieved requires attention to the cognitive content of the drama, which, in turn, develops a situation in which the patient can further express a discharge of emotion and, moreover, signify a separation from an overwhelming concern with personal terrors.

There is insufficient space available to describe the later dramatic sequences, save to state that they are highly comic and that the comedy in them serves to link the everyday world of the audience, where individuals are not obsessed with demons and where demons are subordinated to the control of human beings, with the highly distressful, obsessive, demon-controlled world of the patient. During the drama, the patient is expected to laugh. This laughter can be interpreted in the logic of Sinhalese as purifying and representative of further emotional discharge. It also signifies the separation of the patient from a terrifying reality and defines the patient, together with the audience, as observer. The enactment of the drama involves a complex manipulation of ideas which creates a situation for the patient to step outside the role of one who is afflicted by demons.

Scheff’s essay is, I think, very suggestive for the analysis of ritual. More than most current approaches, it directs attention to the dynamics of performance, which along with emotion has been greatly neglected.

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Scheff’s interest in the therapeutic value of ritual arises out of his dissatisfaction with his earlier work on the relationship of labelling theory to mental illness (1966). In a recent book (1975) he has argued that the symbolic interactionism approach that he has advocated cannot account for changes either in attitudes or in the inability of actors to cope with their everyday circumstances—the inability that leads in some circumstances to the application of a mental-illness label. As a result, Scheff has turned to a theory of personal breakdown in which the primary causal factor is the repression of emotion, particularly during the formative years. Through this he hopes to integrate cultural and individual factors in an approach to what is called mental illness. (As a labelling theorist, he does not accept “mental illness” as an accurate designation for what happens to persons no longer able to cope with their circumstances. I agree.) Thus he seems to see advanced industrialized societies as both in error in their child-rearing practices and deficient in mechanisms for adjusting to the results of the repression of emotion. His paper may be viewed as part of a continuing effort to elaborate a general theory of personal collapse.

The difficulty with Scheff’s approach lies in its overly simple description of the relationships among emotions and ritual. There can be no doubt that rituals can be associated with very strong emotional responses, but the association is both complex and contingent upon other factors. Scheff is entirely correct when he identifies a positive and a negative attitude towards ritual in modern scholarship. The negative attitude is much rarer than he is willing to concede, however. The problem is not so much that there are two different perspectives as that the meaning ritual has for actors varies both within a society and between different societies. We are here confronted with the problem of symbolic consensus. A number of studies have shown that standardized meanings for actors may not be assumed (see, for example, Fernandez 1965). If meanings may show such variability, then surely emotional response will vary for much the same reasons. Many approaches, particularly that of Turner (1967), assume that symbols have innate capacities to arouse emotions within actors. Scheff would seem to accept this view. He argues that ritual provides proper distancing from emotion for actors because it arouses the proper, esthetic, emotional attitude.

This argument fails to distinguish between sensations and emotions. Symbols may very well arouse sensations. These are only experienced as emotions when they are defined and shared as such with other actors. For example, Skulaks (1975) has shown that in a Welsh spiritualist cult sensations associated with pain become emotions when shared in healing rites; in these circumstances, pain becomes suffering, and suffering is something that can be controlled and shared. Scheff’s account assumes that private experience is mediated by ritual without public sharing. This leads to his conclusion that modern society is without meaningful rituals, because in modern society there is a paucity of healing rites. This rather romantic view idealizes the quality of life in traditional societies and neglects to seek to discover whether there are situations which function as ritual in modern society.

I have tried to analyze one such situation in an account of a Marx Brothers movie as ritual (Karp 1976). I have shown that actors’ private assessment of public occasions is given expression in this movie, thereby both validating and objectifying the discrepancy between the actor’s experience of the social structure and the acknowledgment of claims to status that persons are sometimes forced to make. Hence we may find the equivalent of rituals in the expressive forms provided by advanced industrial societies. Some other ritual occasions may be devoid of meaning, largely because they are not relevant to the experience of the actors. Here we may speak of alienated ritual. I do not think that we have evidence that traditional societies lack alienated ritual.

This perspective assumes that for rituals to have therapeutic value they must be relevant to the social experience of the actors. It does not assume that ritual automatically arouses emotions. It also does not assume that there is a particular set of emotions naturally associated with given situations and that, as in Scheff’s account, certain types of experiences will arouse universally held emotions. Here his paper is reminiscent of Malinowski’s (1948) account of the emotion of fear universally associated with death. When Scheff tells us that “ritual is unique in that it meets individual and collective needs simultaneously, allowing individuals to discharge accumulated distress and creating social solidarity in the process,” he virtually reinvents Malinowski, errors and all. As Radcliffe-Brown (1952) has pointed out, it is as reasonable to assume that rituals create distressing emotions as it is to assume that they alleviate them.