Repeated activity as ritual reality

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ABSTRACT
In this paper I argue that some recurrence of a steady flow of activity can be treated as a contemporary ritual. We can find such features in common life, as well as in the popular music sphere, on the stage, and within the audience. Such activities can reward bearers with a spiritual value or relief (such as the strengthening of faith and courage; driving away fear, stress and nervousness; calling success; celebration). In traditional ethnic environments, religious ceremonies and rites, the communication is focused on supernatural powers. Here, in a modern ritual, there is a willingness to attribute supernatural character to everyday, ordinary matters. This paper explores the functions of these common day rituals, and defines some typical examples.

Keywords: ritual; rite; popular music; Czech music; techno mania; dance.

The relation between music and rituals offers an unlimited number of particular subjects. In the past, music in its most general understanding, such as sounds and rhythm, used to be a frequent part of rituals of various ethnic groups of the world. Music had and has a symbolic meaning in many religious systems; it is an inherent part of the liturgy and faith manifestation of various denominations.

We can find many examples of how music and ritual are interconnected, especially in Africa. However, I don’t want to deal with matters of ethnic music, world music or folklore in my paper. I would like to focus my attention on popular music acts which are sometimes more similar to various situations of everyday life.
My question is - do musicians need rituals today? Can we find some features of rituals in contemporary popular music? Which particular phenomena can we mention in connection with popular music and rituals?

The Latin word *ritus* means some order or system of rules and some sacred ceremony or rite defined by particular order. There is also some connection to the Greek word *aritmos* (number, numeration, order) and to the Sanscrit world *Rta* (truth, rule, code). In a more general sense the expression could mean also some habit, a custom, a common and formed way of some activity.

**Steady flow of activities**

For the purpose of my paper I would like to define the subject in the most liberal interpretation: as a repetition of a steady flow of activities, which rewards its bearers with a symbolic value of spiritual release or relief such as the strengthening of faith and courage; driving away fear, stress, and nervousness; calling success; celebration; etc. Ritual usually links the life of humans to some higher structures, to an order, which can be biological or spiritual (cultural). Here, more than a communication focused on supernatural powers, it is a willingness to attribute supernatural character to everyday, ordinary matters. We do the ritual even if we know well that we will not gain the supernatural power, but also such activity is important and can bring us some relief.

We can examine and explore functions of these common rituals, and we can recall some typical examples, focusing especially on pop music. Rituals have important functions regarding the organization of people, stabilization and preservation of values. They serve the fixation of norms of a particular society. Collective experience can help with the stabilization of feeling and sense of security inside society. They can sometimes also serve for the demonstration of respect or submission. In the extreme we can have joy and fun also from the action of ritual itself, from the making of a ritual without a concrete function. Just a mere repeated activity can lead to some emotive experiences.

**Greetings and celebrations**

It is not difficult to recall some simple act from everyday life which has markedly some features of ritual: some kind of greeting (shaking hands, lifting a hat, various military hand-saluting, uprising of pupils in the classroom when a teacher is coming in); birthday wishes; small rituals connected with eating, drinking wine or smoking joints; starting or ending activities of various social events; love and erotic actions; a special way of celebrating goals in football, ice hockey and other sports.

So we have rituals or at least features of former rituals around us every day and usually we don’t feel that it is a ritual. People need rituals. They help them in communication and concentration.
RITUALS IN MUSIC

Rituals outside of religious music have similar functions and effects like those of common life. We can find them within small subcultures as well as in the sphere of the commercial mainstream of mass media.

Of course we can find the features of ritual also in older non-sacred music. As Štedroň (2010) argues, the origin of early opera had a relation to important rituals of the period of the last third of the sixteenth century. The most important ritual which contributed to the origin of opera in the North-Italian courts was the wedding and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice which embodied the fragility of human relations and the relation between a wedding and a death.

More ritual features have evidently archaic and pagan origins. Many of them became later a part of Christian services. Playing a special repertoire at weddings or funerals is common to the present time in various forms all over the world.

CHRISTENING OF CDs

Some Christian rituals are adapted to commercial acts. It is difficult to evaluate the correctness of such processes, when features of sacred rituals are misused in pop culture for publicity, advertisement and promotion. A popular example in the Czech Republic is a ceremony of the christening of newly released CDs.

As Tesar (2010, p. 88) described, it’s a little bit controversial. There is a clear parallel with the birth of a child, but the traditional “transitional” sacred ritual is changed to the act of advertising. We can admit that for some musicians and fans such ritual can retain the original sacred character. The christening of the CD becomes also the place of meeting, place of celebrating, place of prospect and faith; it is a moment of transition and change - musicians have finalized their creative working cycle and they are starting the new cycle connected with the promotion of the creative work.

A strange connection of spiritual and material elements culminates with the fact of recurrence: the group usually approach the christening of the same new CD several more times. The record company organizes the act of christening in every big city of the country. From the point of view of Christianity it is real “blasphemy” because the priest is replaced by some celebrity. It is clear that the “child” is not important, but the commercial effect towards the participants is important. So the Czech custom practice of the christening of a newly released CD during concerts or press conferences is a mixture of traditional ritual features with contemporary promotional mechanisms.

BETWEEN DEFLATION AND INFLATION

Pop culture is ritualized often when there is a lack of new and inspiring content. However, there are various situations in popular music practice with a healthy and beneficial use of some ritual features. The most strong and beneficial is usually during the rise and development of new styles or movements when it is strongly connected with new charge and content.
Many ritual features penetrated popular music from the sphere of Afro-American folklore. Original camp meetings or ring shouts had some features of contemporary big open air concerts and festivals, for instance. We also can recall such typical concert situations as communication between the singer and audience. For example, the auditory repeat fragments of melodies, the singer jumps among the audience, etc. If the interaction is spontaneous then the ritual operates well.

On the other hand, some action of recurrence can lead to extremely blank results without sense and real content. For instance, when some performance has not enough energy to provoke spontaneous reaction of an audience and performers provoke the audience only verbally and by the help of some gesture in order to initiate some rhythmical hand-clapping, then the situation results rather in an artificial manipulation with people.

**Techno Rituals**

Various new forms of venerable rituals can intensify enforcement of new trends, styles and genres. For example, the Danish film document about the techno music scene *Technomania* (1996) supports this claim. Protagonists of the film compare the performing of electronic dance music through a rave party or techno party of the early 1990s to ancient tribal ceremonies, where the dancers feel the ecstasy, a DJ replaces a shaman, sound equipment is erected instead of a totem pole, and optical effects replace a glittering fire.

Danish music journalist Henrik List states in the film that “techno-culture is a tribe gathered around the totem at sacred places”. Danish editor Claire Wielandt declares “you forget where you are and you just absorb the ancient power”. DJ Goa Gil compares: “Also oldest tribes of the planet met during a full moon, played drums and danced […] They felt to be a part of the ENERGY […] I always aim to achieve this habit”. Finally the guitarist of the group System 7 Steve Hillage argues: “Ancient dances were always part of rituals and this is only a new form which uses the latest technology”.

**Modern Bloody Rituals**

Let’s conclude the discourse with two examples from the Czech alternative musical scene. Both are slightly extreme. Both present the stage show with elements of a bloody ritual: scarring the singer’s back with a knife as a climax of the concert (Michael Kyselka and the group Hookers), and hanging the person by skin on hooks (as witnessed one of the participants, Sultan).

1. **Scarring the Singer’s Back with a Knife as a Climax of the Concert**

As a first example there is a concert of the rock group Hookers with singer Michael Kyselka. His performance culminates with this action: before the end of the concert, an arranged person with a knife comes to the stage and makes the cross or the letter “X” on the singer’s back. This show is not repeated every evening but it is repeated...
on different occasions, so the scar is restoring forever. The singer acknowledges the inspiration by GG Allin, American punk rock singer (1956-1993), whose performances had been full of rough transgression features. Kyselka is not so excessive but his concerts represent an example of intentional modern ritual.

The first time I saw this show was in 1993 in the American city of Atlanta, where the singer lived for a period of time. My experience has been described in this way:

The show of a local group the Hookers happened on 12 August 1993. Michael Kyselka, originally from Prague, established the group under the influence of GG Allin early in 1992. Czech Mike, how Michael is referred to in the Rock club Maskarade, where he had a job, was brought on the stage with a blindfold over made-up eyes. From time to time he takes a bottle of vodka from the pocket of his bathrobe. For part of the concert he sang blind. Partly spoken performance shifted to shouting while kneeling down and the band was carried forward with the singer. The hard-core tension increased. The culmination came with an appearance of boy - girl (a drag artist), who came on the stage with a big knife to renew the scar in the shape of an X on Michael’s back. According to Michael’s testimony this is a way to change the performance to a ritual and release a natural energy to intensify the show. The Hookers then played frantically and exhausted Michael had to be escorted home after the last extra song. (Opekar 1994; translation from Czech by the author)
The last time I saw the show was in 2008 in Prague where the singer is now based after his return from emigration in the second half of the 1990s. He renewed the band and continued with concert-rites. He explained to me the action in this way:

The performance became a ritual which brings an injection of the natural energy and intensifies the show. The ritual in rock music brings a gradation and climax of the show. It is a catharsis, like a slitting of the envelope and releasing some message to the universe in the last crescendo of a chord. (Kyselka 2010; translation from Czech by the author)

2. **Hanging the person by skin on hooks**

The second example belongs to the sphere of so-called suspension – willing suspension on hooks by the skin. Let’s admit there is no direct link between the act and music, however usually there is more or less a connection to industrial music or just to a monotonic electronic rhythm and melody. The hanging action could sometimes appear as an accompanying program of the festival of industrial music.

There are fixed rules of the action, as expressed by participant Ondřej, nickname Sultán (Kyselka 2010). He marked himself as a Victim and the executor as a Piercer. Thus we can identify some sadomasochist features within the action. Persons involved talk about themselves as modern primitives, about hackers of their own body and consciousness who try to overcome themselves with the help of fear and pain.

Sultan argued that the monotonic sound and industrial music helped to bring him to the point when he already doesn’t feel the pain during the action.

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Figure 2. Suspension. Without date. Illustrative photo from www.cilichili.cz. Downloaded: 26.jul.2010.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can argue that repeated activity as ritual reality occurs very often in our contemporary life, though in new forms and in various social contexts. The activity may have an extreme shape like the last two examples. It may also be (mis)used for promotional purposes and advertisement. Most often it is just a latent part of our lives. People are usually unaware of this ritual character of common happenings and everyday activities. Nevertheless they help them and bring them various forms of relaxation and relief. It could happen individually or collectively, in personal life, or at cultural or sub-cultural levels. Popular music is often a starter and a bearer of such rituals. Sometimes listening to music itself can be perceived as ritual as well. Frequently, ritual extends the everyday existence of man. It can aim towards the spiritual above us, as well as inward, to the soul of man. Music can express either of these ways.

ENDNOTES

1. See for instance Holubová 2007; there are also common dictionaries and small general encyclopedia like Holub and Lyer 1968, Klimeš 1981 or Filipec and Daneš 1978.
2. Transcription by the author. See also <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNAySNrzSQ A&feature=related>; part 3:6, mins. 5:30-7:08; accessed:08.10.2012.
4. For an audiovisual illustration there are only short low-class extracts available on YouTube from 2004, for instance: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0v2l6CrpwA>; mins. 6:20-6:50; or <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpnBTuxJ4Xs>; mins. around 0:30-2:30; accessed:08.10.2012.
5. There are some examples available on YouTube, for instance <http://www.cilichili.cz/ clanky/otevte-se-svym-demonum--43.html; accessed:08.10.2012.
6. For more detail see Opekar 2010. Music and ritual were themes of the 7th international colloquy on traditional folk music, modern folk music, ethnic music and world music in Náměšť nad Oslavou, Czech Republic in July 2010. For the paper presented at the IASPM conference in Grahamstown 2011 I extended and modified several extracts of the Czech paper presented in Náměšť.

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