ONLINE A LOT OF THE TIME

RITUAL, FETISH, SIGN

Members WebCams Faq Videos Pictures
UPDATES:
MEMBERS
Streaming:
Rare DOUBLE UPDATE , two user captured solo videos added, as always lots of nude
Wedne
Back
Saturd
Cam'
Wedne
New
Got bored of living by YouTube's
up my own videos section, and to celebrate its
grand opening I've added a video Dionne
made for me. It's pretty sweet. I still have

KEN HILLIS

Online a Lot of the Time

Online a Lot of the Time

RITUAL, FETISH, SIGN

Ken Hillis

DUKE
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Durham
&
London
2009

© 2009 Duke University Press

All rights reserved
Printed in the
United States of America
on acid-free paper ♾
Designed by Jennifer Hill
Typeset in Chaparral Pro by
Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data
and republication acknowledgments appear
on the last printed pages of this book.*

For Winnie

>>> Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction Rituals of Transmission, Fetishizing the Trace 1

1 Rituals 47

2 Fetishes 79

3 Signs 103

4 "Avatars Become */me*" DEPICTION DETHRONES DESCRIPTION 133

5 So Near, So Far, and Both at Once TELEFETISHISM AND RITUALS OF VISIBILITY 203

Afterword Digital Affectivity 261

Notes 267

Works Cited 287

Index 303

>>> Acknowledgments

A sketch of this project first took shape in a paper I was fortunate enough to present in 1999 at the Knowing Mass Culture/Mediating Knowledge Conference hosted by the Center for Twentieth Century Studies in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In the intervening years, the research for this book has been supported by my home institution, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. My work was greatly advanced by a research and development leave from teaching as well as by a Spray-Randleigh Research Fellowship, both from UNC. A separate fellowship at UNC's Institute for the Arts and Humanities allowed me time to revise the manuscript.

This book is an outcome of my decade-long research adventure into the various complex intersections among ritual, fetishism, signification, and Web-based identity practices and techniques. Many individuals supported me during this time. At UNC, my department chairs, Bill Balthrop and Dennis Mumby, were strongly supportive of my endeavors. My sincere thanks to the individuals at Duke University Press who helped marshal this book toward publication, particularly Ken Wissoker and Courtney Berger. I am grateful to the three readers who provided both pointed critique and helpful commentary during the process of anonymous review.

No book is written in isolation, and my friends and colleagues provided many different forms of kindness and assistance. In particular, I wish to thank Ricky Barnes, John Beauchamp, Lisa Bloom, Wendy Chun, Paul Couillard, Lauren Cruickshank, Mary Ann Doane, Nathan Epley, Philip Hartwick, Jeremy Hunsinger, Martin Jay, Lynne Joyrich, Jon Lillie, Liz McKenzie, Susanna Paasonen, John Durham Peters, Rob Shields, Jon Simons, Jonathan Sterne, T. L. Taylor, Carol Vernallis, Nina Wakeford, Michele White, and Aylish Wood. I owe a special debt to Michael Petit, whose critique, editorial

commentary, and partnership sustained me throughout the book's production and were pivotal to its completion.

Portions of this book began as papers and presentations at Brown University, University of Surrey, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, North Carolina State University, Northwestern University, the Crossroads in Cultural Studies Conference in Tampere, Finland, and the Console-ing Passions Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana. I further benefited from presenting parts of chapters at conferences organized by the Association of Internet Researchers, the National Communication Association, the International Communication Association, and the Association of American Geographers. I extend my sincere appreciation to all concerned.

It was as a graduate student in geography at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, that I first encountered James Carey's pivotal arguments from the 1970s on communication as ritual and communication as transmission. While I argue for the subsequent emergence of Web-based rituals of transmission, Carey's work formed an early matrix within and through which I was able to identify and develop arguments for the synthesis of transmission and ritual at the heart of many contemporary internet practices. It was John Fiske, then a faculty member at Madison's Department of Communication Arts, who introduced me to Carey's thought and who encouraged me to think critically about how the divide between the disciplines of communication and geography might be bridged. John made no claim to foretell the future, but I remain hopeful that his 1996 prediction about the present work proves true.

>>> Introduction

Rituals of Transmission, Fetishizing the Trace

World Wide Web: Diogenes's ancient spirit infuses the name. When asked from whence he came, the cynic is said to have replied *Kosmopolites*—I am cosmopolitan: a citizen of the world, without country, society, place. The "cosmos" in cosmopolitan once referred to adornment and ordered arrangement; we see this etymological linkage in the word "cosmetics." In the same way that cosmetics and cosmetic surgery refer to what is visible on the surface or the skin of a body, both cosmopolitanism and the Web organize an experience of what is visible—a mobile worldview that articulates to cosmopolitanism's related meaning of "rising to the top." By offering a view from the top, the Web contributes to the production of value driven by desire—for the Web, like a cosmetic, never fully takes leave of the bodies and cultures it simultaneously appears to adorn, mask, and alter. Its qualities of virtual space promise the cosmopolitan virtual pilgrim or wanderer the penthouse view, and offer the detached cosmopolitical power of the mind's eye to see the world, including oneself, as a picture. The Web, therefore, like the ideal of cosmopolitanism, is an intersection-cum-fusion of art and life; it remains profoundly ambivalent to modern sensibility.

Subject formations most consonant with such hybrid or in-between qualities of ambivalence are those comfortable with a self-alienating and cosmopolitan placelessness that offers them the (utopic) possibility of transcending the restrictions of dominant sociocultural norms rooted in tradition, place, embodied locality, and the state.[1]

This is the cosmopolitan Web dynamic: A culture of networks and a culture of individualism linked by endless electronic nodes implicitly promoted as an ordered and harmonious system; everyday manifestations of a desire for a worldwide *oikos* or *ecumene*; networked assemblages of digital information machines "wherein" it is imagined that a global and capitalized sensibility might find a mobile and universal home away from home. Cosmopolitics. Fabrication of flexibility, flow, modularity, displacement, simulation, and ephemerality. Visual assemblages of graphic traces. Sign machines. Moving images of exchange value. World as theater. Search as map. Link as road. Network as territory. Monad as nomad. Spectacle as destiny. Anywhere, everywhere, and nowhere but always on the move.

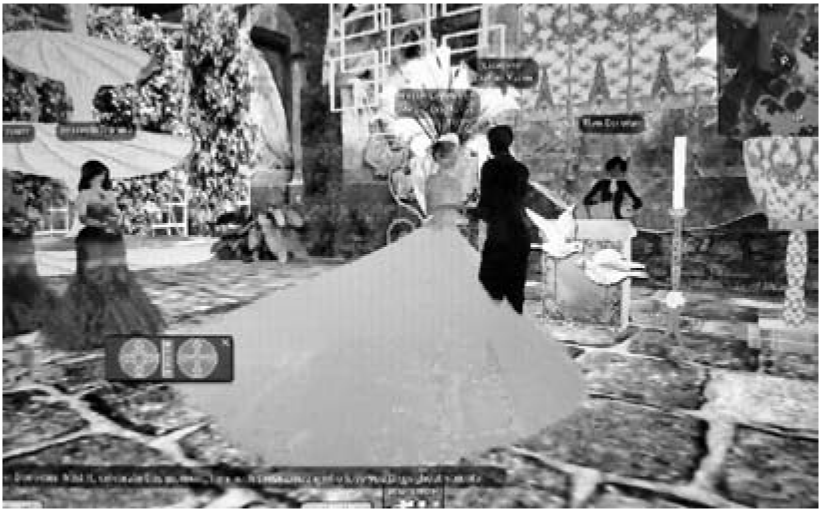
A mobile focus on the visible organizes the cosmopolitan Web dynamic; yet in never fully detaching from the Web user's body, the visible also authorizes understanding the sign world of the Web as constituting a psychic or even material extension or indexical trace of this individual. Materially, Web participants remain "here" in front of the screen's display; experientially they are also *telepresent* (literally "distant presence") "there."[2] To the extent that networked information machines enable individuals to transmit or move a sensory experience of self-presence "elsewhere" across virtual space, the ground is set for the creation of human rituals in networked environments.[3] Traditional rituals set in situated places have been adapted to online settings; at the same time, these settings facilitate new possibilities for ritual that wouldn't otherwise exist. Renovated practices and new techniques of ritual, fetishism, and signification have emerged. Web participants, as connected cosmopolitans, are forming part of a utopic move into a graphical world in which communicability—the state of communication and the means to communicate—becomes a cosmopolitical end in itself.

Second Life is one example among many of a Web-based virtual world that allows individuals to create animated identities depicted onscreen as moving icons called avatars. It exemplifies the vanguard aspirations surrounding the experientially immersive "3D Internet." The popularization and hype surrounding the introduction of concepts such as the 3D Internet and “Web 2.0” reflect, in part, the desire to position the internet as more a social creation than a technical one. Here we can identify how hype works to culturally embed new technologies. In certain ways Web 2.0 operates as a branding strategy: it asserts that new forms of social networking applications are better able to facilitate new forms of online commerce than are the established “1.0” utilities with proven commercial potential, including voice over internet protocol (VOIP) and giant American firms such as Comcast, Yahoo! and MSN.

At the time of this writing, Second Life enjoys its status as the premier and most technically sophisticated multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) 3D Internet graphical chat site.[4] On the Second Life site, corporations such as Toyota, Sears, IBM, American Apparel, and Circuit City have opened virtual offices for disseminating information, academics hold virtual conferences and use the site to recruit and teach students, politicians provide interviews, therapists assist autistic children.[5] In September 2007 the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic performed works by Rachmaninov and Ravel in a replica of its concert hall fabricated on the site.[6] As of October 2007, the Second Life site simulated 375 square miles of land,[7] and after spending time there it is easy to imagine a Guggenheim Second Life by Frank Gehry — the rendering of the museum as pure sign.

A crucial reason for Second Life’s vault to prominence is that in November 2003 its developer, Linden Lab (owned by Linden Research, Inc.), allowed Second Life “residents” to fully own what they “build” on the site. In early 2007, the company further announced that it would make available to developers the software blueprint of its PC program. Developers are free to modify it for personal use and share it with others.[8] Residents of Second Life negotiate, through their avatars’ moving performances, the increasing expectation that they take their places as traveling signs within a networked world based on communicability and flow. Residents design and set up their own site-compatible virtual spaces (sometimes referred to as “persistent environments”), and they design avatar forms according to their own skills, preferences, requirements, and desires.

Figure 1 is a still image from a video capture of a wedding ceremony conducted in Second Life in early 2006. The wedding took place in the “Secret Garden,” a personal iconographic environment designed specifically for the occasion by code-savvy site participants. The avatar named River Donovan officiated the exchange of vows between the avatars Merwan Marker and



1 Second Life Wedding, 2006. Courtesy Jeremy Hunsinger.

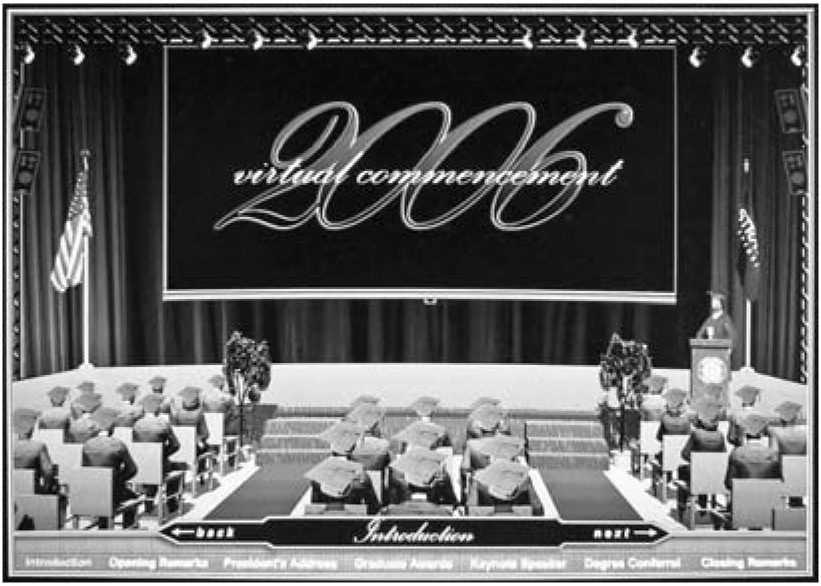
Mercurious Monde. Not all Second Life activities mirror traditional ritual practices, but the wedding ceremony is respectful, thoughtful, even conventional—and it is as fetishistically executed as any ceremony on this side of the screen, down to the bride's dress, the elaborate floral arrangements, and the release of virtual doves. The ceremony relies on the agreed-upon standards expected of any social ceremony focused on individuals who intend to publicly proclaim their commitment to one another. It is a ritualized form of storytelling that, as Nick Yee argues, gives heft to the virtual, avatar identities of the residents taking part.[9] It is also something more: in the replacement of the perceptible world by a set of images (Debord 1994:26), a Web experience such as Second Life's virtual wedding constitutes a learning experience pointing directly to the image as an iconographic sign/body, a formerly mechanical bride on its way to cosmopolitan mobility and seemingly conscious independence.

>>> Rituals of Transmission

Web-based rituals such as the wedding on Second Life depend on the merger in practice of two ideas of communication often held distinct by communication scholars: communication as the use of a device or mechanism such as the postal system, telephone, or radio to *transmit* messages between people across space; and communication as a *ritual* gathering, often of a religious nature, of people coming together in the same place for the performance of activities intended to generate, maintain, repair, and renew social meanings and relations. Transmitting information across space is centrifugal—messages move outward and away from the sender centered in the here and the now. Such messages, composed of words and images, are fully distinct from the sending bodies. In contrast, physically gathering together to "hear the good news" or bear witness to a testimony of action is centripetal—the gathering place is the productive center where communication is produced; it constitutes a middle ground that draws together various individuals into a group, the members of which enter into communication with one another. Members perceive what gets said or shown as directly emanating from the body of the teller or actor. The networked transmission of digital information collapses this binary understanding of communication and blurs distinctions between these processes. Each individual who "enters" the sites discussed in this volume in the digital form of what I will call the "sign/body," though remaining geographically separate from other "visitors," can experience a sense of joining with them in a form of virtual gathering place. A variety of ritualized activities may then take place virtually in these settings that fuse and modulate the centrifugal and the centripetal, and therefore may seem to do the same for human bodies.

Common sense and traditional Western understandings associate rituals with embodied *rites of passage* set off from daily routines; they are extraordinary events distinct from yet lodged within the everyday: individuals gathering together to solemnize, mark, or celebrate birth, marriage and civil unions, death, healing ceremonies, coronations, graduations, and trials. The practices traditionally associated with bounded ritual performances situated in a physical space remain strong. The specific forms of language, habitual social interactions, and relationships between bodies and the codes of communication they entail, however, are inflected in new ways (at times renovated, at other times made superfluous) by information machines and the virtual spaces they render graphically possible.

Strayer University, headquartered in Arlington, Virginia, launched its Web-based "virtual commencement" on June 27, 2006 (figure 2).[10] Graduates and others opened the original commencement website to attend a graduation ceremony complete with a keynote address, names and degrees in di-


2006
virtual commencement
← back
Introduction
next →
Introduction
Opening Remarks
President's Address
Graduate Awards
Keynote Speaker
Degree Conferral
Closing Remarks

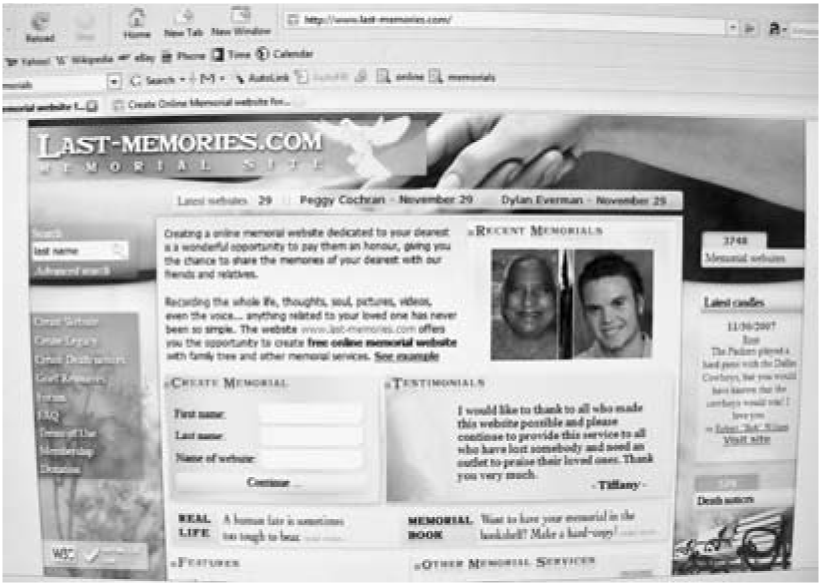
2 Virtual commencement ceremony for Strayer University, 2006.

ploma format, and a rendition of Edward Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*. The setting of the ceremony positions the viewer at the rear of an auditorium behind rows of mortarboard-clad graduates facing the stage. The valedictorian or master of ceremonies stands behind an on-stage lectern as curtains open and a screen descends to project, at appropriate points in the ceremony, viewer-activated videoclips of inspirational speakers who address "the leaders of tomorrow." The ceremony includes a keynote address by Susan LaChance, a U.S. Postal Service vice president for employee development and diversity. In her speech, LaChance departs from conventional boilerplate to promote the neoliberal value of flexibility built into the ceremony itself: "Not only did Strayer University give its graduates the option of deciding when they could take classes, but it has given them the option of deciding the day of their graduation ceremony. The life of an online student comes down to balancing many responsibilities . . . so it's only fitting that online graduates experience a ceremony that helps strike a balance in their lives."[11]

The "balance" achieved through Strayer's virtual ceremony lies at the intersection of a produced opposition between culture and economy. We live in a period when “the basic unit of economic organization is . . . the network . . . relentlessly modified . . . to . . . market structures” (Castells 2000:214). The development of digital rituals such as Strayer’s virtual commencement indicates that the participants require that traditional rituals shed specific associations with actual places and adopt greater flexibility of form. Such a requirement means that the image of the graduation must be divorced from its original discursive and bricks-and-mortar settings. The ideology of convenience (a necessity for individuals who must be flexible, that is, customizable as employees) requires simulating a gathering place. This supersedes the older cultural meaning of a ritual as bringing people together in the same place to produce meaning, and the virtual ceremony that “strikes a balance” reveals the logic of capital colonizing an older collective form of producing meaning and order through ritual action.

We generally understand a ritual as an event constituted in a set of activities that induces a change or shift in people’s perceptions and interpretations: when the officiator announces that the couple is married, they really are. This constitutes a change in circumstances. Rituals such as marriages, funerals, and trials are “framed” or positioned as differing or standing out from everyday life. But rituals also confer order on and an understanding of everyday life; their form signifies meanings that extend beyond the actual ritual activity. And while rituals entail customary and formal qualities, this need not preclude their also being small, personal, and informal performances.

Consider, for example, the emergence of dozens of online memorials and virtual gravesites to commemorate the dead (figure 3). With names like Virtual Memorial Gardens, World Wide Cemetery, DearlyDeparted.net, ForeverStudios.com, ToLive4ever.com, and MyDeadSpace.com, these websites allow individuals to upload personal details about the deceased, including biographies, photographs, and digital videos. Depending upon the application, the bereaved and other visitors can leave personal notes, present virtual flowers, and light virtual candles. The listings, according to the memorial site Memory-of.com, “have become a way to speak to the departed by writing them letters, for friends to exchange memories, and for strangers as well as distant relatives to send condolences to the family. In this way these rituals take a traditionally private ceremony and render it public.”[12] According to the online *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying*, digital cemeteries first appeared in the mid-1990s, and most “evoke images of traditional cemeteries, with


LAST-MEMORIES.COM
MEMORIAL SITE
Latest websites 29
Peggy Cochran - November 29
Dylan Everman - November 29
RECENT MEMORIALS
CREATE MEMORIAL
First name:
Last name:
Name of website:
Continue
TESTIMONIALS
FEATURES
OTHER MEMORIAL SERVICES
3748
Memorial websites
Latest candles
11/30/2007
Death notices

Creating a online memorial website dedicated to your dearest is a wonderful opportunity to pay them an honour, giving you the chance to share the memories of your dearest with our friends and relatives.

Recording the whole life, thoughts, soul, pictures, videos, even the voice... anything related to your loved one has never been so simple. The website www.last-memories.com offers you the opportunity to create **free online memorial website** with family tree and other memorial services. See example

I would like to thank to all who made this website possible and please continue to provide this service to all who have lost somebody and need an outlet to praise their loved ones. Thank you very much.
- Tiffany -

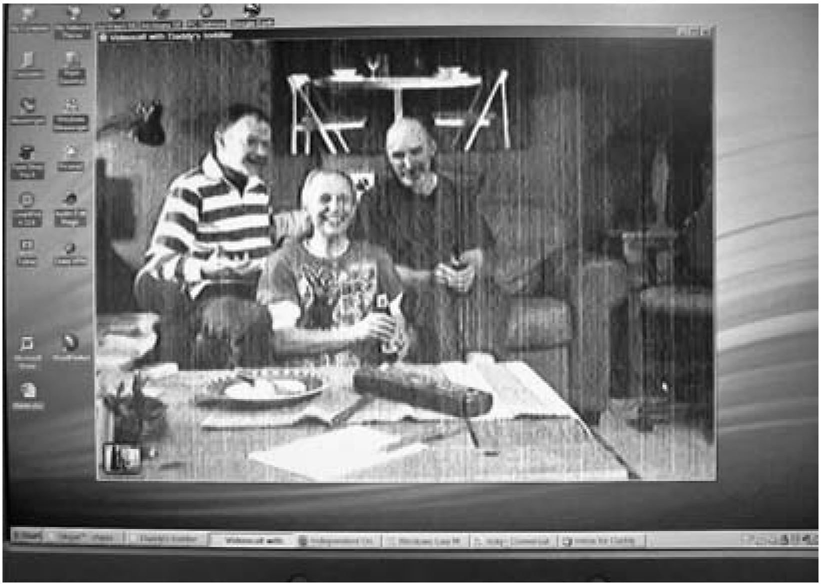
REAL LIFE A human fate is sometimes too tough to bear.

MEMORIAL BOOK Want to have your memorial in the bookshelf? Make a hard-copy!

3 A screen display from Last-Memories.com virtual memorial site.

pictures of cemetery gates or gardens on their opening pages. Opening pages often invite visitors to 'enter' their cemetery, and once inside, web cemeteries . . . [provide] a sense of place and to many, a feeling of community; as with traditional cemeteries, other losses and the people who mourn them are nearby."[13]

Figure 4 illustrates a more personalized ritual indicative of the growing use of personal webcams for audio/video chat and PC-to-PC phone calls. Webcams are cameras attached to networked computers that over the Web transmit images that are continuously refreshed. I live in North Carolina, and for the past year I have had coffee every week or so with close friends who live in Toronto. We do so through webcam technologies supported either by Skype or Yahoo! Messenger. We prefer Skype because the webcam image can be expanded to fill most of the laptop's screen or display, thereby enhancing the experience of meeting together in virtual space. On both ends of the wire a small webcam placed somewhere close to where we are seated transmits our images in real time to one another; microphones do the same for our voices. We exchange personal information — something we could also do on the telephone or by email. The exchange of visual images coupled to



4 A screen display of friends during a virtual coffee klatch.

audio information, however, heightens and makes more direct my friends' experiential presence to me. We see each others' faces move in response to what we are saying and seeing, and the time we allot to each coffee klatch—no more than half an hour—marks an informal, performative ceremony set off from the day's demands yet part of the everyday. It is both transmission as a ritual and a ritual transmitted or communicated (see Carey 1975; Rothenbuhler 1998:5). At times these encounters induce feelings of absence and "wish you were here," yet mostly they have the opposite effect: everyone feels that they are somewhat in each others' presence.

These examples of networked rituals are, in part, contingent—the Second Life wedding relies on code-savvy participants who cannot all be in the same material place at the same time; the spatiotemporal and economic demands placed on Strayer's graduates mesh with the "convenience" of online convocation; online memorials spatially relocate gravesites and make private mourning public; my virtual coffee klatch meshes available technology and the group's desire to maintain regular and friendly contact. What is contingent, moreover, becomes historical when it gains meaning through human interpretation such as our collectively produced understanding that we all benefit from meeting this way online. Virtual weddings, funerals, graduations, and coffee klatches are "localized" examples and personal actions that take on positional value as part of a broader cultural dynamic (Sahlins 1985:109).

Whatever their material or virtual forms, rituals are communicatory activities variously intended to generate, maintain, repair, and renew as well as to contest or resist relationships among people; relationships between people and the natural world; and relationships between people and the supernatural world. Though the technologies supporting digital ritualizations are commodity forms, they also articulate in the public imaginary to a belief in progress and, by inference, technology and science and the latter's disinterested, cosmopolitan view from above that is afforded by the former. The ritualized uses of these devices, however, also serve as contemporary talismans. In a circular fashion that conforms to cosmopolitanism's deeply ambivalent dynamic, the talismanic, fetishistic body-referencing practices that Web settings increasingly situate also point to the ideal of science. They confirm allegorically for those using the Web that such practices in themselves constitute a form of applied knowledge as well as a kind of vanguard practice.

Few of the website participants I discuss conceive of their practices as ritual per se. They would not describe their use of information technology as ritualistically enacting, rehearsing, or enabling a virtual future that could actually come to pass, or evaluating how things should be — each a component of the ritual function of negotiating the order of the world. Instead, they would variously say they are having fun, killing time, honing web-based skill sets, teaching a class, making friends after a particularly nasty breakup with a boyfriend, or opening themselves to new ways of meeting people for friendship or sex or a relationship and so forth. Ritual theorists identify many of these activities as rites of passage that serve to provide one of ritual's benefits — the induction of a semblance of order during difficult or even chaotic periods of change that might otherwise prove too destabilizing to individual or group social relations. Rituals, as modes of social action, give shape to the everyday organization of time and space. For networked individuals, such chaotic periods include the contemporary conjuncture, a part of which is the virtual dictate to circumnavigate the "flow" of the ongoing computerization of everyday life.[14] For such individuals, networked digital settings may be used as ways of performatively taking control over, or at least modulating, significant changes that otherwise threaten to overtake the already over-individuated and disintermediated neo-monad. In this way virtual space, as a setting or ground for online ritualizations, accrues increasing importance as the stage on which individuals donning the form of the networked sign performatively give some order to their chaotic experiences of time and space. Ritual, then, like ideology, is an interpolating dynamic. Its nature has been theorized as essentially conservative (Bourdieu 1991; Couldry 2003). A ritual works to incorporate participants into certain forms of order. Some support dominant social forces; others may operate at askance purposes. Yet all rituals offer participants a way of making sense of an at times radically unstable world.

My examples of Web-based rituals, therefore, illustrate more than the useful application of a utilitarian tool. Ritual is foremost an activity. It does not take place in a vacuum. It is never pure or detached from culture, consequences, power, and desire. Its practices range from the strategic (those intended to influence future outcomes through calculated combinations of timing and gestures that make means visible) to the tactical (such as my having coffee with friends) that introduce a quality of order and help getting through the day. The forms that rituals take matter, and their forms are contingent on the places, both real and virtual, where they take place. People develop and perform rituals across a wide range of flexible, individuated practices. In this volume I direct my assessment of ritual practices to those developed and emerging within and across two broadly based online settings that feature moving images of bodies. The first is avatar-driven graphical chat (MUVEs such as Second Life), also known as 3D Chat and, less frequently, as a multi-object virtual environment (MOVE). Graphical chat settings rely on animated graphical illustration to render MUVE participants as sign/bodies that move within virtual environments.[15] The second setting is that of personal webcam sites, specifically those mounted by gay/queer men,[16] in which webcam operators stream live video images of themselves on a regular basis. These two foci of analysis indicate that geographically dispersed individuals are using online settings as a virtual surrogate for the gathering space necessary for a ritual's participants to come together. Such individuals, therefore, are also ritualizing the idea of virtual space. These two foci thus support a divergent range of participant techniques and practices;

considered in tandem, they indicate the complex dynamics and modalities by which individuals produce meaning through their networked transmission of information across material space.

>>> Fetishizing the Trace: The Sign/Body

Media rituals "re-create the illusion of bodily presence, the most basic of all ritual gestures" (Marvin and Ingle 1999:140). Human perception accords to movement the quality of liveliness, and becoming an iconographic sign/body in the form of an avatar or a moving webcam image erases *experiential* distinctions between the psychic reality of an image representing an individual and transmitted through Web networks, and the physical reality of the individual's moving, active body. Recent empirical research using immersive virtual reality (VR) technology confirms that individuals lose track of their body locations in virtual settings. H. Henrik Ehrsson reports that it is possible to determine the experience of embodiment through "visual perspective in conjunction with correlated multi-sensory information from the body" (2007:1048). To induce the sensation of out-of-body experience in subjects, Ehrsson had them wear VR head-mounted displays that transmitted images of the subjects recorded from behind. The display prevented them from seeing any other spatial representation or image of the self in virtual space. Ehrsson then used the end of a rod to press on the subjects' chests while at the same time he held a different rod in front of the camera behind them that made it seem as if the virtual individual viewed from behind was also being poked in the chest. Subjects reported perceiving their chests being probed, yet they also sensed that it was the virtual individual lodged within the display (in other words, a moving image or sign) that was also being touched by the rod. In a second experiment Bigna Lenggenhager et al. (2007) demonstrated that the sight of a humanlike figure, such as an avatar in virtual space, combined with the actual stroking of the subject's body can induce an experience of relocating the subject's sense of self away from his or her body's location in actual space. As Ehrsson comments, "We feel that our self is located where the eyes are" (2007:1048).

Gesture and movement are crucial to any success at communicating and inducing belief on the part of these sign/bodies. Gilles Deleuze (1986:56–61) identifies the rise of cinema as pivotal in revealing the previously naturalized binary placing images in the qualitative realm of consciousness and movement in that of quantifiable space. Such a binary between idealism and materialism, interior and exterior, divorces consciousness from the thing itself.[17] Deleuze identifies how viewers bridge this gap between perception and ideology through his concept of *l'image-mouvement*, which is translated into English as "movement-image" (56). Cinema, a technology that renders image equal to movement, erases the psychological distinctions between the image as a psychic or experiential reality and movement as a physical reality. In cinema, there are no actual moving bodies distinct from spectators' perception of movement. The image's ability to move confers on it a quality of immanence: "The image exists in itself. . . . The identity of the image and movement leads us to conclude immediately that the movement-image and matter are identical" (59).

Both l'image-mouvement and movement-image signify the interpenetration of interior image-generating consciousness and external movement in space. To my thinking, however, the French term somewhat better conveys the truthful ambiguity of cinema as the realm of images — images of moving bodies and objects in space. My use of the hybrid term sign/body attempts a similar strategy: I understand the online moving image of a body or object as a special kind of sign. The sign/body points to those online forms of signification mounted by Web participants and users whose practices and techniques reveal the broader project of using the Web to collapse the binary that Deleuze identifies; that is, to render the Web as both the realm of the image and consciousness and that of space and movement, thereby to reconnect consciousness to the thing.

Not coincidentally, assertions and implicit beliefs that the Web constitutes a form of space multiply in tandem with the growing ability of the Web to support images that move. Moreover, the moving images of graphical avatars and personal webcam operators allow viewers to experience these moving images as indexical traces of actual human beings. The sign/body is indexical; it points back to the operator's body on this side of the screen or display. At the same time, as the philosopher Deleuze and the scientists Ehrsson and Lenggenhager et al. confirm in different ways, moving images hail perception autonomically, and the viewing of a moving image of an object, thing, or event has the potential to authorize the perceptual sense of experiential access to a trace of the referent. The dynamics of signification further suggest to human perception that the moving image/icon articulates metonymically and allegorically to the thing it stands for and points toward:

the human body of its operator or referent. This point about the indexical trace, with its implication of cause and effect, is crucial to the arguments I develop in this volume. While the indexical sign/body is clearly a representation, I am arguing that it is not perceived, autonomically or psychically, as such by those who consume it in the kinds of online settings I examine. The autonomic reception of the moving image operating as if it were a trace of an actual human being located elsewhere parallels the psychic desire made into the need to receive this image in the same way — that is, as if it were a transmogrification that can render actually present the distant individual it represents. In such a way does communicability become an end in itself.

A concrete example will serve to further clarify this point. I recently attended a seminar devoted to the relationships between ethics and research focused on Second Life and its resident avatars. Many participants engage in virtual ethnography on the site; others use the site to teach. Several participants stated their concern as to how best to protect the privacy of the person to whom each avatar is directly linked. In American contexts, the general consensus is that private space and private life on this side of the screen are protected by the privacy provisions contained within the guidelines of the academic Institutional Review Board (IRB). But Second Life is a media form, and what gets represented "there" could be argued to take the form of a public transmission of information. Certainly the technology itself readily facilitates the ability of an individual to archive what happens in the setting for her or his subsequent transcription and review. The seminar members' concern to protect the privacy of Second Life participants was paralleled by the members' very real concern also to protect the privacy of the individuals' avatars. The logic of such an articulation seems to me to inhere in the assumption that 3D Internet sites such as Second Life are no longer only forms of media per se; rather, because they allow for indexical experiences of traces of actual human beings they are now experienced as actual spaces "in" which aspects of actual human beings have come to reside and are publicly and privately addressed. Such a development far exceeds the powers of modern representation or even postmodern simulation; indeed, it depicts and insinuates the evolution of the machine world of images as an abstract, sovereign postrepresentational force into which, nevertheless, aspects or traces of human beings can (re)locate. Such a development was anticipated by Guy Debord who argues that "for one to whom the real world becomes real images, mere images are transformed into real beings" (1994:17). Within this machine-dependent virtual world the appearance — the image — takes command as it stands in for presence itself. And the forms of public discourse that this world enables lend support to the seminar members' concern to obtain IRB approval. The success of public discourse "depends on the recognition of participants . . . people do not commonly recognize themselves as virtual projections. They recognize themselves only as being already the persons they are addressed as being" (Warner 1990:114). In such combinatory ways the contemporary moving image has become a form of social relation with which we must all now increasingly reckon. And we will perform this reckoning within social contexts increasingly embedded in spectacular technological systems that can distance us from the adequate recognition, let alone consideration, of crucial life-threatening issues on this side of the screen. The lack of adequate recognition here points to an underlying difficulty in imagining different futures and therefore different politics than those currently beckoning from a purportedly postrepresentational virtual space.

The networked ritualized activities I examine depend for their efficacy on an underlying cultural fetishization of information machines and the global practices of transmission they enable and propel. To varying degrees, networked individuals fetishize not only information machines as the economic and social actualization of the progress myth but also an experience that such machines support — of the postrepresentational trace, transmitted to them in the form of an indexical sign/body, of geographically distant individuals who pique their interest for any number of reasons. Fetishizing this experience reflects, in part, an underlying recognition that experiences that can be transmitted are also enduring — memorable. Each setting allows for a semiotic interplay of symbols (words), icons (images), and indices (traces of the referent), though semiotic strategies vary in accordance with the form of the virtual environment and the expectations it excites. Most theories of fetishism posit that a distance or a space must separate or divide a desired material object (the fetish) from the person who desires it, and that this object must be visible to the eye. While the absent/present binary this entails is part of Web dynamics, there are no material objects on the Web but rather only signs and, at the level of viewer experience, sign/objects and sign/bodies. Nevertheless, the implicit desire remains that one might use the Web as an ersatz space to reach out, touch, and fetishize not only a (virtual) object but also other individuals. This desire is fueled by at least two factors.

The first factor is lodged in the ways that cosmopolitan networked individuals are encouraged to identify as mobile, flexible, and engaged in on-the-go yet customized and interpenetrating forms of consumption and production. Community-based rituals of association designed to induce support for place-based community increasingly compete for the time and attention of such individuals with the demands of the neoliberal work world, the time spent commuting between exurban homes and distant employment centers, and the related requirement, marketed as a choice, convenience, or even destiny, to assume ever-greater self-responsibility for all aspects of one's daily life. Booking hotel or airline reservations or maintaining one's own retirement account online are small examples of the move away from an earlier form of service economy based on employing specialists trained in such practices. These newer online activities may offer a form of consumer empowerment; they certainly indicate the cultural fetishization of information machines. Despite the hype that promotes such activities as requiring little more than "point and click," the time and labor required to perform them is considerable and might once have been expended on place-based community activities. I am not suggesting, however, that the latter activities are inherently more desirable. For some, they may be; for others, they may constitute oppressive social demands happily abandoned. Yet the underlying human need for some form of social cohesion with others that ritual practices support has not abated, and as Mark Andrejevic (2004:29) argues, the kinds of customized production and consumption inhering in the promise of flexibility promote nostalgic associations with purportedly more communitarian, premodern forms of social relations. The desire for at least the possibility of community continues. In a cosmopolitan and customized fashion, one may continue chatting with one's virtual friend at the same time that Expedia.com furnishes a list of flights to the next city that one's job requires one to visit.

The Web's pervasive and persistent applications that feature aesthetic appeals to viewer sensation is the second, intersecting factor fueling the desire, or even the need, to connect through networks. This hegemonic redirection of activity is rendered more appealing by the graphical quality of many Web-based transmissions. As I elaborate in chapter 3, to graph something is to make a record of its material presence. Graphing is a recording practice, but not of a preexisting symbolic code. Rather, it is a *tracing* or an index *of the real*. As John Peters notes, "Tracing implies recording . . . Recording implies transmission" (2006:144). This quality of graphing as the transmission of a trace—in *graph*ical chat; in webcam video transmissions of people's moving images, the precursors of which lie in the cinemato*graph*; in the extensive use of photo*graph*y by fans of webcam operators—is central to the appeal of the potential for networked personal experiences of traces of embodied human referents that always reside somewhere else. Though the transmission of a trace through online digital settings depends on the ephemeral, modular nature of Web connections, the graphical and therefore implicitly recordable nature of such a transmission also suggests its durability and hence contributes to experiencing it as psychically real and, by inference, somehow possibly material.

Transmitting images of bodies in the form of moving, graphically inflected signs that are experienced as psychically (but not actually) real introduces the possibility for an individual to be experienced phenomenologically as a *telefetish* both by others and by the individual himself or herself. He or she can fetishize the trace of others. The differing forms that individuals adopt to represent themselves in these online settings point back indexically—like pointing fingers—to themselves. Why is this important? All individuals engaging the Web remain on this side of the interface. But as chat and webcam participants they can experience seeing themselves as a networked sign/body; in cosmopolitan fashion, they experience becoming an image with exchange value courtesy of an assemblage of information machines that maintain separation between people even as they transmit a virtual experience of coming together. As Giorgio Agamben (2000) notes, this separation allows for language and communication practices to gain autonomy from actual bodies—a separation, again, of the practices of consciousness from the thing itself, of conception from the perceptive faculties that first inform it. *Cogito ergo sum*. Like a ghost within the machine, the networked digital image acquires a quality of semi-independent liveliness seemingly worthy of fetishization in its own right. With this status the image can then also be imagined as itself a social relation in itself. Yet to the degree that, for example, an individual participating in graphical chat comes to understand his or her avatar as an extension of himself or herself, he or she also understands that the avatars of others also point back to the individuals they represent. The avatar image is both sufficient in itself and serves as the instantiation of desire for spatially distant others.

The avatar of a webcam operator, as a visible and fetishizable sign/body, is a "virtual object" that can become as desirable to viewers as its embodied referent who can also see herself or himself transmitting as a sign/body to other participants. Seeing oneself seeing oneself—a graphical chat participant manipulating her avatar so that it turns toward her on the screen, waves, and says "hi"; a webcam operator watching his digital image update in real time—can induce an experience of awe. Each individual witnesses a self-produced self-representation as transmitting back to himself or herself the potential of his or her multiplicity within a sign system—including all the things he or she is not yet, or might desire to become. A crucial use value of the avatar or the image of the webcam operator for their owners and operators, therefore, lies in the degree to which viewers (including owners and operators) experience these iconographic images as psychically equivalent to their embodied referents and, therefore, as a means to signal their collective desire to bridge the gap between consciousness and movement, inside and outside, body and sign. This implies either that a part (the avatar) can stand in for its whole (the assemblage of the human operator and the avatar sign) or, more perversely perhaps, that they are equivalent in that the avatar signifies one aspect of an embodied human entity constituted in a plurality of meanings. In these virtual settings such signs can accrue a value equal to that of their owners or operators. In this way, MUVEs and personal webcam sites serve as ritualized forms of learning. In these "progressive" settings, virtual forms of exchange value between bodies and signs can come to seem at least equal in importance to use value to the point where exchange value itself develops a form of autonomous power (Debord 1994:31). The online rituals I examine perform this set of exchange relations.

>>> Transcendent Desires, Information Machines, and the Society of the Spectacle

The West turns its philosophical assumptions, its ideas, into technologies.[18] As semioticians would argue, all humans think in signs. We also build the signs we think. These signs, like ideas, generate or gestate from within material and historical realities. Neil Postman observed that "we are surrounded by the wondrous effects of machines and we are encouraged to ignore the ideas embedded in them" (1992:94). But when we build the signs we think, while the resulting technology reflects the idea or sign embedded in it, it also comments on the earlier material world that it now enters, in part to also alter through new forms of mediation. The information machines upon which sites such as Second Life and Strayer's "virtual commencement" ceremony rely participate within an ongoing history of naturalized yet contradictory assumptions about vision and sight, including metaphysical, empiricist, and positivist epistemological assumptions. Such assumptions manifest age-old desires that symbolic expressions of material reality can be adequately communicated in images and related optical effects. More recent cultural instructions encourage people to identify both with and as commodities, images, and simulations. Debord argues that the spectacle is the "material reconstruction of the religious illusion" (1994:18). Within a Marxian framework Debord's analysis seems complete. But if I were to agree with the nature of this illusion I would also think something more is at stake, and it would be both an individual and a collective need to confer meaning on an otherwise disenchanted world. The development of programmable software agents and electronic avatars doing one's bidding within electronic networks indicates a cultural revival of Neoplatonically inflected belief systems that for their cultural salience rely, in part, on fetishized uses of allegory and emblems, as forms of "visual language," to accord aspects of personal control to exterior forces such as divine symbols, magical signs, and inanimate forms perceived as occupied by living spirits. This revival also depends on a Cartesian and Gnostic inflected belief that the self, like a kind of spirit, is in possession of a body but is not the same as this body it controls.

The issue of the body double, in the form of the online avatar but also the doll, the puppet, and the automaton, expresses a set of desires that has a long history in the West. This history is freighted with underacknowledged issues of transcendence, magical affect, mimesis, and an ongoing Neoplatonic desire to synthesize the empirically verifiable sense world in which we live to that "other," more ideal world of forms of which we are purportedly aware, and which surrounds us, but which we remain incapable of fully perceiving (Nelson 2001). These issues, moreover, are not the exclusive purview of metaphysics — they parallel and implicitly inform capital's focus on abstraction as seen, for example, in its use of data collected about workers as part of rationalizing production and making workers conform to principles of "scientific management" (see Andrejevic 2004:33). The idea of the body double suggests the redoubling of the subject through forms of exteriorization, whether in data banks or mechanical devices. With respect to doubles and information technologies, Andrejevic explains that "Deleuze coined the term 'dividual' to refer to the no longer discrete (in)dividual, who finds him- or herself multiplied in myriad databanks. Similarly, Mark Poster describes the data image of the subject as a 'second self,' and Phil Agre calls it a 'digital shadow'" (2004:33). While Neoplatonic ideas about transcendence through forms of doubling are coolly received in the academy, except perhaps within the history of philosophy and certain departments of theology and religious studies, their circulation nonetheless proliferates through popular culture "entertainments" including digital variations. Graphical chat MUVEs illustrate how the Web has infused new meaning into the role of puppets transmographied into digital avatars. In updating a number of the sociocultural functions of puppets, online avatars take the form of moving images discursively rendered as desirable virtual objects endowed with godlike, quasi-independent powers. Like puppets, avatars are positioned as having inner spirits that participants unleash. The Web, along with video gaming, is arguably the site where these shamanistic ideas about the animation of inanimate forms enjoy a popular resurgence even if their complex history remains little known or a subject of indifference to most gamers, Web users, and participants.

The possibility of a body double as a form of second self, moreover, articulates to a different set of more recent discourses of inscription and automation. Readers may recall an earlier cultural anxiety that humans were soon to be replaced by robotics and other forms of mechanized, industrial automation as exemplified by the very models of automatons — Disney World's animatronic laborers. If this specific form of fear of replacement by commodified devices has receded, the digital avatar is a different, equally metaphysical vision of replacing the human with an automated machine — an information machine rendered as a screen image and fabricated according to ideological and contingent assumptions about actual bodies. The idea of a digital avatar replete with a quality of "digital humanity" trades in supernatural associations; even the name of the ersatz space where avatars "reside" — Second Life — connotes religious associations with rebirth and renewal. (Some Second Life residents now refer to the world on this side of the screen as "First Life.") These supernatural overtones intersect with the commodification of reality that the site proposes. The site's name also recalls

Karl Marx's discussion, filtered through religious analogy, of commodities that come to be seen as "independent beings endowed with life" (1952:31). One might say that in Second Life the commodity is born anew, constituted as a haunted technological vision "of the exiling of human powers in a 'world beyond'" (Debord 1994:18).

Thomas Hobbes also contributes to the Western history of the double. By 1651 Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, as part of his theory of the modern social contract, already could theorize the multiple "actors" who would do the bidding of a central "author" on the various stages of early modern life. The materialist Hobbes did not intend to promote a mind/body dualism—that would be a principal legacy of René Descartes, Hobbes's contemporary and philosophical adversary. However, actors who do the bidding of someone more sovereign than they concord with the notion that the actor is a laboring body that may speak ventriloquistically for the central author who controls the scripts. Equally, a central author organizing and controlling the actions and speech of the actors concords with the idea of a central, unitary, and interior core self that may have multiple exterior "cosmetic" personae or masks performing strategic gestures. It is thus possible to locate Hobbes's author-actor binary within the Neoplatonic tradition of inscribing human bodies as sets of texts and other representations. Here, Neoplatonism meshes with Cartesian dualism contained in the idea that the self possesses a body that remains distinct from the self. Hobbes's binary is grounded in this immanent metaphysics of an exterior body "ornamented" by a set of implicitly cosmopolitan personalities distinct from the interior self. Hobbes was clear that the author would control the "scripts" that actors would perform. The current transfer of activities and power to "actors" taking the form not of human bodies but of designed electronic devices, virtual objects such as avatars, and other software agents simulating and standing in, indexically, for human bodies indicates the seldom acknowledged trend in popular and commercial practices to disavow or at least renegotiate the status of a fully autonomous self based on universal principles. At the same time, for those who are online a lot of the time, spheres of communicability such as the Web are increasingly perceived as spaces where quasi-autonomous sign/bodies (the descendants of Hobbes's actors) perform their coming to life.

The websites and practices I examine in this volume suggest that the implicit qualities of transcendence once thought to imbue the unitary self are being transferred to networked information machines. As quasi-autonomous beings, the digital actors or sign/bodies in such virtual spaces seem increasingly lively and in sufficient control of their own "scripts" so that one might postulate that the embodied operator on this side of the interface is in the process of trading places, of becoming something of an actor himself or herself. The human activity in such settings is a form of networked ritual that serves as a teaching text to instruct Web participants in new ways of relating to the inanimate but animated world and new ways of coping with or transcending the social disaggregation of everyday life. Individuals negotiate the threat of images through their engagement with sign/bodies; in increasingly mediated social relations on both sides of the interface, images pose the threat of acquiring greater power than that held by many of the individuals they mediate. Images, moreover, resist complete definition and therefore never fully fall under human control. In relying on networked settings for performing disavowals of the unitary self—disavowals of the transcendental unity of individual perception—such individuals also treat the Web as a set of possibility spaces. They render visible and ritualize a theory of the neoliberal postsubject constituted through the act of transmission. In cosmopolitan fashion these individuals surf capital formations and the bifurcated, ephemeral, flexible, yet extensible sign and body politics that draw together political economy and metaphysics.

A related issue in the accelerating engagement with Web-based rituals is manifested in the ways that networked individuals negotiate the tensions between the Enlightenment's privileging of abstraction—of the semiotic symbol—and the contemporary move to abandon modernity's suspicion of iconographics. The culture of networked individualism is, in part, conceived and fabricated through digital imagery and visual technologies. This culture portends a quasi exteriorization of consciousness not unlike an electronic exhumation of a medieval form of allegorically inflected consciousness. Though the medieval and Renaissance eras may have lacked today's information machines, theorizing such links remains productive. As Walter Benjamin (1968) reminds us, images from the past that we are able to relate to our own past and present can provoke critical insight. The Renaissance's philosophical interests in such issues as hieroglyphs, allegory, and emblems were esoteric yet practical, and a similar metaphysics of presence, coupled to a "seeing is believing" empirical pragmatism based on the visible, fuels contemporary interest in visual virtual environments as "immediate" yet intensely mediated communication spaces *and* practices. In the digital set-