

TAKING THE SPELL OFF OF DEATH: MEDIA AS MOURNING RITUAL IN RUSSIA'S *PSYCHIC CHALLENGE. Summary*

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In recent decades, anthropologists have noticed the increased deritualization of grief and mourning in contemporary Europe and North America. Once a sacred ritual, the wake and the funeral have become commemorative acts, making space for new ways for mourners to give and receive help and support. The position of the deceased's hand is now of no importance; not wailers but professional psychological services help people grieve their dead.

The issue of ritual transformation is particularly relevant for today's Russia, posed between traditional and modern society. No longer a traditional community with an established and shared system of beliefs and religious practices, Russian society does not yet have an infrastructure of complex social and psychological support in place for those experiencing loss. Under the circumstances, other institutions may do what mourning rituals are meant to do. Their job is to help people survive a loss, to form a notion of what happens after death and how to deal with it, to help overcome the fear of death, and to assist in solving the social disruption that may occur after a society member's passing.

Mass media may well become one of these institutions. Ritual practices in the media have more than once become objects of anthropological and sociological research, including works on death. However, such works have a number of serious drawbacks, one of which is the lopsidedness of their approach based on Durkheimian (and post-Durkheimian) functionalism.

According to Durkheimian principles, the main objective of ritual is the successful reconstruction of a community's boundaries. In the context of personalized mourning rites, such an approach is only ever adequate for describing "traditional" communities. Modern society deritualizes the funerary sphere. Customary mourning practices become increasingly individualized and therapeutic and play a significantly less important role in the process of social reconstruction—hence the shift of researchers' attention to the subject of personal experience of loss.

This clearly suggests problems of conceptualization. A functionalist approach has been applied to mass rituals, whereas the role of media in contemporary personalized mourning rituals is not yet clear. If there is no need to reconstruct or reimagine the community, what is the media's function in rituals of mourning?

In this article I examine how mass media may include the spectator in the ritual practices they demonstrate. For my case study, I have chosen the popular Russian TV show *Psychic Challenge* (*Bitva ekstrasensov*, as it is known in Russia). This is the only show from outside the 10 nation-wide channels among the 10 top-rated TV shows. During *Psychic Challenge*, the viewer witnesses psychic communication with the spirits, deciphers and reads the signs from the other world, and learns how to make unsettled spirits calm down.

The example of *Psychic Challenge* allows researchers to transfer their interest from collective rituals to local grieving practices and to establish what role mass media might play therein. My primary research question may be articulated as follows: if, as in *Psychic Challenge*, the rituals demonstrated on the show (and their consequences) are perceived as real, what function do they serve—and, more importantly, how? The main thesis of this article is that *Psychic Challenge* is an example of a mediatized ritual of grieving. This show presents New Age religious notions, steeped in ideas of symbolic immortality, which broadcast and actualize the symbolic function of ritual in a modern community.

In the present article, ritual is understood as a collective activity capable of shaping a community's core values. In this context, the media is akin to a ritual, in that both shape (symbolic) core values. After Nick Couldry, I suggest taking a look at how New Age religious notions, broadcast through media channels, help construct a value system. In the case of this article, ideas of symbolic immortality form the basis of mourning rituals.

A ritual is an act of communication expressed through symbolic behavior and a strictly prescribed sequence of actions. Mourning rituals use various ways of actualizing symbolic immortality, which have been described at length in a number of authoritative works.

As the empirical basis for my analysis, I chose episodes from the last three seasons (14–16) of *Psychic Challenge*, broadcast on Russian TV in 2013–2015. I pay particular attention to the storylines and to the use of discursive practices related to death.

My principal research method is that of ethnographic observation, in accordance with the research logic of mass media anthropology. An ethnographic approach to media presupposes understanding TV episodes as narratives. In this case, the situation being observed is cast as natural and in many ways “real.”

Not one of the 50 episodes of *Psychic Challenge* that I have seen failed to mention death. In one of the latest season's episodes one contestant, Viktoriia Raidos, upon familiarizing herself with a new assignment, asks one of the show's host, “Sergei, I have this question, are we ever going to work with the living?”

Death and the deep sense of loss of a loved one can be a great source of fear. The media's interest in this topic is, therefore, completely justified. Strong emotions of this sort allow humans to construct an imaginary world and believe in its relative reality. This process of construction needs to be simple and easy to decipher, which is why its principal components must be readily found in daily life. Death and dying are ideal candidates for this role. Death is present in everyone's

life, whether as the grief of losing a family member to disease or feelings of guilt after the death of parents.

On most episodes of *Psychic Challenge*, the constant exposure of ordinary situations to the deeply felt emotions of grief and mourning transforms the rational logic of the narrative into a lamentation and plaint. This deflects the viewer's attention from logical connections and narrative inconsistencies and helps present the story exclusively through feelings of compassion and co-recognition.

However, death is not the only topic on *Psychic Challenge*. Psychics on the show always touch upon the deceased protagonist's personal problems, thereby transforming the simple enumeration of the causes of his or her death into a personal relationship. The psychics speak of the feeling of guilt for a loved one's death, of illnesses, love and grievances, fate and destiny, and of relations within the family. This is, in fact, what allows the show to transform a gruesome story of death into a commemorative ritual necessitating the mourners' participation.

An important element of the show's narratives about death is that death, almost invariably sudden and violent, occurred when the decedent was still young and active. Emphasizing such deaths fits well with fear of uncontrollable death. A passing like this does not just frighten but requires taming and symbolic explanation. The psychics always provide that explanation, thus letting the mourner come to terms with the loss. According to the psychics' narratives, a tragic death cannot be prevented. One can only accept and make peace with it. In this context, a psychic's sacralized narrative has the therapeutic function typical of a mourning ritual. A bad death calls for not just an explanation but also social and symbolic legitimization. By using diverse strategies to posit symbolic immortality, grieving relatives learn not only that the death was logical and impossible to prevent but also that life continues into the other world.

The figure of a psychic on the show deserves special attention. This is not a traditional sorcerer in the classical sense, who not only possesses sacred knowledge but may also be capable of putting it to use, for good or evil. The psychic on the show is drastically different from the commonly accepted image of the sorcerer: psychics are always benevolent figures striving to help. They never harm anyone or engage in "black magic"; they do not place curses or point the bone at anyone. This reinforces the commemorative nature of the demonstrated rituals, reducing their function to solving domestic problems. Psychics do not cast spells but rather interpret and explain.

By way of introduction, many psychics on the show mention a personal tragedy or encounter with death. This fits well with magicians' and sorcerers' esoteric biographies, which frequently feature a near-death experience. A brush with death indicates a sorcerer's special abilities as one who did not just escape but has also "tamed" death. Now, thanks to this special and sacred experience, the sorcerer has acquired certain capabilities, including that of communing with the spirit world. The show's psychic is always a guide to the other world. The psychic works with death by drawing on otherworldly secret knowledge and powers. Rather than just peeking into "the world of shadows," the psychic is capable of receiving and decoding received signs and omens.

This stands to reason, for death needs to be controlled and must be recognized in the various signs sent to us from beyond. This allows one, firstly, to ascertain that there is something after death (since we receive signs from the other side); secondly, this introduces an element of predetermination into the process of dying and death. Death thus ceases to be a sudden and uncontrollable event.

These and similar "significant situations" substantiate more than just life's pre-determination. Like any other element of funerary and commemorative ritual, this practice is necessary to separate the bereaved from everyone else. It also helps put into words their experiences of guilt, sorrow, and loss. The deceased appears not only to bid farewell but also to express her final wishes, to ask for something, and to make something known.

These explanations give the bereaved an opportunity to resolve their feelings of guilt and explain what is happening. They also serve as a means of social regulation. It is interesting, in this context, to see how predictions and the reading of signs help resolve conflicts. A psychic serves as the arbiter, passing judgment on guilt and punishment by speaking for the deceased to the living.

The last important function of a mourning ritual, which ought to be mentioned, is the regulation of crying and other expressions of emotion. The ritual determines the limits of permissible emotional display. Psychics take on this function by admonishing mourners to stop disturbing the dead and to let them go. One grieves over one's loss, and certain rationalizing, explanatory models are required to soothe this grief. These explanatory models must be capable of addressing a host of questions, such as why a person died, why death happens at all, and what to do about it. In this sense, *Psychic Challenge* continues to construe death as a natural event, transferring affective experiences into the sphere of mythology.

Psychic Challenge works with one aspect of symbolic immortality: the fear of oblivion. "The world is such that, so long as you remember someone, they continue their existence here, in our midst," said on the show. It seems that the dead should not be forgotten, that their commemoration involves communing with the spirits, who in return provide protection and help in domestic affairs. After death, one has the opportunity to join a large ancestral family and help one's surviving kin.

The main function of a death ritual is the cultural and social mediation of grief. Right after the first, usually very powerful, emotional response to the loss comes a rather restrained expression of emotions, tightly governed by the bereaved's social environment. Contemporary Russian society finds itself in a situation where traditional ritual practices have been significantly modified and made obsolete, but no alternative tools for working with grief and other emotions have taken their place. My main idea is that mass media may quite successfully work with personalized emotions of grief, producing mediatized practices that perform the function of the commemorative ritual. The TV show *Psychic Challenge* has become one such medium for many in contemporary Russia.

In terms of structure and storylines *Psychic Challenge* makes use of New Age religious practices. For a transitional society such as present-day Russia, this seems to comprise a symbiosis of traditional religious beliefs with diverse ideas about spirits,

shamans, and the afterworld. These practices aim primarily at shaping core values. In this case, the core values consist of ideas about symbolic immortality— notions about the afterlife, omens, and such. The viewer sees how easily the psychics can recognize and interpret signs sent from the spirit world; they see how the spirits help the living and show them how to go on with life. The bulk of the psychics' advice is intended to "stop the tears": psychics convince the bereaved that the deceased are better off where they are. Ending grief is an important function of a mourning ritual.

Following Nick Couldry, I posit that in this capacity the medium itself becomes a ritual. By working with symbolic immortality and involving the viewer, *Psychic Challenge* takes over the function of suppressing the fear of death. This TV show is a mediated commemorative ritual. Further study of the media's function in commemorative rituals will help researchers to understand how media might work in situations where they replace traditional rituals.

This thesis certainly needs additional verification: it is not clear how viewers perceive the show and what viewing strategies exist. This is an important omission, which, however, seems quite acceptable at the present stage and may be explained by the program's reality show format. This is further complemented by the program's popularity, impossible without the effect of "recognition," and ordinary viewers' participation in episodes.

Translation from Russian by Elena Lemeneva