

Mimetic and Ritual Processes as Social Institutions. Transformative Opportunities in the Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT

In the Anthropocene a central task is to conserve our natural and cultural heritages which are closely interwoven. This is no easy task. Many negative effects of human activity and behavior in central areas of society are produced in complex mimetic processes, rituals and gestures and then reinforced by repetitions. To break the vicious circle of negative anthropogenic developments many political, cultural and social practices must change their focus to that of the goals of sustainable development. For this to happen mimetic processes and rituals need to be practiced critically, particularly in the areas of education and socialization.

1. Introduction

When we consider the Anthropocene today, it is clear that humans have become a telluric power that, on the one hand, shapes the fate of the planet and on the other is itself determined by the destructive effects of human activity. A main focus of our perception of the Anthropocene is the relationship of humans to nature. There is often reference to the heritage of nature and the heritage of culture, i.e. the common heritage of nature and culture, which is endangered. Today there are hardly any areas of nature remaining that are not affected by humans. Therefore it often makes little sense to differentiate between nature and culture. It is far more a question of seeing, analyzing and researching the interdependence of nature and culture. How can we prevent our common heritage and the conditions of life on our planet being destroyed? This is a central question that confronts human beings in the Anthropocene. Important

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social fields in which the dynamic of the Anthropocene is to be found are not only climate change, the destruction of biodiversity, the acidification of the oceans, biogeochemical cycles, environmental pollution and the depletion of non-renewable resources but also the nuclear industry, the relationship between humans and machines, digital culture, artificial intelligence and robotics and also gene technology and biotechnology (Wulf 2020, 2022b; Wallenhorst 2021; Federau 2017). Many institutions, organizations, and interactions in these social fields can be understood as an expression of the wish to “subjugate” the earth and to master the planet. To implement this attitude towards the world and other people, industrial modernity and above all late modernity have developed numerous social practices that are driven by capitalism. These include not only political, economic, and technological practices but also cultural and social practices, for example in education and socialization. Because of the central importance of capitalism in these processes, terms such as “Capitaloscene” (Moore 2016), “Chthuluscene” (Haraway 2016), or “Growthscene” (Brand and Wissen 2021) among many others, have been proposed. However, they only address partial aspects of the Anthroposcene and are therefore less suitable for conceptually grasping the change of the present that encompasses all areas of life.

These practices play a central part in the preservation and further development of the Anthropocene (Wallenhorst, and Wulf 2022, 2023). Some of the most important practices, shaping many areas of society, are mimetic and ritual processes. If the undesirable developments in the Anthropocene are to be corrected then there must be a change in the mimetic and ritual processes in many areas of society. Here I would like to clarify why a transformation of the institutionalization of mimetic and ritual processes is so important.

2. Mimetic Processes

From early childhood on, mimetic processes are extremely important both for retaining and passing on the negative effects of the Anthropocene as well as for changing them and making fundamental reforms in the relationship between human beings and nature. Plato and Aristotle understood that people depend on mimetic processes for their individual and collective, cultural and social development (Plato 2012; Aristotle 2013). This insight has been confirmed by research in Historical Anthropology (Wulf 2013a, 2013b; Gebauer, and Wulf 1995, 1998), in Evolutionary Anthropology (Tomasello 1999, 2008) and in

Neuroscience (Rizzolatti, and Sinigaglia 2008; Jacoboni 2008). People learn to a very large extent in mimetic processes, that is through imitating, making themselves similar, representing. These processes are not simple copying processes like making photocopies. They are productive processes in which people behaving mimetically take an “impression” of the behavior of other people which they then integrate into their imaginary.

The concept of “mimesis” contains suggestions of mimicry, representation, imitation, reproduction, simulation, autopoiesis. As an anthropological concept mimesis helps us to understand and explain processes of socialization and education and social action and aesthetic experience. Here “mimesis” is a useful tool in describing and analyzing interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary processes (Wulf 2022a). The spectrum of meanings of the concept is ambivalent. On the one hand, as processes of mimicry, mimetic processes can result in an adaptation to something that is given, set in stone and lifeless, and thus also result in the negative conditions of the Anthropocene (Horkheimer, and Adorno 1972). On the other hand, such processes also inspire many hopes for the processing and incorporation of better ways of life, practices, attitudes, and values. They can lead to “living experiences” (Adorno) of the outside world, of the Other and one’s own self. Mimetic processes can initiate movements of “broken intention”, space for what is non-identical, possibilities for a non-instrumental approach to nature and the world, in which the particular is protected as opposed to the universal, and people and things are conserved. Given the present situation of social and cultural development, the ambivalence in mimetic processes is inevitable.

While modern, rational thinking is directed towards the individual, isolated subject of perception, mimetic processes are often embedded in the complex relationships between people (Lawtoo 2013, 2021). The mimetic creation of a symbolic world refers to other worlds and their creators and draws other people into one’s own world. It recognizes the exchange between world and human beings and the aspect of power that this contains (Girard 2010). The history of mimesis is a history of the power struggle over the creation of symbolic worlds, over the freedom to portray others and to interpret the world according to one’s own ideas (Ricoeur 1984-1988). In this respect, particularly in education and socialization, mimesis is part of the history of power relationships.

Mimetic processes are not merely processes of reproducing or taking imprints. On the contrary, they need to be shaped individually by children, young people, or adults. Here the degree of individual difference will vary on the

basis of differing conditions. Many mimetic processes cannot be distinguished from the processes of desiring or wishing for something, and of sensual perception and experience (Wulf 2018).

Although, in view of the negative effects of the Anthropocene on the planet, it is necessary for people's behavior to fundamentally change, there is the danger that the destructive developments endangering the future of the planet will continue without being diminished at all or only slightly changed. The younger generation take over the attitudes and behavior patterns that prevail in everyday life in society through mimetic processes. Since it is extremely difficult to resist the attraction and the power of these behaviors, they continue to spread. One way of removing oneself from the influence of ways of life that are perceived as negative is to prohibit them and banish them from everyday life. This prevents them spreading, allowing them to be replaced with new behaviors that are regarded as positive. Another possibility, that also recognizes the mimetic pull of negative ways of life, aims to challenge the effects of negative ways of life and to use our critical insight in order to protect ourselves from their power and influence. Here it is not prohibitions but insight and recognition that are seen as driving the change in destructive social practices and ways of life.

The example of consumer behavior serves as a good example of this (Hohensträter, and Krankenhagen 2019). If we accept that the excessive consumption indulged in by many people is a central characteristic of the Anthropocene, then we consider how this behavior can be changed in order to reduce the destructive nature of human consumption. People buy things and replace them just for fun. They enjoy the luxury which makes them feel good. They enjoy purchasing things, even if they do not necessarily need them. People do not care if the things they replace are still in good condition or not. In mimetic processes children, young people and adults learn to behave the same way. To build a sustainable society, people must change their behavior of consumption (Gekeler 2012). Otherwise, due to the power of mimetic processes it will not be possible to develop a sustainable society. Despite a rhetoric of sustainable development, the behavior of extensive consumption will be a powerful model encouraging people to continue the practices of non-sustainable behavior.

To prevent this, we can ban excessive consumption or support people in challenging the destructive sides of their consumer behavior and thus help them change their behavior through insight. There are different preferences for dealing with the problem depending on the social system or democratic tradition in question. Both alternative ways of acting recognize that current practices of

consumer behavior are based on intergenerational ways of life that continue to be preserved and spread through mimetic processes. These must, however, be changed, if we are to develop a society that values sustainability. New practices and ways of life are necessary if such a society is to come into being. These practices must also become the starting point for mimetic processes which will help to disseminate them. The first alternative involves preventing mimetic processes that relate to negative practices by means of prohibition and exclusion. The second involves developing new ways of life that are viewed as positive on the basis of a critical view of negative practices.

By assimilating previously experienced sustainable behavior, people acquire the ability to behave in a sustainable way. By mimetically participating in sustainable practices human beings expand their behavior and create new possibilities for sustainable actions. People re-create sustainable situations or behaviors or practices they have experienced in the past and by repeating them make them their own. It is in the confrontation with sustainable situations or practices that they acquire the possibility of behaving sustainably. Outer and inner world continuously resemble each other and can only be experienced in their interrelation. Similarities and correspondences between the sustainable inner and the sustainable outer arise. Subjects make themselves similar to the sustainable outside world and change their behavior in this process.

The mimetic capacities of children, young people and adults are closely tied up with physical and social processes and counteract tendencies towards abstraction in society (Kress, Selander, Säljö, and Wulf 2021; Paragrana 2018). They form a bridge between them and the outside, the world and the other person. They attempt to reduce the sharp divide between subject and object and the clear difference between what is and what should be. There is an understanding of what is “between”, that is experienced in a subject “becoming similar” to an outside world or another person. Mimetic processes contain rational processes but go far beyond this (Kraus, and Wulf 2022). In these processes people step out of themselves, become similar to the world around them and are able to integrate the outside world into their inner world. Mimetic processes result in the embodying of attitudes and the preservation of sustainable practices. They help us to become close to objects and the Other and are therefore necessary for our understanding.

In mimetic processes an imitative change and shaping of preceding worlds takes place. Herein lies the innovative moment of mimetic acts and the chance to contribute to sustainable development. Social practices are mimetic if

they refer to other actions and can themselves be understood as social arrangements that represent independent social practices as well as having a connection to other actions. Social acts become possible through the emergence of practical knowledge in the course of mimetic processes. The practical knowledge relevant to social acts has a physical, playful, historical, and cultural side; it is formed in face-to-face situations and is semantically ambiguous; it has imaginary components, cannot be reduced to intentionality, contains an excess of meaning and is manifested in the social productions and performances of religion, politics, and everyday life (Kraus, Budde, Hietzge, and Wulf 2021).

3. Rituals

Acquired patterns and behaviors re-consolidated through the ritualization of mimetic processes. This is how actions and behaviors that are characteristic of the Anthropocene come about. Regarding consumption, for example, a habit is established through ritual behavior. This habit becomes ingrained or institutionalized in us as passive and active, mimetic, and performative elements come together. In social institutions such as families, schools, peer groups, media it will also control mimetic and ritual learning processes. In the course of this, behaviors and activity patterns, feelings and attitudes are formed. The result is a practical knowledge that is based on the imagination and cannot be analysed in language. It is a classification and control system that influences action and behavior in the different social fields in both a formal and an informal way.

The negative effects of the Anthropocene are repeated, spread, and intensified through ritualization, ritual arrangements, and rituals. Through their performativity, many destructive behavior patterns become ingrained or institutionalized right through society. This can be seen in almost all areas of everyday life, e. g. in the consumer world, in the transportation of people and goods, in our approach to the climate, energy and natural resources. If we want to make humans treat nature, the world and other people in a less destructive way, what is needed first and foremost is a critical examination of the violence inherent in the way we have behaved up to now. We must also analyze the origins and effects of this behavior (Wulf 2022b; Wallenhorst 2021; Federau 2017; Gil, and Wulf 2015). Then it is a question of developing plans and examples of other cultural and social practices which value sustainability and the reduction of violence. Finally, these must become rooted in the way people live their daily

lives through ritualizations, ritual arrangements and rituals. If we are to achieve a reduction in the destructive conditions of the Anthropocene there has to be a complete change in many of our current ritual practices.

For the development of sustainable behavior that corrects the negative developments of the Anthropocene new ritual arrangements and rituals are necessary, in which subjects stage, perform and repeat sustainable actions and behavior. An analysis of many reforms shows the possibilities that exist. In this context it is important first to explain the social and individual significance of rituals and to show the potential that rituals have to bring about social reforms. In international ritual studies there are different definitions and an agreement that different concepts of rituals are possible. (Turner 1982; Bell 1992; Grimes 1995). To begin with I would like to make a distinction between four types of rituals: firstly, religious rituals which one may also call liturgy - the holy mass, for example (Wulf 2021); secondly, ceremonies: e.g. the visit of a state president to another country (Wulf 2005); thirdly, festivals such as weddings or Christmas parties (Wulf, and Suzuki 2011); fourth, everyday rituals (Wulf et al. 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2011). All approaches to classifying rituals are faced with the fact that rituals are the product of repetitive multidimensional processes of symbolization and construction. The phenomena studied are more complex than the concepts and theories used to describe them.

Rituals are tied to time and space, and their cultural and historical conditions are embodied in these terms. Different spaces have differing effects on the structure, quality, and style of the rituals that take place within them. Ritual spaces differ from physical spaces. Rituals create ritual stagings, performances, and ritual spaces, using body movements, settings, and symbolic and indexical frames. Rituals and space are not related in terms of subject/object or cause and effect, but interactively. The performativity of ritual repetition brings the body into play, which leads to the development of bodily, sensory experiences (Michaels, and Wulf 2012, 2014). Their performativity can be interpreted in different ways. However, even if its interpretation varies, the performativity of a ritual repetition can contribute to the integration of a community. Mimetic processes also play an important role in ritual repetitions. They relate to previously performed ritual actions, the current repetition of which is the result of a creative, mimetic act of reference in which not sameness, but similarity and difference are engendered. Here we have the *diachronic dimension*, which is oriented towards the past.

In addition to this, there is also a *synchronic dimension* of mimesis in repetition which is also important and in which the participants relate to each other in their ritual activities. This mimetic reference to each other is necessary for the staging of the ritual arrangement to be successful in a functional and aesthetic sense (Wulf 2016, 2022b).

During the performance of rituals, the participants orient themselves simultaneously and directly towards the actions of other participants. They do so largely by means of mimetic processes, using the senses, the movements of the body, and a joint orientation towards words, sounds, language, and music. A ritual can only take place as a structured whole if all actions are successfully coordinated, precisely orchestrated, and adequately embodied. If the interaction is to be harmonious, the ritual activities must be mimetically coordinated with each other. If this is achieved, energies can “flow” between the ritual participants, and this is experienced as intense, pleasant, and bonding (Csikszentmihalyi 2008).

In this process, the images, schemes, and meanings that are produced become part of the participants’ imaginaries. At the same time, the movements of the ritual are incorporated into the participants’ bodies, resulting in the development of practical knowledge. Practical sustainable knowledge is implicit or tacit knowledge and as such difficult to investigate in research. It is a specific form of knowledge, which Gilbert Ryle has called “knowing how,” as opposed to “knowing that.” With his distinction between “knowing how and knowing that,” Gilbert Ryle drew attention to the fact that there are different forms of knowledge, the practical implementations of which that are referred to as “knowing how” are difficult to research (Ryle 1990). With these methods, the focus is not on the acquisition of factual knowledge which can be expressed linguistically. On the contrary, “knowing how” refers to a skill which enables the person to act and is learned in mimetic processes by relating to the practices of other people. Rituals are an example of this. Rituals and ritual repetitions are not statements, reasons, or explanations. They must be staged and performed. The knowledge required for rituals is a performative, practical kind of knowledge. This differs from the knowledge which is needed to describe, interpret, and analyze rituals. “Knowing how” is thus a practical form of knowledge—a skill which is incorporated and visible in a person’s repetitive performances. Other examples of this knowledge which are expressed as skills include games and actions in sports (e.g., football), dance, music, painting, drama, and performance. Knowing how, i.e. “skills,” is also required as a pivotal form of

knowledge that is acquired through repetition and used in everyday activities such as driving a car, cooking, using a mobile phone or navigation system. In mimetic processes today, mobile phones, smartphones, and tablets merge with the body and with their assistance our immediate bodily boundaries are expanded.

Practical sustainable knowledge is acquired through repetition of the ritual of sustainable development. The significance of ritual actions for the embodiment of the values, attitudes and emotions of sustainability and the development of practical knowledge lies in the role of repetition, in the creation of this form of knowledge, which is so important for sustainable behavior. It is learned mimetically in body-oriented, sensory processes which enable us to act sustainably in institutions and organizations. This kind of knowledge is an important aspect of practical sustainable knowledge, and it is how sustainability becomes rooted in the human body, enabling us to orient ourselves accordingly (Kraus, and Wulf 2022). Images, schemes and movements are learned in mimetic processes, and these render the individual capable of action. Since these repetitive processes also involve sustainable products of history and culture, scenes, arrangements and performances, these processes are among the most important ways of handing down a culture of sustainability from one generation to the next (Resina, and Wulf 2020).

4. Central Functions of Rituals

The following section will examine the most important findings of the performative approach to ritual research in education, where the focus is on the performative arrangement and the practical and bodily side of rituals and ritualized educational practices. It touches on many forms of theoretical and empirical research and demonstrates the complexity of ritual structures and activities and their great potential for education for sustainable development.

1) Rituals create social relationships and social communities. As the social movement “Fridays For Future” shows, the ritual of “demonstration” is of central importance for the establishment of the movement. Without the ritualization, the social community of the demonstrators would not exist. The symbolic and performative content of the ritual practice creates and stabilizes the identity of the demonstrators. The ritual of “demonstration” creates a structure in which all demonstrators participate. The ritual structure of the demonstration is both real and rooted in the imaginary of the participants. It

gives the participants a feeling of belonging together. It relates the ritual practices of the demonstrators to each other in such a way that they respond to each other. A community is formed in this ritual activity as a performative community.

2) During the performative arrangement of rituals in social life and education for sustainable development, a new social reality is created. This new social reality is the goal of demonstrations like “Fridays for Future”. Taking earlier rituals as a basis, every performative arrangement in social life and education creates a new ritual reality and a new ritual community. This ritual community can develop among the children or people who carry out the ritual practices for the first time, but it can also involve a repetition, whereby the community confirms its status as such. The actual performance of ritual practices is essential for the forming of social and educational communities and the development of sustainable behavior. The community expresses itself in the performative style of the performance. The ritual presentation enables the expression of something that cannot be expressed otherwise.

3) Performativity yields its full effect in the staging and performative arrangement of rituals. This becomes clear in the staging and performance of the demonstrations “Fridays for Future”. The term staging in this case refers to the way in which the ritual scene is set in education for sustainable development. Spontaneous demonstrations are examples of rituals in education in which staging, and performance largely coincide (Butler 1990; Wulf, Göhlich, and Zirfas 2001; Wulf, and Zirfas 2007). Especially in such cases, the question arises as to who is staging the educational ritual—who is the agent and who is the agency of its performance? Is it a tradition, a group, a person, or a collective imaginary and practical knowledge which emerges from the ritual?

4) The bodies of the participants are implicitly involved in the staging and performance of rituals for sustainable development (Lakoff, and Johnson 1999; Wulf 2013a, 2013b). How do the bodies appear in a ritual? In the “Fridays for Future” demonstrations, a rhythmically moving collective body is created, into which the bodies of the individuals merge. How do they take their place in the scene? What does their arrangement in the ritual tell us about the community, the individuals, and their culture? The movements and practices of bodies require our attention. How is the ritual space measured in terms of bodies and what rhythm do they follow? The distance between bodies and the way they approach each other and keep their distance is significant. What positions do they take? Are they standing or sitting? The figurations of bodies

are symbolically coded and are used to communicate messages. The “logic” of the body, its presentation and expression play an important role in the performance of rituals in education. This is especially true for the preconscious perception of bodily expressions, which forms the basis on which the atmosphere of ritual arrangements is sensed. The bodies of other people look at us before we become consciously aware of them and they determine our perception of them in this way. In order for the performance of rituals to result in community-forming processes, children need to experience the flow of energies and force between people—a physical and psychological process which takes place at the outer reaches of our consciousness (Wulf, and Zirfas 2007; Wulf, and Fischer-Lichte 2010).

5) Social hierarchies and power structures are staged and placed in context in ritual performances. This is the case even in demonstrations such as “Fridays for Future,” in which the equality of participants, regardless of age and social status, is a prerequisite for the success of the political gesture. Ritual power structures are not always easy to recognize. Judith Butler (1990) has illustrated in several works that ritual repetition is one of the most effective social strategies for establishing and securing power structures in education. Even belonging to a gender is tied to ritual repetitions, which are required to create our initial identities in this respect. Power issues between the genders and generations are also dealt with in everyday rituals at the family breakfast table; this occurs in a seemingly casual manner that is more effective for its relaxed appearance. Ritual staging and performance allow several matters to be handled simultaneously in education. The coherence of educational settings and communities depends on the distribution of power and therefore the control of this distribution is one of the central tasks of rituals. A stable balance of power is maintained, regardless of whether issues of authority are addressed directly, dealt with in passing, or analyzed in detail. To achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, Sustainable Development Goal 5 must be considered. This aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women.

6) Rituals play an important role in the treatment and handling of difference and alterity in education (Wulf 2016). In multicultural demonstrations like “Fridays for Future” or in the manifold interactions between multicultural children in inner-city schools, rituals are important. They support all participants to overcome differences and live together in harmony. School communities offer examples of both success and failures in this area; the

imaginary, symbolic, and performative elements are equally important here (Hüppauf, and Wulf 2009; Wulf 2018, 2022a).

7) The synchronous and diachronic aspects of mimetic processes are vital for the success of ritual practices in social life, and education. During the performance of rituals and ritual practices like in the demonstrations of “Fridays for Future”, the participants relate immediately and directly to the actions of other participants. This takes place in a largely mimetic manner, using the senses, the movements of the body, and the common understanding of words, sounds, language, and music. A complete arrangement and complete occurrence of a ritual only takes place when all ritual actions are successfully coordinated and precisely orchestrated. A prerequisite for this is the staging, but the performance itself is the decisive factor, as the ritual actions must be in exact relation to each other. Otherwise, the results are farcical, and the ritual is deemed as having failed. Harmonious interaction in education requires that the ritual practices relate to each other mimetically. If this happens, energies can “flow” between the ritual participants and they can be experienced as intensive, pleasant and bonding. Just as in dance or wooing, the rational control of actions also has its limits in rituals. The feeling that a ritual has succeeded only occurs if a mimetically created harmony that is beyond rational control occurs in bodies, movements, and gestures. This mimetic occurrence is the basis for the feeling of belonging and community as well as the experience of the sacred.

5. Conclusion

As different as social institutions are, their effectiveness for all generations depends to a large extent on the mimetic and ritual processes that take place within them. If we wish to reduce the negative impact of the Anthropocene on the planet it is essential that we develop new ways of acting and behaving which are geared towards the goals of sustainable development (Wulf 2022b). These innovative forms of acting and behaving can become the starting point for mimetic and ritual processes which will help to reduce the negative dynamic of the Anthropocene. Examples of this are new forms of an environmentally friendly approach to nature, non-renewable resources, plastic waste and consumption. These can be passed on in mimetic processes, adapted to different regions and made sustainable in mimetic processes. From an early age human beings develop through relating mimetically to others, above all to those they are close to. Through relating mimetically to them they take an imprint of their

destructive and their constructive behavior which they then use to develop their own ways of behaving. Similarly, nature and the surrounding world as well as their cultural products, objects and artifacts are also appropriated through mimesis, and ritualization. Mimetic and ritual processes enable people to interact with their common heritage of nature and culture in a responsive way. In our social lives and day to day actions such processes are also an essential part of innovation and creative action. In art, literature, and music they expand our horizons of experience and play an important role in the creation of individual and collective imaginaries. These mimetic and ritual powers remain at play as post-literary generations enter deeper into the age of the Anthropocene. In addition to new human and nonhuman challenges, the “broken” intentionality of mimetic and ritual processes opens up new possibilities for a caring approach, leading to a less violent sustainable world. If today’s societies are to undergo a transformation and become less violent and more oriented towards sustainability, then new institutions and examples of “best practice” are needed. They can become the starting point of processing and spreading sustainable practices and can play an important role in creating a world that promotes sustainability. It remains to be seen whether and to what extent these processes can result in a reduction in violence and a new relationship with nature as part of our shared world.

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