

## Introduction

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Ritual, as a theoretical and historical framework, has become both ubiquitous and complex. By virtue of its panoply of meanings and uses, the concept proves to be particularly productive in a wide range of disciplines. Coining the phrase “the ritual process,” anthropologist Victor Turner identified ritual as an element that exists in all social relationships and symbolic systems. Many theorists favor the term “ritualization” over “ritual” for just this reason, finding the latter a static concept that fails to underscore the fluid nature of the practice. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, “ritual” was defined as a prescriptive code of religious behavior and “rite” as the manner of enacting this behavior through the celebration of divine service. In contemporary scholarship, however, the meaning of ritual and ritualization has broadened. Not only referring to religious practices such as totemic worship and pilgrimages, the terms now include daily rites of passage and traditions, as ritual theorist Arnold Van Gennep notes.

Ritual is no longer limited to the religious, just as it is not confined to the observable. Although theorists such as Ronald Grimes privilege anthropological observation above all other sources of data, this tradition is changing. In her paper, Sarah Slevinski addresses the place of historical rituals in contemporary scholarship by attempting to “observe” a ritual that is no longer in practice: the Polish *Wigilia* supper. Slevinski’s paper illustrates that ritual theories are flexible and that the scholar should not be hindered from using a contemporary theory as a filter through which to view an older ritual. She addresses questions regarding the conditions surrounding the *Wigilia* rituals of pre-industrial Poles, while at the same time postulating larger, more theoretical questions about the usefulness of ritual theory in Slavic studies.

After Slevinski challenges the standard interpretation of historical ritual, Sang Hyun Kim’s article engages in a detailed study of a very particular ritual—the lament. Kim’s article addresses a common statement about ritual studies, namely, that it should interpret rites in

their social contexts. In this study, Kim uncovers the correspondence between ritual practices and societal traditions: the wedding lament is tragic because the bride's fate is a hopeless one, whereas the funeral lament is hopeful, since it allows for the deceased to return to Earth and reenact the rites he would have performed while alive. Kim's methodology is coherent with Turner's conception of ritual as a "social drama" in which laments constitute a performance of particular, embedded social roles.

Alyssa DeBlasio, in her paper, examines the role of rituals and ritualization in coordinating human activity with the activity of the divine. As a ritualized art form, the codified nature of medieval icon painting dictated the way in which Orthodox ideology was revealed to the Rus'ian community. Specifically, DeBlasio argues for a new method of reading icons—one that takes into consideration ritualization in the work of the icon painter, in the reception of the community, and in the icon itself.

Yakov L. Klots' study of Vladimir Nabokov's *The Defense* focuses not on medieval rituals, but on linguistic and narratological dimensions of Nabokov's *oeuvre*. In the work of Clifford Geertz and Edmund Leach, ritual acts as a language through which societal relationships are communicated. Klots, working within this methodology, views language in relation to the game of chess; ritual is not only a language, but it is a game.

This issue of *SISC* concludes with Julie Draskoczy's paper that, like Slevinski's and Kim's, looks to contemporary ritual theory in order to better interpret historical ritualization. Focusing on death rituals in Kievan Rus', Draskoczy's paper uses Varangian legends and medieval Rus'ian literature, such as the *Kievan Crypt Paterikon*, in her project of drawing connections between early religious traditions. Draskoczy sets up a useful system of "framing" that makes important links between the myths of the Varangians and the pagan beliefs of the Rus'ians. The use of framing devices acts as a form of meta-communication, detailing minute similarities and differences between two belief systems that might have otherwise been disregarded as coincidence.

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The theme of *SISC*'s sixth issue is STALINIST CULTURE. The editors welcome submissions of graduate-student work investigating any aspect of the topic in relation to Slavic culture(s).