

The rhetoric of religious homologies in air travel

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Since the terrorist attacks in New York City of September 11, 2001, travelers have seen a remarkable increase in security measures, especially for air travel. These are familiar to anyone who travels by air, whether domestically or internationally. Passengers must present more documentation, in many cases, than before. There are rigorous checkpoints at which travelers and their baggage will be scanned and searched. Strict rules for how to proceed through these checkpoints are in place. Most people know that there are cameras everywhere now. In many airports, armed guards are a frequent sight.

Given the intrusiveness of many of these measures, the question arises as to why they are accepted as readily as they are by the flying public. Anyone who has undergone these security measures knows that while there may be grumbling, there is widespread acceptance, even for procedures that may be intrusive and time consuming. Compliance with security measures is widespread. Why is that the case? Several answers may be given.

First and most obviously, enhanced security measures appear to be working. Since their implementation, there have been no incidents on a scale even approaching 9/11. Second, the public is by and large aware of being monitored by security measures that are nevertheless not obviously in the public view. We do not know when or how we are being observed. We all understand that some flights have armed air marshalls aboard. We know that there are cameras everywhere. It is widely known that flight staff have received additional training to suppress and counter attacks, or even openly unruly behavior. And although it may not be obvious from

simple observation, most passengers know that physical defenses for cockpits have been significantly hardened. These unseen measures mean that air travelers today are in Jeremy Bentham's and Michel Foucault's Panopticon, the hypothetical prison in which inmates know they may be observed without their own ability to see the observers.ⁱ Such uncertain surveillance is likely to create compliance.

Third, the flying public is aware of coercive security measures that are very much in the public view. Many of us have had the experience of seeing armed military personnel patrolling airports, equipped with fearsome looking assault rifles. Most airports have quite a few police and other security personnel simply walking around. Most travelers will at one point or another have seen police with dogs making passes through waiting areas in terminals, searching for weapons and explosives.

Without denying the effectiveness of these measures in achieving compliance, I want to point to one more dimension of control, and that is *rhetoric*. By rhetoric I mean discourses designed to influence people. By discourse I mean linguistic texts but also images and practices that are displayed and interpreted in more or less predictable ways, even if out of awareness. State authorities have long known that compliance is best induced when the compliant are not focally aware of being forced to comply, which is central to the idea of hegemony as a means of control.ⁱⁱ The naked use of raw power is embarrassing to the state. Much better to persuade the public to cooperate than to have to call out the dogs.

Here I must say that I have very little faith in the rhetorical power of those announcements that come on regularly in terminals reminding us not to accept packages from strangers, and so forth. The content of these messages lost their impact, I think, some time ago. I

will argue below, however, that their repetitive nature may contribute to an important dimension of persuasion.

The dimension of persuasion that I think is most effective in gaining compliance from air travel operates not at a level of explicit appeal. It operates at a level of form or pattern. The 20th century theorist and critic Kenneth Burke developed elements of a rhetorical theory of form over a long career and in many works.ⁱⁱⁱ Form may in principle be distinguished from content or information, although in practice it is impossible to draw a bright line between them. If I tell you what I had for breakfast, that message operates mainly at the level of content. Music, on the other hand, is highly formal and has most of its effect at that level. Form is almost always more interesting, captivating, and persuasive than is content. How many times could you stand to hear what I had for breakfast? And that information wasn't all that enticing to begin with. Now think of your favorite piece of music. How often could you hear that in a row? Probably several times, because the human mind responds to form more than to content. Why do we see television shows or movies in rerun, when we already have the information? Because the show or movie follows an appealing form. When reading a murder mystery, why don't we just skip to the end to see who the guilty party is? Because we enjoy going through the form of mystery and detection. If we have a lot of content to learn or memorize, we all know that it helps to put it into some sort of form, or mnemonic device. Learning the information about the order of the planets out from the sun is tedious and just a bit difficult, but link them to the form of a sentence and it gets easier: "My very earnest mother just served us nine pizzas," here assuming that Pluto has been reinstated as a planet.

One formal concept in widespread use across the natural sciences,^{iv} the social sciences,^v mathematics,^{vi} and the humanities^{vii} is that of homology. A homology is a formal pattern that

cuts across a wide variety of objects and experiences that might seem to be quite different. The point of demonstrating a homology is to show some important dimension of relationship or connectedness that is not otherwise apparent. A biologist might observe a homology among vertebral structures across a wide range of species, and from that draw some conclusions about evolution, for instance.

In my work, I have made extensive use of homology as a method, so as to assert a dimension of rhetorical influence operating at a formal level and thus, largely out of conscious awareness.^{viii} I have argued that the form of haunted house films, for instance, is one of dislocation in time and space, of being in strange and unfamiliar spaces and operating within temporal logics that are strange and unfamiliar. And I have then argued that haunted house films are homologous with certain real life experiences of dislocation in time and space, such as feeling totally out of place in one's context, or feeling that one is not a part of the times in which one lives. The homology creates a connection between experience and discourse, and the discourse can then advise people rhetorically about those dislocations, with different films giving different answers: don't fall into the dislocation in the first place—defeat the dislocation—flee the dislocation—and sometimes, the advice that all is lost.^{ix}

Discourses and experiences that are homological become susceptible to each other, and what we know from one can tell us what we know from the other. If we know that people are moved rhetorically by one member of a homological set, it is likely that they are moved by another member of the set, for formal reasons. When the homology is discovered across a wide and disparate set of discourses and experiences, we may learn something about rhetorical forces operating at a formal level that connect a surprisingly wide range of texts.

Sometimes a discourse will give us hints as to its homological set, sometimes that must be discovered by the scholar. Who remembers the words with which the first Star Wars film began? "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...." What form or pattern does that announce? The fairy tale, of course. And so if fairy tales appeal to an audience then in part for that reason, so will the Star Wars films. Now, one might say that fairy tales are a genre and may be understood using genre theory, but the range of texts in the Star Wars series shows us that homologies can cross discourses beyond the constraints of genre.

Here is one description of a homology, expressed as formally as I can, although as noted above one cannot in practice divorce form from content entirely:

A stranger with strange powers comes among us. The stranger is a blessing to some and a disturbance to others. The stranger is persecuted by those in dominance, and is eventually cast out or radically changed in one way or another. But the stranger returns, healed, and in so doing heals us.

Now, this form underlies a number of discourses, not least of which is the Christ myth in the Western, Judaeo-Christian tradition. But it also structures films such as *Edward Scissorhands*, *E.T.*, and lesser known films such as *The Brother From Another Planet*, and *Resurrection*. It describes the Gandalf subplot of *Lord of the Rings*. But doesn't it also underlie a number of real life experiences one might have with strange, alluring, or difficult coworkers, neighbors, even family members? And in that case, the discourses may give rhetorical advice to people experiencing the same form in life.

Now so as to give one but not the only explanation, and a rhetorical explanation, for the widespread public compliance with air travel security measures, I turn to a homology that can be shown to underlie a great many experiences and discourses. Here is the essence of the

homology, expressed as formally as I can, although as noted, one cannot in practice divorce form from content entirely:

One enters a special place, set off from ordinary experience. To do so one must debase oneself, removing certain possessions such as clothing. What one may say and not say, do or not do, is strictly prescribed and proscribed, with serious consequences for violating these rules of speech and conduct. One is examined closely, even intimately, for impurities and transgressions. If admitted to this special place, one is admitted to special experiences and allowed to do things, such as to journey to special places or dimensions, not otherwise allowed to those who have not passed these portals. Once inside, one is exposed to certain ritual practices and discourses that reaffirm the authority of those in charge of this place.

Now, clearly that form describes formally entering the secure area of an airport. I will elaborate on this in a moment. But doesn't it also describe the form or pattern in the Harry Potter Series related to entering Hogwart's Academy? To the X-Men series of Dr. Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters? For that matter, is this description far off from what happens in admission to graduate school? To entering a martial arts school? Even to entering into religious communities of many faiths? In short, can we not see this form as a homology underlying a number of discourses and experiences alike?

So, to comply with the security measures of air travel is in many ways to comply with the form that underlies a number of other experiences. But I want to focus here on one particularly powerful homological connection, and that is between entering into the secure area of an airport, and complying with all the rules and regulations there and beyond, and entering into sacred spaces or houses of worship. Most people, I think either have done both or know about doing

both. Even the most confirmed atheist is likely to have entered a sacred space for a wedding or a funeral, and if not, has seen plenty of media representations of those experiences. I have a Christian background and so know about what one does in church, but I live next to a Burmese Buddhist monastery and I understand and am compliant with their rules, such as the requirement to remove shoes before entering into their holy places. I think the homology between submitting to the security measures at an airport and submitting to the requirements of entering into sacred spaces, is both clear and a compelling reason why people might comply at airports.

To be clear, I don't have the space here to do a detailed homological critique, but I will sketch the broad outlines of one. A full analysis would involve mapping details of different experiences onto the form and thus onto each other. But here let me just sketch a general picture of what that might look like.

It is clear that entering the secure area of an airport, as well as entering into holy places, requires debasement. This may take different forms. In the secure areas one is very likely required to remove certain articles of clothing. Electronic scanners may reveal at least the contours of one's naked body. Any request by a security agent to be wanded, or to be patted down, must instantly be complied with or there will be trouble. Similarly, entering a holy place may require the removal, alteration, or even addition of certain items of clothing (such as head coverings). At the crucial moment of going through these surveillance measures, it is well understood that total compliance with instructions is necessary if one wants to avoid serious legal trouble. One had just as well enter a church wearing a bikini swimsuit.

In entering a secured area of an airport as in entering a religious space, there are strict limitations on what one may say and not say. Do not even think of joking about bombs and weapons at the security checkpoint. Best not to enter a synagogue reciting bawdy limericks.

Once inside each special place there are ritualized discourses which one will observe, whether one pays close attention or not. Indeed, one characteristic of a ritualized discourse is that it reassures attendants that an established order is in place. In an airport, recorded messages cycle every so often reminding one to report anything unusual, not to accept packages from strangers, and so forth. Most passengers let these messages roll off their backs as they eat snacks, get shoes polished, shop for reading material, and so forth. By the same token, religious sites are very likely to have ritualized repetitions of mantras, statements of faith, songs and hymns, standardized prayers and so forth to which people may closely attend to or not. The repetition of language is reassuring and essential to ritual. Think of the parishioners in many Catholic churches who would rather hear the liturgy in a Latin they do not understand than in their own vernaculars. The ritualized repetition of patterned discourse is what is key, and that each context has these indicates the homology at work.

Those who are in charge of sacred spaces will often have some kind of clothing that sets them apart, whether a full set of vestments or a simple stole or head covering. The uniforms of religious observance are formally parallel to the uniforms of air travel. Each airline's ticket counter attendants will have their own livery, while police and airport security personnel are set apart by their own clothing. Depending upon the place of worship, those familiar with the ritual will read the language of sacred clothing to know who is the priest, the rabbi, the cantor, the imam, the choirboy or girl, the lay leader, and so forth.

Of course, nearly all religious sites will promise that participation in the rituals of the faith will guarantee access to a special state of grace, even to a Heaven of eternal salvation. And once into the secured area of an airport, one now has access to travel to distant and, often, at least

interesting if not exciting locations. One is to be caught up in the air, in either case, and transported to the new and different realm.

Now if the public, whether actively religious or not, has been trained by long exposure to what one is to do in a sacred space, a knowledge instilled by personal or mediated experience, and if compliance with these sacred expectations is understood to be an expectation, then that training creates rhetorically a predisposition to comply with airport security. Security measures that follow the forms of religious ritual take on a flavor of morality, of spiritual authority. Airport security need never, and likely will never, make explicit spiritual appeals to the public, but such are not needed if security follows the form of spiritual authority.

Rhetoric need not be always at a level of conscious awareness, nor explicitly argumentative, expository, or didactic. There is a rhetoric of personal experience and social expectations, conveyed in a language of practice, events, image, gesture, and ritual. This is sometimes called socialization, but rhetoric is the engine of socialization, the means of its conveyance. We learn somehow that one does not go to visit the Queen in soiled overalls and mucked up boots. In the small stuff of everyday experience, amplified by messages in popular culture about everyday experience, there is powerful rhetoric that urges compliance with social expectations. It is often a rhetoric in the service of established power. I think this is one of, although as noted not the only, reason for a fairly quick and a fairly complete public compliance with new security regulations concerning air travel. I hope this essay might prompt further investigations into homologies that support social and political control, and in the method of homological criticism that can expose such mechanisms.

ⁱ Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. NY: Vintage, 1995.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Burke, Kenneth. *Attitudes Toward History*. 3rd ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.

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^{iv} Beer, Colin G. "Homology, Analogy, and Ethology." *Human Development* 27 (1984): 297-308.

^v Ann, Martha and Dorothy Imel, Lee Redfield, Barbara J. Suter. *The Great Goddess: An Introduction to Her Many Names*. Boulder, CO: Our Many Names, 1993.

^{vi} Atiyah, Michael. "100 Years of Mathematics." *Normat* 48 (2000): 123-26.

^{vii} Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen, 1979.

^{viii} "The Homology Hypothesis: Pornography on the VCR." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5 (1988): 202-216.

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^{ix} "Electric Literature As Equipment For Living: Haunted House Films." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2 (1985): 247-261.