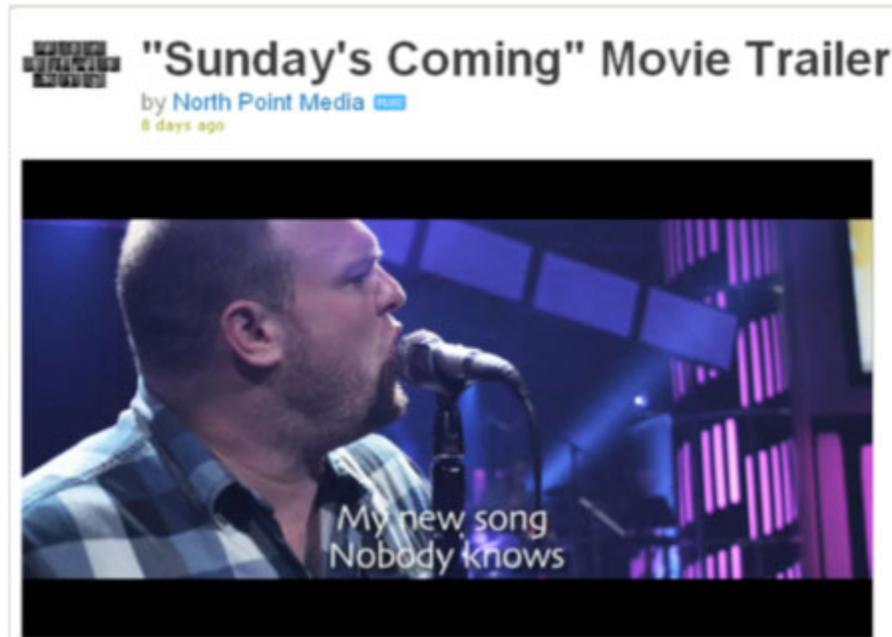


"Sunday's Coming": A Companion Ritual Analysis, Part 1



I've been forwarded the same video link by five different people in four different parts of the United States, four through e-mail and one through Facebook. The video is ["Sunday's Coming."](#) It's a well-produced "send-up" of "contemporant" worship disguised as a movie trailer.

Whether you are a devotee or a despiser of contemporary worship, one thing that cannot be denied about it is that, when done well, participants often experience it as a genuinely compelling encounter that they say changes their lives. And that's because, when done well, there is an undeniable coherence between what is done, how it is done, and what is said at every step of the way. In short, it just works!

Part of what I do as a church leader and a scholar is ritual analysis. Ritual analysis as a discipline takes seriously that what most affects us in worship is not what is said, but what is actually done. It is the interaction of movement, light, images, sound, and then "text," in that order, that best predicts the effect that any kind of experience, including worship, will have on those who participate in it. Being able to name how all of these factors interact to generate different effects in participants and then design worship based on that knowledge is a skill that all worship planners, in whatever "style," can and should learn to cultivate.

So with the hope of encouraging more such ritual analysis of how worship does what it does (or doesn't do!) where you are, I offer the following ritual analysis of the eight specific worship elements lovingly satirized in "Sunday's Coming."

1. The Big Opening -- The singer/narrator describes this as "lights and big drums" and says, "You know it's cool because you heard it on the radio." From a ritual analysis perspective, these actions are doing exactly what any opening ritual should do: They catch attention, pull individuals into something they want to be part of (here because it's cool and familiar), give the brain a strong sense that you are part of something much bigger than

yourself (sensory overload with lights and big drums) and all the while focus attention where the ritual overall needs it to be -- in this case, on the "folks up front," and more specifically, on a soloist up front. "Lights and big drums" generate an "oceanic sense" that the brain then attributes unconsciously (and automatically) to the soloist up front, while texts spoken or sung and a general awareness that this is a religious assembly may attribute it to God. This is important for many of the subsequent actions, where the person and the function of the soloist may change (though in this video, the soloist is always male), but it's still a soloist who is driving all the action in the foreground.

2. The Welcome Guy -- The musical soloist is replaced by a different kind of soloist who has several different functions to perform. One of them, but perhaps not the most important one, is welcoming. The act of welcoming here is far more gestural and physical than textual -- big smile, arms open wide, tattoos revealing this person "has a past."

The more important role, though, is a double segue. Ultimately, this ritual is not likely going to be about the gathered community. (The individuals in the congregation are usually literally "in the dark" and seated in individual, often theater style seats in such settings). It is going to be about the individuals experiencing God (or *something* that both comforts and challenges them in some way) in their personal lives, although it happens with lots of other people present. So the first segue "the welcome guy" actually performs is from the "big group experience" to an identification with a "person like me, or like I'd like to be even if I'm still in my past." In short, his first segue role is actually individuation, getting us to think about ourselves, as individuals, as participants.

The second segue role is then to move us as individuals back into a compelling group experience where we all individually can participate precisely because we all know the song. The little "twisty" hand gesture "the welcome guy" does sort of winding himself out the picture and "pulling" the band, and particularly the song leader soloist, back in, completes the transition. The song leader now "is," unconsciously, both the song leader (who generated the oceanic sense) and the welcome guy (with whom I identify as an individual).

3. The Song Everyone Knows -- The effect of this song, thanks to the segue and what came before, isn't to generate an oceanic sense (like "lights and big drums" did) but rather to reinforce the now dual identity of the song leader (oceanic sense and individual identification) and to reinforce my participation primarily as an individual. Since everyone knows this song, everyone can participate in one way or another, even idiosyncratically. If I want to dance like I prefer or switch harmony lines or make up my own harmonies or riffs, I can do that safely because I am an individual, first and foremost, the music from the stage and the soloist still big enough to "cover" any "mistakes" in pitch, and the "groove" of the room and its relative darkness at this point will still cover what, if watched by others with more light, might be embarrassing for me to do. So while "lights and big drums" created a catharsis as a group that got me focused on the front, this song creates a catharsis for me as an individual that gets me focused more on myself and maybe "me and God." To an outside observer just coming in it may seem as if the music is being generated primarily by the whole group now, but it's actually being generated by each individual in the group, collectively, and still driven, even if a bit less directly, by the soloist/song leader.

This is a critical moment for the ritual, however. The deep individual self-expression made possible by "the song everyone knows" creates a real threat that people may focus only on themselves, and actually lose focus on the soloist up front. That's why it's ritually essential that this song is followed by the next -- a song nobody knows... yet.

4. The Song Nobody Knows -- This is a solo performed by the soloist who now has actually a triple identity (generator of oceanic sense, person like me or like I want to be, and now also a person who lets me be me with everyone else here). But more has to happen to enhance the "soloist avatar" before "the message," and this is the opportunity to enact that. So far, the soloist has "cred" as someone who is cool and identified with me. But he is not yet identified as actually an expert in his own right or as a person who has real answers or real authority in his own right. I might want to hang around him or trust him as a buddy, but I might not follow him. Adding

those attributes is what "the song nobody knows" actually accomplishes.

Here's how. This song really is unknown to practically everyone present, if only because it may be the composition of the soloist and may not have been performed before. That the soloist can compose new music adds to perception of the soloist's expertise. What's more, the song really is generally a solo, designed for that soloist to perform and may not be singable, in fact, by non-professionals without a lot of practice. Perhaps a chorus in it is singable, but the main body of the song is not; the range of the song (lows to highs) and the complexity of the melody just won't work for most people. That means the soloist can do something the rest of us cannot do by ourselves. The soloist may invite us to join on the refrain, which then enables us to participate in what the soloist can do, but not without his constant guidance. If I actually can sing the chorus, I am assured that his guidance is helpful, even if I can't yet do everything he can. All of this means the soloist now also has expertise, authority, and answers I know I can trust, if I just try just a little.

A quick word about the atmosphere and the content for "the song nobody knows" may be helpful as well. Typically, when this song begins, the lights in the house go almost completely dark and there may be a spotlight (filtered perhaps, or with a slight foggy effect) on the soloist. So whatever energy was in the larger room (in each of us individually) is now transferred, visually, to the soloist. Typically, too, this is a song that will express some personal pain, problem or longing before God. Even if the words do not do that explicitly, the musical form usually does. It will likely be either moody, or passionate or both. So the music, and likely the words, are not only building up the "soloist avatar" with more attributes, they are also generating a sympathetic awareness of pain, problems and longings in my own life.

And that's what the offering and the "video package" build on and reinforce.

5 and 6. The Offering and the Video Package -- "[Sunday's Coming](#)" describes this primarily as a way to collect the offering, get the band offstage, and re-set the stage for the sermon, and so as a kind of exercise in "group distraction" (pay no real attention to those guys rolling in the palm tree or passing the plates), almost like a commercial break. Actually, these two actions, and the second even more than the first, are designed to put the ball back in the individual's court in a direct, even if unnoticed, way. "The song nobody knows" has primed our affective awareness of pain, problems, and longings. We're given in the act of an offering one opportunity to respond to that awareness by giving money if we want to --although, as the soloist points out, that's actually just between me and God. But it's one thing I CAN do to respond.

Meanwhile, and more important for everyone present whether they "give to the Lord" or not, the video package brings that "affective background" into even more focal awareness. The "blurry motion background" and frequently ambient musical soundscape that accompany it connect with our own individual "stream of consciousness," that affective background of pain, problems, and longing. The questions on the screen give some kind of name and direction to those feelings and unconsciously lead us each, individually, to frame those feelings in terms of those questions and identify those questions as the things we need answers to in order to respond to those feelings. In English literary criticism, the song nobody knows, the offering and the video package together cause us to enter the "[green world](#)," or in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, "the dark wood."

7. The Man with the Answers— Out of the hazy darkness, light begins to dawn on the stage, and out walks the ultimate incarnation of the soloist, the pastor, "the man with the answers." Everything in the ritual up until now has been leading to this moment. But as the video points out, the first manifestation of this "man with the answers" is actually not about giving answers at all, but about providing empathy. Now firmly in the "dark wood" or "green world," each individual is in a state of emotional vulnerability. The "soloist/pastor" must address that first by acts of presence before going anywhere near addressing the questions themselves. That is why the pastor moves *gradually* out of the darkness into an increasing light. That's also why the initial movements of the pastor are slow and the voice level is low at first. It's also why the pastor's affect at first somewhat mirrors the affect created in the audience -- concerned and slightly pained, but also confident that there is a way through this. And it's also the reason the pastor's clothes are business casual (at least in

predominantly Caucasian and suburban contexts) and not three-piece suit or clerical garb (alb, robe, etc.). All of these non-verbals strongly communicate empathy with just enough authority that when something more authoritative and even challenging is said later in the message, it is more likely to be ratified as a real and good answer by each individual present.

All of that is just "set up." It's up to the pastor to deliver on every bit of association that has been built up around the "soloist avatar" throughout the service. To review, that includes empathy, authority, and ability to move me beyond where I started, a person who lets me be who I am, a person like me but also like I want to think of myself becoming, and someone capable of evoking an oceanic sense. The skillful pastor will start with empathy and a tinge of authority, then back away from authority toward individuality ("letting me be me") with enough "coolness" that I want to be like the pastor, then bring on the authority more fully, then make me feel I can do what he's asking, as challenging as it may be (mirroring what happened when I could sing at least some of the chorus in "the song nobody knows") and conclude with a move into the oceanic sense to "hardwire" all of that into my brain and body.

8. Closing Song with Violins -- While format and other constraints limit the capacity of many pastors to move into the oceanic sense in their actual "message" -- something more traditional "pulpiteers" of the nineteenth and earlier centuries and many in non-Eurocentric worshipping traditions still today are masters at evoking, they can at least segue in that direction so that the "closing song with violins" can actually go there to "seal the deal." Once again, the point of the "big music" is catharsis, but this time of a third type. To review, the opening "oceanic sense" established the credibility of the soloist-avatar as one who could generate such a profound feeling of connection with God and others. With "the song everyone knows," the catharsis ratified the value of each individual and her or his experience. The catharsis here, generated by a familiar song with a powerful emotional melody line (perhaps a grateful "torch song for Jesus") helps people leave feeling empowered and good about the answers and challenges they have just been given for their own individual lives and with a sense that God is with them, individually, to make things better than they were before they came.

Whether we make fun of it or embrace it, the "contemporant" pattern of worship described in "Sunday's Coming" is undoubtedly effective, and in large part because it pays such close attention to the affective. When done well, it delivers exactly what it primes us to expect; and because it does that, the overall experience is a satisfying one that many people want, and some even long, to be part of again and again.

At the same time, because it is so effective at what it does, it begs some questions of all of us as worship planners. I'll get to those questions in [Part 2](#) of this article.