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The point of no return: Ritual performance and strategy making in project organizations

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Organization scholars call for a more critical approach to the field of Strategy-as-Practice. Particularly, more interpretive and micro-level analyses of strategy from a performative perspective are endorsed. This paper addresses this call with an ethnographic study of rituals that mark kick-offs, launches, milestones, and deliveries in project organizations. Using a performative approach, the aim is to investigate how rituals are sociomaterially orchestrated and the implications this has for strategy making. To collect data, fieldwork was conducted during eight ritual events in four infrastructure projects in the Netherlands, and 46 in-depth interviews were held with ritual participants. Our study reveals the often overlooked strategic role of rituals in terms of (1) engaging an audience, (2) legitimizing project plans, and (3) catalyzing transitions via a 'point of no return'. The contribution of this paper is a performative analysis of rituals offering insight into the understudied aesthetic, corporeal, and material nature of strategizing.

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Introduction

The practice-turn in organization studies has directed our attention to the importance of social practice in strategy research, elaborated in the research domain of Strategy-as-Practice (Vaara and Whittington, 2012; Carter et al., 2008; Jarzabkowski, 2003, 2005). While strategy theory originated from a positivist, economic tradition, Strategy-as-Practice offers another perspective by drawing from social theory (e.g. Giddens, 1990; Goffman, 1959; Foucault, 1982; Bourdieu, 1991). Despite its advancement, scholars still call for more interpretive, in-depth, and critical analyses of strategy to unleash the full potential of Strategy-as-Practice (e.g. Carter et al., 2008; McCabe, 2010).

Taking this call as a point of departure, this paper will focus on the practice of rituals and their implications for strategy making. Prior research has underlined the value of studying rituals in organizations to indicate the episodic, purposeful, and transformative nature of strategizing. Precisely, scholars have shown how meetings, workshops, 'away days', and business dinners are ritualized to enhance their strategic potential (e.g. Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008; Peck et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 2010; Johnson, 2007; Sturdy et al., 2006). Most of these studies draw from classical ritual theory (e.g. van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969) to inform research and develop theory in the field of strategy. In line with this, we utilize theory from the field of anthropology and conceptualize rituals as ceremonial events performed in demarcated time and space, with predetermined actors and audiences, and particular words, gestures, and materials to create meaning and reality (van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1977, 1982; Bell, 1992).

To study rituals, we utilize a performative approach which regards social and material processes, structures, and entities as entwined agencies in a world's becoming (Barad, 2003; Dale, 2005; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). In simpler terms, we understand rituals as sociomaterial practices where the amalgamation of social and material factors constructs certain meanings and realities (Gond et al., 2016; van den Ende et al., 2015). Consequently, a performative approach addresses how social and material entities are interrelated, and how and why they matter in practice, also referred to as sociomaterial mattering (Barad, 2003, 2007; Gond et al., 2016). The field of Strategy-as-Practice has yet to address strategizing through sociomaterial mattering. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the sociomaterial constitution of rituals and the strategic impact this might have in practice.

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In accordance with our aim, the central research question addressed in this paper is "How are rituals sociomaterially constituted and what strategic effects do they have?" To answer this query, an in-depth ethnographic study of eight ritual events in four infrastructure projects in the Netherlands has been conducted including two project kick-offs, two project phase launches, two milestones celebrations, and two project deliveries. Findings demonstrate how rituals in projects are sociomaterially orchestrated and performed to produce the strategic effects of engaging an audience, legitimizing project plans, and actualizing transitions.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it adds to the Strategy-as-Practice debate an empirically grounded analysis of rituals offering insight into their thus far overlooked strategic role. Secondly, this paper mobilizes a performative approach that exhibits and integrates social and material facets of strategy making. Specifically, our study reveals how the sociomaterial composition of rituals expresses meaning, (re)constructs reality, and catalyzes transitions.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First we conceptualize rituals, followed by a clarification of the performative approach used. Subsequently, we outline the methodology employed including a description of the research sites and context, our research techniques, and data analysis. We then outline the findings to unpack the strategic effects of rituals, based on observations in the field and supplemented with interview accounts. Next, we offer a critical analysis and discussion of the findings to disclose the implications of ritual practice for strategy making. Finally, the main conclusions are drawn and the research contributions are provided.

Ritual as theory and as practice

In the field of anthropology, the study of ritual is comprehensive and enduring. Renowned scholars such as Lévi-Strauss (1944), van Gennep (1960), Turner (1969), Goffman (1967), and Geertz (1973) are among its most important theoretical pioneers. When reviewing ritual theory, two main issues emerge. Firstly, there has been a strong inclination to view ritual as a magical, sacred, or symbolic activity as opposed to practical, utilitarian, or strategic activity (Bell, 1992). Conversely, with the support of various studies (e.g. Alexander, 2006; Bell, 2009; Martin, 2002; Schechner, 2012; Smith and Stewart 2011; Turner, 1982), we contend it should be seen as possessing both symbolic *and* pragmatic aspects simultaneously. A second issue is that it has been (and still is) exceptionally difficult to define what ritual is or is not in theory. While some scholars view it as an extraordinary activity, others see it as part of all activity and basic to all social life making it almost impossible to define (Bell, 1992). Therefore, it is suggested scholars should focus on what ritual *does* to distinguish itself from other activities, rather than on what it means in theory (Bell, 1992, 2009; Islam and Zyphur, 2009; Smith and Stewart, 2011).

In line with this, we draw from the work of anthropologist Bell (1992, 2009) who understands ritual as practice; as something that actors do. She terms this 'ritualization', defined as a *strategic* way of acting, appropriated and orchestrated to distinguish what is being done compared to other, more ordinary practices. Thus, rather than focusing on what ritual means or represents, ritualization underlines what ritual does to privilege itself and on how it does it. This requires a shift from looking at ritual activities as the expression of meanings, to what constitutes and anchors such meanings. A ritual is then understood as a practice for differentiating between acts, for constructing qualitative distinctions between the ordinary and extraordinary, and for attributing such differentiation to reality (Bell, 2009).

The means for privileging and differentiating ritual include performance, such as the scripts, props, and actors on a stage; formalization, meaning it is premediated and organized rather than spontaneous; repetition, as it is recurrent according to cycles; and symbolic action comprising bodies, materials, and speech that constitute meanings (Alexander et al., 2006; DeMarrais et al., 1996; Goffman, 1959; Johnson et al., 2010; Turner and Schechner, 1988). Rather than being structural features of rituals, these are mechanisms to give them a privileged and authoritative status over other practices, enabling them to preserve or transform social conditions (Bell, 1992, 2009).

A performative approach to ritual

To further conceptualize and analyze rituals in projects we utilize a performative approach. In our performative approach, performance refers to the embodied practice or 'acting' of ritual whereas performativity refers to the meaning or reality it (re) constructs (Loxely, 2007; Gregson and Rose, 2000; Butler, 1988). A performative understanding of ritual is not novel. Goffman (1959, 1967) already showed how individuals frame and socially construct their reality, performing roles as social actors on 'stage' and during their daily ritualized interaction with others. van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969) studied how '*rites de passage*' were performed in traditional communities to enable the shift of an individual or group from one social status to the next, marking important transitions and milestones during a lifecycle. Furthermore, Moore and Myerhoff (1977) emphasized how a ritual is formally enacted like a play, involving the manipulation of materials and symbols to attract the attention of an audience and generate sociopolitical consequences. In a similar vein, Turner (1977) describes a ritual as a performance in a sequestered place, with a stereotyped sequence of activities involving speech, gestures, and artefacts designed to influence forces on behalf of the goals and interests of ritual actors. In short, through its framed and scripted performance, a ritual can establish, effect, or bring about something (Bell, 2009; Tambiah, 1981). In this sense, a ritual does not merely manifest something, but rather it accomplishes something as part of its process (Turner, 1982; van Gennep, 1960; Rappaport, 1999).

A performative approach gives insight into the strategic and carefully orchestrated performance of rituals. Through their appropriation, rituals can exercise persuasive power and are thus essentially rhetorical, using materiality, aesthetics, and poetics to sway an audience (Giesen, 2006; Kornberger, 2013; Sillince and Barker, 2012). This typifies them as situated

performances that enact "a highly charged ceremonial form designed to attract the collective attention of a field" (Anand and Watson, 2004: 59). Consequently, a performative perspective stipulates how ritualization is a form of strategizing that *does* something beyond the performance of ritual itself (Alexander, 2006; Kornberger and Clegg, 2011; Koschmann and McDonald, 2015), even if doing is saying in the form of a 'speech act' from an Austinian perspective (e.g. "I do" is an *act* of marriage) (Austin, 1963; Tambiah, 1981; Searle, 1969). As Bell (2009: 75) explains, a ritual is in one sense the event of the performance itself, but when analyzed further the event produces certain shifts or changes, creating a new situation and reality.

Though there are many uses (and abuses) of the concept of performativity which, in turn, explicates the performative approach used, we see performativity as sociomaterial mattering (Gond et al., 2016). This indicates that social and material entities are seen as entangled agencies in a world's becoming (Barad, 2003; Orlikowski, 2005; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). Thus, there is no real separation between 'the social' and 'the material' which are simultaneously agential in co-constructing reality. Importantly, this view encourages organization scholars to consider how the materiality of practice matters which has often been discounted by studies prioritizing social processes and structures (Robichaud and Cooren, 2013; van den Ende et al., 2015). Therefore, we deem the material or nonhuman facet of ritual practice to be equally constitutive, in conjunction with its social or human facet.

Sillince and Barker (2012: 14) convey a ritual as an occasion "where expressive significance is given by material objects such as scenes, props or clothes, and scripts," in order to produce certain effects. Essentially, rituals are not only social and symbolic, but visible, tangible, and material practices where spatial settings and artefacts play a leading role in constructing meaning and reality (Sillince and Barker, 2012; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008; Robichaud and Cooren, 2013). Here, the material and corporeal manifestation of ritual has just as much performative power as the social and discursive (DeMarrais et al., 1996; Turner, 1982; Boivin, 2008), such as a material contract signed with a signature by an appointed figure, in the presence of witnesses and within a demarcated space, which binds and makes tangible an agreement. As such, the materiality of ritual is agential as part of the codes and means of performative action (Turner, 1982; Koschmann and McDonald, 2015). A ritual thus concerns a particular set of activities that fuse materiality with social and cultural elements such as symbols, language, and discourse.

Overlooking our theoretical framework, using a performative approach to analyze rituals is valuable for the field of Strategy-as-Practice because it casts light on the often overlooked strategic role of rituals. Rather than being purely symbolic or expressive, our interpretation regards rituals to be equally pragmatic and strategic where sociomaterial factors play an important role in the creation or 'performance' of meaning and reality. Specifically, a performative approach to ritual offers strategy scholars a means to study the material, corporeal, and aesthetic nature of strategizing which has often been neglected in prior studies (Carter et al., 2008). Moreover, we contend the field of strategy can benefit from a more serious engagement with anthropological theories underlining the strategic and performative nature ritual practice (e.g. Bell, 1992; Turner, 1982). Indeed, notions of strategy and performativity are integral to ritual practice which enables scholars to gain more insight into and extend theory in those domains respectively (Johnson et al., 2010; Koschmann and McDonald, 2015).

Methodology

We employed a multi-sited ethnographic method by executing fieldwork at different project sites (Hannerz, 2003; Marcus, 1995). Access to the sites was granted by a Dutch community of public project managers and resulted in the selection of eight ritual events in four large infrastructure projects in the Netherlands (see Table 1 below). The project cases studied are provincial and/or urban construction projects, embedded in multiple social and political contexts, and having considerable environmental and societal impacts (van den Ende and van Marrewijk, 2014, van den Ende et al., 2015). To analyze rituals it is essential to relate their meaning and practice to their context. Therefore, we first 'zoom in' on rituals to observe how they are performed, followed by a process of 'zooming out' (Nicolini, 2009) to see how and why they are organized, to uncover their significance according to various project actors, and to relate this meaning to the specific context of each project.

The selected rituals are formal and ceremonial events as these are premeditated and more easily accessible for researchers (Trice and Beyer, 1984). Consequently, the unplanned or 'backstage' rituals were not the direct focus of this study. We made the decision to use the concept 'ritual' because we observed in the field that all the events under study, whether they were project kick-offs, phase launches, milestone celebrations, or project completions/deliveries, were practices that were ritualized; i.e. performed strategically to distinguish and privilege them from ordinary, everyday practices (Bell, 1992, 2009). The events under study also fit our conceptualization of rituals as formal, ceremonial events performed in demarcated time and

Table 1
Project cases and ritual research sites.

Project	Ritual events	
Room for the River *River expansion project*	Project kick-off Deventer	Project kick-off Zwolle
North-South line Amsterdam *Subway project*	Launch tunnel drilling phase 1	Launch tunnel drilling phase 3
Railzone Delft *Underground railway project*	Milestone completion of tunnel	Milestone highest point of building
Hanzeline *Aboveground Railway project*	Internal project delivery	External project delivery

space, with predetermined actors and audiences, and certain words, gestures, and materials that construct meaning and reality (van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1977; 1982; Bell, 2009).

Using a 'mixed methods approach' (LeComte and Schensul, 2013), the first author collected data between the summer of 2011 and 2014 in the field by means of participant observation, desk research and interviews. Participant-observation was conducted during each ritual performance to 'zoom in' on its practice (Nicolini, 2009). According to Trice and Beyer (1984) rituals are tangible, visible, and culturally rich occasions for intermittent observation. The duration of the rituals varied from 2 to 4 h. During ritual occasions, it was essential to collect an abundance of observational accounts in the form of photographs and recorded as fieldnotes. Apart from participating in these rituals the author also visited information centers, open days, and project excursions to gain thorough knowledge about each construction project.

Desk research was used to collect secondary visual data in the form of media reports, photographs, and videos. Visual media allow the researcher to concentrate on different aspects of the image and to recognize diverse and subtle details which would otherwise have been missed (Rose, 2016). Visual data enabled us to use camera shots, stills, and slow-motion pictures to analyze and reanalyze, if necessary, behavior and materials in the greatest possible detail (Rose, 2016; Pink et al., 2013). Additionally, secondary textual data, such as invitations, news articles, and reports about the ritual events were also gathered. Furthermore, the desk study revealed extensive contextual documentation about each project.

To help uncover the meaning(s) of ritual performances, 46 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a variety of project managers and associates (see Table 2 below). Purposeful sampling was used because we sought participants who organized, performed, and/or attended the selected rituals. All interviews, with an average duration of 1.5 h, were held as soon as possible after the ritual event, and recorded, transcribed, and translated from Dutch into English. Participants include 'Communication Advisors' who play an important role in organizing and scripting ritual events; 'Builders' comprising project directors, managers, employees, contractors and constructors; and 'VIPs' representing state officials and political representatives such as mayors, aldermen, and ministers. Open-ended questions focused on the subjective interpretations interviewees had when reflecting on the ritual performance and its components.

Table 2
Interview sample and details.

Project case	Transition ritual	Com. advisors	VIPs	Builders	Total
Room for the River	Kick-off Deventer	2	3	2	7
	Kick-off Zwolle	2	4	1	7
North-South line	Launch phase 1	2	1	1	4
	Launch phase 3	3	1	2	6
Railzone Delft	Milestone tunnel	1	1	1	3
	Milestone building	1	1	1	3
Hanzeline	Internal project delivery	3	0	4	7
	External project delivery	4	3	2	9
		18	**14**	**14**	**46**

Data analysis

Both actors and audience participate in drawing the hermeneutic circle when it comes to ritual semantics (Alexander, 2006). Initially, a ritual script is based on cultural interpretation(s), which is reinterpreted by its actors who attempt to perform its meaning, which is subsequently reinterpreted by the audience, not to mention that the media often plays an important role in mediating this meaning further for an audience (Cottle, 2006). An important analytical aspect of this hermeneutic circle is that, through participant-observation, the researcher is part of the audience as a ritual spectator. The ethnographic literature emphasizes this empathic understanding in which the researcher him- or herself is the primary research 'tool' (van Maanen, 1995). Researchers might then gain a 'feel' for organizational aesthetics through sensual and experiential fieldwork in organizations (Warren, 2008). Thus, not only did we analyze the interpretations of others (second order data collection), we also analyzed our own first-hand interpretations (first order data collection).

The coding of our qualitative data was inspired by the initial and axial coding of Glaser and Strauss (1967), the first order and second order labeling of van Maanen (1979), and by the more recent first order concepts and second order themes of Gioia et al. (2013). In all three approaches, while the initial or first order coding is more empirical and informant-centric, the axial or second order coding are more conceptual and researcher-centric, based on theoretically informed themes. Additionally, coding was guided by our research question to ensure the codes provide evidence supporting analysis and interpretation (LeComte and Schensul, 2013: 81).

In utilizing this methodology, we found the first order codes of time, space, actors, audience, words, gestures, and materials, which are based primarily on empirical evidence representing the basic elements of ritual performance that were observed and analyzed in the field. Our observations in the field were supplemented with interview questions such as: "when and where was the ritual performed?", "who played a role?", "who was invited?", "what was verbalized?", "what spaces and materials were used?", "what gestures or actions were performed?" These first order codes and their corresponding data for all eight ritual events in the four project cases are exhibited in Table 3 below. In this way, we could observe, analyze, and compare the rituals across cases to find patterns.

Table 3
Summary of the findings.

Project	Event	Time	Space	Actors	Audience	Words	Gestures	Materials
Room for the River	Kick off Deventer	Start	Church	VIPs Builders Children	Citizens Media	Speeches Choir Poetry Interviews	Signature signed	Film & photo Sand art Food & drinks
	Kick off Zwolle	Start	Next to River	VIPs Builders	Citizens Media	Presentation Speeches Interviews	Button pressed Banner raised Champagne toast	Film & photo Button Banner Champagne Food & drink
North-South line Amsterdam	Launch phase 1	Start	Underground	Builders VIPs Children	Citizens Media VIPs	Speeches Holy script Choir Interviews	TBM baptized Banners released Champagne bottle smashed	Film & photo Holy Statue TBM Banner Champagne Food & drink
	Launch phase 3	Start	Underground	Builders VIPs Children	Citizens Media VIPs	Speeches Holy script Choir Interviews	TBM baptized Banner released Champagne bottle smashed	Film & photo Holy Statue TBM Banner Champagne Food & drink
Railzone Delft	Milestone tunnel	End	In tunnel	Builders Citizens VIPs	Citizens Media	Speech Interviews	Champagne bottle smashed	Bikes Balloons Champagne Cake
	Milestone building	End	On top of building	Builders Citizens VIPs	Citizens Media	Speech Interviews	Champagne toast Flags raised on poles	Flags Champagne Food & drink
Hanzeline	Internal delivery	End	Theatre party venue	VIPs	Builders	Presentation Speeches Poetry Interviews	Button pressed Champagne toast	Film & photo Button Champagne Food & drink
	External delivery	End	At railway stations	VIPs Children	Citizens Media	Presentation Speeches	Button pressed Royal train inaugurates railway	Film & photo Button Royal train Food & drink

Thereafter, we reduced the data into larger categories based on the strategic impact of ritual events. More specifically, we analyzed *how* the rituals are performed to produce strategic effects according to our research question, and then addressed *why* by decoding their meaning and purpose. This led to the second order coding of three strategic effects observed and analyzed during ritual events in all four projects: (1) engaging an audience, (2) legitimizing project plans, and (3) catalyzing transitions via of 'a point of no return'. These are elaborated below in the findings and discussion sections, anchored in observations, interviewee accounts, and our conceptual framework.

Unpacking the strategic effects of rituals

In this section, the findings will be shared which address how rituals are orchestrated and performed, and what strategic consequences this has. Specifically, the sociomaterial configuration of rituals is observed and analyzed to produce the strategic effects of: (1) engaging an audience (2) legitimizing project plans, and (3) catalyzing transitions via a 'point of no return'. Below, these will be described with an elaboration on the social and material elements that were incorporated and staged to construct certain meanings and realities.

Engaging an audience

Fundamentally, each ritual in this study purposefully summoned the attention of an audience to an important moment, milestone, or transition, stimulating spectators to envision and reflect on the project process. Interviewees stated that during a ritual event "you can reflect on how it was" (interview alderman, Room for the River), "you can stand still and take a few steps back" (interview provincial representative, Room for the River) or "you [can] sketch a vision" (interview contractor, Hanzeline). Thus, rituals encourage participants to become aware, reflect, and move on. In this sense, rituals delineate important moments between the past and the future, thereby enabling a shift in the present moment with the intention of moving a strategic project plan forward.

To attract the attention of participants during ritual events, ordinary, everyday working sites were turned into extraordinary, sanctified spaces. In six out of eight studied cases, rituals were held on actual construction sites, festooned with

performances, music, catering, champagne, flags, balloons, banners, etc. (refer to Table 3 above for details). For example, the two rituals marking the launch of the tunnel drilling phases in the North-South line project were held in decorated construction spaces 25 m underground. In these spatial settings, a Catholic priest turned a stoup of ordinary water into 'holy' water with a prayer and used this holy water to baptize the tunnel boring machines (TBMs) using a special baton. To further sanctify the space, a sacred statue of Santa Barbara (the holy protector of mine and tunnel workers) was placed in a glass shrine, decorated with flowers and candles, by the 'machine master' next to the machine, and a traditional mining song was sung by the workers. Attendees were evidently impressed by the space, actors, and materials during these events because an extraordinary circumstance was created. The communication director and organizer of the event explained this purposeful setup:

> It contributed because it is something extraordinary, something magical or something, and ceremonies help with that, that it's something mystical, and that fit in our approach that we wanted to bring it closer to [the tunnel workers], their pride, their craftsmanship. (interview communication director North-South line project)

By ritualizing construction spaces, they become extraordinary or even sacred. This means that what is included, voiced, and/or made visible within those particular spaces is (or should be) regarded as significant and authoritative for its participants. This is confirmed by an organizer of the external delivery of the Hanzeline project who explains: "you do [a ritual] in an extraordinary circumstance or space [because] this gives cachet. People need something representative that sanctions the agreement." It follows that ordinary secular spaces are temporarily made special through ritualized action to privilege and sanction what a ritual declares or does, enabling them to establish, effect, or bring about something (Bell, 2009; Schechner, 2012).

Creating an extraordinary space and moment in time is regarded as important by respondents because it helps to demonstrate the progress and accomplishment(s) of a project:

> Such a ritual is also an expression of, let's say, a certain manifestation. An organization wants to manifest itself, wants to show itself; 'look, this is what we have accomplished.' (interview project director, Hanzeline).

Notable in this quote is that a project communicates and manifests itself openly and strategically to outsiders during a ritual event. In this sense, a ritual is not only held to mark an important moment or milestone, it is also "especially a moment that society sees there is progress" (interview provincial representative, Room for the River). Or, as a communication advisor of Railzone Delft stated:

> Such a project gives hindrance and disturbance, and so people need something from time to time […] so when there are important milestones you make sure that you can share those with society and that you can show them […] its about that you grab a moment to show a part of the community, 'look, this is how far we are' (interview communication advisor, Railzone Delft).

In sum, ritual events have the strategic effect of attracting attention and raising awareness by creating an extraordinary circumstance in space and time. This is pragmatic for the project organization to communicate important messages, to manifest a project's progress, to show the relevant community that a significant milestone or accomplishment has been reached, and to give shape and visibility to a project plan.

Legitimizing project plans

Another strategic effect of ritual events is the legitimization of project plans. By legitimization we mean to sanction, authorize, or justify the construction project with the purpose of gaining public support and acceptance (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). Interviewees claimed enhancing legitimacy through ritualized performance is crucial for accreditation and decision-making in construction projects. For example, the director of the Hanzeline project explained during an interview that "[a ritual] is functional, you need it. It gives managers a certain form of legitimization to finalize a decision."

During ritual events it was observed that active roles were played by key decision-makers in society, including directors, state officials, and political representatives such as aldermen, mayors, ministers, provincial representatives, the Queen of the Netherlands, and even a Catholic priest. These actors have been grouped and labelled as 'VIPs', being those entitled or authorized to perform rituals, representing an essential corporeal and symbolic strategy for legitimizing project plans. One organizer of the Hanzeline project delivery said the following:

> [The delivery] has a national meaning. That's why we asked her majesty the Queen to [inaugurate the railway]. She does it with her own train, the royal train … she will come symbolically as the first person to open the railway, and be the first person to ride on the railway … This is formal, the minister will be present, the president-director [of Dutch Railway], the president-director of ProRail [a Dutch infrastructure maintenance and construction organization], also the commissioners of the Queen and the chamberlains and several mayors are present. (interview commissioner of the Queen, Hanzeline)

These findings indicate that not just anyone is authorized to perform a ritual and that ritualization is very much related to power. Turner (1982: 92) explains that rituals are usually performed by those "who consider themselves or are considered the most legitimate or authoritative representatives of the relevant community." This was indeed observed in the field of study.

According to interviewees, when a project, sub-project, or project phase is initiated or completed, it is necessary for key-decision makers in society – usually state officials – to perform a ritual because they represent society and, thereby, have the power to act as mediators between the project organization and the public with the ability to influence public opinion:

> As alderman I wanted to play the unifying role between the internal project and the external world. I believe that is where you can make the most impact, and where the interface is with the project (alderman, Railzone Delft.)

In the cases studied, ritual actors used special attire and decoration to manifest their authoritative position. For example, the priest (North-South line case) was wearing white and golden robes and carrying a staff with which he baptized water into holy water and blessed the TBMs. The Queen (Hanzeline case) arrived in her private royal train, walked from the train to the podium over a red carpet, and wore a cream colored cloak with a matching fancy hat; the latter a fashion item for which her style is famous. The aldermen (Room for the River case) in Deventer and Zwolle and the minister (Hanzeline case) all wore upscale suits and a livery collar around their neck which is a rather hefty silver or golden chain often decorated with a regional crest and gems, and worn only by important state officials. The alderman of Room for the River explains: "You will always see me in a suit. This is decoration, this is intentional […] this gives [me] a feeling 'alright, now I am being taken seriously'." Thus, such material and corporeal orchestration complements the strategic role VIPs play and may reproduce their position of power and enhance their ability to influence an audience.

Actors are well aware of the influence they can exercise during a ritual. Playing their role 'right', such as giving an impressive speech and exhibiting the correct dress and decorations, is performative and strategic in that it can shape the future. As Kornberger (2013: 104) explains, a strategist is an elite who claims jurisdiction over the future. Significantly, ritual actors realize they can impact or shape the future:

> My role is ritualistic […] but if I play it well, this gives people a feeling of 'yes, the world is in order, things are being attended to, it goes as it is supposed to go, and we have trust in this.' […] So the thing is, because I say we will do it in this way it will also happen in this way […] For a big part this is magic, because there is the illusion that there is order, this makes for a future by behaving in a certain manner, to make things better. The illusion steers the behavior of people and makes itself reality. (interview alderman, Room for the River Deventer)

Notable is that in all the projects studied, local school children played active roles during ritual performances as well, representing another corporeal strategy to gain legitimacy. In Room for the River, children dressed in green 'Room for the River' t-shirts received and guided attendees during the project kick-off in Deventer and presented the aldermen with poetry about the river. In the North-South line project, children wearing neon safety vests and helmets chose and revealed the female names bestowed to each TBM. In the Railzone Delft case, when the contractor consortium was chosen for the project, children were dressed in yellow 'Railzone Delft' t-shirts and helmets, and gathered at the construction site to welcome the contractors. Lastly, in the Hanzeline external delivery, four children were selected from each city (through which the railway travels) to present their winning poem about the railway to the Queen during the ceremony. Ritual organizers explained that the selection and role of children as actors is of symbolic and strategic value. A communication advisor of the Hanzeline case explained:

> It is always positive what [the children] emit, and people always like that. Children are also endearing and they are the future of course. And this always goes well, yes, and it's also involving a part of society, you know? And what better way to do this than through [involving] schools? (interview communication advisor, Hanzeline)

According to interviewees, children are given roles to perform during ritual events because they symbolize virtue and the future which create positive associations with the project. This was confirmed by the alderman of Room for the River who explained that "the children are there to give us the feeling that we are doing it for the future." Moreover, during the external delivery of the Hanzeline project, children who won poetry contests at school publically recited their poems about the railway that revolved around the event's main symbolic theme of 'connectivity':

> Together with the Queen, the children bear, in the context of the theme of the Hanzeline, 'connection'. The children connect, as it were, the cities, places and residential locations with each other, and they also won a poetry contest at school. The children depict with [the poems] the connection to the future as well (interview communication director, Hanzeline).

In sum, the sociomaterial constitution of the studied rituals, such as children on stage wearing project clothing and reciting poetry, and the presentation of authoritative representatives wearing special attire and giving speeches are strategically important to sanction, authorize, or justify the construction of these projects. Notably, the studied projects have an immense societal and environmental impact which is often negatively received by outsiders (van den Ende and van Marrewijk, 2014). Therefore, the sociomaterial orchestration of children representing the future and VIPs exercising their authoritative position serve to validate and legitimize the construction project. Indeed, rituals are occasions "where you can make the most impact" (alderman, Railzone Delft). Essentially, then, the performance of authoritative figures and children is a symbolic, visible, and corporeal strategy for legitimization to ensure the successful development and actualization of the construction project within a particular sociopolitical context.

Catalyzing transitions via 'the point of no return'

Besides engaging an audience and legitimizing project plans, rituals enact transitions in the life cycle of a project. According to project participants, by deliberately marking phases, sub-projects, and milestones rituals play an essential role in the temporal organization of the lengthy and ambiguous project process. This was emphasized by a state attorney of the river expansion project:

> In this way, you divide your work into phases, also because of the limited scope when people find it difficult to see the whole process from the beginning until the end. It is good to, well, make phases and to say 'hey, this is where we have arrived and now we will go on.' (interview state attorney, Room for the River).

Transitioning from one phase to the next is also considered important to let the audience know where a project is positioned in its implementation process and what still has to materialize. The alderman who played a leading role during the official kick-off of the river project in Deventer explained the transition being made during the event and the meaning and purpose this had:

> The main meaning was marking and transition. We [state officials] are busy with making plans and now something will really happen … now we made it official and this is the political meaning of [the ritual] … This means for the public that, 'yes, you will be bothered by us but it's for a good purpose.' (interview alderman, Room for the River)

To enact a transition and communicate certain messages explicitly to an audience during a ritual, a script is followed representing a written document describing a detailed, step-by-step program of the ritual event. A ritual actor in the North-South line project mentioned this during an interview: "[the ritual] is completely planned ahead, like 'first we will do this, and then this' so there is a whole program that has been prepared, a script." The script includes the utilization of words, gestures, and materials that have high symbolic value and construct meaning and reality. A common example is publicly signing a contract for the initiation of a project which grants administrators official permission to construct it. The state attorney of the Room for the River case described this experience:

> At some point you sit behind a table and everyone has that contract in front of him and then you put with your pen your signature. Photographers always find these the most boring pictures out there, but for those people behind the table it is the marking of the end of all discussions. 'We no longer are going to talk about the price, we no longer talk about conditions, we agree.' (interview state attorney, Room for the River).

What all ritual events had in common was a pivotal moment during which a particular symbolic gesture was performed involving both human and nonhuman elements, here referred to as 'the point of no return'. During the Room for the River kick-off in Deventer, the point of the actual start of the project was marked when the dike warden and project contractor publicly signed their signatures and the words "hereby we start" on a slab of sand that was artistically displayed via a light projector on a screen for the audience.

For the Room for the River kick-off in Zwolle this point was manifested when the provincial representatives, aldermen, and minister of infrastructure and environment pressed a red button together on a stand outside next to the river, after which a giant banner was raised by two excavator machines nearby reading "together we start for a safe Zwolle."

In the Hanzeline railway case, during both the internal and external project deliveries, red buttons were also publicly pressed on a stage in front of the audience, internally by the president-director of the project and externally by the Queen, thereby indicating 'the point of no return'.

In the North-South line subway case, during both phase transitions of the sub-project of tunnel drilling, this point was made clear during several consecutive moments; first when the Catholic priest baptized the TBM and the statue of St. Barbara, the holy protector of tunnel and mine workers, followed by the alderman who smashed a bottle of champagne against the machine, after which a big blue banner was released revealing the female name bestowed to the TBM. According to project members, this point was very important because it had strategic value for the project organization. A communication advisor and organizer of the launch of the first phase of tunnel drilling described this:

> For us it was very important that with [the kick-off] we showed the city that we were really going to start drilling, because there were still a lot of people in Amsterdam, even on the day that we would start drilling, who thought 'oh, we can still stop this.' So, by doing this so publicly, so manifestly, then you make it very clear, and this is also the power of a ritual, [to say] 'look guys, now it will *really* happen.' (interview, communication advisor, North-South line)

In the Railzone Delft railway project, when they celebrated reaching the end of the tunnel during a ritual event called 'tour de tunnel', they allowed ten residents to ride a bike through the tunnel and reach the finish line at the end of the tunnel, decorated by an arch of balloons. After they all crossed the finish line, the manager of tunnel construction and the alderman also smashed a bottle of champagne against the wall of the tunnel to manifest the milestone. Several months later, when they reached the highest point of the municipality building, a toast was made by the alderman after which five representatives of the collaborating project partner companies raised five flags representing their organization on poles that were placed on a platform at the top of the building. Though less abrupt than pressing a switch or breaking a bottle, raising a flag is another universal symbolic gesture to indicate important moments, reflections, or transitions in life (Eriksen and Jenkins, 2007).

Evidently, material elements such as sand art, buttons, posters, banners, champagne bottles, balloons, and flags are utilized by human actors to establish a point of no return and help catalyze a transition. In this way, the amalgamation of social and material elements serves to turn something abstract into something tangible. A tunnel constructor of the North-South line project explained why this is necessary:

> Well, because it's like a sort of peg. I mean, first of all it is a very literal moment that you create, you need that. I mean, if you would just say "now we start", then it has less impact [because] then it's just so empty. So evidently you do need *something*. (interview, employee North-South line)

Thus, the sociomaterial mattering in the studied rituals, such as publicly pressing red buttons, baptizing machines, bike riding through the tunnel, smashing bottles of champagne, and publicly signing signatures are symbolic *and* strategic gestures marking 'the point of no return.' This alludes to the irreversible nature of rituals which is crucial for the strategic impact they have.

Discussing the implications of ritual practice for strategy making

This in-depth study focused on how rituals are sociomaterially constituted and the strategic consequences this has in the context of large-scale infrastructure projects. The findings indicate that social and material elements are orchestrated during ritual performances to co-produce three strategic effects of engaging an audience, legitimizing project plans, and enacting transitions. While these effects can be traced to extant ritual theory (e.g. Turner, 1982; Bell, 2009), this empirical study exhibits *how* these effects are produced on the ritual stage through sociomaterial performance in the context of construction projects which provides novel insights.

Firstly, to engage an audience, this study demonstrates how construction sites are ritualized into extraordinary spaces, including decorations and performances to impress spectators and manifest a project's progress. In this way, spatial settings and artefacts play a leading role in creating meaning and reality (Sillince and Barker, 2012), such as the baptism and naming of a TBM underground to launch a project phase. In line with other studies (e.g. Turner, 1982; Koschmann and McDonald, 2015), we show how the materiality of practice is agential as part of the codes and means of performative action. Secondly, to legitimize project plans, the performance of state officials who authorize the construction process and children representing the future served to gain public support and accreditation from the external environment. Essentially, the environment of construction projects is typified by a normative social order to which they must conform in order to acquire legitimacy and support, thereby increasing their likelihood of a successful and timely completion (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Scott and Meyer, 1991). Hence, these rituals can be understood as mechanisms to embed projects in their wider context (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Finally, the findings show that to catalyze transitions, pressing red buttons, smashing bottles and signing signatures enact a 'point of no return', thereby enabling a shift in time and giving the impression of irreversibility. This attributes performative power to symbolic words, gestures, and materials because they act as catalysts for the transition that is being made. These findings correspond with Turner (1982) who explains that many passage rites are irreversible which increases their effectivity. Project planners played active roles in enacting 'points of no return', thereby crafting their plans, purposes, means, and ends into the societal system and co-creating standards of what constitutes a legitimate, acceptable, and successful project within a particular context (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

Linking these findings to Strategy-as-Practice literature, a ritual can be understood as a strategic practice for "disciplining the future" aimed at "transforming reality" (Kornberger, 2013: 104–105). Means for doing so involve the aesthetic use of scripts, performances, and props as observed during the rituals of this study. Kornberger and Clegg (2011: 155) adhere that strategies are first and foremost aesthetic phenomena that express "what words would not be able to capture". Similarly, when zooming in on the ritual performances of this study, we observed they were highly aesthetic, such as the exhibition of machines, construction sites, balloons, banners, photographs, film, art, statues, dress, decoration, and so forth, constructing a particular sensual experience and engaging the audience in various ways. Moreover, these artefacts were accompanied by symbolic actions such as giving speeches, raising a glass to give a toast, singing songs, reciting poetry, or raising flags. In this vein, ritual performances are carefully orchestrated aesthetic channels of communication, indicating that strategizing is not only discursive (Ezzamel and Willmott, 2008; Hardy and Thomas, 2014) but also highly visual, corporeal, and material (Carter et al., 2008, 2010; Löfgren, 2004).

Furthermore, we found that because rituals are highly visual and material, they display an elusive and mute form of strategizing which enables them to slip under the radar of control (Meyer et al., 2013). They are rhetorical and manipulative because they remain implicit via the use of scripts, symbols, and materials. In this way, what might seem like a nice performance by children who recite poetry is, in fact, a strategy for gaining public support and legitimacy. Ritual practice, or ritualization, is thus a mode of meaning and reality construction that disguises itself through its orchestration, thereby enhancing its effectiveness. This means that a ritual's performative power and strategic impact is embedded in the misrecognition of what it is in fact doing (Bell, 1992, 2009). It follows that rituals embody human purposes, means and ends, aspirations and visions, both individual and collective, which are performed implicitly rather than articulated explicitly (Turner, 1982). Such in-depth and micro-level analyses of strategizing help to unleash the full potential of Strategy-as-Practice (Carter et al., 2008). Additionally, our analyses offer a performative perspective that is empirically grounded and exhibit how human and nonhuman facets are integrated and mobilized to produce strategic effects. This contributes to the operationalization of a performative approach which has been problematized in prior studies (e.g. Faulkner and Runde, 2012; Leonardi, 2013; Mutch, 2013).

After zooming in on ritual practice at the micro-level, we can zoom out to link our findings to the wider context of construction projects to gain more insight into the relevance of rituals for strategy making. When considering the wider context, it is crucial to address the immense impact these projects have on society, not only structurally but also socially, politically, and environmentally (Engwall, 2003; Maaninen-Olsson and Müllern, 2009; Manning, 2008; Marshall and Bresnen, 2013; Scott et al., 2011). Due to their impact, including the high cost and long duration of such ventures, it becomes necessary for project organizers to devise strategies, not only to persuade or manipulate, but also to respond and conform to the external environment. In our research, strategizing involved ritualization to communicate meanings and gain accreditation from the external environment. Indeed, Meyer and Rowan (1977: 348–351) explain that to become embedded in their environment organizational actors must "incorporate elements which are legitimated externally" and employ "ceremonial criteria of worth." This rhetorical strategy of accreditation is essentially a political process between authorities and audiences (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Sillince and Barker, 2012). Moreover, DiMaggio and Powell (1983: 150) stress that just because conformity is largely ceremonial, it does not mean that it is inconsequential. Rather, external assessment criteria such as ritualized authorizations, endorsements, and celebrations serve as strategic mechanisms for influencing an audience and bringing project plans into being. Especially in contexts of complexity and uncertainty (which are common feats of construction projects) these rituals respond to external pressures and expectations, and further serve to establish and manifest the alliance between governments, municipalities, and other organizations involved in the construction process (van den Ende and van Marrewijk, 2014).

Ritualization is thus used by organizational actors as a creative form of strategization to actualize project plans according to a devised agenda, and to reproduce and reshape the relationship a project organization has with its environment (Sillince and Barker, 2012). It follows that other than being purely ceremonial and symbolic, the rituals of this study are essentially constitutive and strategic to persuade others to accept the project, to convince that it will make for a better future, and that it is worth the time, investment, and societal and environmental impact. In other words, the rituals of this study tell a story and envision a future to pave the way for a project's construction. Instead of imparting practical information about a project plan, a ritual event will communicate symbolically, tell the story poetically, and sketch the vision aesthetically to appeal to a wider audience and enhance its strategic effects. Taken together, the rituals of this study are sociomaterially orchestrated and performed to help realize large-scale infrastructures along a path of least resistance.

However, the strategic effects produced by rituals from a performative perspective are limited and negotiated (Anand and Jones, 2008; Koschmann and McDonald, 2015), in part depending on the extent to which the performance is impressive and convincing for an audience (Kornberger, 2012, 2013). Namely, the strategic effectiveness and performative power of a ritual is never a given but depends in part on the strategic mastery of the ritual script, actors, and materials (Kornberger, 2013; Kornberger and Clegg, 2011; Anand and Jones, 2008). Moreover, while rituals can be used strategically for certain purposes, they also have latent or hidden meanings, and implicit forms of power beyond human intentions (Kunda, 1992). Hence, the use of rituals by actors to achieve certain ends and influence others is debatable (Koschmann and McDonald, 2015; Anand and Jones, 2008). This is because rituals "are only partially articulated, understood, or acknowledged by participants" (Kunda, 1992: 94), meaning that they have manifold, ambiguous, and complex layers of meaning depending on multiple interpretations. Moreover, research claims that we cannot take for granted the performative aspect of ritual agency in its own right or reduce this agency to the actions and intentions of organizational actors (Koschmann and McDonald, 2015). Thus, rituals are constitutive of reality and can perform or accomplish things that are unpremeditated, which is an understudied facet in organization studies. In a similar vein, Anand and Jones (2008: 1057) contend:

> It is important to see rituals as political symbols that are fabricated and controlled by interested and motivated actors. [At the same time] the legitimacy and taken-for-grantedness of ritual is not given, but is an ongoing accomplishment that organizers of the ritual have to constantly strive for.

Consequently, the strategic impact and performative power of rituals is not reducible to their actors and organizers. Rather, scholars should address multiple factors, both human and nonhuman, that conjointly make up the performative assembly of rituals. Therefore, this research has focused on the carefully orchestrated performance of actors, symbols, words, gestures, and materials during ritual events which frame and construct meanings concerning construction projects and their environment. In doing so, we aimed to expose the more implicit and elusive elements involved in ritual performances and the strategic effects they produce by drawing from first-hand observations and interpretations from the field.

Concluding remarks and contributions

This research focused on the practice of rituals in infrastructure projects and their implications for processes of strategizing. Utilizing a performative approach, the aim of the paper was to explore how rituals are sociomaterially constituted and what strategic effects they have. Findings indicate rituals are performed strategically to engage an audience, legitimize project plans, and enact transitions in the project process. The contribution of this paper is twofold. In the field of strategy, this paper adds to the Strategy-as-Practice debate an in-depth analysis of rituals that are scripted and performed to have strategic consequences. This casts light on the often overlooked strategic role of rituals in project organizations. Secondly, we use a performative approach that exhibits and integrates social and material facets of strategizing, showing how rituals, as sociomaterial practices, express meaning and (re)construct reality. Importantly, a performative perspective moves beyond a symbolic understanding of rituals towards seeing them as simultaneously pragmatic, strategic, and constitutive.

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Biographies

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