

Producing the Reverend: Performing the Political and the Spiritual on the Global Stage

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"It is my feeling that in the age of information most statements can't carry progressive values. Such words disappear in thin air, become instantly nostalgic or stylistic. We seem to lack a critical culture right now. Why? Information carries meaning hypnotically but not powerfully. Stories, in contrast, create meaning when we observe the experience of a changing individual."

The quotation is from Mr. Bill Talen, and it is the answer to what he says to be his basic question, namely, how it is possible to make a statement in 2000 (Kalb 2000). Based on this short quote one would think that the author is indeed a storyteller, a writer perhaps. Talen, however, is best known as Reverend Billy, the character created and played by Bill Talen, the performance artist. Although the persona of the reverend is part of the show, the show itself grew to its own reality. Talen has been reverend since 1999 of the church he established and originally called “The Church of Stop Shopping”, and renamed after the financial crisis of 2008 into “Church of Life after Shopping”; one of the shows performed by him and his group is referred to as the “Church of Earthalujah”. It all begun as something like a one-man performance, featuring Billy, who was street preaching against consumerism at Times Square, in front of the Disney Store. The act soon developed into an elaborate show, including theatre performances with a gospel choir of forty members, a 5-person live band, as well as carrying out regular priestly duties, ranging from baptisms, funerals and marriages, to not so regular services, like the exorcism of credit cards, bank machines and cash registers of well known companies, such as the Bank of America, Walmart or Tesco.¹ The circle of the venues expanded as well: the shows, or rather, public events on freely accessible public spaces include not only street preaching, but also what he calls “shopping interventions”, referring to performances during which he and his group of performers literally clog the smooth flow of customers in shopping malls by climbing the escalator the wrong way, preferably during the peak of the Christmas shopping frenzy, or merely make customers stop staring at their performance that turns out to be a fake Christmas-in-the-mall type of show, with all its usual iconographic attributes, but the message of the preaching reveals a twist, if only one listens to it. With the expansion of his pursued duties, apart from the venues and types of events, the number of his occasional arrests or exclusions from certain places have also grown.

¹ One can get an idea of some major aspects of his work from the following video, featuring the gospel choir and one instance of the reverend’s exorcism of credit cards, with the involvement of the audience (see especially the part between 1’10”-3’10”): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJGn3E8QmNE>. I should also note that Bill’s director and partner, Savitri D clearly plays a crucial role in the creation and recreation of the phenomenon of Reverend Billy, but the examination of the cooperation aspect behind the show is not within the scope of this paper which deals rather with the way the phenomenon itself functions, through the iconic figure of the reverend.

Reverend Billy's looks are striking. His hairstyle is bleached blond scruffy pompadour, and he wears a clerical collar with his signature white dinner jacket. Both the acting style and the vocal elements of his rhetoric resemble a powerful regular sermon in the TV-evangelist style of Jimmy Swaggart, who clearly influenced Billy's persona. His performance, acted out in an energetic, exalted voice is indeed an ironic reiteration of the over-exaggerated style of the priests he parodies, but at the same time it oddly seems to be much more than that. He admits to have had a religious Calvinist upbringing, and while preparing his persona, dedicated himself to the study of the preaching styles of Pentecostal churches in New York. He even taught a course on preaching in America while he was artist in residence at the New School in New York City (Lane 2006, 305). So his performances are indeed not mere shows on satirizing the type of the televangelist; he uses the power associated with this type to his own purposes. His acts involve the audience into the repetitive crescendo of Pentecostal call and response, while several of his sermons end in the congregation going out of the church together to an organized event in support of an issue of crucial importance to local communities, such as the protest against the bulldozing of the Esperanza community garden, or the lobby in support of the union of bodega workers. As it is clear already from the examples mentioned, the venues of his performances give no less an ambiguous picture than his looks; in Jonathan Kalb's formulation he "doesn't confine himself to the controlled environments of auditoriums and playhouses" (Kalb 2001, 161). However, it is certainly not unusual for political activist-artists to use public spaces for their performances. It is also regular for performers to put on shows in performance art centers or be invited to art galleries -- Reverend Billy, for example, lead the exorcism of British Petrol's 'evil spirit' from Tate Modern in 2011. At one early point of his career he also preached mini-sermons lasting a minute and a half on the "Morning Edition" of the National Public Radio. For such an extraordinarily charismatic artist it is not unusual even to have his own followers, who are willing to join the game, and deliberately disregard the line between the performer and his persona. But it may be perhaps more surprising that he is also invited as guest speaker, or indeed a guest priest, to functioning churches as well. One reverend of a church that gave home to one of Billy's sermons that, among others, included the chasing out of demons from credit cards of the audience, proposes the following in an interview: the symbolic message of Reverend Billy (as she refers to him in the interview, "the Reverend"), together with the comedy of his performance is welcome with them, since, the hosting reverend suggests, Reverend Billy uses the brand of the evangelists as Pop Art uses brands, which makes the audience think about the symbol of the evangelist – what are they a symbol of, and what symbols are using them.² Indeed, the comedy, the satirical aspect as well as the hilarious fun offered by such chasing of demons is a highly effective part of Reverend Billy's appeal. An important difference, however, between Pop Art and Billy is that while Warhol's Campbell soups, no matter how perplexing in their simplicity, will always remain iconographically identifiable representations of soups cans, Billy's act is not merely an ironic reiteration of a type

² See video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUiUrEqmBQA> The passage in question can be found around 5'50".

through performance art, nor is it satire used for the purposes of anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist political appeal. Importantly, it strives to go beyond performance art, and become a spiritual rite of its own – and it is acknowledged as such, not only via invitations by real congregations to real churches as the one mentioned, but also through the ritualistic aspects of the show itself. However, before we have a closer look at the ambiguous effects that arises from the a unique combination of the elements such as comedy, satire, political activism and genuine spiritual content with identifiable religious roots, let us see the theatrical traditions in which such a performance may be interpreted, or more precisely, the traditions in which theatre and life (or theatre and the world) are seen as parallels. This perspective also explains the approach of my argument offered for the examination of this complex phenomenon.

My own interest in this figure springs from a larger research on the different versions of the *Theatrum Mundi* metaphor, the heterogenous traditions that influenced its diverse and frequently incompatible meanings throughout history. I am intrigued not only by the possible interpretations and uses of the metaphor in various contexts (such as pamphlets, philosophical tracts, poems or stage play performances), but also the ways its meanings intermingle with specific practices, called, sometimes only retrospectively, instances of the *Theatrum Mundi*. One way of creating a basic typology of the various interpretations is to distinguish between two groups. In examples of the first one the metaphor expresses the fundamental illusory character of our life on Earth -- here the idea of theatre is connected to a negative, deceptive or futile aspect of play. In the other group theatre is understood in the broad sense of role-play as well as the reiteration of behavioural patterns tied culturally to specific contexts and situations – this understanding of theatre is void of negative connotations, and may actually stand for the opposite of the questionable and illusory that it stands for in the first meaning. A well-known example for the first understanding would be the most widespread Elizabethan use, following the Christian and Stoic traditions of the topos, according to which our life on Earth is mere vanity, an empty show – and according to the Christian but not the Stoic version, we will experience its opposite, the eternity of the afterlife, when we exit this earthly stage. The melancholy Jacques' well-known monologue from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is one version of this type.³ From the other, entirely different perspective, however, it is either that life itself is theatrical in our successful or not so successful use of the actor's skills, but clearly based on the social presentation of the self,⁴ or in a more radical sense, it is precisely through certain types of play and theatre that humans have a chance and may go beyond the ephemeral, vain or illusory character of the quotidian life. Importantly for my discussion regarding what I see the characteristic ontology of Reverend Billy's performance, I would like to refer to one specific use, belonging to this second type, which characterizes medieval traditions of religious plays known as guild plays of mystery cycles. Several scholars regard

³ The *Theatrum Mundi* is actually combined in this monologue with another widespread topos of the era, the Seven Ages of Man. For detailed interpretation, see: Fabiny 1984, 273–336.

⁴ Examples here may range from Stephen Greenblatt's understanding of self-fashioning in the Renaissance to Erving Goffman's sociological investigation on the presentation of the self in everyday situations of life. Cf. Greenblatt 1986; Goffman 1959.

medieval drama as ritualistic, and thus immune to the charge of being illusory or pretentious. We know, however, that not everybody accepted the ritualistic validity of these plays, even in their own time. According to T. G. Bishop even the plays themselves were conscious of this possible charge and tried to divert it in various ways, as he elaborates on this idea in his *Shakespeare and the Theatre of Wonder* (Bishop 1996). Still, the tight connection between religious ritual and theatre authorized this specific type of role-play in a sense that later, commercial and popular theatre did not. According to Ann Righer, author of a monograph on the play metaphor in Elizabethan, and specifically Shakespearean drama, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Play*, this fact actually makes medieval drama unsuitable for the display of the *topos* (Righer 1967, 61). In her opinion, until there is no distinction in the community between players and audience, the play metaphor, the idea that the whole world is a stage, cannot make sense. Another scholar, Lynda Christian argues in her monograph on the *Theatrum Mundi* that there is a huge hiatus in the use of the metaphor in the Middle Ages, between its last appearance in the 12th century by Salisbury as the representation of life as vanity, and its reappearance in the writings of the Neoplatonists in the 15th, especially Pico della Mirandola, according to whom man (especially the creative artist) and God are both creators, as well as audiences contemplating the world as stage. With the exception of Salisbury, Lynda Christian points out that the gap in the use of the metaphor is actually a millennium long, one from Saint Augustin to Marsilio Ficino. Christian offers the most plausible reason for this hiatus as well, namely that in the Middle Ages there were no theatrical institutions or buildings to which the metaphor describing the world as stage could have been connected (Christian 1987, 69 and 80-81). Martin Stevens argument, however, contrasts both Righer's and Christian's view about the irrelevance and absence of the *topos* in medieval times. He applies the *Theatrum Mundi* specifically to describe a concept, a function of medieval drama, a concept which, in his opinion, influenced explicit later uses of the figure, such as in Shakespeare (Stevens 1973, 234-249). Although I do not claim that this same use influenced in any way Reverend Billy's show with its on religious overtones, I certainly regard this medieval type of the *Theatrum Mundi* in several ways comparable with the *logic* in which Billy's sermons may be so puzzlingly powerful and effective.

Stevens proposes that even Shakespeare's Globe is cosmic theatre because it follows the *Mappa Mundi* – *Theatrum Mundi* analogy of medieval plays, and traces the characteristics of the medieval so called T-O map in staging arrangements, for example, of medieval mystery cycles as well as the sketch for the staging of the *Castle of Perseverance* from the Macro manuscript. Just like the maps included Jesus sitting on his throne at the top of the maps he refers to, so did, he argues, the plays themselves represent God through play, and also points out what is from my perspective crucial, namely that the guild plays had the power, for the time of the festivity on which the plays were performed, to turn the whole town into a stage. This stage, however, is a *cosmic* *Theatrum Mundi*, not an earthly one; playing on this scaffold comprising the site of the audience's urban everyday ensured that the citizens can participate in the spiritual cosmic reality, or in other words, that their everyday is *turned* into this other reality, that their playing imbues the spaces of their everyday with a metaphysical world.

It seems to me that while Reverend Billy's specific type of performance seems to capitalize on the conscious mingling of play and real on the one hand, and on the other of play and

spiritual, it actually fits in this medieval tradition of the *Theatrum Mundi* – termed as such, as we have seen above, only retrospectively. Reverend Billy’s main tool is precisely this mingling, one aspect of which is the sense that he is difficult to tell from what we might accept as a real reverend, and a major reason for this is the iconographically precise design of the show and its participants: him wearing a priestly collar, his ingenious and also charismatic gospel singers dressed into appropriate gowns, and the fact that he frequently preaches in an arrangement in theatres that spatially recall the setup during a mass, with the priest and the congregation. Another important characteristic of his version of mingling play and spiritual is that he genuinely engages his audience, be it through turning a mock-religious performance into something that is accepted as real one, or shifting from a recreational comic show into targeting his audience’s convictions and beliefs, even in the sense of employing his priestly power as a way of supporting explicit and radical political activism. Still, what does this specific use of the *Theatrum Mundi* tradition, in Stevens’ sense, add to Billy’s show? Regarding the fact that the performers playing on the scene of anti-consumerist activists feature parody frequently and traditionally as an important tool, Talen’s show is not unprecedented. One has to think only of examples such as the group called Billionaires for Bush, campaigning in favour of the wealthy, and thus undermining the activities of large corporations, politicians and wealthy businessmen by exposing and campaigning for their otherwise not so explicit concerns. What makes Talen’s dedication different compared to other examples in the scene of performance artists engaged in serious political activism, whose toolbox also relies heavily on theatrical skills and practices is the fact that, similarly to the medieval guilds, through his playing, Reverend Billy indeed imbues his actions with a certain type of spirituality, thus making them real as rituals. As said, it is not merely mingling play and real, so that the audience would not know in any moment the extent to which what is said and done by the performers are meant to be taken seriously or not. It is precisely the element of the spiritual that makes a significant difference, the appeal to engage the audience not merely in a political act, but in a ritual, with admitted spiritual content. Although it is not easy to grasp what the term or the idea of the *spiritual* actually means to the reverend, his own words do throw some light on this question.

“Conducting this operation is a delicate matter, Talen says, because the whole 'spiritual' thing has been completely hijacked. All the language has been hijacked by people we're in mortal combat against. If it's not the right-wing fundamentalists, then it's the New Agers, who are just as fundamentalist.” (Kalb 2000, 165)

The quotation reveals at least two things. First, Talen *is* serious in offering something that he truly believes to be spiritual, which has been “hijacked” by undeserving people, and should be restored. Second, although we cannot be sure what spiritual is in his understanding, it is certainly incompatible with fundamentalism. His actions, thus, can also be interpreted as attempts to regain a portion of what he calls “the whole ‘spiritual’ thing”, to reclaim access to what may be experienced as spiritual, outside, but also inside its conventional spaces in the contemporary United States, both physical and mental. Talen’s chosen method seems uniquely effective in this reclaim. He, as a performer-priest can offer “hundreds of hard-core artsy skeptics (often in their 20's) their first chance ever to shout ‘Hallelujah!’ and to indulge in Pentecostal call and response” (Kalb 2000, 164) with what has been called the “astonishing

torrent of righteous words about the spell of consumer narcosis” (ibid). So perhaps his show is full of playful and theatrical features, but with his described behaviour, he can successfully dodge the accusation that would try to vitiate the authenticity or the seriousness of the show. His *Theatrum Mundi* is destined not merely to showing that life is like theatre, and that it is possible to mingle play and real. Importantly, just like in the case of the guild plays, his play is rather the *prerequisite* of real, not its opposite: the Biblical reality acted out to present the spiritual in the quotidian in the mediaeval example may be criticized (as it indeed has been) based on the grounds of the authority of the players to perform something that is liturgically not strictly regulated, but the message that it is dedicated to convey is rooted deeply in the spiritual beliefs of the performers. Also, if anything may be questioned, according to the conviction of the performers, and thus the logic of this type of theatre as well, it will be the reality *outside* and not *inside* of the play – in the former case the quotidian, everyday life on Earth as opposed to the divine eternal reality, which is manifested by the plays. While in the latter case, the one of Reverend Billy, it will be the simulacrum of reality projected by the drives of consumer culture against his sermons that strive to awaken people from the “spell of consumer narcosis”.

His reclaim of the spiritual extends to specific events and specific spaces too, almost as in a spiritual fist-fight. When in 1999 protesters gathered due to Mayor Giuliani’s threat to withhold public funding from the Blooklyn Museum triggered by the public uproar following the representation of a black Virgin Mary using elephant dung, it was easy for the Reverend not to join the “activists and artists on the left side of the street” who were giving “long rallying speeches about the freedom of expression” (Lane 2006, 306) but the angry Catholics on the other side. He indeed was an angry Catholic priest at that moment – this is why he could enter the wall of armed police making sure that the two groups would be kept separate – and this is how he could deliver his speech to his ideal audience:

“My Children! Let’s take the art off the walls and let’s have.... sports! Let’s turn the Brooklyn Museum into aSports Bar!.....Tear down the art! No more art! I want my Freedom! I want my Sports! And Disney! Thousands of monitors, all with GAMES! It doesn’t matter what games, just GAMES! And Elton John! And Chim Chim Chiree! Let’s turn the Brooklyn Museum into.... Times Square! A place that is only safe for shoppers, Children! Let’s go shopping! Praise be! Amen!” (Quoted in Lane ibid.).

We cannot know the extent to which his addressed audience at that moment was puzzled or not, but he was finally identified as someone who may look like a proper person on that side of the divide, but was delivering the wrong message, and was eventually lead away. For people seeing the irony in his words, the parallel between Baudrillard’s understanding of the *simulacrum* and Billy’s criticism of what he sees as the fake world of the disneyfied consumer is apparent (Baudrillard 1988). This parallel is the more noteworthy since Baudrillard’s notion of the *simulacrum* echoes not only several of the accusations formulated by anti-theatrical puritans against theatrical play at the turn of the 17th century, but also the broad interpretation of the first large group of the *Theatrum Mundi* referred to above, in which human life on earth is illusory in itself *because* it is theatrical. Billy, on the other hand, while also criticizing the fakeness of games (sports, capitalist types of recreation, as well as shopping -- the potentially

dominant game of our everyday behavior), with his own uniquely theatrical act demonstrates the creative potential in play, and his aspirations to shape the world through playing in it in an alternative way. In the last section of my paper dealing with Reverend Billy, I would like to specify my understanding of this “alternative way”.

Regarding the fact that Talen mixes religion or ritual with theatre, he is also an example in a series that has a long tradition, including earlier predecessors, but also far less remote ones than the mediaeval guild players. According to the view of the Cambridge anthropologists, accepted widely until today, the theatre of the antiquity has evolved precisely from religious ritual: among the roots of Elizabethan drama, for example, religious plays that evolved gradually from the Christian mass are regarded crucial not only as forerunners but also as important contexts for the interpretation of later plays. But revolutionary theatre makers of the 20th century, such as Grotowsky or Schechner frequently rely on the ritualistic tradition and power of playing. Talen’s novelty, it seems to me, is grounded, partly in the unprecedented combination of looks, behaviours and venues, but perhaps more importantly, in the unpredictable clues that he provides for his audience for the constant framing and re-framing of his show. As an interestingly related fact we should recall that Catholics were so fiercely attacked by Puritans around Shakespeare’s time precisely because they thought that Catholicism is the theatrical display of an empty show. Talen’s performance dodges off this charge in a way similar to the medieval versions of the *Theatrum Mundi*, as explained above, so that the charge of illusory or empty show just does not apply. In the earlier instance the accusation does not apply because of religious authorization, which may or may not be debatable, while in Talen’s case because religious authorization does not go beyond artistic self-authorization, while the performance engages diverse discourses such as artistic show, political activism *and* religious ritual at the same time. The core of the unique effect seems to be in the ambiguity created by such behaviour, by Billy’s talent to criticize and ironize about, and the same time celebrate the same thing. This behavior is present in several layers of his performance. His identity in itself is already ambiguous not only because he looks and behaves like a priest but is more readily categorized as a performance artist, but also because one never knows whether one listens to Talen, the performer, or Billy, the priest – as it may be also seen in TV interviews, in which he is juggling with these roles⁵ Similarly, in his book co-written with his partner and director Savitri D, the parts marked as written by him play with the alternation of the voices of Talen and Billy. A version of this switch between identities is precisely the thing that allowed him to enter the “wrong” corridor of protesters against the exhibition in the Brooklyn Museum. But the same ambiguity characterizes his acts as well. What should one think, hoping to be on their right minds, for example about the exorcism of credit cards? Where is the dividing line between ironic show, ritual and straightforward political activism? No matter whether the audience approves of and enjoys and joins the show or not, they are constantly forced to evaluate and re-evaluate the frame in which to interpret the events, since the only constant characteristic of this frame seems to be the fact that it is perpetually shifting. Actually, in a way similar to what Joel Altman has said about the unsettling operation of Erasmus’ Folly: “Folly pursues a decorum that is consistently

⁵ A TV interview in which he does exactly that, namely that one moment he acts like Talen, while in the other like Reverend Billy can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUiUrEqmBQA>

inconsistent, and this makes it impossible for the reader to respond consistently, since one never knows whether at any given moment she is to be taken seriously” (Altman 1978, 59).

Before I conclude, I would like to introduce briefly my second reverend, Rob Bell, who from a certain perspective seems to have gone through the precise opposite version of the pilgrimage of life compared to that of Reverend Billy: Talen is the performance artist, in a sense turned into a priest, while Bell, the pastor of an evangelical megachurch, after stepping down as leader of a church he established in 1998, Mars Hill, turned into a speaker in performing-arts centers, including, ironically, deconsecrated churches.⁶ At its peak, membership at Mars Hill was heading toward ten thousand, about four years after it had been established. Membership, however, dropped, first in 2003, after Bell decided not to exclude women from leadership of the church. Next, around 2006 when Bell gave a series of sermons in which he preached that churches should fight poverty, oppression, and environmental degradation. He finally stepped down when a book he published, entitled *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell & the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* caused wide uproar in Christian circles because it questions the existence of Hell. The book has been inspired by a congregant “who insisted that Mahatma Gandhi, because he wasn’t a Christian, must be suffering in Hell”.⁷ Bell must have been aware of the potential outcome of the conflicts that his opinions caused in his church. He did have the power of the evangelist appealing to wide masses, perhaps even similar to the one Talen satirizes, he just could not identify with this role in the long run. He felt that the idea of being born again in Christ allowed him to think of rebirth not as a single event, but as an open-ended process. And indeed, he seemed to have reinvented himself, a pastor heading towards the other end, from which Reverend Billy started to build his congregation: the entertainment business. Having met Carlton Cuse, a television producer whose credits include “Lost” at a Time dinner that was celebrating influential people, the two started to work together on a script of a TV show which was tagged as “a drama project with spiritual overtones”. Later they also conceived a plan for a different project: a faith-inflicted talk show, starring Bell. After leaving his church due to his conflict with fundamentalist believers, is he now, we may ask, moving towards the other enemy Talen named in the quoted interview, the similar fundamentalism of New Agers? We cannot know yet, but the message of a video called “Spirit” he produced in a series called Nooma, while he was still at Mars Hill is, in a way disappointingly, not very different from what one learns about breathing at a beginners Pranayama yoga class. But Bell’s similarities with Talen, their similar logic in applying what we may recognize as a specific type of the *Theatrum Mundi*, is noteworthy: their combination of the entertainment business, activism and spirituality, their quest for the renewal of institutionalized ways of worship, and their similarity in attempting to make the theatrical spiritual and their lack of reluctance to making the spiritual theatrical.

⁶ A detailed report about Rob Bell (on which part of the information presented about him in my article is based) appeared in the *New Yorker* in 2012 (Sanneh 2012).

⁷ As a curious fact vaguely related to representatives of the *theatrum mundi* tradition dispersed in time, it should be noted in brackets that Bell’s claims in this book resemble in several ways the ideas of the Neoplatonist Pico della Mirandola mentioned above as the advocate of the power of the creative, performative power of artists, who create worlds through their divine inspiration similar to the creation of the Lord himself: both Pico and Bell deny eternal punishment.

Still, while Billy -- in Joel Altmann's words that were applied to Erasmus's Folly -- does not follow any decorum, and shifts between frames from one second to the other, Rob Bell has been moving, although in a creative manner, between clearly identifiable contexts and genres: from being a real priest to joining the frame of the mainstream entertainment industry.

As a conclusion, let us return, once more, to Revered Billy's idea that I quoted at the beginning of this paper about the meaning of stories as opposed to information.

"It is my feeling that in the age of information most statements can't carry progressive values. Such words disappear in thin air, become instantly nostalgic or stylistic. We seem to lack a critical culture right now. Why? Information carries meaning hypnotically but not powerfully. Stories, in contrast, create meaning when we observe the experience of a changing individual."

In the last sentence, we read that stories, in contrast to information, create meaning in relation to the experience of a changing individual. The idea is somewhat cryptic. Who is the changing individual and who is the person observing this change? My guess is that Talen primarily refers to the individuals within his own public, on whom he hopes to observe the change towards a direction that complies with his goal not so much as a performer, but rather as a political activist and a spiritual leader. But it is important that he refers to *stories* in the sense of Walter Benjamin, according to whom "half the art of storytelling is to keep a story free from explanations as one reproduces it".⁸ His way of meeting this requirement of "half the art" seems to be through his performance, which points to similarities between the patterns of life and play, and the power of framing play as life and *vice versa*. By putting his audience into the constant revaluation of the frames in which what they see should be understood, he makes his audience critical of the activity of framing itself, as well as the meaning of this activity regarding their perception of reality. Framing, ultimately, will be not his task, but the task of his audience. An important thing that Billy's show conveys, therefore, in the end, is not so much that it would offer a nuanced and personal story as opposed to hypnotic and superficial information, but rather the fact that he can indeed satirize *and* celebrate at the same time the type of the reverend he impersonates, with all its functions, and this helps him necessarily remain the changing individual he talks about, the individual that he wishes us to become. Perhaps also similar to the one Rob Bell voluntarily also became, when he left the Mars Hill empire behind.

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⁸ The comparison between Benjamin's and Talen's understanding of storytelling is dealt with by Jill Lane (Lane 2004, especially 304), this is also where she quotes the passage I include above (Benjamin 1968, 89).

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Video materials:

Reverend Billy and the Life after Shopping Gospel Choir: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJGn3E8QmNE>

Nooma series (Breath): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SE-eTN-qepA>

TV interview with Bill Talen: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUiUrEqmBQA>