

THE MIMETIC PRAXIS OF RIDDLES AND TV QUIZZES

Michael Elias

Conference "Violence, Mimesis and the Subject of Responsibility",
Loyola University Chicago, June 1 1995

1 Introduction

I continue to be who I am
as long as you don't know who I am.
But when you know who I am,
I cease to be who I am.

There might be many answers to this old anonymous riddle, but most riddle researchers treat it as self-referential: the solution is the riddle itself. There is, however, in riddling more at stake than just looking for the correct answer. 'Continuing to be who you are' is related to being known by the other, and when the view of the other changes, "I cease to be who I am."

A crucial aspect of this riddle is identity and the relation with the other: interdividuality. 'Do you ever know who you are?' The leaflet of this congress gives an interesting answer: a picture of chaos with a painting that depicts a 16th century text 'Nobody knows himself' - in Dutch - "Niemat en kent he selv".

Huizinga, in his *Homo Ludens*, discussing riddle contests in world mythology, observed that in ancient times riddling used to be a more serious matter than nowadays - more of a wager than amusement. Modern riddle scholarship posed the question why riddling in contemporary, industrialized societies seems to have deteriorated from adult literary entertainment into a pastime for children. and why - on the other hand - it continues undaunted in rural communities of the Third World and elsewhere. The answer commonly given is that traditional speech events like riddles - customary in a wide range of cultures - have disappeared from 'modern life' as a consequence of the spread of mass media. In a different form however riddling has made a revival in quizzes, broadcast by television.

Before I proceed, first some remarks on terminology. The English word riddle is used in different ways. As a noun it refers in a general sense to mystery, problem, secret, paradox, and the like. The Oxford English Dictionary gives 'Life is a riddle to me'. From another point of view it is considered as a genre, among myths, sagas, legends, proverbs, jokes, curses, prayers, etc. But the primary meaning is derived from 'doing things with words', from speech acts and speech events, from the verb to riddle, with a riddler and a riddlee and sometimes an assembled group. In the approach called 'ethnography of speaking' it is assumed that riddling belongs to the linguistic competence of language users.

It depends on context, situation or intonation whether a speech act **counts as** a riddle. The initial formula "Riddle me riddle me riddle me ree" is not compulsory, nor the word order of a question. On the contrary, when a riddle is a question it is often not a true riddle, but a so-called 'catch riddle', more like a joke:

What's the difference between a baby and a coat?
Why did the chicken cross the road?

A: One you wear, one you were.

A: To get to the other side.

Riddling will often comprise several speech acts; it relates to linguistic and non-linguistic units. In riddle sessions the roles of the participants shift continuously according to whether they act as riddler/performer or respondent. Successive turn-taking depends on who knows more instances. One of the major characteristics of the speech event is **rivalry** - and when a respondent in the audience guesses the right answer, the riddler loses face, he is (metaphorically and for a short moment) dead, and the other participant has the right to propound the next riddle. And so on.

2 Riddles in mythology

My argument is as follows: I will briefly explore riddling as displaying wisdom in myths, and riddling as a form of amusement. Next I consider TV quizzes: in my view a continuation of this tradition. I try to interpret the different cultural settings of this whole riddle complex from insights of mimetic theory - and in these thirty minutes only on a few main points.

In mythological narrative the death of the riddler who failed to answer, is no metaphor. Riddle-contests in different myths of classical antiquity, Greek, Roman, Scandinavian, or Asian, are steeped in accounts of riddle contests between men, gods, and wise monsters. The riddle-contest is an integral part of the ceremonial of sacrifice. With its accompanying violence, the riddle at the heart of myth. - Let me give you some examples.

The Greek Sphinx used to ask riddles of passers-by and eat those who could not answer them. Very well known is the riddle of man that Oedipus solved, less known is:

There are two sisters
one gives birth to the other,
and she in turn gives birth to the first.

A. Day and night

In oldnorse Edda the god Odin, who disguises himself to conceal his identity, matches his own lore with that of the giant Vafthrudnir. After an initial test, they continue the wager with the loser's head at stake. In the verbal contest in Vedic literature, the brahmodya, life of the Brahman is at stake. If he answers correctly he receives the prize, if he fails he has to die. One of them literally loses his head, which separates itself from his trunk and falls into his lap - that's the mythic version.

Every riddle shows its dangerous character by the fact that in mythological or ritual texts it is practically every time a so-called 'neck riddle'. Folk tradition has carried this motif further by embedding it in a narrative frame which tells about people who are able to save their neck by propounding a riddle their judge is unable to answer.

Comparable contests occur before and during **wedding ceremonies**. Samson's riddle in Judges is a very well known example - it is selfreferential. Another, in a different context, is

Turandot, the Chinese princess, very literate and extremely beautiful, conversant with science and humanities. Many, many lovers, but she despises them all. Only the man who will be able to solve her riddles will be worthy of the princess - all the others ones are beheaded. Prince Kalaf ceased to be who he was when he saw her portrait - through the eyes of the painter, triangular! He falls in love. Although he is aware of the risk, he submits himself to the riddling session at the court. - He however outriddles her. But then he gives Turandot a chance to outriddle him as well. What happens, so that man and woman unveil each others' secrets.

Riddles have a connection to rites and ceremonies. James Frazer in part 6 of his *Golden Bough*, "The scapegoat", writes that among the Bolang Mongondo on Sulawesi riddles are never asked except when there is a corpse in the village. Elsewhere, while a corpse is uncoffined, watchers propound riddles to each other. The explanation given is that the practice is rooted in animism, and enigmatical language may be used to puzzle the spirit of the departed. A better explanation is probably to consider these social events as regulating rivalry, according to the cultural representation of the scapegoat mechanism.

3 Amusement & quizzes

I turn to riddles as a form of amusement, especially after dinner. Third century Greek *Deipnosophistai* 'dinner of the sophists', written by Athenaeus tells that the one who failed to give the right answer in riddle sessions, was punished: he had to drink salt wine. This humiliation is no beheading, but still a physical punishment; in later times it is just verbal: shouting, shrieking, etc.

Israel Abrahams, the author of the well-known *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* writes that riddles were a regular table game; all the great Jewish poets of this period composed riddles. A very popular riddle:

Bake him with his brother
Place him in his father
Eat him in his son
And then drink his father.

The answer is: Bake the fish in salt, his brother (for salt water comes with the fish from the sea), place him in his father (in water), eat him in his son (the juice or gravy), and then take a draught of water.

The point is not only finding the right reference. Underlying is the play with confused family relations - like the incest-riddle of King Salomon and the Queen of Sheba, referring to the daughters of Lot.

Take thirty from thirty and the remainder is sixty.

This is an arithmetical riddle, the solution of which depends upon the numerical value of the letters: Hebrew שלשים = 30. Take the ל = 30, and the remainder is ששים = 60 (by Abraham Ibn EZRA, 1089-1164, Spanish Hebrew poet and grammarian from Cordova).

A short EXCURSION

A Talmudic riddle that can be found in the Gospel as well:

Q Salt is good; but if the salt loses its saltiness, how will you season it?

A The Talmud says: with the afterbirth of a mule!

Q How can a mule have an afterbirth?

A Just as little as salt loses its saltiness.

And Jesus says (Mark 9: 50): "You must have salt within yourselves, and be at peace with one another." So, the tradition of riddling is taken up by Jesus. - Now look further at 'I am the bread of life', 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will rise it up again'. There is an interesting book on riddles and misunderstandings in the Gospel of John by Herbert Leroy, *Rätsel und Missverständniss*. He argues that the misunderstandings in the Gospel are hidden riddles. 'I am the bread of life' refers to the last supper: take and eat: this is my body. A 'crucial' reference, in the double sense of the word.

After the invention of printing, two traditions run along each other. The Finnish riddle scholar Aarne distinguishes between the literary riddle which springs from mediaeval Latin tradition and the folk riddle in the vernacular. So on one side there are riddle books like the German Strassburger Rätselbuch, the French Les Adevineaux amoureux, on the other side literary riddles by Shakespeare, Cervantes, Schiller, Voltaire.

From the nineteenth century onwards, this picture changes. Literary riddles seem to disappear and researchers apologize for their subject. After the Second World War in industrialized societies riddles more or less disappear from the adult domain, but the genre of folk riddles revives in TV programmes. One notes "a strongly interactive relationship with the viewers" but the quizzes themselves get a low rating in intellectual or literary circles.

There are hundreds of different shows, all over the world. They form a major television genre. However, there is an important difference between spontaneous riddling and the ceremony of the TV quizzes. Whereas in riddle sessions participants vie among themselves to get their riddles presented, in TV shows participants are carefully selected by those in charge of the programmes. Let's look at some fragments of quizzes.

A American quiz shows from the fifties

B Dutch version of *Wheel of fortune*

C *Going for gold* (British, European participants)

* ritual of entrance quiz master

* introduction participants

* prizes, 'shop'

* elements of tension, winning/losing

[videofragments]

4 Current interpretation

The first quizzes in the fifties - the American \$ 64.000 dollar question for instance - are reported to have started with one person being examined by the quiz master. A major

innovation was the introduction of another participant, which entails emulation. Another: a jury. Nowadays many combinations are possible.

There is extensive theory in communication studies on popular programmes - I concentrate on John Fiske's book *Television Culture*. He states that the narrative structure underlying the shows, lies in the nonliterary forms of game and rituals. In his view there is a distinction between aspects of **game** and **ritual**: in game participants start out equal and finish differentiated, into winners and losers; in **ritual** differentiated groups receive equalizing identities. He supposes quiz shows are primarily games, though there are important rituals particularly at the beginning and sometimes at the end; the quizmaster is the high priest in the ritual. The shows use knowledge to separate out winners from losers; they display a hierarchy: the bigger the element of luck, the less academic. The winner is "accorded a ritual of equality with the bearer of social power, the questionmaster", who takes him or her, sometimes by the hand into the reserved part of the studio, where the prizes are made the objects of a ritualistic celebration. Apart from being British, we observed that in *Going for gold* the master keeps more distance than in *Wheel of Fortune*. Fiske says: the shows encourage materialism, and insert participants and audience into the mainstream of social values.

On the other hand there is a tension between social order on the one hand, and freedom, anarchy or chance on the other. The reversal of normal power relations between consumers and producers, the confusion of different roles in the quizmaster (entertainer and examiner), could mean they convert into carnivalesque practice - as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin. The theory is: escape from the constraints of everyday life frees from subjection to the powerful, shapes ambivalence, of homogeneity and contradictions. It explains the excitement and pleasure some shows produce. For Fiske this is a reason to evaluate the shows positively - contrary to literary criticism. He observes the same aggression toward carnival as to the quizzical pleasures.

5 Mimetic Praxis

A basic question is **why** the whole mise-en-scène of quiz shows attracts so many people. Although one should be careful in analyzing contemporary culture - in my opinion Fiske's paradoxes are better understood if we consider the speech event of riddling as a mimetic praxis, and consequently quizzes as well.

A few remarks. If we trace the amusement and the supposed relaxation of the quizzes back to the reported riddle contests of traditional societies, it is significant to learn that a quiz like Wheel of fortune is based on the parlour game 'Hangman'. The rule-governed competition reminds us of the rituals in the riddle contest and the sacrificial acts that accompany it: the sacred is present in the profane. Both ritual and play have a religious origin and arbitrary prizes point to a history of victimization; metaphors like 'climbing up' and 'falling down' have to do with expulsion. Aspects of the judge, king or priest are represented in the quiz masters, who are offering themselves also as a model for imitation.

Some ethnographers look at riddling as a technique anciently and primitively employed at times of crisis or on occasions when the fate of someone or of a whole tribe hang in the balance. In the Oedipus-riddle this is very clear: the Theban society is in disorder.

Concerning the carnivalesque: riddles have the quality of merging what is in a certain sense

meant to remain separate or forbidden to conjoin. They compare an object to another entirely different object. Riddles are *qualitate qua* carnivalesque and formed part of the ritual at several festivals. It is reported that the Latin riddles of Symphosius were originally devised for recitation at the ancient feasts of Saturnalia, a traditional forum for enigmas and jests, and the carnival atmosphere is reflected in the verse. James Frazer in his *Golden Bough* was indignant at the fact that a real man who personated Saturn suffered a real death in his assumed character. Frazer's conception of this murder has been developed - as we know - by René Girard in *La violence et le sacré*, where he states that society feels the constant need to re-experience its own origins, albeit in veiled and transfigured form. By means of rites the community manages to cajole and somewhat subdue the forces of destruction.

Let's look at a Dutch caricature of a quiz. It shows a loser, chaos and destruction.

[video] fragment 'Koot en Bie'

The riddle games in TV shows gain attention and reflect values of society, principally by activating our **cultural memory**. They reiterate stages in the representation of the scapegoat mechanism, thus enabling the audience to live the situation of winners and losers in the victimization and to taste the sacred food of society. Ecstasy and attraction are to be understood as mimetic desire, connected to primitive sacralisation of violence. By differentiating the world into winners and losers, the quiz shows reestablish order.