Public rituals in modern western societies will be the subject of this article. These rituals are part of the political or cultural field of society. They are performed by institutions which are exposed to the public eye. As a result, thanks to the media the general public has the possibility of essentially unlimited participation, which therefore can be considered constitutive. The performance ritual marks the social interface between the individual and the collective or the institution, which may change their mutual assessment. In the main a distinction can be made between three different types of ritual: those of consecration, initiation and conversion.

The rituals of consecration comprise according honours, tributes, awarding distinctions, awarding decorations in the military and political field, and prize award ceremonies in the literary-cultural field. For all these presentation ceremonies the religious connotation of the notion of consecration plays a part. The ritual of initiation or appointment means that someone is incorporated into an existing group or institution. In the third case—conversion—it is a question of changing from one group to another; this likewise religious notion is often executed by actions of separation, isolation and dismissal on the one hand, and by forms of purification and admission on the other hand. That is why parallels with the ritual of initiation are possible.

Such ritual performances, affecting a socio-cultural group or institution on the one hand, and the individual on the other hand, are about processes of legitimisation which affect the individual’s feeling of identity in relation to a public institution, or his public prestige and perception by the institutional consecration. Since the individual is perceived differently after having passed through the ritual, the dimension of
‘Statusmodifikation’ (status modification)\(^1\) has to be taken into account for the ritual performances to be analysed in this article.

In the following I will deal with the general criteria of the ritual action, then I will present the cases treated in this article. In a third section I will discuss the question of what happens if one of the two sides—the institution or the individual/prizewinner—cannot accept the result of the ritual process.

1. The basic interest in safeguarding continuity can be considered a universal phenomenon of cultural formation. This aim is made visible to society by the fact that the social and cultural knowledge of content, methods and the habitual course of events, as well as the visualisation of culture-specific norms and the values of one’s own and of others, is passed on from one generation to the next by various forms of social learning. The temporarily restricted phase of socialisation, ending when the aspirant is entrusted with the rights and duties which he or she requires to participate in public life, is structured as is the individual’s biography by privileged and habitualised events of legitimisation. These will inform both the individual and the society on the individual’s position within the latter. This information can be given as a result of the extent and usage of the respective social and cultural knowledge. Usually the interfaces between individual and collective, between the story of life and its social background, between event and structure seem to appear as events or situations with ritual character.

The interfaces are focussed on a period of probation, verification or decision which legitimises the aspirant’s transition from one level of social status to another, which usually goes hand in hand with a more extended range of social rights and duties. The dynamics of social change only take place in a specific segment of social reality. For a ritual process to be valid and officially accepted in social everyday life, its correct performance is indispensable. All participating protagonists officially have to be authorised according to the rules and regulations in effect.

The course of the ritual has to include all of the constituent sequences.

\(^1\) In a case study Vogt (1998) demonstrates how the bestowal of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany (Bundesverdienstkreuz) negatively influences the status of the honoured person according to his or her own perception: due to this recognition many former friends feel inferior and withdraw from him or her.