

The Limits of Liminality: A Critique of Transformationism

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The concept of 'liminality' has become pervasive in religious studies, performance theory, and social-cultural analysis. Shaped by the work of Victor Turner, liminality now rests alongside a family of interrelated concepts—performativity, creativity, transformation, transgression, subversion, process, power, marginality, carnivalesque, communitas—as a master concept informing diverse fields, applied to a wide range of topics. The author addresses the limits of the concept of liminality, especially given the prominent role the concept has come to play in discussions of social-cultural change, associated as it is with notions of critique and transformation. Three shortcomings are addressed: the erasure of ritualized practice within the liminality paradigm; the detachment of the concept from its relation to easing personal and social disorder, as originally developed by van Gennep; the absence of dialectical theorizing, thinking liminality in relation (rather than merely as opposition) to social structure. This is the first and (lengthier) part of a two-part essay; the companion piece will appear in the next issue.

Introduction

Dramatistic principles have long been used as analogs to the social world,¹ but it is only in the 1950s that we see the emergence of cultural performance theory, stimulated by the work of Milton Singer in India (who studied distinct, bounded rites and performances as windows onto a general understanding of a

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¹ For example, in Calderón's *theatre mundi* or Shakespeare's 'all the world's a stage.' See Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, ed., *Life: The Play of Life on the Stage of the World in Fine Arts, Stage-Play, and Literature* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001).

culture) and the sociology of Erving Goffman, who applied ritualistic and dramatic terminology to social interactions. Many thinkers contributed to the rise of performance/performativity as a theoretical paradigm and research agenda, significant among them J.L Austin and Kenneth Burke and, later, Stanley Tambiah and Judith Butler. But it was the thought of Victor Turner which gave impetus to the ‘performative turn’ of the 1980s and 1990s. Whereas Goffman, in construing everyday life as performative or ritualistic, aimed to reveal pretense, Turner enthusiastically deployed dramatic terms to point out ritual is not simply oppressive or conflict ridden, but culturally creative, generative, and efficacious at navigating ‘social dramas.’

As Turner himself noted, in a review of an inaugural symposium on ethnopoetics:

Anthropology itself is shifting from a stress on concepts such as structure, equilibrium, system, and regularity to process, indeterminacy, reflexivity, resilience ... There is also a renewed interest in “performance,” partly stemming from sociolinguists such as Dell Hymes, partly from modern folklorists ... and partly from the fundamental work of Gregory Bateson and Erving Goffman.²

Turner’s theorizing both reflected and created this shift. It is largely through Turner’s writings that the concept of *liminality* has come to pervade a host of fields and disciplines: religious studies, performance theory, ritual studies, cultural anthropology, social theory, literary criticism, organization studies, nursing and medicine, travel and tourism, and more. Liminality now rests alongside a family of interrelated concepts—performativity, creativity, transformation, transgression, subversion, process, power, marginality, carnivalesque, *communitas*—as a keyword informing diverse fields, applied to a wide range of topics. The literature about liminality is now so vast it would take a systematic, collective effort of scale to map the contours, uses, and abuses of concept. Here, I want to address the limits of liminality, especially given the prominent role the concept has come to play in discussions of social-cultural change, associated as it is with notions of critique and transformation.

The climate crisis, war and terrorism, mass (usually violently forced) migrations of people, worries over bioengineering, dysfunctional democratic institutions, monopolistic corporate power, gross inequities in wealth distribution—take your pick. There is no shortage of serious problems facing us—so serious that to follow Slavoj Žižek’s talk of a ‘weak apocalyptic’ moment or Jean-Pierre Dupuy’s quasi-prophetic ‘enlightened doomsaying’ is not to engage in hyperbole.³ The

² Victor Turner, “A Review of ‘Ethnopoetics,’” *Boundary 2* 6, no. 2 (1978): 583-584.

³ Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010). Jean-Pierre Dupuy, “The precautionary principle and enlightened doomsaying,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 76, no.2 (2012): 577-592.

depth and interconnected nature of these multiple crises and the perils accompanying a failure to adequately understand and respond to them means we need to engage in critique of those ideas commonly proffered as integral to social analysis. The ubiquitous use of liminality in social critique and analysis means we need to assess both its assets and liabilities.

The focus here on liminality's liabilities in no way aims to debunk or invalidate efforts to either create liminal rituals or performances, or to use liminality in social analysis. It seems to me, however, that discussions or deployments of liminality tend to be hampered by three key problems: (1) The interest in and use of liminality in the fields I follow and conduct research in outweighs interest in an entire repertoire of action that I will group under the heading 'practice.' The liminality paradigm often has little to say of practice: exercises, drills, trainings, habits, rehearsals, repetitions, disciplines—these have been given short shrift, especially considering their historically prominent role in the construction and maintenance of life worlds. (2) Use of the concept of liminality has detached from its original theoretical framework, to become 'free floating.' It is worth revisiting the origins of the concept, to see what is often missing in current discussions, and gauge to what degree the concept falters in the absence of the cultural matrix informing its original usage. (3) Liminality is rarely theorized in relation to normativity. Rather, liminality/anti-structure are often first placed in binary opposition to disciplined, normative practice (to social status, to norms, to structure), and, second, the suspension of rules, transgression/subversion, and creativity are generally valorized at the expense of norms, institutions, and structures. We are in dire need of a better understanding of the relationship between structure and anti-structure.

Again, to allude to the thought of Žižek, it is relatively easy to organize a liminal event/experience; but what do we do the morning after liminality? Turner notes that if "liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs."⁴ Fine, but then what? What about those "normal modes of action?" Suppose those central values and axioms are found wanting. Liminality is typically understood in terms of breaking down and subjunctive/reflexive moods, not building up and indicative moods. But what happens to liminality in a social world characterized by the fact, as Dylan put it—more than thirty years ago—that "everything is broken?"⁵ If liminality is a situation involving a temporary suspension of norms, what happens when the 'normal' mode of social life itself is characterized by such suspension? Is the call for more liminality adequate to such a social-historical situation? If the liminal adventure generates new insights, are ritual and performance to play a

⁴ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 167.

⁵ Bob Dylan, "Everything is Broken," track 3 on *Oh Mercy*, Columbia Records, 1989, vinyl.

part in instantiating these in normal modes of social action? I believe they are, but only if more work is done on the practice end of a training/practice—play/performance spectrum.

Liminal Atmospheric, or ‘Transformationism’

To the first point, I can be but anecdotal. I have no statistical analysis to present, but my general impression in trying to keep abreast of the published literature and conference proceedings in the fields with which I am familiar (ritual and performance studies, anthropology and sociology of religion, religion and cultural analysis) is that liminality has become a ‘master concept’ through which all that the term connotes—a position of marginality, critical subversion of rules and norms, transgression, generative creativity, parody and satire, fusion experiences—are unquestionably taken as inherently positive social-cultural goods. Of course, there are exceptions. Árpád Szakolczai, for example, has noted that in late capitalism, where the temporary suspension of norms is replaced by a ‘permanent liminality,’ the concept of liminality is shot through with paradox and tension.⁶ Szakolczai’s concerns are echoed by his colleague Bjørn Thomassen, who argues that a defining characteristic of Eurocentric modernity is its “continuous stress on transformation and transgression, a state of ‘permanent liminality,’” which aims at the “negation of stable forms and ideas.”⁷ From this perspective, the general trajectory of research agendas to emphasize liminality exemplifies what Thomassen takes as basic to modernity—a hyper-emphasis on flux, instability, re-fashioning, margins, the transgressive, the protean. While Szakolczai and Thomassen critically engage with the theorizing of liminality, especially in relation to weighing its analytic power to understand rather than simply reflect modernity, it remains a privileged frame of reference, superseding earlier influential structuralist orientations. If ‘trickster’ logics are invisible to structuralism, structural logics are beyond the purview of liminalism.

I offer here a few examples of the ‘atmospherics’ of liminality in the published literature. Consider the insights of Jon McKenzie, who first drew attention to the problem pursued here. In his overview of the field of Performance Studies, he observes:

[At] the heart of its movement of generalization, Performance Studies scholars have constructed cultural performance as an engagement of social norms, as an

⁶ Árpád Szakolczai, “Permanent (trickster) Liminality: The Reasons of the Heart and of the Mind,” *Theory & Psychology* 27, no 2 (2017): 231-248.

⁷ Bjørn Thomassen, “Anthropology and its Many Modernities: When Concepts Matter,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18 (2012): 160-178.

ensemble of activities with the potential to uphold societal arrangements or, alternatively, to change people and societies.⁸

Here, ‘cultural performance’ is broadly conceived, capable of variously serving as social glue or crowbar. McKenzie goes on, however, to describe how Performance Studies has defined itself in strongly antistructuralist terms. “What is performance? What is Performance Studies? ‘Liminality’ is perhaps the most concise and accurate response to both of these questions.”⁹ McKenzie highlights the persistently tight focus on liminality within Performance Studies, referring to this focus as the “liminal norm.” Taking liminal events and performances as constitutive of the field means that “it is transgressive or resistant potential that has come to dominate the study of cultural performance.”¹⁰ The subtitle of his book, which suggests a historical development is, not surprisingly, *from discipline to performance*. Discipline is demoted, even disparaged, transgression and resistance emphasized. McKenzie (nearly twenty years ago), issued a warning, of sorts:

By focusing [primarily] on liminal activities, on transgressive and resistant practices, or, more generally, upon socially efficacious performances, we have overlooked the importance of other performances, performances whose formalization and study also took off in the United States and which have since gone global.... [the] function [of these other kind of performances] is for the most part highly normative, so normative in fact that one might justifiably align them with the Establishment, the System, the Machine—in short, with the very institutions and forces against which cultural performance has directed much of its efficacious efforts over the past half century.¹¹

All I am doing here is echoing McKenzie’s warning, as it seems to me that the field of Performance Studies and related fields has not absorbed McKenzie’s sound analysis and good advice—the liminal remains more in vogue than the normative, as both a subject of study and a theoretically inclined preference towards openness, transgression, experimentation. Perhaps I overstate the case, but a recent collection of essays on the concept of liminality, titled *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality Today*,¹² is, I believe, rather exemplary of the persistence of the “liminal norm.” The founding assumption of the essays in the volume is that liminality is to be associated with boundary breaking, that is, with resistance, critique, and transgression. Such examples could be multiplied many times over.

⁸ Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 30.

⁹ McKenzie, *Perform or Else*, 50.

¹⁰ McKenzie, *Perform or Else*, 30.

¹¹ McKenzie, *Perform and Else*, 52.

¹² Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen, Harald Wydra, eds., *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015).

Again, my point is not that ‘transgression’ is somehow ‘wrong.’ But what of structure, foundations, normativity? A step further: It is not simply that normativity tends to be given short shrift—normativity tends to be positioned as a boogey or straw man. A few years ago, Routledge launched an excellent series with the title ‘Contemporary Liminality,’ edited by Szakolczai, who describes the series as follows:

This series constitutes a forum for works that make use of concepts such as ‘imitation,’ ‘trickster’ or ‘schismogenesis,’ but which chiefly deploy the notion of ‘liminality,’ as the basis of a new, anthropologically-focused paradigm in social theory. With its versatility and range of possible uses rivalling and even going beyond mainstream concepts such as ‘system,’ ‘structure’ or ‘institution,’ liminality is increasingly considered a new master concept that promises to spark a renewal in social thought.¹³

To be clear, I am not rejecting the utility or validity of liminality as a conceptual paradigm; I have trafficked in the concept many times.¹⁴ My question, following the lead of McKenzie, is whether liminality remains overused, over-emphasized, mis-appropriated, and unjustly elevated as somehow superior to and “beyond mainstream concepts such as ‘system,’ ‘structure,’ or ‘institutions.’” Is the relationship between structure and anti-structure, as this series description suggests, one of inferiority-superiority? Such a claim is specious. If there were a time when, for example, it was ‘mainstream’ to be civil and polite, what is needed when civility collapses (as it seems to have done of late) is not so much transformational renewal as recovery of a traditional value. Perhaps social thought and analysis is as much in need of renewal or reform as it is re-creation. Social structures and institutions as such are not inherently problematic but only potentially so; it is the specific content, nature, and functioning of those institutions that must be queried.

Approached historically, it seems that in the effort to correct an early overemphasis on the conservative and normative nature of rites and cultural performances, the theoretical pendulum has swung through equilibrium to the opposite maximum potential where all is liminal and where liminality (again, along with its associated terms—performance, creativity, transgression, transformation, *communitas*, subversion) is understood as resistance to and critique of the reproduction of bodies and roles and values, not part of the maintenance or production of bodies, roles, and values. Liminality is often understood as a spanner thrown into the workings of the industrial or globalized neoliberal machines, or as a matrix of experimental creativity aimed at

¹³ From the website of the book series, *Contemporary Liminality*, published by Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Contemporary-Liminality/book-series/ASHSER1435>.

¹⁴ Several of the essays collected in my *Excursions in Ritual Studies* (2020) deploy the concept of liminality.

accessing forms of transcendence in a world shorn of sacrality. But not only is the notion of “a new master concept” that claims to undercut mastery (discipline, structure, norms, stability) logically flawed, the discussions and theorizing of liminality, I am suggesting, generally fail to develop what is really needed—a dialectical understanding of the relationship between liminal performance and the rites and ceremony upholding structured norms and institutions. This failure perhaps originates with Turner’s underdeveloped theorizing of the relationship between structure and anti-structure, even though such a relationship is integral to his theory of social drama. (Of course, the same charge could be leveled against theorists whose favor structuralist approaches, as they often neglect or have trouble dealing with matters of criticism, creativity, change, and transformation.)

Both the popularization and scholarly use and application of concepts adopted and developed by Turner generally attend, as Turner did, especially in his later work, to rites and performance that are antithetical (or at least claim to be antithetical) to hierarchies, rules, norms, traditions, and social statuses and structures. Liminality, performance, creativity, and critique are pitted against the ceremonial status quo. By invoking Turner’s writings on liminality, many scholars, scholar-activists, and arts-practice researchers form a tight braid between ritual, performance, and transformation. Authentic ritual comes then to be equated with transformation—in contrast, say, to status maintenance rites or bodily entrainment—a very big assumption or definitional sleight of hand that informs a quasi-worldview that Ronald Grimes labels “transformationism.”

Grimes charges Turner with some responsibility for cultivating a sense that authentic ritual is ritual that transforms, a perspective that tends to expand, becoming an encompassing worldview rather than theoretical concept. Not all rites transform; some celebrate, others protect, still others purify:

We cannot *assume* that rites transform any more than we can assume they conserve. In my view the most vexing problem in Turner’s theory of ritual is not his dramatism (as some have claimed) but his “transformationism,” the ideological assumption that rites, by definition, transform. Some do; some do not. Which do and which do not should be a matter of observation, not of definition.¹⁵

As I have previously discussed, ritual is often so closely associated with “transformation” that the terms have in some sense become synonymous.¹⁶ Grimes further points out that even when the language or idea of transformation is used or claimed, we need to remember that claims need verification; we need to assess

¹⁵ Ronald L. Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies* (Waterloo: Ritual Studies International, 2020), 187.

¹⁶ Stephenson, *Ritual: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 54-70.

ritual's efficacy, and stated purposes or claims do not automatically translate to functions or effects. The language of transformation is often vague: What, precisely, was transformed? For how long? To what degree? Was the transformation significant? In any case, not all rites transform, a claim Turner is only able to make through a strict definition of his terms.¹⁷ And we ought to pay greater attention to those ritual forms that aim not at transformation, but at order, stability, and maintenance.

To follow Grimes' train of thought a bit further, we see in his body of work a clear commitment to ritual "creativity and criticism." A student of Turner and a colleague of Richard Schechner, Grimes understands the role ritual may play in matters critical, subversive, and creative, as well as the value of thinking ritual in terms of or in relation to dramatic performance. But Grimes also demurs from too tightly yoking ritual to performance, since to exclusively connect the two is to miss what is central to many rites, a dimension Grimes terms "enactment."

Ritual is *enacted*. Ritual is a kind of action, but not just any action. It helps to remind ourselves of its difference from ordinary action by assigning it a special verb, "enact." To "enact" is to put into force or into play. Since ritual acting is different from stage acting as well as from quotidian activity, we need a verb different from but related to "act." Ritual action is special; in this respect, it is similar to "acting," the sort that transpires onstage or in film. But ritual is not identical with pretending. However made up, it is not regarded by participants as mere fiction or a game—hence the term enactment.¹⁸

Many rites entail a "putting into force," and it makes as much sense to place ritual alongside the cultural domain of *law* as that of *performance*. Just as governments enact laws, ritualists enact rites; and, in and through such enactment, worlds are founded, brought into being, or, as Roy Rappaport describes the matter, ritual (in particular what Rappaport defines as "liturgy") generates "the general, enduring or even eternal aspects of universal orders."¹⁹ Of course, given the modern histories and legacies of patriarchy, colonialism, racism, and totalitarianism, we need to be properly suspicious of such declarative, indicative, and conservative claims for ritual, as well as the presence of declarative claims within specific rites. But, again, what is at stake is not a preference for either the liminal or the structural but the content of each as well as their relationship.

I am suggesting that a significant conceptual repositioning of ritual and performance is precisely what is required today: Alongside study of ritual's liminal spaces, performative qualities, and transformational efficacies, researchers need to pay greater attention to other kinds of efficacy, to the power of rites to "put into

¹⁷ Ronald L. Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (New York: Oxford, 2014), 250-253.

¹⁸ Grimes, *Craft*, 196.

¹⁹ Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 53.

force,” doing the work of social maintenance and bodily entrainment. Peter Sloterdijk (in perhaps too sweeping a generalization) describes epochal cultural centers of gravity, and suggests a new direction: Just “as the nineteenth century stood cognitively under the sign of production, and the twentieth under that of reflexivity, the future should present itself under the sign of the exercise.”²⁰ Turned into a question, Sloterdijk’s call for *exercise* could be phrased, What happens should we reach a cultural moment where all is *liminal performance* and *discipline* a dirty word? The balance of research attention needs realignment: less focus on transformation, subversion, and creativity, more on matters of techne, *askēsis*, and the embodiment of social beliefs and values. If there is a time to tear down, there is a time to build as well.

Ritualized action, transgressive performance, and public art are adept at raising awareness of the fact, say, that Exxon Mobil has been actively disseminating false information about climate change.²¹ But deconstruction goes only so far. Are ritual and performance to play any role on this morning after the revelations? Does performance (or ritual) only query culture? Does cultural performance merely hold the everyday at a distance, so we can see it? Or might performance and ritual build culture, conserve fragile values, embody shared beliefs and principles? I am suggesting it most certainly can, but only if conceived in terms of disciplinary practice. Since the days of Kant modernity has been marked with the glow (and stain) of critique; but we cannot live as permanently critical, liminal beings. Is all our ritualizing and performativity to be cast in the subjunctive mood of postmodernity—playful, indirect, ironic, resistant, reflexive, militant? How do antistructure and structure communicate and support one another? What is the connection between the extra-ordinary and the ordinary? Between the sacred and the profane? It is in handling such questions that Turner’s theorizing falls short because it overvalues liminality, while offering no clear conception of the relationship between, in his terms, “ritual” and “ceremony.”

Liminality as Transition

As is well known, Turner borrowed the concept of liminality from Arnold van Gennep, who developed a theory of passage rites in terms of a tripartite scenario of separation, liminality, and incorporation. Van Gennep’s classic book from 1909 opens, however, with a brief discussion of the “pivoting of the sacred.”

²⁰ Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life* (London: Verso, 2014), 4.

²¹ The aesthetics of anti-globalization protests and occupy movements in relation to the role of a Bakhtinian inspired carnivalesque spirit, with roots in Artaud’s Theatre of the Absurd, has received considerable attention. As a point of entry, see Ben Shepard, “Absurd Responses vs Earnest Politics; Global Justice vs. Anti-War Movements; Guerilla Theatre and Aesthetic Solutions,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Protest* 1, no.2 (2003), <http://www.joaap.org/1/BenShepard/>; accessed January 20, 2020.

“[T]he only clearly marked social division remaining in modern society is that which distinguishes between the secular and the religious worlds—between the profane and the sacred.”²² I’m not sure this is true—social class, ethnicity, and gender remain important markers of division. Van Gennep notes, however, that equality and individual liberties are constitutive of the modern west—if not in fact, at least in principle—leaving only the sacred-profane distinction as a marker of social positioning.

For van Gennep, liminal experiences are dynamically generated by and responsive to this profane-sacred pivoting. People, for example, who have lost a child or who are diagnosed with a serious illness are likely to move from ordinary (‘profane’) space into a period of crisis (‘sacred’ space). ‘Sacred’ so understood is not some-thing, but rather a situational process—not a noun but a verb—“sacredness as an attribute is not absolute; it is brought into play by the nature of particular situations.”²³ Van Gennep develops his notion of the sacred with reference to the periodic presence of a dangerous ambivalence accruing to an individual in the course of their movement through major points in the life cycle—birth, initiation, marriage, and death. The sacred is clearly conceived by van Gennep in terms of experiences of disruption, dislocation, and ambivalence, in an individual life, in the social body, or even in the natural world. The sacred then is understood in processual terms as a pivoting or a passing through a threshold to a different biological and cultural space.

Traditional societies recognize the inevitability (biological changes, for example) and unpredictability (the onset of a dangerous illness, a natural disaster) of such situations and navigate these moments of ambivalence and danger through formally prescribed passage and healing rites. Modern societies do as well, if less often and formally, as evidenced by the impeachment proceedings in the legislative bodies of the United States, taking place as I write. Such a social moment/scenario is what van Gennep means by the *sacred*: a moment of danger, a tear in an individual life or the social-political fabric. As commentators have endlessly expounded, the founders of the American Republic foresaw situations of corruption and placed within the constitutional framework a ritualized transitional mechanism to re-stabilize a potentially dangerous situation. Impeachment, like any pivoting into the realm of the sacred, is marked by ambivalence, an in-between state precisely because it is difficult to categorize the President and the status of the Presidency during the proceedings. The sacred is eruption, and mechanisms kick in to correct or ward off devolution into chaos. Ritual action is not merely responsive to the sacred, but in a real way contributes to its very articulation. Turner describes a “social drama” as “a sequence of social interactions of a conflictive,

²² Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. Vizedom and G. Caffee, intro. S. Kimball (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 1.

²³ van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 12.

competitive, or agonistic type” —breach, crisis, redress, reintegration or schism— with attempts at redress exhibiting characteristically liminal qualities and features; among his exemplary cases are the Dreyfus affair and Watergate.²⁴ In Turner’s terms, impeachment is a case of “redressive action” aimed at sealing off or correcting a real or perceived breach in values or institutions. In the case of President Trump’s impeachment, the redressive action seems to have largely failed, as the results lacked any consensus; with the social body perhaps even more fraught with antagonisms post-impeachment, increasingly liminal actions are likely to emerge. In many respects, Turner is a thoroughly Durkheimian thinker; with respect to legal cases, Turner acknowledges their main function is to “maintain the status quo” and “reassert and reanimate the overarching values shared by all.”²⁵ We should not let a prejudice associated with the phrase ‘status quo’ distract us from the importance of reasserting and reanimating norms; again, normativity as such is not a ‘bad’ thing. Turner mainly focused on the fault line between reintegration and schism in the playing out of social dramas; a third possibility is a protracted public debate over deep-seated disagreements, though one hopefully contained by legal and ritualized mechanism that forestall escalation into violence, and aimed at a more comprehensive sense of solidarity, rather than leading to the fracturing of the social body into sub-groups.

Liminality for van Gennep is the experience characteristic of that zone of action aiming to stabilize danger via prescribed transitional routes. Crucially, from van Gennep’s perspective, people may well be broken down in the liminal phase, but they are put back together again, and transitioned to a new set of socially recognized knowledge, values, roles, and responsibilities—even if that should include, in the case of a trial, say, a transition to prison.²⁶ Liminality, to emphasize, is a transitory zone, facilitating movement between relatively stationary states and ordinary times, serving to quell and coral instability in service of stability. The idea of permanent liminality is nowhere to be found in van Gennep, nor in Turner, unless we point to Turner’s halfhearted, late attempt to characterize modernity as being *liminoid*—that is, in a permanent or quasi-permanent or rapidly recurrent liminal state. With the coming of modernity, suggests Turner, the formally mandated liminal rites of traditional social institutions are replaced by voluntary leisure and entertainment activities, often driven by artistic and counter-cultural communities endeavoring to gain perspective on the weaknesses of modern social life, as well as supply religious or quasi-religious experiences to a disenchanted world.

²⁴ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 70.

²⁵ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 10; 75.

²⁶ I trust the reader will not take this an apology for the evils of a criminal justice system lacking any sense of rehabilitation and restorative justice, but rather aimed solely on punishment and profit.

In Turner's writings, we often find the term 'sacred' used as an adjective—a sacred site, a sacred person, and so on; but it is not developed in any systematic way as a core concept. What happens when van Gennep's concept of liminality is detached from its relationship to the sacred? For one, we find the notion of liminality comes to accrue those properties formally associated with the sacred: ambivalence, inversion, danger, chaos. Second, liminality is unplugged from its framing preliminary and postliminal phases to stand, as it were, entirely on its own. Third, we lose sight of liminality as a response to the eruption of the sacred (again, understood as fractiousness, disruption, disagreement, chaos), aiming for a broad social response that both accommodates dissonance and confusion while at the same time preparing for and ensuring a stable corporate body. As Szakolczai and Thomassen recognize, van Gennep's notion of a pivoting sacred is scarcely descriptive of modernity, given that "[modernity] is a constant breaking of boundaries with no ritual of reincorporation."²⁷ Within van Gennep's conceptualization of individual and social life entailing movement from sanctification to de-sanctification to re-sanctification, the contemporary moment seems awash—even stranded—in processes of de-sanctification.

The sacred, emphasizes van Gennep, is dangerous and disruptive; the sacred, akin to a "change of condition" is "disturbing [to] the life of society and the individual, and it is the function of rites of passage to reduce their harmful effects."²⁸ Permanent liminality then corresponds to a situation of permanent danger and permanent social disruption. Here is a potential fault line in Turner's appropriation of the concept, and even more so in subsequent uses of Turner, which perhaps fail to read him carefully: Today, liminality is often understood not in service of stitching together something torn, but in tearing; not establishing new boundaries and statuses, but in breaking them—ritual and performance as avant-garde militancy, resistance, and critique; a permanent kind of *in-betweenness*, or *interstices*, which is exactly how Schechner describes performance and performance studies, centered on "crease phenomena" in the "social topography," seeking out places of "instability, disturbance, and potentially radical change..."²⁹ Traditionally, the practice of liminal ritual was to move people out of and through instability, not court it.

Centers and Margins

Schechner observes that Turner, at the end of his life, was optimistic about the potential of the counter-cultural currents of the 1960s and 1970s to "recapture

²⁷ Árpád Szakolczai and Bjørn Thomassen, *From Anthropology to Social Theory: Rethinking the Social Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 43.

²⁸ Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 13.

²⁹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 184.

the force and unity of traditional liminality.” Turner, assesses Schechner, “was an optimist, if not an outright utopian. He predicted that ‘the liberated and disciplined body itself, with its many untapped resources for pleasure, pain, and expression,’ would lead the way to a better world.”⁵⁰ Schechner goes on to note that the downward trajectory of life in our globalized world means Turner’s utopianism “was unjustified,” and he locates the failure to create a better world with a resurgence of:

sacred and secular rituals, staged in central, symbolically loaded places—major avenues, civic centers, cathedrals, stadiums, and capitols—reinforce officialdom and mainstream values. Various fundamentalisms—Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, and even Buddhist (in Sri Lanka)—attract adherents by the hundreds of millions.

As traditional, conservative, fundamentalists gather at the center, liminoid “artistic and social activities take place at the margins and in the creases of established cultural systems [that is in liminal zones], off the beaten track in ‘bad’ neighborhoods, and in remote rural areas.” Schechner, rather optimistically, holds out some hope for the internet’s potential to integrate these “distant and disparate venues” but “the question remains whether or not official cultures... will reign in the [liminal] vibrancy of the internet.”⁵¹ Writing prior to a full appreciation for the power and of social media in disinformation campaigns, Schechner may be forgiven for his naively upbeat assessment of the internet, but there are nevertheless problems with such a grand narrative.

First, utopianism is in its essence a *via negativia*, a gesture of negation more than capable of saying ‘no,’ but rarely offering reasonable, manageable alternatives to the actually existing world. If utopianism’s ‘other’ is everything as it is, and romanticism’s is the repressed and buried glory of the past, liminalism’s other is everything at the center: ‘transformationism’ fetishizes margins by targeting centers. Are we truly willing to reject or view with suspicion all those around the globe participating in “sacred and secular rituals, staged in central symbolically loaded places”? Moreover, is there anything in principle wrong with upholding “officialdom” or “mainstream” values? Schechner seems to think so, though I would argue it all depends on the content of the stream. Unfortunately, the use and application of the concept of liminality has become part of the growing trend to overestimate the importance of critique at the expense of affirmation. Perhaps some institutions, some forms of “officialdom,” some of what is “mainstream” need to be given the benefit of the doubt and, if found supportive of promoting well-

⁵⁰ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 67. Schechner is quoting here a line from Turner’s late essay, “Are there Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?,” in *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience*, ed. Edith Turner (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 291-301.

⁵¹ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 67-70.

being, strengthened through various means, including ritual and performance. Why are institutions assumed in need of constant disruption and change? (At my university, there seems to be a new ‘strategic plan’ every year.) “Structure” is not some sort of enemy. A life of liminal marginality, as alluring as it might seem to those bored being firmly ensconced in the safety and routines of hard fought for, tried, and tested social structures, is, in the end, unlivable. The very success of mundane structures and institutions carries the danger of overlooking their achievements. Millions of people around the globe living precarious lives on the margins would welcome the simple, mundane comforts many take for granted. Here, we must be judicious and careful in valorizing or advocating the merits of liminal acts and experiences in our globalized world. The goal is not necessarily to flee to and embrace the margins, but to allow greater access to centering institutions, as well as move those worthwhile beliefs, values, and ways of life that may be cultivated or protected at the margins into the center, into “officialdom.” I for one would prefer not to incessantly argue the need for affordable housing, the banning of landmines, the prosecution of white-collar criminals, and the affording of dignity and safety to LGBTQ+ communities.

Second, if regressive and oppressive “fundamentalisms” are rearing their ugly heads in ritual forms — and, to be sure, they are — we need both ritualizations and performances capable of deconstructing them as well as a renewal or creation of new structurally central rites to replace them. In the words of Turner’s quoted by Schechner, this new “body” is to be both “liberated” and “disciplined.” Once liberated, what will form the ritual/performative content of this disciplined, official, normative, mainstream body? In any case, often what is needed is not so much ritual creativity as ritual extension. Many same sex couples, for example, have weddings the form of which is quite in keeping with tradition. Many Catholic women simply want to be priests and administer the eucharist in one of those “mainstream” centers of culture Schechner seems to deride. Many women want to break through the glass ceiling and earn as much as men for equal work.

Third, there are many varieties of fundamentalism, yes; but one variety is the idea that one more bit of liminality will cure our ills. While I acknowledge Schechner’s recognition of the value of liminal performance taking place at the margins of society, it is also the case that he seems to avoid acknowledging we have arrived at a strange situation where part of the official structure of postmodern globalized life is the promised spark of liminality. But liminality, contra Schechner, is not merely found at the margins, but in those mainstream places of “officialdom” he names — civic centres, capitols, and stadiums. One could counter here: Schechner is speaking of an ‘authentic’ liminality not simply spectacle. This is a fair distinction, but we must also come to terms with the fact that liminal events are not merely the purview of those on the margins or those engaged in the serious business of cultural critique, but in some fashion now fully integrated into the current zeitgeist. Aldous Huxley noted there are two ways for the spirit of a culture to

erode. The first is the Orwellian prison, but the second, is the rule of “burlesque.” As Neil Postman summarizes, it isn’t simply ‘Big Brother’ with whom we must now deal:

When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.³²

To be fair to Schechner’s thought, he does clearly distinguish “transformation” and “transportation.” Picking up on Turner’s distinction between the properly liminal and postmodern liminoid, Schechner recognizes the latter as shaped by typically “transportive” experiences, rather than transformative ones. Transportational ritual and performance “move” people, but they are then “dropped off at about where she or he entered.” In transportive experiences, “no matter how strong the experience, sooner or later, most people return their ordinary selves.”³³ Schechner makes here a crucial observation; my sense is that rituals, performances and events often labelled with the discourse of liminality and transformation are likely more liminoid and transportational in character. This is not to disparage the need for “transportive” experiences; but we also need to understand how these relate to everyday, mundane time, as well as to processes of social-cultural change—or the lack of change, for the liminoid and transportational may well be today’s versions of Rome’s ‘bread and circuses.’

Now, one could postulate an intellectual/theoretical division of labour, with performance studies ruling liminal worlds, and structuralists eyeing all things normative. But such a parceling out of domains will cement our inability to approach the matter of social change and transformation in a properly dialectical fashion. When Grimes asks, what is the ritual gesture that will save the planet, he is being deliberately provocative, but not flippant.³⁴ If liminal moments reveal present shortcomings and future possibilities, how is the harmful corrected and the possible instantiated in new (or in the recovery of old) forms of embodied ritualized action in day to day life, in mainstream officialdom?

Dialectical Thinking?

Turner uses the term ‘ritual’ in both a broad and narrow sense. Broadly understood, in terms of social function or efficacy, ritual spans the gamut from conservative, normative and indicative forms to the creative, reflexive, and critical.

³² Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 155-156.

³³ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 72.

³⁴ Ronald L. Grimes, “Performance is Currency,” in *Rite out Place: Ritual, Media and the Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 147-160.

In the narrower and more specifically ‘Turnerian’ sense, actions of the former kind Turner termed ‘ceremony,’ reserving the word ‘ritual’ for the later. Ritual in this narrow sense is basically synonymous with liminality, and potentially transformative insofar as it allows the “the contents of group experiences [to be] replicated, dismembered, remembered, refashioned, and mutely or vocally made meaningful.”³⁵ We have then a set of parallel Turnerian concepts performing similar theoretical duties: Ritual is to ceremony as anti-structure is to structure, as the subjunctive mood is to the indicative, as the liminal is to the normative, as the extraordinary is to the ordinary. Turner has here the beginning of a dialectical (or processual) framework informing his theoretical musings, but this framework falls short for two key reasons.

First, Turner’s definitional strategy is shot through with tacit (sometimes explicit) normative evaluation. In *The Ritual Process*, for example, in a section titled “Dialectic of the Developmental Cycle,” Turner describes:

social life [as] a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality.... In such a process, the opposites, as it were, constitute one another and are mutually indispensable.... each individual’s life experience contains alternating exposure to structure and *communitas*, and to states and transitions.³⁶

Despite their “mutual indispensability,” structure is imagined as “low,” *communitas* is “high,” suggesting that liminality/*communitas*/equality/fusion is inherently superior. Turner’s sense of ritual is dynamic, a process of constructing, sometimes deconstructing, meaning, beliefs, and values—but it is clear his allegiances are with studying rites characterized by the ludic, play, drama, and inversion. There is no a priori reason for favoring or privileging one or the other of these opposites, but Turner clearly does so. In his late work, *From Ritual to Theatre*, Turner writes of his preference to “think of ritual essentially as performance, enactment, not primarily as rules or rubrics.”³⁷ As one who counts himself a member of the tribe of performance theory, I am suggesting it is perhaps time to interrogate the wisdom or, at the very least, the implications, of such a preference, pointing to Turner’s underdeveloped recognition of the “mutuality of opposites.”

Secondly, though Turner emphasizes matters “dialectical,” it is unclear whether Turner means changes within a social system or changes of that system. Turner not only shows a marked preference for studying antistructure, but also

³⁵ Victor Turner, “Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual and Drama?” in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, eds. Richard Schechner and Willa Apel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 12-13.

³⁶ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 96.

³⁷ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 79.

thinks that liminal ritualization and performance is the heart of the fullness of individual experience and the dynamic driver of social life. Turner suggests that liminal rites and performances “can perhaps be described as a fructile chaos. A fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structure, a gestation process, a fetation of modes appropriate to anticipating post-liminal existence.”³⁸ If this is the case, liminality is but a waystation on the path to new form and structure. What of the “anticipated post-liminal” life? What is the place of ritual and performance in the run of the mill, everyday course of things? Jonathan Z. Smith defines ritual as “a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things.”³⁹ This is ritual in a more declarative, indicative mood. Is performing an ‘ought’ empty of creativity or fulfilling experience? Of authenticity? If the liminal is the space of the ‘could be,’ where is the space for the practice of the ‘is’?

I remain unconvinced that ‘could be’ is a priori preferable to the ‘is.’ Again, content is all important. Does ritual in a declarative or ceremonial mood—associated as it is with normativity, essentialism, structure, universals, status systems, and hierarchy—serve to only impede the kinds of transformations we seek, such as a more equitable distribution of income and wealth, better health care, and a greener economy? Conversely, liminal forms such as carnival in no way guarantee wonderful outcomes, as the homophobia and antisemitism in recent carnival traditions in Europe reveal.⁴⁰ Inversion, subversion, and parody are not unquestionable goods.

Unfortunately, Turner is too often polemically enamored with antistructure. “Liminality,” he writes, “may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations

³⁸ Turner, *Are there Universals*, 11-12.

³⁹ J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 63.

⁴⁰ In the European Carnival season of 2020: The troupe Asociación Cultural El Chaparral, participating in Carnival in the Spanish town of Campo de Criptana had women wear costumes depicting concentration camp victims, while men wore the uniform of SS officers, dancing to music broadcast from speakers resembling smokestacks. In Croatia, in the town of Imotski, Carnival goers depicted gays and lesbians as fiends, burning an effigy of a same-sex couple kissing. Carnival in Alsast, Belgium continued its growing tradition of antisemitism, depicting Jews as insects and wearing SS uniforms. In Basel, Switzerland, a Fasnacht music group Gülle Schlüch (‘manure hose’) exhibited fascist and neo-Nazi sympathies through gestures and iconography on instruments and costumes

may arise."⁴¹ My simple point is that one may regard liminality in such fashion, but this is a preference, not an empirical observation, and it has the effect of casting structural assertions as a poor child of liminality. But why would one need to say 'Nay' to every positive assertion? Nay to feeding the poor? Nay to reducing CO2 emissions? Nay to preferring democracy to tyranny? Nay to the rule of law? Nay to fighting against Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia? As Turner has been assimilated to social cultural theory, some of his more inspired, utopian claims, like this one, unplug from the richer, more nuanced analysis in his writings, to become a kind of dogma informing his leanings towards 'transformationism.' After all, one could easily make the case that Turner has matters backwards and that chaos (another term for "Nay to all positive structural assertions") is not a creative matrix but simply an unendurable state of affairs that only a positive act of creation—a naming, a yes, a "structural assertion"—serves to hold at bay.

The theorizing of ritual has often revolved around dualisms. For example, Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, in *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual*, divide ritual into two broad classes: shamanism and liturgy.⁴² A common dualism in ritual theory, around the question of function, is the polarization of *conservation* and *transformation*. Is ritual conservative, traditional, even moribund? Or is it critical, creative and dynamic? The very way of posing the question tends to set up a binary opposition. In early sociology, anthropology, and religious studies, ritual's normativity was emphasized. In the structuralist school of thought, ritual is imagined as a glue binding together a society. But rites may also be employed as a tool—a crowbar, a hammer, a focusing lens—serving to destabilize hegemonic values, identities, and beliefs. Turner was educated in social functionalism, but he steered away from it to emphasize the critical, creative, and, strategic power of ritual. In the wake of Turner's work, theories and attitudes about ritual have tended to divide over the question of what rites do: conserve or transform? The better question, and one seldom asked, is not whether ritual conserves or transforms—of course, it can do both. Rather, the more vexed questions are, What is in need of conservation? What needs transformation? What is the relationship between these potentials? Turner, I suggest, never really developed a clear conception of this relationship.

As Turner develops the concept of liminality, moving from considering the rites of tribal societies to the modern west, liminal action is increasingly shorn of its structural containment by pre and postliminal prescriptive and normed struc-

⁴¹ Victor Turner, *Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970), 97.

⁴² Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship*, Oxford Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

tures, a move that pushes liminality toward pure transformation: Journeys become the destination; deconstruction effaces logocentrism; becoming trumps being; peripheries, margins and heterotopias are celebrated over centers and norms. Just as theories of cultural trauma cannot seem to imagine ever being post-traumatic, so too with liminality. At some point, however, the striving, the gestating must end, and the new forms and structures crafted; after “dismemberment” must come “refashioning” and the “disciplining” of the body.

Turner at times uses the word ‘dialectic’ to describe the relationship between structure and antistructure: “social life is a type of dialectical process;” in rites of passage, people are “released from structure into *communitas* only to return to structure revitalized.... No society can function without this dialectic.”⁴³ But Turner does not mean ‘dialectical’ in any strong sense of historical transformation.⁴⁴ People may well be revitalized (or transported) without there being substantive structural changes in any Hegelian or Marxist sense of the term; in fact, transportive rites and performances could well be integral to securing structural relationships deemed problematic, as argued in ‘rites of rebellion’ theories. Turner’s use of the term *dialectic* then is unfortunate. In the same passage, Turner introduces another term describing the relation between structure and antistructure: “oscillation,” which suggests a cyclical, repetitive process. True dialectical process entails an *aufhebung*, a lifting up and incorporating of past antinomies. Turner briefly mentions Marx and Hegel in *The Ritual Process*, and we do find the phrase “revolutionary strivings,” but there is no clear articulation of progressive social-historical change. Turner’s detailed work on the Ndembu for example, has little to say about the place of Ndembu religion and ritual in the context of European colonialism, as Talal Asad has discussed.⁴⁵ Szokolczai and Thomassen have noted the largely apolitical nature of Turner’s thought, and worked to move

⁴³ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 129.

⁴⁴ This observation was first made, I believe, by Tom Driver in his *The Magic of Ritual* (1992), which includes, in an appendix, a robust criticism of Turner’s thought. Driver’s book has been republished under the title *Libertating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual*. In spite of Driver’s nod in the direction of transformationism, he understands transformation as but one of ritual “three gifts,” the others being “order” and “community.” Driver’s critique of Turner is well-worth the time.

⁴⁵ Such critique is found as early as 1973, in a volume edited by Talal Asad, in his Introduction to Asad discusses this problem in the *Introduction to Anthropology & the Colonial Encounter*, edited by Talal Asad (New York: Humanities Press, 1973), 9-19. Asad argues that the decision within the school of British Functionalism to shun politics in service of scientific objectivity by ignoring the colonial contexts informing fieldwork was itself a thoroughly political decision.

Turner's thought in the direction of a more robust political analysis of revolutionary change.⁴⁶

In places, Turner's theorizing of the relationship between structure is antistructure is quite conservative. In *The Ritual Process*, Turner raises the crucial question: Just why do societies organize periods of ritualized activity in which we take on roles, gestures, postures, symbols and utterance at variance with our normal socioeconomic and political positions, roles and statuses, enjoining people to feel and experience the world differently from how they typically do when living life in their assigned station? Turner offers a few suggestions, and then inches towards a major claim: "the liminality of status reversal may be compared to comedy, for both involve mockery and inversion, but not destruction, of structural rules and overzealous adherents to them."⁴⁷ Liminality is, ultimately, in service of maintaining order, not destroying and reinventing that order. In this sense, liminal ritual is akin to Max Gluckman's thesis of "rites of rebellion," where carnivalesque rites and performances serve as safety valve mechanisms ensuring the periodic release in small doses of potentially explosive social antagonisms and energies. I am tempted to suggest that so long liminal (or liminoid) rites and performances stand alone and detached from pre and post-liminal ritualizations, whatever critical, creative, transformative insights they produce will quickly dissipate, and fail to strike the deep roots in influential social structures.

Conclusion

I wish to reiterate a point already made: Critical social-cultural analysis must tend to both form and content. Turner is very clear that liminality emerges in a situational matrix, in which content matters a great deal. At the close of *The Ritual Process*, discussing rites of status reversal around the theme of hierarchy and humility, Turner writes:

Crudely put, the liminality of the strong is weakness—of the weak, strength. Or again, the liminality of wealth and nobility is poverty and pauperism—of poverty, ostentation and pseudohierarchy.... while the structurally well-endowed seek release, structural underlings may well seek, in their liminality, deeper involvement in a structure that, though fantastic and simulacral only, nevertheless enables them to experience for a legitimated while a different kind of "release" from a different kind of lot.

Here, Turner is clearly aware that liminality depends on the contexts, the life-world one is rooted in, the place within a structure or system that one inhabits.

⁴⁶ See Szakolczai and Thomassen, *From Anthropology to Social Theory* and Bjørn Thomassen, "Notes Towards an Anthropology of Political Revolutions," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no.3 (2012) :679–706

⁴⁷ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 201.

Liminality, in other words, is not purely defined by form (inversion, playfulness, ambivalence), but also by content. Further, as Turner suggests without exactly hitting the nail on the head, integration into the structural center ought to be more than the mere “legitimated while” during which ritual transpires. Such liminal ritual is, as Turner well recognizes, merely supportive of the maintenance of social structure; again, such support is not necessarily problematic—it becomes so when then center is oppressive, unjust, and rigid.

Szakolczai, at the close of his article on ‘permanent trickster liminality,’ quotes Foucault, who observes that study requires “a historical awareness of our present circumstance,” and clarity about “the type of reality with which we are dealing.”⁴⁸ Liminality can be an asset in times of ossification and rigidification; but in times constituted by the erasure of norms—by a degrading driving of people to marginal existences, by buzzwords the likes of ‘innovation’ and ‘transformation’—a turn to liminality may well serve to only exacerbate an already precarious social situation. To the extent we live in and with postmodern culture, irony, subversion, and a subjunctive mood are the mainstream; in such a situation, a transgressive, liminal act may be pushing a grand narrative, a hierarchy, and essentialism. Liminal ritual, if it remains a mere occasion for “release” (or transportation), whatever the immediate benefits of that release, fails to reorder the positioning of “structural underlings.” Turner acknowledges the difficulties: In modern, complex societies, the insights acquired via moments of liminal marginality achieved by groups such as the “small-scale ‘withdrawal’ groups, like the hippie and digger communities of San Francisco and New York” have not managed to “developed a structure capable of maintaining social and economic order over long periods of time.”⁴⁹ What Turner discerns here ought to be a persistent focus of attention—the creation and maintenance of a new and lasting social/economic order: Really existing capitalism is killing us. At stake is nothing short of the birth of such a new structure, one that, to be sure, will have to incorporate insights gained from previous traditions. Like Turner, I have little idea what the ritual dimensions of such a new order might look like, but there is no chance of building it so long as the liminal remains primarily a zone of release or escape. To be processually complete, the entrance into liminality needs to wed with the hard work of divining the nature of the pre-liminal situation, as well as with the construction of postliminal rites and performances of reincorporation that drive into the bone the insights gained in liminal experience. A good place to start might be with the ritualization of truth-telling as

⁴⁸ Árpád Szakolczai, “Permanent (trickster) Liminality: The Reasons of the Heart and the Mind,” *Theory and Psychology* (2017), vol 27.2: 231-248.

⁴⁹ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 202.

one among a handful of “ultimate sacred postulates”⁵⁰ upon which to found life in a globally interconnected and mediatized world, a topic I will return to in the next issue of *Liminalities*.

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⁵⁰ “Ultimate Sacred Postulates” is Roy Rappaport’s term for founding principles of a culture, beyond empirical verification, logical deduction or refutation, created in and through ritual activity.

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