

## **Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance,**

Graham St. John, (ed) 2008

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Victor Witter Turner (1920 – 1983), working with his wife Edith Turner, was an anthropologist deeply concerned with ritual both in tribal communities and in the contemporary developed world. His early fieldwork in African villages in the 1950s was typical of the career development of field anthropologists at that time. He developed a special interest in rituals, seeing these as social drama in addition to the religious expression of the sacred. He drew on the work of Arnold van Gennep (1960, originally 1908) on rites of passage (viz. birth, marriage, death and sometimes puberty initiation), translated into English in 1960: Turner focused on the concept of *limen*, 'threshold' and the term *liminality*. Van Gennep added pre-liminal separation or isolation from, and post-liminal reincorporation into, one's community as a threefold schema. The context was tribal and religious, with gods and spirits demanding to be appeased. Turner applied this retrospectively to his own fieldwork, and far beyond van Gennep's work, developed the concept to embrace all transitions and all rituals everywhere. He bracketed out academic scepticism about tribal religion and focused on how the people experienced the ritual. Ritual as social drama gives it a significant social function, to dispel conflict and schism and to mend quarrels. He then applied this concept to western developed society to explore how conflict is resolved and what replaces ritual in a secular context. His respect for ritual led him to join the Roman Catholic church.

The concept of liminality was both slippery and rich in potential. For van Gennep, a child crosses the threshold to adulthood and has to overcome spiritual/psychic dangers through ritual. They are separated from the village, inducted, go through a change-of-status ceremony, and are then reincorporated into the village with new status. Birth is the transition to life, and funerals the transition to death. Marriage is a transition to procreating new life. Each were regarded profound human milestones. Turner inquired further into how other thresholds were/are experienced, and how people cope with them. He examined other rituals to determine their underlying function within the community, seeing this as conflict resolution. The state of mind entered he called *liminal*, 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1967). Advanced societies which used liminality for recreation (e.g. in sport) he called *liminoid* (Lewis's term is "liminal-like", see below). Turner contrasted (1969) social structure (e.g. status, power, top-down authority) with 'anti-structure' (bottom-up creative responses and pressures to change). Anti-structure is the liminal arena; the greater the powerlessness, the greater the need for positive anti-structural activities, which he styled *communitas* (positive community activities). Generally he viewed *communitas* as ritual-as-social-drama. He argued that *process* takes precedence over *structure*. Life is fluid, and messy. Structure can get undermined by these processes.

So the processes need to repair any breaches that might occur. He called this *processual* in contrast to *structural*, the ruling paradigm of the day. His later academic career in Chicago and Virginia (Charlottesville) focused on liminality within theatre and performance art, and on Christian pilgrimage. Richard Schechner provides an appreciation in a posthumous collection of papers (Turner 1988).

The collection reviewed here presents 17 chapters by scholars who have been influenced by the Turners. It reveals that Edith was in fact his co-researcher and co-author and her own career developed after Victor's death. The book has four parts:

1. Performing Culture: Ritual, Drama and Media
2. Popular Culture and Rites of Passage
3. Contemporary Pilgrimage and Communitas
4. Edith Turner.

First there is a 37 page critical introduction to Turner's work by Graham St John, exploring many contested and contradictory areas in a pioneering body of work at the margins of disciplines. He places him on the threshold between modernism and postmodernism. He adds a detailed and helpful summary of each of the papers.

The first five chapters deal with cultural performance, theatre and media. These seek a unified theory; explore ritualization; reconciliation and redressive action; liminality in Media Studies; and social drama through the media, focussing on Stephen Lawrence's murder. Lewis (ch. 1) offers a significant critique of Turner. He argued that the divide between everyday life and ritual (i.e. structure and antistructure) is not sharp, that creative conflict resolution often takes place everyday, and that ritual need not be a creative move forward but can reinforce tradition. On social drama, defined as 'periodic social upheavals' [p.43] to redress wrongs, he noted that special events varied, and distinguished between planned and spontaneous. He claimed that Turner under-valued play which Lewis argued was more significant than ritual in that humans share it with animals whilst ritual is a human creation. Some special events may, as Turner claimed, redress imbalances; but much was simply enjoyed. In fact play could be viewed as spontaneous and chaotic, 'antistructure', and ritual traditional and conservative. The concept of liminality in van Gennep is precise; Turner's attempts to generalise to cover all transitions and all ritual is "problematic" and "an unwarranted overgeneralization" [p.49]. His *communitas* resembled Christian fellowship, and Turner would not envision negative community pressures, such as towards prejudice and racism. Lewis translates *communitas* into "embodied experience" [p.52] which might include singing and dancing. Turner linked this to *explanation*: the voices of participants and outsiders linked together into "polyvocality" and "multiperspectival" work [p.53]. Lewis emphasised the shared experience of the participants as they shared touch, taste, smells, sights and sounds. He used the terms "intersubjectivity" and "intercorporeality". He retained the distinction

between special events and everyday life, which interact; order and disorder; the potential for events to become patterned [performativity]; the creativity of play and the solemnity of ritual. Alongside the human potential for liberation he places the opposite tendency for destruction.

Maxwell (chapter 2) focuses on ritual in a theatre context. The performance is "a border, a margin, a site of negotiation" [p.69], even demonstrating ritual as persuasive, heart over head. Chapter 3, on "sorry business" (grieving) as a particular emphasis on Australia and relationships between settler and aborigine, a long running "social drama" [p.77]. This leads to a discussion of the theatre as radical and potentially reconciling. Chapter 4, on media studies, ends with a hope that media studies develops "a paradigm assisted by tools designed to comprehend human universals amidst cultural difference" [p.106]. Chapter 5 presents the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence as a social drama running through the media that prompted reconciliation and changed society, becoming "a potent symbol and a catalyst for change" [p.122], contributing to the dynamics of public reflexivity.

The four chapters in part 2 problematise the liminal or liminoid nature of sport; trance and liminality of the dance hall; backpacking as a rite of passage; and a theatre-making immersion event. Sport is viewed as visceral, dynamic, creative and transformative, as deeper than for mere entertainment. We can understand where the idea of implicit religion on the terraces comes from, how a team's success affects supporters' lives. Backpacking is the one example where rites of passage is returned to, where the concept of liminality originally came from.

Part 3 deal with the 'burning man festival', a huge cultural event; female shopping as identity formation, preceding a graduation ceremony, so also a rite of passage involving image/identity formation; non-violent direct action and protest; and support networks for parents with children with special needs. The chapter by Scalmer on Gandhi and non-violence will interest readers of this journal. It is well researched with unusual details discovered. It views anti-nuclear demonstrations as a form of communal bonding. Incidentally, the misspelling of Aldermaston [p.24] is the only typo I noticed. Nowak (chapter 13) uncritically applied Turner's schema to special needs education, and in particular for pupils with 'invisible' disability such as ADHD or autism. That is that redressive action and re-integration followed social action to mend a breach. Such pressure will not always succeed. This may be a threshold from poor to acceptable practice, but it is not a rite of passage.

The final part gives an interview with Edith Turner, plus three chapters on the language of the feminine; faith and social science; and experience, performance and consciousness. Edith Turner although co-researcher with Victor, was mostly un-named and unrecognised because of academic practices. She later edited the journal *Anthropology and Humanism*. She stressed more than her husband the need to respect religious insights, and in particular those of native tribes so easily dismissed by secular researchers.

She claimed to have seen spirits in tribal ritual (under the influence of hallucinogens). This is a considered rejection of the academic preference for atheism over religious faith. Together they emphasised that anthropology should be a study of human *experience*, not just behaviour, and that researchers should be openly reflexive about their own experiences.

Turner has taken a precise concept from van Gennep, that is religious protective rites during major life transitions, and has adapted it into a general programme far removed from the intention of the originator. This has introduced a range of confusions which this volume in part sorts out and in part magnifies. The concept of *liminality* (the state of being on a threshold) was applied both to major upheavals and to performances generally, distinguishing only between 'authentic' liminality, and playful artifices such as the theatre which are named *liminoid*, that is *liminal-like*. Liminality is viewed as an in-between state of mind, in between fact and fiction (in Turner's language *indicative* and *subjunctive*), in between statuses. This concept has endured in performance studies and has the potential for wider usage. His arguments for a positive liminal state of mind, which he called *communitas*, also has potential for inspiring creative 'beyond the box' approaches. This is 'bottom-up', multi-perspectival, democratic – or in his terminology *anti-structural*, beyond authority structures. Turner drew all this from the idea that ritual is transformative, even therapeutic, social drama, not only functional but *eufunctional* – viz. working for good. This is an attempt to define the creative process, and is still inspiring research and practice. Creativity as *threshold* still has potential to be developed. However, Turner's notion of all ritual being social drama is an overgeneralisation. Some ritual is traditional, nostalgic and as regards new insights, quite dead. Tribal rituals studies in anthropology were capable of more dynamic interpretation, with rituals solving social disputes, but Turner was not justified to interpret all ritual as explained by this model. It is reasonable to use these dynamic rituals as a model for transformational theatre, but not all theatre is life-enhancing. The concept helps us to evaluate ritual, distinguishing between rituals which reconcile disputes, which affirm identity and community, and which are nostalgic and static.

Turner's schema of social breach to reconciliation, a revolution through ritual, draws both from his Marxist past and his Christian present. His *communitas* is reminiscent of 'fellowship'. Turner's central belief was that ritual has still a central part to play in modern western society, with serious purposes (liminal), and entertainment aims (liminoid, liminal-like). Performances can have serious transformative purpose, challenging, changing hearts and minds and being a part of social reconciliation. Much about Victor Turner has been reworked and honed; but there are serious concepts which still need to be further developed in terms of theatre, ritual and religion, and even education where there is meaning in the idea of threshold. New studies might concentrate on "the subjunctive", the potential, the might become: using quasi-ceremony as exciting threshold activities may well reduce existing stresses and encourage appropriate forward planning.

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