

Book Review

Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance Edited by Graham St John (New York: Bergham Books, 2008)

SANDRA D'URSO

The collection of papers presented in this book all concede to a 'vision' of Victor Turner's anthropology as highly influential upon the discipline of performance studies, in particular his modelling of 'liminality' and how it operates within tribal and modern ritual structures. The book is organised into four parts and the underlying thread running across all sections of the book tells of the anthropological pioneering conducted by Victor and Edith Turner particularly in the area of methodology. Furthermore the book demonstrates how their nuanced approach to anthropological research has facilitated an extension of the conventional idea of tribal 'ritual' across to contemporary Western performative forms and practices. Most of the authors go on to critique certain aspects of Victor Turner's work, particularly the categorical distinctions he makes between liminal and liminoid cultural forms. Arguably, the applicability of ritual 'liminality' within theorisations of Western forms of secular performance becomes academically as well as poetically tenable, (via Turner's interdisciplinary lead), and is fully capitalised upon in this book.

In my understanding, theorising through the category of 'liminality' within the discipline of performance studies is usually an attempt at describing perceived states of indeterminacy set around the performer's body; the position of the performer's body in space; the arrangement of other objects in space; perceived temporal anomalies within the duration of performance; and the interactive loop or reflexivity set between participating subjects and or corporealities present within the performance. Usually associated with religious or tribal/traditional ritual, the indeterminate space of 'liminality', becomes a seductive category for contemporary performative forms that aim at creating a temporal/spatial/bodily zone outside of the norm; a kind of multi-layered, secular/sacred event-hood staged at the margins of the ordinary flows of Western social activity.

Of course the field is wide and there are certain genres of performance that attract the tag of 'liminal' more readily than others. As is evidenced by this collection of writings, the aforementioned liminal performances will usually borrow a 'tribal' aesthetic, and adopt a philosophy of 'one-ness'; such as seen at neo-primitive community festivals or other performatively framed durational events. However, the implicit link set between 'neo-

primitivism'/or states of indeterminacy within performative events along with forms of ritual liminality has become somewhat of a theoretical convention within performance studies circles. Whilst the bulk of the papers in the collection do not offer a thorough critical examination of this convention, Ian Maxwell's contribution 'The Ritualization of Performance [Studies]' presents a very comprehensive critique on the 'utopian' tendencies of theorising through 'rituality' and 'liminality'. With the help of Jon McKenzie, Maxwell argues that the convention of theorising through Turnerian 'liminality' continues at the expense of a performative efficacy potentially aroused within radical dystopian visions (60). Graham St John also offers an insightful critique on the disproportionality of the utopian vision of liminality and 'communitas' expounded by Turner. The 'dark' side of communitas in the form of Nazi hysteria at rallies for example is cited by both authors as a way of emphasising Turner's bias towards a utopic world view.

Some of the examples of 'contemporary cultural performances' featured in this collection include acts of political protest; a mediated murder case; modern sports; electronic music and dance events; back-packing; community festivals; a bushwalk as theatre-making ritual; and shopping. As is evidenced by this list of varying events, the category of 'contemporary cultural performance' and its qualification within the interstices of ritual/rituality is sweepingly broad and I find at times theoretically cumbersome. So whilst the category of 'Contemporary Cultural Performance' features prominently in the title of the book there isn't a cohesive examination or statement of the 'what', 'where' and 'how' of this particular category of performance.

Part of the problem, as I perceive it, is that the book is confined by an overarching definition of contemporary culture which is distinctly Western and secular. As a result, examples of liminality that either have a specifically religious dimension or otherwise fall outside of the Western-secular paradigm seem not have made it into the book. Arguably the most appropriate way of considering liminality in the context of post-modern/contemporary cultures, in the West, is through the lens of secularism. Unfortunately I find that the implicit synonymy of 'secularism' with the 'contemporary' in the book, has had a reductive effect on the possible striations and multi-dimensional possibilities of the Turnerian vision of the liminal. The pairing up of the term contemporary with the cultural practices of electronic dance events and back-packing etc, while perfectly relevant, is in my opinion somewhat theoretically and aesthetically obvious, safe and at times a little thin. For example, in her paper 'Backpacking as a Contemporary Rite of Passage' Amie Matthews is able to successfully and interestingly match the processual stages of a typical back-packing experience, (via the data collected from her back-packing interviewees), to the stages of the Turnerian 'rite of passage' model. Whilst successful and at times quite entertaining (particularly the voices of the interviewees) the analysis and comparison of youth back-packing culture to Turner's liminality and pilgrimage, in a sense unapologetically de-historicises the religious dimension of the term/practice of 'pilgrimage'. Furthermore, the drawing of equivalence between the acts of risky youth travel sex to Turner's modelling of 'communitas' (185), in my opinion, produces a kind of theoretical inflation of the behaviour of western, middle-class, students. To be fair however, the book does attempt a counter-balance of its predominantly secular themes in chapter sixteen, with Douglas Ezzy's paper,

'Faith and Social Science: Contrasting Victor and Edith Turner's analyses of Spiritual Realities'. Here Ezzy mounts a critique of what he deems as an endemic bias towards a secular world view within academia, and uses phrases such as 'methodological atheism' (311) or 'fundamentalist secularism'(313), to illustrate his point.

A common critique of Turner's work is aimed at the distinction he makes between liminal and liminoid forms. The argument is that Turner implicitly draws an 'evolutionary' line between tribal ritual and the liminoid forms of post-Industrial society. Therefore, as a result, Turner's distinction ascribes a 'derivative' or secondary nature to the liminoid forms of post-industrial societies. For one example of this line of critique on Turner, see Sharon Rows paper, *Modern Sports: Liminal Ritual or Liminoid Leisure?* Here Rowe is able to show that by Turner's own criteria for establishing the distinction between liminal/liminoid, that modern sports qualify as a 'genuinely liminal' ritual performance (127). Also see Graham St John's paper, *Trance Tribes and Dance Vibes* for the analysis of psytrance party culture and how the apparent liminoid -subversive character of the events, often succumb to liminal style conformity (165). This line of critique is consistently echoed throughout the first three parts of the book, and whilst demonstrative of the potentially inverted colonialism of citing the 'originality' or 'purity' of tribal cultural practices, it becomes a little repetitive. Therefore, while each individual paper presents with well balanced and cogent critique, when they're put together into a book seem to produce an attitude of culturally based anxiety; particularly in relation to the perceived in- authenticity of the liminoid and the West's connection to it.

Part One of the book, which is titled *'Performing Culture: Ritual, Drama, and Media'*, includes some fascinating 'unpacking' and critiquing of Turnerian anthropological categorisations and schemas. Particularly timely and fascinating is the collaboratively written paper entitled, *'Performing "Sorry Business": Reconciliation and Redressive Action'*, which tests Turnerian models of 'social drama' and 'redressive action' against the Howard era's political approach to indigenous affairs and how the story of 'sorry business' or lack thereof, was played out in the media and at live protest events or 'demonstrations/walks'. The paper then moves from the media or cultural performance dimensions of 'sorry business' into the theatre world and again tests the Turnerian models of liminal/liminoid against the works of Indigenous theatre companies such as Company B at Sydney's Belvoir Street theatre; where the performance making process and technique of 'story-telling' are said to problematise the clear anthropological distinctions set between 'liminal-as- tribal' versus 'liminoid as post-industrial and subversive' (81). My overall impression however, and as is addressed by Mihai Coman in chapter four, is that the application of the concept of liminality, in particular as it is used to describe the consumption and production of media events within media studies circles, is rather broadly stated, superficial and problematic. Furthermore, as is the case with some of the lines of argumentation in this section of the book, it is unclear whether the terms 'ritual' and 'liminality' are being applied as a metaphor or not, and as such the theoretical strength of this attribution of liminality to contemporary media and representative cultural models becomes confusing and unconvincing.

Part Two of the book is titled, 'Popular Culture and Rites of Passage', and again the underlying theme of this section is about testing Turnerian models such as 'liminal', 'liminoid', along with his concept of 'communitas' against contemporary cultural events such as sports events and back-packing among some others. The consensus in this section is that Turner makes a mistaken distinction between liminal and liminoid forms and that there are contemporary cultural events and performances which may be read for both their liminal and liminoid characteristics and qualities, and thus evade or disqualify that distinction. Terms such as 'secular rite of passage'(186), and others like it, are used in this section as a kind of 'proof', attesting to the complex formulations of ritual process as leisure, and furthermore intimating that leisure activities in the West are formulated as a composite of secular/sacred event.

Part Three of the book is titled, 'Contemporary Pilgrimage and Communitas' and presents a set of papers with quite divergent subject matter; from a community festival known as 'Burning Man'; to the subject of shopping as the ultimate form of Western sacred pilgrimage. Further themes include the dissemination of Gandhian philosophy in the West by travelling pilgrims from the U.K; and finally the assessment of the typical patterns and experiences of conflict experienced by parents of children with Special-Needs. As is indicated in the title of this section, the common thread in this set of papers is set around Turner's theories of pilgrimage and formulations of 'communitas'. However the points of interest for me in this section of the book were not necessarily due to the cross-theorisations with Turner's concepts, but rather for the subject matter in itself. For example, whilst brief, I enjoyed learning about the Gandhian philosophy of 'non-violent direct action', and in particular the historical descriptions of how the 'self-conscious' British needed to overcome the cultural based anxiety of making a spectacle of oneself, in order to successfully transport this form of protest to the U.K.. Conversely, the contribution that I find most troubling is Carole M. Cusack and Justine Digance's paper about 'shopping' as a sacred process of identity formation. The study focuses on the yearly ritual of young women attending a special shopping event staged inside a Sydney architectural shopping icon, during which they choose the dresses and accessories they will wear at their school graduation ceremonies. The authors use terms such as 'consumption sacredness' (33), in order to advance the idea of shopping as *the* "religio-spiritual activity" (233) of the West. My concern here is a lack of feminist critique in the reading of this exclusive shopping pilgrimage 'for ladies,' along with the homogenising notion that religio-spirituality in the West necessarily implies a bond with the commodity market. There are multiple religious traditions practiced in Australia along with multiple communities of women that do not fit the schema put forward here in which the experiences of identity formation and religious practice are reduced to a shopping based spirituality. It is not uncommon for the activity of shopping to be metaphorically compared to religion and spirituality, and is in fact a valid way of critiquing Western over-consumerism; however, when applied in this way (non-metaphorically), becomes a homogenisation of complex processes in culture such as identity formation, whether on the level of gender or religion.

The fourth section is titled, 'Edith Turner', and offers the most insightful material on the Turner anthropological adventure and its relationship to the categories of religious/spiritual

experience, performativity and ritual. Predominantly this section explores the subject of Edith Turner's authorship position in an era when scholarship was traditionally conducted by men. In interview with Matthew Engelke, Edith elucidates on her roles as wife and collaborator with Victor Turner. Edith tells about the various aspects of what it was like to be a woman and writing about her experiences of ritual during the early days of her marriage. Whilst her relegation to the margins of traditional scholarship was problematic from a feminist perspective, Edith speaks candidly of how she enjoyed a kind of freedom in her writing on the field that Victor could not enjoy. In her own words she was not beholden to the 'rigours' of traditional scholarship, as was her husband, and as a consequence was able to write personal experiential narratives relating to the data collected during their field trips. Edith's experientially conceived anthropological texts, have since become highly regarded and well accepted within the circles of traditional scholarship. In chapter 16, Douglas Ezzy argues that Edith's experiential approach to the field work, resulted in the respectful recognition of the spiritual narrative of the participant of ritual. As is the case in traditional social sciences, the shaman's/priests/participants voice is reinterpreted and sublimated by the formal voice of the anthropologist, rather than processed as 'real' and legitimate (320). According to Ezzy, the Turners' approach has revolutionised the ordinarily ethnocentric methodologies of traditional anthropology. See also Barbara A Babcock's compelling contribution in chapter 15, 'Woman/women in 'the Discourse of Man'. Babcock also supports the argument that the Turners' experiential anthropological method allowed for a kind of flexibility and respect for the other that traditional methodologies cannot necessarily accommodate.

We are also given a very personal account of Victor Turner through the voice of his wife Edith, which sheds much light on the inconsistencies perceived in his scholarship and modelling of liminality and ritual process within this particular volume. The contributors in this last section of the book seem able to process the contradictions and inconsistencies in Vic Turner's work from the perspective of those that knew him as a colleague and friend.

Together these selected texts achieve a balanced blend of interdisciplinary discussion on themes of ritual and rituality; potentially of interest to those operating out of performance studies, cultural studies and media studies discourses. Students and 'lay people' with a specific interest in anthropology and or religious studies, should perhaps go straight to the fourth section of the book. Whilst there are no detailed anthropological field notes on tribal or contemporary forms of ritual here, the fourth section of the book does have some fascinating anecdotes of extraordinary tribal ritual phenomena, as recounted by Edith Turner in interview.

This book will be most appealing to those interested in critiques of Turner's categories of 'liminal' and 'liminoid' and how these categories translate into contemporary and western leisure practices. On the whole the book is insightful and accessible; however some prior background reading of Victor Turner's work is perhaps necessary.

Sandra D'Urso is a Master of Arts student at The University of Melbourne. In 1998 she won the Phillip Parson's Prize for the best theatre as research project. She writes, directs and produces her own work, and is currently a member of the terrorbyte internet performance group.

Editorial Note

Performance Paradigm issues 1 to 9 were reformatted and repaginated as part of the journal's upgrade in 2018. Earlier versions are viewable via Wayback Machine:

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