Excursions

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Excursions, vol. 8, no. 1 (2018)

www.excursions-journal.org.uk

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Beyond Turner's Liminal Community: Perpetual Crisis and the Everyday

Introduction

For the anthropologist Victor Turner (1986), community is not so much a unified body of individuals, tied together by space, time or circumstance, as it is a shared experience of process. Turner describes a social drama that consists of four distinct phases: breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration. In the first, an existing community is breached by some decisive change that fundamentally undermines its operation. In the second, the community, now unable to continue as before, falls into crisis, which in turn leads to a third phase, wherein the community must redress or reform its constitution to incorporate or reintegrate the external change. By this reading, community is multiplicitous, existing as both the body affected by, and the manifestation of, our communal experience of shared space. It is both medium, and mediator—

as with the suspension of a vehicle, it is the embodied system by which a collective can compensate for the inflexibility of exteriority. Equally, we might consider crisis as a suspension in a less metaphorical sense, that of a forced suspension of fact, as it exists to the community at present (the suspension of fact is, after all, nothing but the opening up of epistemological possibility). In prioritising the process of community, Turner (1986) invokes the term 'Communitas' to explicitly describe the 'liminality'–borrowed from the Latin, *Limin*, meaning threshold–of the crisis by which community is orientated, inherently tied to both the breach that pre-empts and the redress that follows. It is not so much a free-standing component of a broader system as it is the fluidity by which that system functions. Liminality assumes movement between the states it mediates, actively reconfiguring them as it does so. Its function is not simply to bridge distinct phases, but to 'dissolve all factual and commonplace systems into their components and "play" with them in ways never found in nature or in custom, at least at the level of direct perception' (Turner, 1986, p.25).

In this paper, I will seek to explore the conditions of 'communitas' and argue that it is the networked nature of a community's membership upon which crisis relies. I will discuss the notion of perpetual crisis–defined as an external imposition outside the community's control–and suggest that it prevents direct engagement with a shared ecology. I will argue that the autonomous governance of community–what might better be described as its political agency–is threatened by technological advances that alter the networks that shape our world view, co-opting the very processes upon which communitas relies. Exploring both Turner and Jean-Luc Nancy's arguments for considering community as a process, I will argue that a reliance on symbol-based technologies risks interrupting the direct negotiation with Other upon which communitas relies.

Crisis and the Formation of Communitas

To consider community as akin to communality, or as the outcome of a localised communion, is to risk overlooking an aspect fundamental to its character—distance. Though the very nature of community points to a common ground between its membership, this does not amount to a sanctified sameness as much as a shared horizon of experience. Community contains within it an inherent presumption of differentiation: it is comprised of a membership of operatively and locatively distinct subjects for whom any over-arching identity comes not from a pre-formation similarity, but from a performed coming-together. Such a performance relies on both difference and distance—its players must be both connected and disconnected, able to move together precisely because they are not as one. Such a movement is not simply a dance of inter-subjectivity, for which 'community is a "property" joining belonging to subjects that join them together', but rather highlights the amorphous nature of a subjectivity that relies upon its surroundings as a means of both definition and integrity (Esposito, 2007, p.2). It is by considering community as a process of shared inhabitation and excitation—rather than as a uniformity placed upon, or residing within, its individual players—that we can best examine the operations and conditions by which it might emerge.

Mediation is not, by necessity, liminal. When Turner invokes crisis, he does so as an active, emergent, and performative result of the breach that pre-empts it, a phase that by its nature is both transitional and conditional. In eliciting, or enacting, change within the social system from which it emerges, crisis does not simply subsume the difference between the stages it marries, but actively performs alternate ways of being with a view to unearthing unexplored potentiality. Crisis locates the Otherness that has been, until now, beyond the limit of the community, directly into the heart of the formation of individual and collective Selfhood by which a community achieves definition.

Turner's take on the performative explicitly ties the performance of communitas to its location within the social drama–crisis is not merely a means of bringing other potentialities to bear, but is a creative, dramaturgical response to breach. A given community's membership is always acting out new ways of being together, an ongoing and autonomous self-management of shared space. And while Turner often chooses to focus on ritualistic or theatrical modes of performance—drawing parallels between, for instance, Artaudian theatre and Brazilian Carnival (Turner, 1986, p. 123). This in no way suggests that the everyday is less ritualistic for all of its mundanity, devised as it is from the same preoccupation, that of the definition of Self in response to the irritation of Other. Indeed, Turner makes clear that 'the dramaturgical phase begins when crises arise in the daily flow of social interaction. Thus, if daily living is a kind of theatre, social drama is a kind of meta-theatre' (Turner, 1986, p.76).

It is by considering crisis as a performance undertaken as a prerequisite of communitas, that we can best engage with it as a liminal phenomenon. Rather than pointing towards a negative–the ill or unwanted moment of systemic collapse–liminal crisis instead points towards a process of growth, the condition under which a system remains fluid. With this in mind, it is its mundanity that makes crisis so integral to community, since it is only through its location in the everyday that crisis is made available to all of its membership equally. Indeed, it is in the mundane that we find the 'commonness' of community. As the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) points out, community is concerned with neither consensus nor communion, but rather with a shared lack of identity, or more specifically, a shared exposure to exteriority that demonstrates and informs the limits of Selfhood (1991, p.xxxvii). Though not invoking crisis in the same terms as Turner, Nancy nonetheless argues for a performed movement undertaken by the community in pursuit of an instability that is, like crisis, integral to its well-being. This movement, which Nancy terms 'unworking', arguably undertakes

a similar function to crisis, serving as a liminal phase that disrupts communion, which is any oneness or universality that emerges from being together (1991, p.31). As a performative motion, 'unworking' is a means of forcing a breach within the community, from which crisis can take hold. Community does not predate this action, but is formed cyclically by it:

> Communication is made of the interruption of singularities, or of the suspension that singular beings *are*. Community is not the work of singular beings, nor can it claim them as its works, just as communication is not a work or even an operation of singular beings, for community is simply their being – their being suspended upon its limit. Communication is the unworking of work that is social, economic, technical, and institutional. (Nancy, 1991, p.31)

Just as Turner's crisis is located within the mundane, everyday acts of its community, Nancy similarly cites everyday communication as the *de facto* performative act—a means of breaching singularity, and drawing the diverse membership not into communion, but into conflict. Any epistemological stability that we may individually construct as we come to terms with the reality of our experiences, is thus compromised by communication within an Other whose own experiences, whose own epistemology, is by definition beyond the limit of the Self. Whether classed as crisis or unworking, it is my argument that the cyclicality of community is found precisely in the failed act of sharing our unique experiences and understandings. Lacking recourse to perfect, direct expression, and lacking a singular, unified understanding of the world, any sharing that takes place is always an expression of radical difference, and it is within the creative grey-area that such difference presents, that the social drama unfolds.

Horizontal and Vertical Modes of Communication

To explore the manner in which the distance between a community's membership contributes to the process of communitas, we must first differentiate between horizontal and vertical modes of communication. If communication provides us with the means to engage with Other, it does so across numerous threads simultaneously, a network reaching not only between Self and Other, but between the Self and its wider community. The unworking that communication offers is disseminated and interpreted across innumerable concurrent thresholds. Liminality is as such not a logical progression between clearly articulated and disassociated states, but an emergent, and unpredictable, mode of being. Crisis occurs not only vertically (the forward expansion of our unique experience of the world) but also horizontally (our understanding of the world as informed by the experiences of our community as a whole). Indeed, these realms are not mutually exclusive, collective experience informs our own interpretation of first-hand events, just as the reality of first-hand events informs our interpretation of any collective experience. It is the tension between our own unique experiences, and those which are experienced and communicated to us by our peers, that provide the conditions for unworking to occur. Just as the community is comprised of operatively and locatively distinct subjects, the network upon which liminality unfolds is equally reliant on distance, a functional space between its connections.

To conflate Turner and Nancy's interpretation of communitas, I would argue that it is the Self's implicit dislocation from Other that allows for the unworking that is epistemological breach. Distance provides the Otherness by which a Self's hetero-reference is disrupted by exposure to something so utterly foreign to its own understanding of the world. The outcome of this distance is that the members of a community, though they share space, are unable to directly share experiences of their mutual ecology. An Other must

remain Other if it is to be able to provide the breach upon which communities relies. It is here that the focus on performative and ritualistic theatrics of community comes into play. The dramaturgy of meta-theatre found both in Turner's Brazilian carnival and his social drama of the everyday, is not simply a means of resisting boredom, or the communities attempt to entertain itself. Rather, it points to a more functional aspect of the Self's exposure to Other– in order to overcome the distance that is so integral to the individual, a communicative object is required that can be passed between otherwise dislocated members of the community. The tension is apparent. Distance is implicit to communication, without it we would occupy the same cognitive space and the transfer of knowledge would serve no purpose. Yet, communication requires a currency that might survive the perilous journey between disparate, dislocated individuals—a currency that, crucially, is neither a property of the individual nor of the collective, but rather something that exists between them.

In an effort to maintain the fundamental integrity of what is communicated, the community relies upon shared symbols available to both parties prior to the communicative act. Words, images, analogies and metaphors are learnt by the community as a means of aiding communication, despite not originating within the substance being communicated. Put simply, there is no inherent 'redness' to the colour red, nothing essentially 'chairy' about a chair. These amount to agreements forged in advance of our meeting, communicative shortcuts constructed along the horizontal, rather than the vertical, axis of the social network. The use of symbols may increase the speed of comprehension, but it does so at a price. It is here, in the symbolic transference of experience between a community's membership—an act that is fundamental to the breach that allows for communities to take place at all— that the process of communitas can be co-opted.

Perpetual crisis

It is my argument that it is possible to interrupt the process of communitas at the point of a community's breach by reappropriating the symbols through which it communicates. In doing so, the community, rather than continuing in the cycle of communitas by which it finds definition and difference, stagnates, falling into a period of stultification that I have termed 'perpetual crisis'. Despite being critical to a community's ability to manage change, Turner (1986) makes clear that it is nonetheless possible to circumvent the process of communitas. To do so is not to avoid crisis, but to invoke a form of non-liminal crisis that eschews redress. Rather than being a liminal phase, crisis becomes the de-facto state of the community, a form of social hypochondriasis that prevents its membership from adapting and regrouping in the face of external change. The cycle of communitas is not so much broken as stalled at the point of the Self's acceptance of, and adaption to, Other. While Turner (1986) cites examples wherein an specific group wilfully absconds from their wider community's social, economic or cultural norms, such as the American counterculture of the 1960's, a social group that forged its identity by locating itself as a radical break from of the normal social values of the time; I would argue that non-liminal crisis–or perpetual crisis–is something that could not only be opted into (a situation Turner terms liminoid) but actually forced upon a community as a means of divorcing them from performative agency.

The reduced potential for breach that the codified presents—the fact that we implicitly already agree upon, at the very least, the communicative currency upon which any later expression relies—poses a distinct problem. A reliance on the codified prioritises sense, what is understood, over *sense* (our capacity to engage with externality) fundamentally relocating the social drama beyond the reach of the individual. Rather than engaging with the Other through a shared first-hand interaction, such a relocation avoids vertical

modes of communication entirely, and places the social drama as something beyond the community—a complete unit of knowledge that can be reacted to, but cannot be experienced directly. The rituals and performances a community undertakes as a means of engaging with the Other—a means of facilitating breach—lose their potency as knowledge becomes something accessed, rather than something experienced. Turner perceives:

> the social drama, in its full formal development, its full phase structure, as a process of converting particular values and ends, distributed over a range of actors, into a system (which may be temporary or provisional) of shared or consensual meaning. (Turner, 1988, p.97)

He makes clear that such a process relies both on the reflexivity of actual lived experience, and the reflectivity such experiences bestow upon the community. Pre-formed knowledge structures, such as symbols, might offer an economy of communication, but they fundamentally lack meaning. Sense, rather than being a concrete category or unit of understanding, is the by-product of the act of sensing. As Turner suggests:

> sociological and anthropological functionalism, whose aim is to state the conditions of social equilibrium among the components of a social system at a given time, cannot deal with meaning, which always involves retrospection and reflexivity... the meaning of any given factor in a process cannot be accessed until the whole process is past. (Turner, 1988, p.97)

The relocation of sense from lived experience to a pre-emptive and fixed external structure, amounts to a relocation of breach from something that happens during the process *of* community, to something that happens *to* the community. What is at stake is our access to a world beyond our existing epistemology, the functionality of distance. Nancy, writing not long after the events of the second world war that informed his philosophical outlook, makes clear that it is the fallibility of language and the impossibility of universality, that helps to prevent the reoccurrence of totalitarianism that so nearly

engulfed Europe. It is the failure, the crisis of communication, born of our operative closure, that allows for communitas to occur:

> It is not a matter of making, producing, or instituting a community; nor is it a matter of venerating or fearing within it a secret power – it is a matter of incompleting its sharing. Sharing is always incomplete, or it is beyond completion and incompletion. For a complete sharing implies the disappearance of what is shared. (Nancy, 1991, p.35)

As discussed earlier, it is the communicative shortcut offered by an over-reliance on symbols that diverts communication from crisis to totalitarianism. Rather than pointing to the fertile distance between Self's, Other's, and Communities, the sharing of codified language aims at the completion of sense; we prioritise understanding one another over the value of failing to do so. Symbols point to a reality that is already known, a substance for which a description has already been devised. It is only in the performance of symbols—the manner in which they are used and misused by the community as it oscillates between horizontal and vertical ways of knowing—that a breach can occur within the community. It is only through such breaches of lived experience, that a community is able to respond and govern the changes in its environment.

The concern around symbolic representations replacing lived experience is only amplified by the exponential increase in intellectual technologies that rely on such representations. Intellectual technologies, a category in which we can place the clock, map, printing press, mass media, and internet, not only use representations as communicatory shortcuts, the automated watch face that stands in for the lived experience of the sun dial, but do so by reframing the distance upon which communication is based. Just as the map expands our understanding of the world far beyond the reach of our bodies, and the clock alters the rhythms by which we interact, they simultaneously dislocate us from the unmediated relation to Other that they replace.

Isolated from a locative community with whom we share, via

communication, our own contrasting experiences, we are forced to increasingly rely upon symbolic technologies that have usurped our day-to-day connection with Other. This amplified network is not so much horizontal as it is *hyper-horizontal*, involving a reconfigured community comprised of a membership far beyond the reality of any locative shared experience. Rather than engaging with either our own experiences of the world, or the interpretations communicated to us by our peers, we are increasingly forced to rely upon ever-more abstract symbols provided by a medium that must engage a potentially infinite number of communities at once. In our desire to make sense of an increasingly globalised understanding of the world, the commonality of (externally provided) sense takes precedent over our own implicit ability *to* sense. While it is not the remit of this essay to address the magnitude or omnipresence of intellectual technologies, I would argue that the determinism that such technologies provide disrupts the liminality of a community's crisis.

What should be 'a kind of meta-theatre' (Turner, 1986, p.76), in which actors engage with first breach, then crisis, then redress, turns instead to a form of meta-narrative, where crisis exists outside of the lived capacity to redress it. As our understanding of time, language, and space, are provided to us in increasingly symbolic forms, what is at risk is the communities ability to participate in the social drama in any meaningful sense. Rather than being autonomous actors in locative breaches, we risk becoming mere spectators of universal impositions. Put simply, we learn to stop experiencing time in favour of experiencing clocks, we know more about maps than we do locations. It is, I would argue, this abstracted universality that provides perpetual crisis with its power. The mundane conflicts of the everyday are soon usurped by abstract and globalised meta-narratives—the war on drugs, the fight against terrorism—imposed urgencies to which we have no direct means of redress. The relocation of sense from lived experience to global, symbolic narratives, presents us with an ongoing stream of crisis's that are fundamentally divorced

from the experiences of the communities membership. Liminality is lost. Lacking the capacity to redress, perpetual crisis is forged through the prism of our community's disembodiment from true social drama—we are engaged in wars we don't fight, against enemies we never meet.

Conclusion

Shared, pre-formed symbols, whether taking the form of intellectual technologies or simply linguistic shortcuts, amount to generalisations that, however useful, prioritise indirect experiential counterparts. While it is simplistic to suggest that all communication takes place entirely symbolically—there must always be the grey and murky realm of human interpretation. I would argue that the very nature of symbolic communication reduces the possibility of epistemological breach, since it relies on objects to which all parties already agree, and which as such fundamentally lack the capacity for irritation upon which the breach/crisis cycle relies.

It is the universality of social agreements that Nancy argues is the function of the community to unwork, and which must be breached by the liminality of Turner's crisis. Universality, for all its ease of comprehension, eventually leads to a totalitarianism in which the nuance of lived experience is replaced by general categories of things. Without wishing to simplify a complex and fragile aspect of our shared existence, it is in such generalisations that prejudice resides. Pre-emptive generalisations are by definition static and seek to reduce the performative capacity of a community that is, in a manner fundamental to the crisis that forms communitas, always engaged in social drama.

Perpetual crisis not only risks disrupting autonomous engagement with the lived ecology in favour of a vicarious exposure to broad meta-narratives, but it does so by co-opting communication in order to lessen the slippage between expression and comprehension, reducing the functionality of its distance. It is precisely the incongruity between vertical and horizontal modes

of experience that allow us to identify difference, and which provide the space in which epistemological crisis can occur. The use of symbols—not least language—serves as a form of communicatory shortcut that allows for a community to share their experiences with greater ease, and yet in doing so it reduces the potential for breach. I have argued that contemporary intellectual technologies, by virtue of their global scope, risk an over-reliance on such symbols, and in doing so not only reduce the likelihood of breach, but also the community's capacity for redress.

As such technologies both isolate us from *local* communities and expand our exposure to *global* communities, they must themselves rely upon increasingly generic symbols. The allure of perpetual crisis is that it fetishizes the communicatory shortcuts already used by the community, invoking symbols with generalised, abstracted meanings, designed to survive the communicative process intact, at the expense of the more specific and contingent expression required for performative agency. The everyday crises that might occur as we undertake more mundane interactions with our local community are superseded by the dramatic meta-narratives of the world stage. And while Turner accounts for non-liminal crisis—a situation for which he reserves the term liminoid to refer to a crisis that is both optional and unresolved—the omnipresence of intellectual technologies all but removes our ability to opt out of their affordances.

The result of amplifying the distance upon which communication relies, is to create a dynamic wherein we prioritise concepts, objects and technologies most likely to maintain integrity throughout their mediation. As we lose touch with our local communities, the abstract symbols required for communication with global communities replace our innate forms of expression, our divorce from the social drama becomes a learnt mode of experience. Distance, once a functional space of coming-together, risks becoming the expected frame by which we view externality, offering isolation, but little perspective. Perpetual crisis appears to make more sense than what is actually *sensed*. By invoking

language and concepts with which we are already familiar, it confirms, rather than breaches, our existing epistemological framework, thus eschewing the liminality inherent to other forms of crisis.

By relying on a limited number of universal symbols, the language of such technologies is inherently repetitious, to the point that the symbols invoked risk actually replacing the idea for which they stand - the stories told by perpetual crisis replace our lived experience of their subjects. As both Turner (1986) and Nancy (1991) make clear, the community relies on a complex inter-relation between its members that constantly seeks to unwork shared symbols—what is shared is not knowledge, complete and whole, issued in the hope of some sanctified oneness, but the space, the distance, of discovery. What is lost in perpetual crisis is the liminality that leads to autonomous and reflexive performance by a given community—the capacity for redress.

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