Coffee break: the intertextual production of liminal spaces in the workplace

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Sub-Theme 19: The Liminality of Organizational Spaces

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Introduction

While liminal spaces have been highlighted as important constitutive phenomena for how organization materializes, studies (e.g. Sturdy, Schwarz & Spicer, 2006) have tended to focus on liminality external to the organization; liminal spaces inside the organization are only very recently beginning to be seriously considered (Shortt, 2015). This paper addresses this and examines how actors contribute recursively to the production of liminal spaces in the workplace by their movement from their working area to take a refreshment break. This brief journey through corridors, stairways, and eating areas, involving human and non-human inter/action, we argue, is part of an ongoing process of intertextuality which produces an embodied, relational and political space of liminality.

Drawing on the seminal work of Turner (1969) on liminality in contemporary social life and Lefebvre (1991) on the social production of space, we establish the view that threshold workplace spaces are produced ‘betwixt and between’ the formal work areas dominated by managerial control, structured technical processes and an increasing requirement for visual ‘transparency’. They are also dialectically produced in acts of spacing (Beyes and Steyaert, 2012), which support the necessary liminal workaday rituals of mutual engagement between colleagues.

Later theorists assert that these processes of liminal space production are embodied in the movement of individuals (Kupers, 2011) into, around and through space and spaces. They are
also however, spaces for which meaning is produced in these everyday inter/actions as spatial ‘texts’ are brought together, as much by the employees who inhabit and move through the physical material of the spaces, as by those who design, build and maintain them. This is a complex process of intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980; Schmitt, 2011) to produce new, continually evolving, dialogic space-texts. It is argued here that the ongoing intertextual production that constitute liminal spaces allow them to be viewed not simply as sites of the temporary suspension of organizational regulation, but as an intrinsic part of organizing.

Researching this complex and under-theorized area, we bring together the methods of co-constructed auto-ethnography offered by Learmonth and Humphries (2011) and visual auto-ethnography (Watson, 2009) in examining the empirical photographic work of one of the authors. The result is a mutually elicited image-text (Warren, 2002) reflecting the ongoing dialogue between the co-authors about space and its production. Theoretically we draw on Barthes’ (1977) approach to reflective photographic practice, to examine the authors’ understandings of photographs of liminal (work-)spaces, as “genotexts” (Kristeva, 1980) in the production of a “paratext” (Genette, 1997; Gray, 2010), which engages ‘readers’ in the intertextual, dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981) process of spatial production. Our paper will contribute to theory through drawing on photographs of liminal experiences to articulate how the notions of paratext and genotext constitute an intertextual framing of liminal spaces in the workplace.

**The spatial dimensions of liminality**

Seminal studies of liminality by van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969) focused on observations of rites of passage and rituals in which individuals experienced three phases: the pre-liminal or separation, the liminal, and finally the post-liminal or reincorporation phase. Turner (1969) described the transitional or liminal phase as a limbo between a past state and a coming one, a period of personal ambiguity, of non-status, and of unanchored identity. Schouten (1991) observed that “In primal societies, culturally prescribed rituals (rites of passage) provided individuals an experience of "communitas" or shared psychological support throughout major status passages.”(1991: 49) However, as Schouten goes on to say “In the modern, secular world,… people often experience liminoid states, devoid of such supportive rites. Left to their own devices to cope with difficult transitions and ambiguous self-concepts people appear to create personal rites of passage through symbolic acts of disposition and acquisition, and, in so doing, to construct new concepts of self” (1991: 50).
Van Gennep’s (1960) early concern with liminal space was recognized by Turner, (1982) who emphasized how such spaces acted to create the contexts where the norms and values of everyday society could be and were suspended. Liminal spaces can generate unsettling, disturbing and dangerous experiences, (Tempest, et al., 2007) but they can also be sites of togetherness, creativity and self-fulfillment (Simpson, Sturges & Weight, 2010; Sturdy, et al., 2006). They are often the contexts where identities are challenged or change, where previous subject positions are no longer sustainable and actors adopt new identities, which may be permanent or remain temporary. Studies of identity (re)construction in liminal spaces (e.g. Beech, 2011; Ellis & Ybema, 2010) highlight the precarious, dynamic and ambiguous nature of these processes. Ellis and Ybema (2010) discuss the constantly oscillating identity practices of managers involved in inter-organizational collaborations, emphasizing their recognition of the impact of boundary-crossing, a fundamentally spatial practice. Beech (2011) on the other hand develops a framework of liminal identity work practices – experimentation, reflection and recognition – situated at the “intersection of structure and agency” (2011: 286), which encourages us to view liminal space as a medium for dialogic construction.

Shortt’s (2015) recent article contrasts liminal spaces in the workplace – “Lifts, doorways, stairwells, toilets and cupboards” (2015: 634) – with the dominant spaces (Dale and Burrell. 2008) of organizational life which “for the most part are designed, defined and frequently managed…such as offices, staffrooms, meeting rooms, classrooms, hospital wards or hair salons” (2015: 634). She emphasizes the marginal, threshold or ‘in-between’ qualities of liminal space (the *limen*) in comparison to the socially structured spaces of formal organization, stating that “liminal spaces are broadly overlooked in spatial research but are no-less significant as spaces in which emotions, identity and meaning might be embedded” (2015:636), a view with which we broadly concur. Foregrounded by an interest in aesthetics and identity, however, the article maintains a strongly material view of space which we challenge in this paper with reference to critical and post-modern theories of space. So rather than embedding emotions, identities and meanings, we view space as produced by (as well as producing) them, as part of broader social, cultural and political processes.

Although retaining a focus on aesthetics and individual identity, Küpers (2011) introduces aspects of phenomenology and process theory to the analysis of liminal space. Maintaining that "spaces and places have always been basic conditions for all transitions of human beings,
things and occasions” (2011: 45), he argues that there is an explicit link between the embodied experience of place – a combination of the sensual, affective and relational aspects of being in and moving through a space – and the “possibilities and potentialities” of personal change. He suggests that “the way spaces and places are experienced, understood and organized relationally, either enable and include, or constrain and exclude, transitional possibilities and potentialities” (Küpers, 2011 p. 45-6). From this perspective, spaces are media for experiences both of being (living in the world) and becoming (moving through the world). They are also embodied in the sense that they are “incorporated within us” by the material, social and emotional connections we have with them. Central to this process of sense-making, according to Küpers (2011), is the liminal experience in movement. The engagement of the consciousness with embodied space contains a powerful liminal quality, which establishes movement as a latent medium for transition. This establishes another facet of our conceptualisation of liminal space, namely that space is not static, but may be experienced and perceived, by the mobile individual, as fluid.

Wasserman et al. (2012) develop this further in their consideration of organizational corridors as liminal, non-spaces which “challenge ‘managed’ and conducted organizational action and allow an alternative mode of work – ‘spatial work’”(2012: 2) to emerge. In viewing corridors as liminal they acknowledge them as spaces of motion, of passage and of transition “in the sense of passing from one state to another”(2012:3) both physically and psychologically. In doing so they draw on de Certeau’s (1984) model of everyday walking practice to emphasize the serendipitous quality of the space, and the sense of creative potential, and also Gabriel’s (1995) notion of a peripheral, unmanaged space where organizational control an surveillance may be evaded.

We agree with many of the conclusions these three contributions by Shortt (2015), Küpers (2011), and Wasserman et al.(2012), particularly regarding the peripheral status of liminal spaces in the workplace, their facilitation of the physical transition from static to mobile, and their subsequent link to an unfixed, perhaps temporally fluid conception of identity. A key assumption of all three which goes unquestioned however is that the experience of space by the liminal subject (the liminar) is as an isolated individual responding to the material phenomenon of organizational space. Our conceptualisation differs in two fundamental ways. First we disagree that the liminar is one who, in Bachelard’s (1994) conception, seeks a space or spaces to withdraw from social interaction in search of solitude. In Turner’s (1969)
seminal exploration of liminality, while acknowledging the liminal entity’s need for “a period of seclusion” (1969: 96), he explicitly rejects the notion that this is a solitary experience. Instead he emphasizes liminality as a communal experience, during which all subjects are divested of symbols of their status within a social structure, or their “position within a cultural space” (1969: 95). As a result, he asserts, liminal subjects can develop “an intense comradeship and egalitarianism” (1969: 95) which he ascribes to a change in the way they relate to others from a modality of structure – “differentiated and often hierarchical system of politico-legal economic positions with many types of evaluation” (1969:96) - to one of communitas – “an unstructured or rudimentarily structured, and relatively undifferentiated…community…of equal individuals” (1969:96). In spatial terms we consider this notion of liminal communitas to be linked with the actor’s desire to produce social spaces with others, which symbolize the suspension of all organizational status or rank and, echoing Beech(2011), suggests a more dialogic conception of liminal practice. Our second area of disagreement is that, in our view space is more than a material construction, it is a complex concept, produced through inter-related processes of human action and meaning-making. We examine this in more depth in the next section.

**Space and intertextuality**

Our own view of space is that it is both the outcome and performance of two interrelated processes of spatial production, the social (Lefebvre, 1991) and the intertextual (Bakhtin, 1981; Kristeva, 1980). These two processes, while offering differing perspectives on how space can be seen as active in processes of organization, converge on a number of shared concerns: the significance of symbolic forms of communication; the involvement of the human body; the role of non-human material elements; and the exercise of power in authority/authorship.

The argument that space is socially produced draws primarily from the work of Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre’s (1991: 11-12) concern was with “the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias”. What emerged from his theorizing was a conceptual ‘triad’ (1991: 33), through which he sought to establish space as both an outcome and a process of social production. The triad explained space as: spatial practice (giving rise to perceived space), representations of space (conceived space) and representational spaces (lived space). Lefebvre (1991: 38) specifically notes society and space to be in a relationship
of dialectical interaction. This suggests an inseparable entwinement whereby society and space co-constitute each other, the one being insignificant without the other. Lefebvre’s (1991) advocacy for this dynamic, dialectical view of space is essentially rooted in his belief that the production of space begins with the production of the body. His view was that “each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space. This is a truly remarkable relationship: the body with its energies at its disposal, the living body, creates or produces its own space” (1991: 170).

Inspired by Lefebvre’s focus on the body and his assertion in later work that “understanding of space…must begin with the lived and the body, that is, from a space occupied by an organic, living, and thinking being” (Lefebvre, 2009 p.229), Beyes and Steyaert (2012) developed the concept of spacing as a “processual performing” (p.50) of everyday space. This allows for both “embodied apprehensions” (p.50) of space at the individual level, and “different enactments of organizational geographies” (p.50-1) to be brought together in what they term ‘polyrhythmic’ processes of spatial organizing. The concept of spacing, inspired by Derridean post-structuralist philosophy, (Derrida, 1981; see Beyes & Steyaert, 2012), and grounded in their interest in non-representational theorizing developed by cultural geographers (Anderson and Harrison, 2010; Cadman, 2009; Lorimer, 2005; Thrift 2007) allows us to ascertain the main features of an individual performing of space: “first everyday practice and materiality; second, embodiment and the body; third, affect and sensation; and fourth, multiplicity and minor politics” (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012, p. 51). From this we see how an individual actor may contribute, through their everyday spatial practices, to a broader social production process. We perceive the materiality of the spaces which we inhabit and through which we move, and our emotional and sensory engagement with it. What we perhaps do not perceive are the underlying communicative and political processes of spacing, something which we feel the practice of photography aids, involving the framing, contextualization, display and re/viewing of the photographs. These connect the photographer to others who conspire with them, consciously or otherwise, in the production of a meaningful space.

While critical geographer, Doreen Massey (2005) agreed with Lefebvre that, as space is produced so it constitutes and re-constitutes those that create it, she also considered space as in a state of perpetual becoming. Its dynamism can be found in recognizing that it is always under construction and is never complete. This is because the
social relations that produce it are themselves formed by unstable bodies in a perpetual state of ongoing unfolding. Massey’s work highlights here that for many individuals, for most of the time, their production of space is likely to be unconscious. Unless one is an architect or civil engineer drawing up plans for a built space, most human practices, not specifically focused on representing space inevitably construct it. Hence the unconscious production of space is probably the norm for the vast majority of social actors. The photographer represents an interesting intermediary in this context, producing whether by intention or by accident a rhetorical space (Barthes, 1977) invested with a meaning which we argue engages the viewer of the image in a dialogue.

The notion that space can be symbolically organized and read as a form of text is linked in part to Ricoeur’s (1971) use of the text paradigm to understand broader social practices of meaning-making. In organization studies, Yanow’s (1998) examination of museums as organizational spaces is an example of the treatment of “organizational buildings and built spaces as texts”. In this she builds on the hermeneutic tradition developed by Ricoeur, which views human artifacts and activities as texts whose meanings can be analysed using tools developed by literary theorists and critics. A key facet of this analysis is the relationship between author(s) and reader(s) of the text, as to how meaning is constructed, conveyed or mediated. In the built environment, Yanow (1998) considers the architects and designers of museums to be authors of special texts. She examines how the intended meanings of these original authors conflict with those of the organizing agents – staff, managers, executives – who operate and thus re-interpret the designed space.

Social anthropologist, Sian Lazar (2015) in her recent analysis of street protest movements in South America, offers a much broader view of cultural phenomena as texts. In her recent study of street protests, she draws on the views of art historian, Vigneron (2010) that a ‘text’ can be “any kind of cultural product” (2010; 41 quoted in Lazar, 2015, 244), and that any text is “intertwined with the assimilation and transformation of other texts…informed by other texts which the readers or viewers have read or seen, and by their own cultural context.” (2010; 41 quoted in Lazar, 2015, 244). She uses the concept of intertextuality as the “relational orientation of a text to other texts” (Bauman, 2004. 4) to argue that the organization of contemporary mass protest events, and in particular their visual and spatial organization, indicates practices of both “collective authorial borrowing” across space and the referencing of prior, historical protest events. For example the consistent logo-images and
tent placements of 2011’s Occupy protests illustrate for Lazar a collective textual interpenetration, while the symbolism of the lone figure in Tiananmen Square, Beijing in 1989 referenced in the Tahrir Square protest in Egypt in January 2011 indicates an awareness of prior historical texts. Lazar (2015) states that “intertextuality is not necessarily only visual or symbolic but may be extended to other understandings of physical action; protests are indeed, intensely physical and sensual experiences, mobilising bodies and their senses in space” (2015, 244). This relational form of intertextuality is rooted in Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of dialogics, with its focus the focus on both the circulation of discursive ‘utterances’ through society and across time and the practices of communicative action. In Bauman’s (2004) view this allows us to identify a key dialectical tension in the use of intertextual theory for ethnographic research, namely between closed, authoritative, monologic versus open, collaborative, dialogic approaches to text authorship.

This concern with authorship is taken up by Schmitt (2012) in his examination of the textual production of “biophysical landscapes” (p.17). He argues that spaces in the biophysical environment when human actors engaging with it assign it with symbolic meanings that can be read; space then becomes “a readable object with connotative meaning and association” (2012: 17). He goes onto the assert that, ”non-authored objects in our biophysical environments – such as wilderness, mountains, shoreline and other places – become coded with meanings through intertextual relationships”(p.19). This concept of a non-authored text built out of layers of intertextual relationships draws on the work of Kristeva (1980), Foucault (1980) and Barthes (1977). Using Kristeva’s general argument for intertextuality that “any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (1980, p.66), Schmitt asserts that “any identifiable text is in fact an unstable node within a constantly shifting and evolving web of references, appropriations, influences and socio-cultural contexts” (2011, p.19). Invoking Foucault’s concept of the “author-function” as merely a “contextual constraint…guiding any potential reader’s interpretation of a text” (p.23), and Barthes’ notion that “the text is meaning at the act of consumption – an instance of collaboration between object, intertextual context (including author) and reader” (p.24), Schmitt argues that biophysical environments are non-authored texts produced by “reader engagement with intertextuality” (p.24).

This bold and radical proposition of the removal or ‘death’ of the author, which underpinned the intellectual project of intertextual theory undertaken by Kristeva and Barthes in the late
1960s/early 1970s, poses a very significant challenge for the field of ethnography with its reliance on textual narrative. However Genette’s (1997) concept of the paratext offers an understanding of how an individual may contribute authored elements of a text which are intended to facilitate the involvement of other readers/co-contributors. The conventional view of the paratext sees its main purpose as “to ensure for the text a destiny which is consistent with the author’s purpose” (Genette, 1997, 407), in other words to make the author’s original intention and meaning clear to the reader. Allen (2000) offers a slightly different interpretation of the paratext - “to mark those elements which lie on the threshold of the text and which help to direct and control the reception of a text by its readers.” (2000, 100) – which rebalances the production/consumption relationship to establish the paratext as a dialogic device. In literary practice, paratexts have been assumed to be elements such as the prefaces, footnotes, the book cover, the publisher’s blurb etc. all of which are literally placed on the margins (or thresholds) of the reader’s experience. Curiously however Genette remains consistently ambiguous about what is and is not a paratext, preferring to characterize it as a zone of transition (between text and non-text), and of transaction. While not his original intention perhaps this serves to highlight the relational function of the text. Gray (2010) used the concept of paratexts to examine the use of promotional flyers and posters for film and theatre performances, through which readers make sense of their content or symbolism. Schmitt’s (2012) incorporation of maps, information booklets, guide books or photographs of an area as paratexts which enable the new consumer/producer of the space-text to begin to develop a meaning of their own from it. Both return us to the broader interpretation of text as applicable to socio-cultural production.

The final element in our conceptualisation of space as intertextual comes from Kristeva’s (1980) development of the concept of genotext, the non-linguistic pre-cursor to all texts. In acknowledgement of her interest in psychoanalysis, this includes the unconscious drives that are not immediately accessible to the authors or the audiences. Allen (2000) views the development of genotext, and its counterpart the phenotext, in Kristeva’s work as her way of articulating “the tension between a socialized, symbolic discourse (the phenotext) and an unassimilable, anti-rational and anti-social semiotic language of instinctual and sexual drives (the genotext)” (2000, 48). Here we see recognition of the role that the unconscious plays in the creation of texts. This interest in unconscious drives is borne out in both spatial theory (Massey, 2005) and photographic theory (Benjamin, 1999), and this prompts us to ponder
both their role in the intertextual production of space and the potentially genotextual role of an individual act of photographic capture

**Research Method: co-constructed, visual auto-ethnography**

Though still subject to much debate, auto-ethnography is now an established method of academic inquiry which links the conduct of ethnographic study with the reflexive, autobiographical reflections of the ethnographer. Ellingson describes the process as “research, writing, story and method that connects the autobiographical to the cultural, social and political through the study of a culture or phenomenon of which one is part, integrated with relational and personal experiences.” (2011: 599). Boyle and Parry assert that auto-ethnography, is an intensely reflexive process rooted in “an autobiographical form of research (which) allows the organizational researcher to intimately connect the personal to the cultural through a ‘peeling back’ of multiple layers of consciousness, thoughts, feelings and beliefs.” (2007: 187).

Learmonth and Humphries’ (2011) examination of the strange, dualistic nature of academic identities, balancing a strong desire to be involved in knowledge production and dissemination as part of a collegial community, with an equally strong urge to amplify one’s influence in those processes through career advancement, advocate a co-construction approach to auto-ethnography. They compare notes, share parallel stories with the reader of two contrasting academic conferences, and perform the narrative of Jekyll and Hyde in mirror image. While we admire and agree with the spirit of co-construction, and our views of the subject matter we deal with have been brought together through the process of mutual dialogue, our positions are somewhat different. While we still both work for the same business school, and we have mutual interests in theorizing management and organizational practice, our academic career paths have been very different: Mike’s from teaching into academic management, Alex’s from a career in industry into academic research. Hence the nature of our co-construction work has been somewhat different.

Warren (2002) argues that the consideration of photographic images offers a more direct insight into the moment and ‘how it feels to be here’. Her (2002) study of the aesthetics of the workplace using photographic methods, she claims, captured the emotional responses of employees to change in the formally organized space (Dale and Burrell, 2008). It is the “inherently embodied practice” (Warren. 2002: 227) of organizing by these individual
employees, prompted by their enforced change of working environment, which the study then seeks to capture using a combination of participant involvement – “handing the camera to the respondents as a means of capturing this data” (2002: 232) - and photo-elicitation. Douglas Harper argued that contemporary ethnographers examining “the polysemic quality of the image – its multiple meanings and interpretations” (2003: 244) in order to “create a dialogue around the competing and complementary meanings of the images” (ibid) may also take historical, autobiographical and reflexive approaches to the process (see Steiger, 2000; Quinney, 2001), as opposed to the multi-participant approach of Warren’s (2002) study. By bringing together our differing interpretations and knowledge of the spaces of our workplace, we position this paper as a dialogic elicitation of liminal space, using the polysemic qualities of the photographs as the focus of our discussions.

Watson (2009) offers a most vivid account of how photographs and other visual artefacts are powerful textual components of her auto-ethnographic work. She explores in some depth the intertextual nature of her own auto-ethnographic visual practices as a researcher, and invokes Genette’s (1997) concept of the paratext as a way of engaging readers in a process of intertextuality that is both produced by and produces her research work. This approach to research, which we term visual auto-ethnography, informs our understanding of spatial production as intertextual. The production of an auto-ethnographic image-text offers the reader access to the personal experiences of the author as an organizational actor. As such, we view it as a paratext in the broader intertextual process of liminal space-making. We would argue that the paratext is a useful concept in the context of auto-ethnographic writing, in the sense that the ethnographer makes a conscious claim to authorship in their work because they wish to introduce a new (academic peer) readership to their involvement in the broader intertextual production which is the focus of their practice. However such a claim may also attempt, as we do here, to emphasize that ours is only one of many individual, intersubjective contributions to the collaborative weaving of the intertextual fabric as a whole. We develop this argument further in this paper to explore the role of individual photographs as genotexts in the process of spatial meaning-making, which we argue are potentially powerful agents in the production/articulation of the actor’s experiences of the liminal.

In the following section we consider the co-constructed, auto-ethnographic image-text developed in our own workplace to examine how the practices of one of the authors in taking
a refreshment break can be viewed as part of the production of liminal spaces. The photographer/co-author has held the privileged, managerial position of Associate Dean in a University Business School for a number of years and Their initial purpose was to support the co-author/photographer in his reflections on the relationship between the experience of management and his physical, spatial environment. Prompted by early conversations and the dialogic work of the two authors to develop their theories of space over the last four years, the co-author built a larger collection, bringing these into their work in 2014 and culminating in this paper.

**Coffee breaks and the production of liminal spaces: a paratext**

“Between the banality and drama or theatre, finding a frame for the mundane, for the ordinary, for the everyday…is really exciting when it stays in that ambiguous place where it doesn’t look like art yet” (Sultan, 1992).

Photographer Larry Sultan in his work *Pictures from Home* (1992) explored how, beneath the everyday routines of his own parents’ lives, they produced and maintained what he viewed as a myth of family life through their home and the ways they inhabit it. Our working routines are built on similar ‘mythical’ practices reflecting the form of organization we feel part of and the roles we play in it. An office (like the one in fig 1) or workspace is a form of spatial text which we produce in our inhabiting

![Figure 1 An office or a mythical, spatial text?](image)

The desk is a mixture of organization and mess. There’s a lot of work to do but I’m keeping it all in ordered piles (fig 2b). All this equipment and I don’t have time to set it up properly (fig...
2a). I don’t have time to think about how it looks when someone else comes in, I just need to be able to find what I need when I need it. Or do I?

Figure 2a and 2b A messy, organized desk?

The embodied experience of a refreshment break begins with an urge, physiological or unconscious, to stop work and seek a different experience. The body moves, in this case from its seated position at a PC workstation in an office (yes that office is a symbol of authority and its privileges!) to a standing position. Already my mind is disconnecting from its focus on the work I have been doing and beginning to focus on the process of refreshment in a pre-liminal preparation (Turner, 1969). This may involve a search for a wallet in a jacket pocket (fig 3a) or a checking for the right amount of change to buy a coffee, or reaching for a cup, coffee, teabag, et cetera (fig 3b). but in essence it is part of the ritual of ‘the break’.
Fig 3a and 3b Pre-liminal choices?

The liminal phase begins with the movement towards the door, as the body disengages from the desk and engages with the transitional process of movement (Küpers, 2011) between work and non-work.

Figure 4 Doorway from my office

Figure 4 is the liminal threshold over which I step. Its potentialities encompass the promise of collegial interaction and the sense of togetherness, creativity and self-fulfilment (Simpson, et al., 2010; Sturdy, et al., 2006) which this may engender as well as the unsettling, disturbing and dangerous (Tempest et al., 2007). It is characterized by ambiguity and depending on my mood and prior experience, may be crossed jauntily or hesitantly.
Immediately beyond the threshold, I turn to walk along the walkway of an open-plan office. The feeling of ambiguity is almost immediate in the transition from the privileged privacy and caged self-control of my office, to the disempowered transparent and structured interactions of the open-plan area. Ingold’s (2008) work on the importance of movement to our perceptual experience of space and to the process of meaning-making in our spatial environments suggests that we produce spaces not as static, bounded zones, but in motion and through perceptual fluidity. The perspective of the walkway holds a relational quality (Cooper, 2005) which perpetuates the feeling of ambiguity: the optimistic space of the tree-lined avenue (Figure 6), offering openness and scope for the positive liminal experience, a space to breathe, relax and imagine, balanced against the fear of ‘running the gauntlet’ of colleagues and managers who may seek to bring you back from the simple fluidity of liminal motion into the stasis and complexity of work problems.
Nearing the end of the walkway I approach the place of greatest risk – the Dean’s office – where the promise of refreshment and brief detachment from work anxieties can be curtailed by a casually delivered question, a mention of your name or a movement towards the door by the occupant within (Figure 4). These events may mean that I will be hauled back from the brink of a liminal transformation to the disciplining structure of organizational management.
All liminal experiences incorporate risk but the risk here, of a loss of promised autonomy (however brief), has a spatial element. Like Foucault’s interpretation of Bentham’s architectural panoptican, “inducing in the (subject) a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (1977: 201), the passing of the Dean’s office is an embodied reminder of my work responsibilities.

My destination for refreshment may vary between the small, communal galley kitchen with its hot water boiler and storage and refrigeration spaces (Fig 8a), or the commercially operated mezzanine café (Figure 8b). This choice presents something of a dilemma. While the café offers pre-prepared refreshments - particularly the delicious café latte, a personal favourite - the kitchen encourages collegial interaction and continued bodily engagement in the preparation of a drink. In Turner’s (1982) characterization, this dilemma may be viewed as the choice between the ‘liminoid’ latte, a playful, self-indulgent distraction from work in the organized space of the café area, and the ‘liminal’ kitchen, a space produced in an ongoing process of interaction and textual exchange.

The visibility of the café area to other organizational actors in moving to and from other spaces of work, and its embeddedness within the organizational architecture, both physically and culturally, suggests it may not really be a liminal space. If I find myself here I set my
coffee cup on the espresso machine and press the button for my large latte. Looking around the café tables half-curious, half-nervous I wonder whether there will be a conversation. Is there someone to have a social chat or exchange research notes with, or will someone ask a work question? By contrast the comparative seclusion of the galley kitchen, and the scope for social space-making – personal mugs left on the drainer and in cupboards, food and drinks in the fridge or sometimes left out to share and a wall mounted, pinboard for social messages – suggests that it may qualify more readily. In there I pour hot water from the boiler into my small cafetiere or into my mug with a tea bag. I allow it to brew and look out of the glass wall across the tops of the trees outside. Someone may join me and strike up a conversation which may or may not be about work, I don’t mind! Something about the place – seclusion? Light? A view of the world outside? The absence of any forms of organizational control? No seats? - encourages it. Time spent there is only brief, but always feels productive.

Fig 8a and 8b Spaces of liminality? Galley kitchen and café/eating area

In recent years Faculty managers have adopted another form of ritual based around a refreshment break, a monthly afternoon tea event hosted by each department in turn. This seeks to engender a sense of community across the Faculty, which facilitates cross-departmental working. For the tea event, I have already prepared my drink at the kitchen across the landing. I wander over, seeking cake and gearing myself for questions about a recent piece of work I will have communicated more widely to staff. I am on duty, on display as one of the Faculty managers

The question arises whether this ritual constitutes a liminal event. Certainly in Turner’s (1969) terms this is a temporary suspension of structured routines and cultural norms and is located away from normal spaces of work. The siting is however most often in a landing area
between departmental wings which effectively acts as a standing corporate exhibition area for external visitors (see fig 9). We question therefore whether, despite its rhetorical claims to encourage community interaction and apparent temporary dissolution of hierarchical boundaries between organizational actors, this type of event can constitute the power/status flattening form of communitas through which a group or community produces a liminal spatial text.

Fig 9 Hosting space for departmental tea events

Conclusion

In this paper we claim that an examination of the personal experience of the individual organizational actor in seeking refreshment breaks from their work, using the methods of visual auto-ethnography offers detailed insights into the liminality of organizational spaces. We concur with Wasserman et al. (2012) and Shortt (2015) that there are peripheral places in the workplace, 'betwixt and between' the formal managed places of structured work routines, which can be constituted as liminal space. We also agree with Küpers (2011) that movement through and into these places facilitate liminal experience, and that refreshment breaks – the titular 'coffee break' – are liminal phenomena. We argue however that the liminal spaces in the workplace are socially produced (Lefebvre, 1991) in agentic acts of spacing (Beyes and Steyaert, 2012) brought together with those of others. In terms of Turner's (1969) classic conceptualization of liminality we view these as spontaneous acts of communitas, which temporarily dissolve hierarchical differences and status boundaries, in favour of a shared,
ambiguous, potentially creative practices. It is these acts which we argue constitute liminal space in the workplace.

We also argue however that the nature of these productive acts are intertextual (Kristeva, 1980) in two senses: firstly that symbolic and communicative meaning-making (textual production) inheres in the process of spatial production; secondly that individual actors bring their own textual readings and understandings to combine with others in a production process, which is relational. Where pre-structured organizational places are visited or pre-planned organizational rituals are adhered to in refreshment breaks, their ambiguities, dangers and creative potential is dampened, which we argue raises questions about their liminal nature.

We have focused our attention in this paper on the experience of liminal spacing by one of the co-authors, a privileged, managerial organizational actor, through the device of a co-constructed visual auto-ethnography. We pursue our argument further through the methodological device of the dialogic visual auto-ethnography. The production of a visual autho-ethnographic account, provides a particular contribution to our understanding of space as intertextual, Using the ideas of Ingold (2008) and Küpers (2012), we attend to details of the individual actor’s bodily movements through space, allowing us to view these as both productive of space, and holding liminal potential for transition and transformation. This highlights the recursive relationship between processes and actors, which we also view as inherent in all spatial production. We also gain insights into this paratext of the (micro) politics inherent in spatial production through the ways in which liminal spacing is not only bounded by authority structures, but also imbued with and by power relations. This begins to hint at a complex, and potentially mutually constitutive relationship between liminal and organizational spacing, which we think may be worthy of further research.

It is recognized from the outset that this individual practice of liminal spacing through the ritual (Turner, 1969) of a refreshment break is merely one contribution to the more relational processes of intertextuality by which colleagues gather to produce a text of liminal space. These processes incorporate movement from their work position and a pre-liminal preparation, the liminal walking to and around a place of refreshment, and a post-liminal phase of re-incorporation into work with their walk back. This intertextual process is viewed as holding ambiguous potential for creativity, humour and temporary identity change as well
as the risk of loss of this temporary self-autonomy in the movement past colleagues and managers who may seek to re-engage them with work concerns.

Finally we claim that the methodology here allows us to articulate the ideas of paratext and genotext in an intertextual framing of liminal spaces in the workplace, through examining photographs of liminal experiences. This explicitly rejects a naïve-realist, empiricist framing of the use of photography as providing ‘evidence’ of the validity or efficacy of a particular theory in the context of this study. Instead we posit the practices of photography here as part of the intertextual process of spatial production which incorporates an ongoing process of theorizing. The researchers’ account is presented as a paratext (Genette, 1997; Gray, 2010) – an intrinsic part of intertextuality which introduces readers/viewers to this process of meaning making as active participants. The photographs themselves may be viewed as genotexts (Kristeva, 1980) or individual cultural artefacts around which space/meaning is produced.

References


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