

## A Feast of Liminal Experiences and Expressions

Paul Stenner, Open University

### Abstract

This contribution is a commentary which builds upon the thesis that the worlds-within-worlds that constitute the obvious contents of human culture (play, sport, song, painting, film, theatre, ritual, prayer, pilgrimage, travel, therapy, etc.) have their source and their vocation in liminal experiences between worlds. They are provoked into becoming by the liminal experiences that they in turn serve to resolve. In this respect, cultural experiences are the source of an inventiveness that necessarily transcends personal existence, but that in transcending it, affords the realisation of its continuity. The cultural devices people active use to manage and provoke liminal experience have been called liminal affective technologies. Liminal affective technologies, including ludic, sacred and aesthetic varieties, operate with or on time in a cultural zone that is conceivable as a world-within-a-world. This contribution develops this idea using examples from the current volume, including film, child's play, pilgrimage, art therapy, ecstatic communion and song. These function as 'as if' worlds-within-worlds which - having their source in liminal experiences between worlds - enable the devising of experiences that help people to make new sense of their existence during life transitions. This commentary will give particular attention to operations with or on time, and how these operations are crucial to new sense making.

### Introduction

Liminal affective technologies, whether ludic, sacred, aesthetic, therapeutic, or some other variety, operate with or on time in a cultural zone that is conceivable as a world-within-a-world. In this volume we see discussion of several examples, from film to child's play to pilgrimage to art therapy to ecstatic communion to song. My thesis is that these 'as if' worlds-within-worlds have their source in liminal experiences *between* worlds, and that – via this source - they enable the *devising* of experiences that help people to make new sense of their existence during life transitions. This commentary will give particular attention to operations with or on time, and how these operations are crucial to new sense making.

Writing this commentary gave me better insight into why Francis Bacon considered that some texts 'are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested'. Bacon was making the point that there are different ways of reading proper to different kinds of texts, but also that the way a text is ingested and digested will also depend upon the constitution and experience of the reader. What a feast of texts have been prepared in this volume!

### Alien food: aesthetic technologies and dream

When reporting how his life changed as a very young man when his father died in 1579, Bacon wrote: 'I myself remember, that being in Paris, and my father dying in London, two or three days before my father's death, I had a dream, which I told to divers English gentlemen, that my father's house in the country was plastered all over with black mortar' (Scott, 1908, p. xxiv). Whilst between worlds, Bacon dreamed (a world-within-a-world). Irreversible time precludes the possibility that Bacon knew of the fact of his father's death before it happened, but in another sense, thanks to our capacity to entertain the future, we all know death before it happens, especially our own. How we can live and dream with this knowledge is a different question. But what about the dreams we do not have? What, about the undreamed dreams

which, as Tania Zittoun (TZ) puts it in her evocatively crafted contribution, ‘may just wait for us until we are ready to dialogue with them, and to open ourselves up to imagine and live what is yet to come’?

What do aliens eat? TZ brings to the table a rich and far-reaching analysis of the film *Arrival*. The film crystallizes many of the issues dealt with in this volume. An emergent event: a new arrival constitutes an ‘uh oh!’ experience which poses an existential challenge to a world whose present now becomes past and whose future becomes unclear. This is the arrival of the liminal present of a world-between-worlds. A process of metamorphosis follows in which the new ‘alien’ arrival is encountered, and then gradually incorporated into a world that is new in so far as its pattern has shifted to ‘incorporate’ the alien. Those who go through the passage emerge different on the ‘other side’, although the process of becoming also allows continuity. The world at stake can be that of an individual or, as in this case, a wider collective. Hence in the midst of the liminal occasion opened up by the novel event of alien arrival, the main character, Banks, is shown *going through* a transformation which will eventually change, not just her, but also the global situation of humankind. Banks’ spontaneous liminal experience (as presented in the film) comes to be mediated by a liminal affective technology: the surreal smoky rings of the alien ‘heptapod’ language. Learning the alien’s language changes Banks’ dreams and disrupts her sense of time, *liminalizes* it. For example, when she dreams of the death of her child the viewer initially takes this to be a disturbing dream of a past trauma triggered by the alien arrival. But as events unfold it becomes apparent that the dream is not a memory but a premonition of the death of an as yet unborn child. But it is precisely Banks’ vision of a future yet to come which changes the course of events between humans and heptapods. We finally understand that the aliens have arrived because – also capable of seeing the future – they know that their survival long-term depends upon future collaboration with earthlings. Notwithstanding the particular deaths of Abbot, Costello and Banks’ child, the future of humans and heptapods alike is saved from destruction *thanks to the access to the future granted by the dream*. By means of its depiction of Banks’ experience of liminalised temporality, *Arrival* thus takes its viewer through their own curious experience with temporality, calling time into question and making it a matter for pondering and digestion, as if an entire cosmology and an entire future were at stake.

#### **Ecstatic wafer and communion wine: between the sacred and the aesthetic**

Robert Innis (RI) offers us soul-food, something comparable to a communion wafer. He concentrates attention on two historical experiences: St Teresa’s convent ecstasy and Phillip Larkin’s melancholy of churches. I am grateful to RI for engaging with my work so thoughtfully, and for finding this new way of *not* dismissing experiences such as those of St Teresa and Phillip Larkin. He directs our attention to the sacred sphere and its close relation with the aesthetic (Bernini’s sculpture and Larkin’s poetry). He also helps further finesse the distinction between spontaneous and devised liminal experience by zooming with precision onto a particular type of experience had by what might be called *liminal specialists*. But he argues that St Teresa, Bernini and Larkin exemplify a liminality that moves *within* a world rather than *between* worlds. Neither St Teresa during her ecstasy nor Larkin in his church seem to be *between worlds* in the sense of going through a life transition, and hence, RI suggests, my analysis hits a limit.

But must we follow RI in viewing these experiences, and the liminal affective technologies (LATs) which support them, less as a liminal movement beyond the self, and more as stabilising and supporting a pre-existing self? St Teresa had entered the Carmelite Monastery

in Avila, Spain, in 1835 at the age of 20, but even though she had already taken her vows, her autobiography suggests that her famous experience occurred as part of a protracted conversion experience that began 20 years later. Conversion surely suggests a degree of movement *between* worlds. It would certainly be a mistake to frame St Teresa's liminal experience as spontaneous. St Teresa – like Bernini, Larkin and Emerson – was a specialist *deviser* of liminal experience who devoted much of her life to an existence in something like permanent liminality. The Carmelite Monastery can be conceived as a veritable machine of 'spiritual exercises' brimming with devices and techniques for the production of sacred experience. One can only imagine the years of dedicated devotion it took to produce an ecstatic experience capable of lasting several days! This level of dedication is surely rivalled only by artists (like Bernini and Larkin). The intimate connection between sacred and aesthetic LATs is starkly exhibited both in the relation between Bernini's sculpture and St Teresa's rapture, and in the poet's repeated encounter with churches. As liminal specialists they worked on and with LATs of various kinds throughout their lives. But what this means is that, more than most, they lived their lives within their preferred worlds-within-worlds. Where most of us read poems and sermons written by others, they devoted their lives to *creating* by means of these LATs. The world *within* which they moved was already a liminal world-within-a-world and, through it, they situated themselves permanently between worlds.

We should recall that Victor Turner's notion of permanent liminality was informed by his study of monastic and mendicant existences within world religions. In the world-within-a-world of a convent or monastery, certain features typical of transition rites (abstaining from sex, observing diets, separation of genders, wearing habits, etc) are prolonged in time or rendered permanent. The nuns and monks are expected to live their lives as a tightly knit community in relative isolation and to specialize in accessing a world beyond the mundane existence outside the walls. It occurred to Turner that the features of a short-lived liminal passage had been fixed in space/time as a permanent institution. What St Teresa, in her ecstasy, was 'stabilizing' and 'supporting' was not her existing self, but her capacity to *move beyond herself*. Bernini rendered that same experience of liminality permanent in marble. We should ask why Stendhal's devout monk took pains to point out the easy confusion of Bernini's sculpture with profane pleasure. In this experience - and without denying the *considerable* share of the body - St Teresa surely found herself *beyond the pleasure principle*. She was reaching a *beyond* – ever 'creeping in at the edges' (see Morgan et al) - from which to experience anew. Her experience was surely intimate with what Emerson called 'prayer': 'contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view'. Larkin too, in trying to move beyond himself, found himself ever returning to the 'serious house' he discovered in churches, and wondering about his motives which seemed to come from a place beyond pleasure.

### **Samosa and a 'sex on the beach' cocktail: time out for ludic pleasures**

Sanna Schlieve and Sébastien Tutenges (SS/ST) take us far from convent ecstasies and church visits to the liberties of young Danes visiting a Bulgarian holiday resort, or while ex-patriated in India, but continuities remain. They portray the irresponsible behaviour of the former, and present the latter as exploiting the oppressive labour conditions of local workers. SS/ST modify William James' notion of a 'moral holiday' to show how the ordinary moral principles people might be expected to observe 'at home' can be temporarily suspended when 'away', but without any sense of moral failing. Metaphorical moral holidays, it seems, enable actual immoral holidays. Morality, write SS/ST, is 'always with us' and there is no 'neutral standpoint'. But what does this have to do with liminality? Whilst not wishing to make light of the moral issues SS/ST rightly raise, I take issue with their tendency to reduce the meaning of

liminality to a *social representation* through which semantic mediation a positive meaning is given to conduct that should be condemned as immoral. Their primary concern is that the ludic pleasures of leisure allow their participants a sense of immunity from morality. The Danish workers they studied in India could ignore international labour standards *because* they told themselves the story that their current existence is merely temporary (they are ‘as-if’ on vacation in ‘a very fancy hotel’).

Essentially, SS/ST argue that indulgence in moral holidays is not some natural fact of human nature but is guided and supported by *social representations* which encourage people to *construct* being ‘away from home’ as a liminal moment of freedom, and to perpetuate that construction in their communications. Taken to an extreme, this perspective might hold that what we call ‘liminality’ is, in fact, nothing but a social representation: something we enact because it has been constructed as a permissible reality by social representations. It is a short step then to *blame* talk of ‘liminality’ for moral failings as if it were reducible to the positive declaration, ‘here and now, everything is permitted’. Hence SS/ST suggest that a ‘traveling rite’ (representation of liminality) is what *prevents* their participants from *feeling* the apparent immorality of their conduct. Despite a concluding observation that occasionally ‘letting go’ may have some health benefits, the general tone takes a dim view of ‘debauched’, ‘corrupt activities’, ‘atrocities’ and ‘forbidden vices’.

I have argued, from a different theoretical perspective, that liminality is a vitally important aspect of reality. Indeed, liminality scholarship opens up ways of addressing how moral orders are themselves re-valued and transformed in the historical process. For example, surely the observer position tacitly occupied by SS/ST is *part of* a broader genealogy of morals in which the source of morality itself is thoroughly questioned? SS/ST judge their participants from a broadly Durkheimian position of social scientific authority. Zumwalt (1982) and Thomassen (2016, p.7) have teased out some longstanding conflicts between the Durkheimian tradition (which social representations theory is part of) and liminality scholarship. Discussing the meaning of liminality, Thomassen (2016, p.7) advises ‘a reflexive use of the term, rooted in its intellectual and anthropological history, with due stress on the concepts of experience and transition’. For Thomassen, the Durkheimian tradition is precisely *not* the intellectual root of liminality scholarship, but a tradition against which liminality scholars since van Gennep have struggled. This point is important, but can be over-exaggerated (Turner continued to draw inspiration from Durkheim). Nevertheless, despite engaging with some aspects of liminality theory, SS/ST tend to reduce liminality to social representations and attack the experiential relevance of transition with striking assertions like ‘when people travel... no matter how far, *they never move into unknown territory*’. This claim, surely questionable, is encouraged by the very definition of a social representation as functioning to render familiar, known and communicable what might otherwise be unfamiliar and strangely ineffable. When figured as a social representation, liminality morphs from a theoretical account of transition into a type of semantic glue that either ‘makes it possible to retain a stable moral experience’ or, on the contrary, anchors the possibility of amoral conduct. So, what difference would adopting a process approach attuned to liminality make here? I offer five observations:

First, whilst I agree that the activities of Danish youth in Sunny Beach can be usefully construed in terms of a culturally devised mode of experience, I disagree that this ‘is a “devised liminality” (Stenner 2017) *in the sense that it is purposefully designed to create moments of histrionic release*’. Liminal experience is experience of, or facilitative of, *passage* and not mere ‘histrionic release’. It is about becoming and not simply about permitting the pleasure principle its moment of freedom from the usual strictures of reality. Indeed, to the extent that SS/ST are

correct that their participants *do not* experience passage, applying the concept of liminality becomes problematic.

Second, although I deviate from Turner's rather epochal (and *Durkheimian*) distinction between liminal and liminoid, the latter notion certainly opens unavoidable questions for SS/ST. Turner directly associates the liminal with *mechanical solidarity* in which collective representations have a common meaning that is absolutely binding on the conduct of all members. Liminal phenomena are thus obligatory, sacred, collective, socially integral and ultimately functionally supportive of the social order. In societies characterized by *organic solidarity*, by contrast, ritual liminality is superseded by liminoid phenomena which are largely optional, secular, individualized, socially marginal and often critical of the social order (in Moscovici's parallel argument in the field of 'knowledge', an optional multitude of 'social representations' superseded unitary and binding 'collective representations'). *Liminal* phenomena, from this perspective, occur in pre-industrial societies where a deep distinction obtained, precisely not between work and leisure, but between sacred work and profane work. Turner thus defines liminal phenomena as 'ergic-ludic' because work and play were *not to be clearly differentiated*. Ritual was the seriously playful work of articulating human existence with divine work and play (Turner, 1982, p.52). Liminal experience unfolds, as it were, between cosmological and earthly practice, recurrently articulating local human activity into the widening circles of society, world and cosmos. A rite of passage fleetingly exposes each passenger to the rhythms and mysteries of a whole cosmic organum. For Turner, the move from liminal to liminoid was associated with factors like the separation of church and state within modern capitalistic economies underpinned by the alliance of science and technology. Under industrial capitalism the difference between mundane work and leisure becomes a basic structural division and rituals are made increasingly subservient to rationalism and individualism. In place of a divine cosmological work of natural rhythms the new 'organic solidarity' aims to order human work technologically and politically, including providing leisure opportunities. Turner traces these developments to sixteenth century England and notes the significance of Francis Bacon's publication of *Novum Organum* in 1620, a liminoid work that 'definitely linked scientific with technical knowledge' and both with power (Turner, 1982, p.53). The sacred, we might say, increasingly withdrew from both work (reality principle) and leisure (pleasure principle). I say 'increasingly' because Weber drew attention to the manner in which the religious ethic of Protestantism at first came to reside in *serious work* during the course of Western modernization (in direct antagonism to the kind of sacred source St Teresa was exploring in her playful work). As Turner put it referring to Calvinism and puritanism: 'Work and leisure were made separate spheres and "work" became sacred' (Turner, 1982, p.38). When Larkin, a self-proclaimed Anglican agnostic, found himself lurking in the 'serious house' of the church he had rejected, he was nevertheless acting in consistency with the protestant dislike of ritual and other externalities: the serious work is the important thing (e.g. the poet's vocation), and the enemy is the 'cakes and ale' of sinful luxury (as the Calvinists liked to put it). Deprivation, Larkin himself observed, was to him what daffodils were to Wordsworth. What is required is a moralistic self-examination of conduct in order to further self-discipline and root-out indulgences (the devil finds work for idle hands). Leisure pursuits – sport in particular – became disciplined and professionalized, a tolerated release of superfluous energy (working engines 'letting off steam'). But, as Weber showed, after a few generations this religious spirit largely evaporated leaving just a valorization of a systematic capitalistic approach to ever-expanding profits that could now be happily rewarded via the pleasures of hard-earned leisure and consumption. The crucial liminal feature of organon-guided transition gave way to a private 'me' space for pleasure, leisure, entertainment or self-development.

Third, I therefore suggest *reversing* SS/ST's analysis. The problems they observe are precisely due to *lack* of liminal experience. In a different contribution, TM/RD/SB correctly observe that my own approach to liminality opposes any 'defaulting to pre-existing "experiences" commonly regarded as liminal' (p.4). The concept cannot be applied as if it were an 'observable it'. We must refuse the tendency – increasingly common in the growing liminality literature – simply to assume that anyone in a situation vaguely characterisable as 'betwixt and between' is therefore liminal. In my account liminal experience is a concrete experience of disruption or interruption within a given actual stream of experience. I have characterized this in a simplified way as an 'uh oh!' experience (Stenner, 2017, Chapter 3). The problem that SS/ST identify with their participants is precisely that they are *unperturbed* and *carry on as usual*, despite events that should make them say 'uh oh!' The 'social representations' these participants draw upon *immunize them from liminality*. Far from 'instructing the Danes that they are in a liminal situation' these representations preclude it, leaving them *unmoved*. They are not themselves 'liminal' but an abstract parody of liminality, a parody that my approach guards against. Contra Turner, this does not preclude the possibility of liminal experience in these domains, but perhaps renders it less likely. The analytically interesting points to focus on are those moments of doubt when participants, despite their representations, begin to entertain a demand to think and feel differently: to *move* or become otherwise. For example, SS/ST would do well to attend to the moment at which Eya *does* waver and say 'I am a bit embarrassed about it now'.

Commented [P1]: Check pagination

Fourth, whilst experience and action may never be unmediated by culture, social representations are not the only mediators. To the extent that social representations render unfamiliar experiences familiar they function in a *structuralizing way* (they bolster expectations and enhance predictability). LATS, by contrast, do not structuralize but *liminalize*. They do not *enhance* 'the expected' in order to facilitate the probability of predictable actualization: rather they *suspend* expectations to increase the pool of available possibilities (Andersen and Stenner, 2020). Liminal affective technologies serve not to regularize experience into the patterns of normative order but to foster and manage liminal experiences beyond existing limited structural patterns.

Finally, before invoking the authority of William James we should not forget that when he briefly invoked his notion of a 'moral holiday' in his lectures on pragmatism, far from being moralistic, he was playfully critiquing the would-be moral certainties of many of his contemporaries. For James identifying something as a moral holiday is not to condemn it. Indeed, as he states in the second of these lectures, it is his 'disbelief in the Absolute' that leads him to 'fully believe in the legitimacy of taking moral holidays'<sup>1</sup>. James was seriously interested in religion and open to the real problem of the experiential sources of morality. In these same lectures he describes how pragmatism 'will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences'. Hence James was open to the possibility that, for example, St Teresa was seeking the sources of morality in her ecstatic experience, and not just indulging in a little moral holidays, secretly snatching squalid sexual sensations under the loosened cloak of religious devotion. In sum, although SS/ST deal with ludic pleasure, we find echoes of the sacred and its critique (echoes of Luther's reformations to eradicate the purchase of the 'moral holidays' he called *indulgences*?).

<sup>1</sup> See

[https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Lumen\\_Learning/Book%3A\\_The\\_Originals%3A\\_Classic\\_Readings\\_in\\_Webern\\_Philosophy\\_\(Lumen\)/03%3A\\_Epistemology/03.6%3A\\_William\\_James\\_\\_On\\_Pragmatism](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Lumen_Learning/Book%3A_The_Originals%3A_Classic_Readings_in_Webern_Philosophy_(Lumen)/03%3A_Epistemology/03.6%3A_William_James__On_Pragmatism)

### **Bento box on the road: pilgrimage as awakening of the sacred**

Zachary Beckstead (ZB) also discusses ‘travel’ of sorts, but in his authoritative discussion of pilgrimage he takes seriously the possibility of liminal transformation. He affirms an expectation that ‘the returning traveller is not the same as when they left’, but instead of reducing these expectations to the prescriptive content of a social representation, he analyses their mediation as part of a liminal affective technology.

A process philosophical starting point is crucial here. He begins – via Ernst Boesch - with an account of human experience as existing in a tension between familiarity and foreignness: we long both for a home and for an unfamiliar *beyond*. We seek novelty as much as security. As actual entities, we are constantly becoming what we are, and hence concepts of ‘movement’ or ‘transition’ acquire two senses: first, like a stone flying through the air, our bodies move across space from position *a* to position *b* etc., and second there is the movement through which the entity we *are* ceaselessly becomes what it is. The first is observable as if from the outside, the second is experienced from within. As SS/ST affirm, we can move in the first sense without seeming to move in the second sense. And yet in fact we are always moving in the second sense: one experience follows another which gives rise to another, and no two experiences are identical. But under canonical circumstances all this movement - and all the little differences that enter into each new pulse of experience – is absorbed into a seamless sense of unified continuity ‘had’ by a subject (Husserl’s ‘natural attitude’). Hence a direct identity is felt between who they were 1 second ago, 1 hour ago, 1 day ago (before going to sleep and after waking up) and even years ago when a small child. Within this stream of continuity even radical ruptures and remarkable novelties can be quickly absorbed: even after severe brain damage, the pulse of experience, though perhaps compromised, is still unified, and – as it were - the gap is closed. But these jolts beyond the routine equilibrium can also be retained in a new ongoing sense of a turning point having occurred: Swann before and after he fell in love. After Hamlet’s death, new unrealized ideals shape Horatio’s future. This is possible because - unlike a stone moving through space - a person experiences themselves within their passing environment, entertains futural expectations, is disappointed or pleased by what is encountered, and reflects upon what might have been and might be, entertaining alternatives and suffering matters of fact. In our actuality, we are each of us a composition of movement, and as such we can be moved in our movement, but any transformation is soon re-absorbed into experiential business as usual, and even those things we promise ourselves never to forget can slip away.

Examining some particular pilgrimage experiences, ZB shows how, as it unfolds, the pilgrimage route is carefully designed to move pilgrims out of their ordinary worlds and to engender progressively more extraordinary experiences of a world-within-a-world. Furthermore, despite the fact that only a minority will have explicitly religious motivations, he suggests that many enter their journey after or during significant life ruptures (declining health, loss of a loved one, etc), or because they are seeking alternatives to their past lives. In this sense, for many, pilgrimage ‘is a quintessential... *world within and between worlds*’. It serves as a LAT to frame, nourish and re-work the spontaneous liminal experiences of those who are *between worlds* by means of engagement with a potentializing *world within worlds*. Again, radical specificity is needed here and not blanket generalizations like ‘all pilgrims *x*’: some pilgrims simply enjoy a pleasant liminoid walk from *a* to *b* and some are ‘topping up’ on a familiar adventure. Whether and how a given pilgrimage functions as a LAT cannot be stated in advance or abstracted from the concrete material and semiotic conditions at play (see Martina Cabra, this volume). Conceived as a LAT in ZB’s hands, pilgrimage also reveals itself

to be a time machine. This is not simply a matter of taking time out from the normal routines. The passage of the pilgrim, he remarks, is a conduit for movement across 'a boundary between the past and the future'. The path walked by so many over so many years is sowed with memories of Gods and heroes. The path to Mt. Koya, for example, is strewn with a multitude of Jizo statues, each symbolizing a dead spirit ripe for re-awakening. The *Danjogoran* is haunted by Kobo Daishi himself. Thus as the pilgrim's long walk leaves their workaday life behind, so in its place is summoned an extraordinary world beyond linear time, through which a walker's life is connected to a collective past beyond living memory, which in turn stretches forward to the infinite. The little biography of one's individual life is enfolded and uplifted into a cosmic 'zoology'.

I was fortunate enough to visit Koyasan with my son just as he was turning 18, and by a stroke of fortune we arrived just on the evening that the path within Okunoin was being lit by candle-bearing pilgrims filing towards the mausoleum of Kobo Daishi. We had not anticipated encountering these pilgrims and our own journey had been just two days in transit by jet, train, bus and funicular, but exhausting enough! Now, finally, here we were at dusk, passing through the ancient forest containing 200,000 gravestones of monks, each apparently awaiting the resurrection of the future Buddha. We were given our own candles to plant in the ground in the name of guiding the return, for a flickering moment, of dead loved ones: re-awakened from the past in order to participate in our future. This was indeed 'unknown territory' and neither Ezra nor myself will ever forget it.

#### **Imaginary milk from a bottle: repetition and ludic becomings**

Martina Cabra deftly examines children's play through a liminal lens and shows us that what is enjoyed in play can be a serious business. We usually think of play as fun, we do it out of pure pleasure, the lighter the better, as when a smiling child offers imaginary milk to a playmate. But like all cultural experiencing, play has a liminal source, sharing it's 'world-within-world' quality with ritual, theatre, art, etc. These too can be fun, light and easy, but – going a little deeper – when necessary (as it so often is) they allow us a safe space to 'enjoy' and work-through more frightening possibilities of tragedy, pain, loss, terror, death. This is why Winnicott argued that the secret of psychotherapy is to create conditions that allow those who are suffering, whose way has been blocked, to learn to play once more, play being the source of creativity and a precondition for self-development.

Freud (1959, p.174) – himself deeply inspired by Greek (and Shakespearian) tragedy - also saw the connection between play and the arts, observing that every 'playing child behaves like a poet, in that it creates a world of its own, or more accurately expressed, it transports things into its own world'. The cultural experiencing that happens in worlds-within-and-between-worlds is thus a form of enjoyment – within the limits of those worlds - of things that precisely *cannot* be reduced to hedonistic pleasure. Indeed, when grappling with such issues in his essay *Beyond the pleasure principle*, Freud (1920) critically reflects upon his own assumptions about the psychic relevance of 'pleasure'. He starts to question his previous commitment to the idea that forms like play and dream and masochism are essentially surreptitious ways of snatching (coded) pleasure-rewards (e.g. 'wish-fulfillment') from behind the back of consciousness. He reaches for a more sophisticated, processual understanding. Play itself leads Freud 'beyond' pleasure when he observes that 'in their play children repeat everything that has made a great impression on them in real life' ... 'If the doctor looks down a child's throat or carries out some small operation on him, we can be quite sure that these frightening experiences will be the subject of the next game'.



In the fieldwork described in her contribution, MC finds exactly this pattern of ‘repetition’ when Natalie and Luke – two young twins - ‘play out’ their anxieties around their imminent transition from Kindergarten to school. She shows how this case provides a neat example of how play *qua* LAT can work as a world-within-and-between-worlds (the twins are classically ‘in-between-worlds’ and they are both perturbed by the big step which will newly distance them from their parents). A participant observer, MC joins in their playing and pretends to be a baby, crying because she misses her mom. Natalie and Luke comfort her, giving imaginary milk from an imaginary bottle and warming her with a cape, while uttering soothing words like ‘You will have fun and mommy comes back tonight, ok?’ ... ‘Yes darling, we come back later... Now we need to go to work’. The value of this seems clear: through the mediation of a LAT (in this case, joint play), spontaneously arising liminality can be explored and newly symbolised in an enjoyable environment that is held in suspense from what is *not* play. Spontaneous experiences that *happen* to one, (especially those that threaten a passive downswerve in capacities to affect and be affected) can thus be re-worked in a devised sphere wherein one encounters or discovers new more positive possibilities for *becoming active*.

But in this case (as perhaps in every case) it is important to qualify what it means for something to *happen* to one. At time of playing, the actual transition to school had *not yet happened* to Natalie and Luke, and – most likely - what *had* happened is that they had been told by their parents that it *will* happen. What has happened to them is this telling of what will happen: the ‘uh oh!’ is an event pre-saging another event that *will soon happen*. According to my somewhat caricatured characterisation, the process of a spontaneous liminal experience is inaugurated by a disconcerting ‘uh oh!’ or ‘this is not’ experience of rupture, and resolved – often with the help of devised liminal experience - through an insightful experience of ‘ah ha!’ At stake in the process of restoring a lost ‘balance’ is a working-out of the *meaning* of what has happened and, as a consequence, the meaning of what will happen in the future. This makes time newly relevant. But the equilibrium-restoring ‘ah ha!’ insight is not guaranteed and the disturbed process of symbolization must be actually gone through. MC astutely observes the relevance of time when she notes how in ‘those 30 minutes of play, we lived through 3 or 4 months of life’. The play allowed time to be greatly condensed and rendered into a form manipulable by, and encounterable by, the three players. Luke and Natalie ‘ventriloquated’ into their play the soothing words - from the recent past or imagined future of - their parents (‘we’re right next door’ etc). Devising this playful time machine thus allowed the twins to translate the problems of their own lives into a frame that is broad and pleasant enough to facilitate a feeling through of their ‘between worlds’ predicament. Here we see exactly the relation between art and life that concerns us in this volume: the once dreaded future of life *beyond the play* becomes a little more manageable and desirable thanks to a certain re-temporalisation that is picked out and experienced in the play.

Freud is on exactly this path when he observes in *Beyond* how repetition of unpleasantness in play allows the player to ‘abreact the strength of the impression and, as one might put it, make themselves master of the situation’ (p. 286). In his famous discussion of the *fort-da* game of his nephew, Freud understands that thanks to the move from the micro-tragedy of act 1 (‘Uh Oh... mummy/toy is gone!’) to the more joyful act 2 (‘Ah ha... mummy/toy is back’) the child ‘passes over from the passivity of the experience to the activity of the game’. In this phase of his thinking, Freud is surely correct to note, albeit implicitly, the commonalities between the liminal cultural spheres of play, dream, art, theatre and therapy and to identify these as safe sites within which the spontaneous disturbances following a shock (he discusses war-trauma) can be progressively worked-through. But in a curious way Freud both *opens up* these insights

and immediately nudges them off-stage in favour of his new favourite actor, *Thanatos*. For example, he recognizes the positive possibility that ‘children repeat unpleasurable experiences... [because] they can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they could by merely experiencing it passively’. But he immediately dismisses this as a mere ‘*additional reason*’ subservient to his preferred idea that the compulsion to repeat expresses a ‘daemonic’ will to death. Indeed Freud repeatedly uses the word *daemonic* to describe the ‘compulsions to repeat’ that best illustrate motivations beyond the pleasure principle. Certainly a person repeating a disturbing experience in play or dream or art or literature or therapy may *feel as if they were somehow possessed* by a force beyond their comprehension, since there are indeed unconscious forces at play here that escape the usual pleasure-and-reality-principle-oriented self-interested rationality. But it is surely problematic to assert from an external vantagepoint of scientific expertise that they are indeed possessed by a daemonic will that craves nothing but death.

I raise this limitation of Freud’s *Beyond* because I want to chew-over one aspect of MC’s excellent contribution with which I disagree: her overly stark distinction between process thought (which allegedly deals only with flux and passage) and cultural psychology (which she suggests can equip process thought with a much needed dose of stability and repetition via notions like materiality and pattern). I do not see such a binary, first because process thought deals *above all* with continuity and second because much cultural psychology *is* processual (see Valsiner, 2014, Chapter 2 in particular). As MC correctly judges, my target in writing *Theorising liminality between art and life* was captured in the subtitle: *The liminal sources of cultural experience*. I imagined bringing a gift to the feast of cultural psychology which adds a new dimension to Jaan Valsiner’s second chapter: an elaboration of Winnicott’s insight that something remarkable is at play in ‘cultural experiencing’: ‘a continual *inventiveness* that provides a *continuity* that *transcends* personal existence’ (PS, *this volume*). Winnicott (p.134) uses italics to ward off any ‘either/or’ between novelty and stability: ‘*it is not possible to be original except on a basis of tradition*’.

Worldviews have long oscillated between basic conceptions of flux and permanence. Whitehead is clear that his philosophy is not a metaphysics of flux but an effort to accommodate both orientations. Ontologies of substance are skewed towards a permanence they take for granted. They assume that to be an *actual entity* is to be a substance with qualities. A hard, grey stone is paradigmatic of actuality because it appears to exist independently *here* in space and *now* in time. It moves when we throw it and we can calculate the amount of time it takes to move across a given space. Excluding subjectivity from scientific calculations is here a positive advantage. Comparatively speaking, the stone *qua* system exhibits *stable equilibrium*. It can easily be ignored, but even a stone has a story of *becoming* when time is viewed on the macroscopic scale of geology or on the microscopic scale of quantum physics. When science took living creatures seriously as subject matter, and then human beings and their societies, it was harder to ignore the *internal* story of self-production, maintenance and becoming. New concepts like homeostasis, entropy/negentropy (and later *autopoiesis*) were developed and intimate relations between continuity and change, external and internal, were recognised as constitutive of ‘living systems’ (see Stenner, 2005). But as we move from stone through plant to animal, the ‘going through’ of those intimate relations calls increasingly for an adequate concept of experience. In first articulating such a concept, Whitehead emphasised that experience *involves a becoming*, ‘that becoming means that something becomes, and that what becomes involves repetition transformed into novel immediacy’ (136-7). Not *either* repetition *or* novelty, then, but *novelty thanks to repetition*.

Gilbert Simondon's distinction between stable equilibrium and *metastability* is relevant here (see Wrosczek and Sluneko, 2021). Following thermodynamic principles, stable equilibrium 'excludes the idea of becoming because it corresponds to the lowest level of potential energy possible; it is the sort of equilibrium that is attained in a system when all the possible transformations have been achieved and no other force remains to enact any further changes' (Simondon, 2020). Stable equilibrium, lacking potential, belongs to that which has exhausted the metastable dialogue between novelty and repetition: the inert, the dead, *Thanatos*. Metastability, by contrast, is a condition in which potentialities hover on the brink of individuation. It is not unique to living systems: the complementarity of wave and particle in quantum physics is metastable until 'collapsed' by a measurement, for example. A crystal too 'individuates' via a *physical* process through which the metastable chemical potentiality of a supersaturated solution is progressively actualized. With the emergence of life, however, the balance between repetitive and novel ways of actualizing metastable potentials is further skewed in the direction of novelty. A living system, being negentropic, must maintain its own systemic continuity through a constant actualization of newly generated potentials, and it must constantly regenerate its own source of potentiality. A living system, for example, *eats* from its environment, thus ongoingly renewing an internal supply of metastability by extracting from its food the potentials needed for the self-perpetuation of its operations (until it dies). Metastability is more than Bernard's homeostasis whereby a free life requires a stable internal milieu. It implies an ongoing and recurrent process starting from an *individuation* through which a metastable 'pre-individual' *becomes* an 'individual' (see Tucker, 2018). And once 'individuated', individualisation must ever start again, each actuality becoming one more potential ingredient for the next experience. It is the recurrence of this *pulse* between potentiality and actuality that yields yet more sensitivities to possibilities *beyond* rock-like repetition. With the further evolution of human mentality and sociality – mediated by layers of symbolic reference carried through experience with 'culture' – some of the potentials at play can be consciously entertained as alternatives.

Psychology, once it has eaten of this apple, cannot start with the notion of a fully formed individual but must broach the ontogenetic question of their individuation and of their arts of maintenance and transformation. Thus Nietzsche, the self-proclaimed 'first true psychologist' contrasted the equilibrium state of contemporary thermodynamics (a mere resting place for the identical, the inert, the de-differentiated) with the eternal *return*, where *return* meant precisely the opposite of stable equilibrium: namely, the (negentropic) *being* of that which *becomes*. Thus Winnicott invites us to consider the emergence of a 'unit self' as a process of individuation from out of a 'potential space'. Winnicott's third space/time shares with Simondon's metastable preindividual (2020) the *unformed* and *as if* quality of *potentiality-not-yet-actualised*. Thus Turner, writing in turn of liminal rites, described a *subjunctive* quality of 'trembling in the balance' (Turner, 1982, p.44). When Turner further elaborated his notion of *anti-structure*, he drew upon Sutton-Smith's theory of play as *protostructural*: a 'latent system of potential alternatives' which precedes and exceeds what he calls the 'working equilibrium... of normative structure'. In each case, something like a *process of experience* yields a new actuality through resolving the potentiality of the tensions, paradoxes and complementarities at play in a constantly renewed condition of metastability. We thus see a thread of continuity – not just between play, ritual, theatre etc as worlds-within-worlds of cultural experience – but also from physical to organic life through to human culture. If a living creature carries a supply of metastability by means of metabolism, human life – without abandoning this method – solves an homologous problem at the level of coordinated conduct by means of culture. We who live beyond the indicative in the subjunctive mood of what *might be* and what *might have been* thus find new cultural ways of juggling the balance between repetition and novelty. Starting with

ritual and play, these potentialization devices are the liminal affective technologies which summon and foster ‘as if’ worlds-within-worlds which feed an insatiable forward thrust into the future, opening new ways of creating and resolving the paradoxes of metastability (Andersen and Stenner, 2020).

In sum, the phenomena so astutely identified by Freud in *Beyond* are best understood as liminal features proper to a *metastable* system that has been thrown beyond the normative structure of its usual ‘working equilibrium’. From this perspective, the phenomena of the *Beyond* are concerned with a problematic of equilibration (to use Piaget’s term), but that problematic is precisely *not* about a return to the deathly condition of ‘thermodynamic’ *stable equilibrium*. We cannot blame Freud if he lacked an adequate account of liminal metastability and took forward instead the thermodynamic notion of stable equilibrium. But this mistaken premise prompted him to (temporarily?) posit a fundamental ‘death drive’ to explain the unpleasant repetitions that he discovered in experience ‘beyond the pleasure principle’. This led him to overemphasise the relationship between repetition and displeasure, and to underemphasise the creative possibilities of repetition (indeed, that repetition is in fact the very being of becoming). Freud derived his theory of pleasure from Gustave Fechner the inventor of psychophysics and inspiration behind modern psychology and, incidentally a Spinozist and the first significant theorist of the *limen*. Freud (p.277) himself attributes his equation of pleasure with stability and unpleasure with loss of stability to Gustave Fechner and acknowledges that his principle of constancy is merely ‘a special case under Fechner’s principle of the ‘tendency towards stability’’ (277). To follow the pleasure principle is to aim towards keeping the quantity of free excitation constant, or at least as low as circumstances permit. When Freud makes the remarkable move of ascribing *pleasure itself* to the death drive<sup>2</sup>, he is observing this connection between pleasure and the *restoration of a prior state of equilibrium*. Lacking a better concept of equilibrium - and *contra* Fechner<sup>3</sup> - Freud perceives this as a return to an entropic *stable equilibrium* associated with the inanimate inertness of death. But the ‘equilibrium’ of a living organism is never in fact stable in this manner.

Everything thus hangs on the characterization of the relation between stability and change, which is why I have laboured this critical point raised by MC. Certainly, once equipped with the concept of liminal metastability, it is apparent that when a person goes through a spontaneous liminal experience they are thrown out of a prior equilibrium and into a phase characterised by liminal affectivity. But that prior equilibrium was never an inert ‘stable equilibrium’ but rather that of a *form of process* that has (temporarily) become pivotal or canonical (regularized, habitual, structured, perhaps *harmonized like a recurring melody*). None of this means that Freud was wrong to reflect on trauma as a certain *undoing* of bound energy which calls for a renewed effort towards binding (Friston, 2010). And he is surely correct to recognize how a shocking event can dislodge the pleasure principle: it can ‘provoke a disturbance analogous to a traumatic neurosis; and only after the binding has been accomplished would it be possible for the dominance of the pleasure principle (and of its modification, the reality principle) to proceed unhindered.’ Only an already individuated ‘self’ can be ‘self-interested’ enough to follow and seek its experiences of pleasure. From this perspective, it is the liminal experience of being thrown ‘between worlds’ that opens ambivalent possibilities *beyond the pleasure principle*. The repetitions of the *Beyond* need not spell death but *more life* and indeed *more than life*. In short, an actual entity itself, being a

<sup>2</sup> ‘The pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts’ (Freud, 1920, p. 338).

<sup>3</sup> Fechner equated pleasure with the re-establishment of stability that follows its unpleasant disruption, but he never said that life is a bed of roses: ‘a tendency towards an aim does not imply that the aim is attained... the aim is attainable only by approximations’ (cited in Freud, 1920).

composition of movement (a form of process), can be moved in its movement and transformed in its mode of transformation. Liminal experience is experience of such movement and transformation.

### **The stone guest interrupts the feast: Liminality abandoned**

Beginning with Ulkeles's art and her creative feminist rethinking of Freud's death and life instincts, Tessa Morgan, Robbie Duschinsky and Stephen Barclay (TM/RD/SB *this volume*), describe continuity as an incessant *art of maintenance* and self-production, and they focus on decline. They explore how this life-affirming work of maintenance is undertaken from within the gendered relationships of older heterosexual couples where the woman is the primary care giver, and the man is diagnosed with a serious life-limiting degenerative condition. This contribution is remarkable in many ways, but not least because it manages to convey and combine political, experiential and sociological senses of liminality. Politically, older people's private homes in the UK are – like care homes more generally - increasingly becoming a liminal 'zone of abandonment' in that the care provided to their partners by older women is both indispensable (given the biopolitical situation of a society bent on neo-liberal economization yet 'caught off guard' by an ageing population) and largely invisible. This political backdrop powerfully shapes psychological possibilities. Experientially, TM/RD/SB focus both on actual 'uh oh!' occasions during which a new future dawns when the predictable flow of expected events is upset, and on actual 'ah ha!' occasions in which the dawning future gathers a new solidity of meaning. They make the important point that spontaneous liminal experience need not be associated with rapid and dramatic transformations but that the concept can be applied equally in seemingly mundane settings involving the slow creep of change. Sociologically, they draw upon intersectionality theory to explore how and why people from different social locations may have different resources to manage their liminal experience.

80 year old Donna, for example, cares for her 84 year old husband Mikey whose penile cancer is in remission but who suffers from mini strokes and has vascular dementia. But TM/RD/SB observe that it was not a 'dramatic' event (like her husband's castration) that provoked Donna's experience of liminality, but the quotidian realization that he was no longer capable of making tea and hence of continuing the 'time-reckoning' ritual that had been an intimate part and symbol of the mutually caring weave of their married life. Mikey dipping the kettle in the water in the sink heralded a transition in the sense of a deepening of his utter dependency upon her (the becoming of what TM/RD/SB call their 'dyad'). It dawned that the present they lived before this event had now become the present of the past, and so a new future – that of the dyad - must now replace the future of the past. A spectacular rupture is not necessary for business as usual to be interrupted by a hole in time. According to TM/RD/SB, the becoming of this dependent dyad was the beginning of the end, and when Mikey had to leave home after a rapid decline, Donna's health also declined.

Equally poignant is the example of Carol singing *Jolene* and *I'll take you home again Kathleen* to her now disabled and fragile husband Charles, rousing him from 'deathly still and silent' passivity. These songs function qua LATs as time machines. *Kathleen* 'symbolically transport[s] Charlie back to his original home in Jamaica' whilst at the same time returning both to their wedding anniversary. In the leaky threshold of interfusion between spontaneous and devised, *Jolene* the man-stealer morphs into *Jolene* the undertaker whom Carol beseeches 'please don't take my man', thereby giving the could-be prison of their small room new cosmic dimensions of significance. New value from the devised world-within-a world trickles into the

world-between-worlds, and a future otherwise bleak takes on a new meaning, despite pervasive social abandonment.

Death is never far from discussions of liminality. The reason for this basic connection between liminality and death was already made clear by van Gennep, and it relates precisely to the thermodynamic concept of entropy that, following Nietzsche, I have shown to have preoccupied the Freud of the *Beyond*. I have never seen this aspect of van Gennep's classic work properly discussed, and so will briefly raise it here. Newton's heavenly bodies can move perpetually in frictionless space (orbiting a large mass like the sun, for instance), but: 'although a body can move through space in a circle at a constant speed, the same is not true of biological or social activities. Their energy becomes exhausted, and they have to be regenerated at more or less close intervals. The rites of passage ultimately correspond to this fundamental necessity, sometimes so closely that they take the form of rites of death and rebirth' (van Gennep, 1909, p.183).

Here we glimpse a cosmology in which rites of passage correspond to the necessity of energetic depletion and renewal. If *all* rites of passage resemble the passage from death to rebirth, this is because 'the transition from one state to another is literally equivalent to giving up the old life and "turning over a new leaf"' (van Gennep, 1909, p. 183). The concept of liminal transition, from its source, was thus closely connected with what Simondon (2020) would later call a metastable system maintaining the 'potential energy' needed for it to go through more energy consuming transformations. Cultural rituals mark and guide transformations because 'the transition from one state to another is a serious step which could not be accomplished without special precautions' (van Gennep, 1909, p.184). Read in the light of TM/RD/SB's contribution, does this contain the seeds for richer cosmological rethinking of the significance of death in our lives? Perhaps a significance that goes beyond the zones of abandonment cultivated by a biopolitical regime which cultivates *Thanatos* by consigning it to these zones?

In his 1976 book on Dionysos (i.e. before Giorgio Agamben), Carl Kerényi discusses the two Ancient Greek words for life: *zoë* and *bios*. Far from polarizing them, Kerényi brings to light the rhythm of their relation. *Zoë* is limitless and enduring life-as-such (as with the expression 'life on earth'), while *bios* is life *characterized* in the finite form of a given concrete creature. The finite life of a given *bios* asserts the biography of its individuated existence, and that biography ends with its death. Since it is proper that each *bios* dies, death is included in the concept of *bios*. *Zoë's* relationship to *Thanatos* is such, however, that it serves as a contrast from which death is excluded: life as *zoë goes on*. *Zoë*, to borrow Kerényi's (1976, p. xxxv) metaphor, is like the endless thread along which 'every individual *bios* is strung like a bead'.

### Bird food: therapeutic LATs

It is unlikely that a diagnosis of cancer will be experienced as anything other than a significant 'uh oh!' experience. It understandably raises immediate doubts and anxieties about the future and transforms the present, not just of the one who has now become a cancer patient, but also of those close to them. In this domain, the liminal affective technologies for working on and with this liminal affectivity tend not to be framed as ludic or aesthetic or sacred but primarily as therapeutic, because a proximal concern is transitioning to as 'healthy' a future as possible. With serious life-threatening illnesses, of course, restoring health is often not possible, and broader 'existential' and / or 'religious' issues concerning the end of life can become directly relevant.

Commented [BW2]: u ?

Commented [P3]: Both spellings are possible – Kerényi uses an o

In another excellent contribution, Kirsten Roessler, Hvidt, laCour, Mau, Graven and Assing Hvidt (KR et al) explore experiences of transition during a cancer rehabilitation programme involving art therapy. Hence they also deal with life lived liminally in proximity to death and they grapple with how painting (guided by the artist Ole Lindqvist and supplemented by the music of Bach and group discussions) might serve as a liminal affective technology helping to devise meaning and continuity ('come to an understanding of the nature of the problems with which they struggle') by working with and on 'emotions', 'thoughts', 'concerns' (liminal affectivity). As they point out, a crux of the issue is how patients with cancer can 'cope with and manage their future' (7) and how interventions like this can aid the process.

KR et al approached the question of how art might influence emotions by running focus groups with 40 patients who participated in a 5 day rehabilitation programme and analysing the resulting transcripts with an eye for examples of reported transition experiences mediated by the art therapy. But, perhaps equally relevant, they also show some of the paintings produced by the participants. Importantly, they acknowledge that not all participants *wanted* to engage with art therapy, and a few found it an unwelcome imposition. I note as an aside that in an ideal world perhaps some participants would have preferred to engage with a different LAT (music, painting, creative writing, theatre, games, crafts, prayer – all offer possibilities), but this would require much resourcing and, judging from this contribution, it seems the Danish situation for cancer rehabilitation looks rather better resourced than most other places.

Having said this, the overwhelming impression from KR et al's report is of a positive and at times transformative experience for the participants. Any thorough analysis of the varied experiences should of course be accompanied by a careful analysis of how those experiences were shaped by the conditions supplied by the LAT itself. The art therapy was just one component in a broader event and clearly the entire 5 day event must be considered as a technology (LAT) carefully designed to *occasion* some unusual experiences and to facilitate their expression. The fact that each participant had a unique experience does not invalidate that each unique experience was to some degree occasioned by the programme. Although art therapy was not the only ingredient, each experience with painting must be understood as *this* experience with painting with *these* people in *this* devised setting at *this* time. Attending to the programme itself *qua* LAT raises a number of issues that cannot be disentangled from the 'effects' of the art therapy. First, the programme allowed each participant to remove themselves from their usual environment and patterns and to spend 5 days in an unusual and highly 'supported' space/time free from more familiar preoccupations. Second, some participants remarked on experiencing a certain 'back to school' feeling of being with a group, guided by a leader, in activities like painting that may not have been done since childhood. The unusual space thus affords a connect in the present to the past. Third, as commented upon by participants and the authors, the group went through the programme *together*. This was a *social* experience amongst people who *shared* a cancer diagnosis in common. Being 'not alone' in expressing one's experience is a significant ingredient (think of Turner's *communitas*), especially given the potentially isolating trajectory of living with cancer (see Little et al). Fourth, the combination of group dialogue and art therapy afforded a mixture of discursive and non-discursive activity ideal for a 'deep symbolic' working through of any 'embryonic' feelings existing 'on the edge' of semantic availability, or any tensions and contradictions which might have been avoided pending an appropriate moment.

The LAT used was thus a complex *composition* of ingredients which together served as the occasion for unusual experiences and activities. The resulting experiences cannot be 'explained' as the result of *either* 'relaxation' *or* 'recreation' *or* 'emotional correction' *or* 'new

cognitive insight', etc, since one might just as well say – at least when it is true - that new cognitive insight arose *because* of the relaxed environment and emotions were transformed *because* this was recreational 'time out'. Like the ingredients that come together in the baking of a cake, once assembled in a LAT these 'components' are simply not discrete independent variables with independently determinable effects on a dependent variable like 'positive therapeutic effect' (although a good cook will know if too much sugar or too little egg has been used). And no matter how good the cake, its enjoyment can never be guaranteed since not only is the proof of the pudding in the eating, but also there is no accounting for taste (which varies, experience by experience). For some, the very (non-discursive) act of mixing colours, of seeing green concretely emerge from blue and yellow and enjoying the pure perceptual fact of this transformation, can constitute a temporary freedom from preoccupied rumination and incessant 'interpretation' (but for the participant who was 'seized by anxiety' this did not happen). There is also the smell of the paint, the texture of the containers, the feel of the brush now loaded with colour, now empty.

And when a transformative experience *does* unfold, it is of great interest to explore this further. One participant, for example, painted a tree, but not any tree: an uprooted tree, replanted with its roots in the air. Instead of growing in the usual fashion according to linear time (the visible portion at least, should surely grow gradually upwards, from roots in the ground to leaves in the sky) a spontaneous liminal experience has uprooted it and *reversed* the usual course of things. The upside-down tree with its roots in the air is thus a potent symbol<sup>4</sup>, created by the participant, of what might be called liminalized temporality. Uh oh! But this symbol of liminalized temporarily also expresses faith because the roots of the backwards growing tree now support the new life of nesting birds. Ah ha! New life. For this fragile artist, and doubtless for many more, this passing of the baton of bios via *zoë* back to bios is called faith. From the traumatic bleakness of one's own imminent biológico-biographical death springs awareness that what might be called *life itself (zoë)* continues.

I am not suggesting that this particular artist 'theorised' their predicament in exactly these terms. Art is never so simple, and nor is life. But for sure this artist *created* that artwork and in so doing they *expressed* or externalised something of their experience in concrete form available to others and to themselves. It is very unlikely that the process of producing this painting was a 'heady' matter of first coming up with the idea and then working out how to execute it. Art produced in this 'heady' way tends to be second-rate. Rather, it is more likely that the artist felt their way to producing the painting through the process of painting it, thereby lending tangible material form to feelings on the edge of discursive articulability (as a crystal grows along a metastable vector). But once created, the painting is there and, furthermore, can be talked about, reflected upon, discovered. It is, to borrow from Susan Langer (1978) a perceptible form expressive of feeling. But it is not a 'self-expression' like a cry of distress or fury. It does not display feeling like a symptom, like a clenched fist, but rather presents feeling that has been transformed it into a symbol that – since it is public - can now be felt in turn by another. Furthermore, the feeling captured in this painting is not just the 'uh oh' of liminalized temporality, but also a certain affective reconciliation with this disturbance: a 'way out' from the blockage it caused in the form of a bigger 'cosmological' picture that includes the new life of the nesting birds.

---

<sup>4</sup> Apparently in Norse legend Odin hung upside down from the 'world tree' pierced with his own spear (resonance with Teresa who was pierced by the golden spear of an angel?). There is also a long tradition of hanging Christmas trees upside down in parts of Eastern Europe.



Finally, in addition to Langer, I would also recommend engaging with Lev Vygotsky's *Psychology of art* to further develop an understanding of how liminal affective technologies actually work (see Zittoun and Stenner, in press). Although Vygotsky deals mostly with literature, and hardly touches upon *making* art, he was amongst the first psychologists to grasp that art functions as a *technique of emotions* and that it becomes particularly vital during times of significant life transition. Vygotsky's approach would help finesse notions like 'corrective emotional experience', which imply an almost mechanical process of rectification (although I do not doubt that KR et al have a more sophisticated approach).

### **A taste of one's own medicine: hidden LATs**

Last but not least, Mads Bank and Lotte Huniche (MB/LH) help us to see how it is the task – often unacknowledged – of medical professionals to create LATs to manage and contain the spontaneous liminality often associated with sickness. They have studied what they call 'pre-diagnosis liminality' and concentrate on the uncertainty and liminal affectivity which can arise when people develop chest infections. Given the Covid-19 pandemic, their observations are now pertinent to practically every human being who comes to be concerned by a developing cough, perhaps accompanied by fever. Once again, the crux of the matter lies in the future: *uh oh!... should I be worried?* Is this just a tickle in the throat or might I have a life-threatening virus? The decision to consult a medical doctor is thus from the start wrapped up with the question of resolving a disconcerting uncertainty: am I ill or not? If so, is it serious or not? Ideally what unfolds is a play in three acts. In Act 1 the patient reports the 'uh oh!' of his symptoms. In Act 2 the Doctor does a physical examination or some tests, and in Act 3 she delivers a decisive medical judgement. The hope, then, is that the liminality inducing 'uh oh!' is met with the 'ah ha!' of either a clean bill of health, or a clear diagnosis. In this way, the medical system can function simultaneously in three parallel ways: first as a *techne* for corporeal diagnosis and treatment (for example, the future of the invading bacteria can be predictably curtailed by penicillin); second as a liminal affective technology for managing the imaginings of an uncertain and possibly dangerous future (for example, the patient can be reassured that there is nothing wrong and sent home); and third as a social procedure with the power to determine legitimate absence from work, school, etc (for example, the patient can take next week off). Crudely (since in practice they are fundamentally entangled), the first is biological, the second psychological and the third societal, and one might say that when an organic disease is diagnosed (e.g. bacteria are found), the bio-medical 'level' decides or settles the psychological and the social levels (MB/LH call this 'biomedical closure'). But the cases in which the medical system can actually deliver this clarity are rarer than one might think, and the unexpected problems that it generates are more common.

In the Danish cases dealt with by MB/LH, for example, the C-Reactive protein test routinely used can provide only indirect information on upper-respiratory infection and its probable causes ('you most likely have a virus'). Some patients can therefore remain in a state of uncertainty. MB/LH show how any residual liminal affectivity is typically managed by inviting the patient to divide up their future into small manageable chunks ('if you don't feel better by Friday... use this prescription to pick up some medication from the pharmacy, and if nothing changes during the weekend... contact medical emergency to obtain something stronger', etc). On the organic level, this is a matter of planning to acquire and take medication, but on the social psychological level, the liminality of an unknown future is contained by structuring that future into reassuringly knowable and actable-upon quantities: the present, as MB/LH put it, is governed 'through the future'.

But these temporalizing techniques can also be insufficient to manage significant liminal affectivity and, under certain conditions, can intensify and further volatilize it. The patient, for example, might consider the Doctor to be neglecting the seriousness of their case and - feeling told off for wasting precious medical time - amplify their existing uncertainty with resentment and distrust. In this way, what Monica Greco and myself call a 'liminal hotspot' can develop between Doctor and patient, and the more uncertain the available medical knowledge, the more scope for genuine conflict arises (Greco and Stenner, 2017). Rather than achieving 'biomedical closure', new 'looping' effects can be generated in which liminal affectivity is amplified and escalated across the levels rather than contained and reduced. Those who are ill but without a diagnosis can enter a subjunctive zone of uncertainty in which concerns about what their future 'might be' can easily grow into frightening proportions. When unresolved, the liminal affectivity generated can lead to a sense of paralysis, or to panic, or to a tendency to polarise into strict and conflictual 'either/or' thinking. But this is not a one-sided problem, as Doctors too can find themselves caught up in the paradoxes of liminal uncertainty, as when the Doctor interviewed by MB/LH describes herself as 'wavering inside' recognising that her judgement call might not be shared by her colleagues, and could lead to trouble down the line (e.g. conflict with a patient).

As with all of these issues, there are important political and socio-historical dimensions. The more successful bio-medicine proves to be, the longer people must live with chronic conditions that cannot be cured by biomedicine, and this despite the ever-higher expectations about its potency. Rather than operating to settle liminality, a biopolitical will-to-power twinned with the capitalist logic of an ever-expanding economy (driving ever greater global inequalities) seems rather to expand and intensify liminality, and render it permanent. As MB/LH point out, the proliferation of liminal hotspots in which people become stuck in the transition of a vicious circle cannot be 'blamed' on individual patients and Doctors: it is a structural aspect of the globalization of permanently liminal societies. We who have the capacity to imagine the future would do well to speak and act. Oh, and to **dream**.

## Conclusion

Starting with the aesthetic mediation of liminal experience by means of film and ending with the therapeutic mediation of liminal experience in a medical consultation, we have seen throughout this volume how the distinctive features of time brought into play by liminal 'devices' (including child's play, leisure activities, ritual practices, song and painting) can be provoked by and work back upon the various experiences of life rupture that I have called spontaneous liminal experiences. This helps to draw into focus the distinctive nature of a rich plurality of otherwise divergent worlds-within-worlds: not just ludic, sacred and aesthetic, but also therapeutic (and what about pedagogic, romantic, philosophic, scientific, etc?). Each of these 'subjunctive' worlds-within-worlds shows up as having a particular pertinence during 'indicative' circumstances of transition when people are *between* worlds.

Crudely, there is a liminality both of art and of life. But the crucial issue is how the subjunctive 'as if' worlds that can be roughly gathered on the 'art' side of this distinction are articulated in resonance with the 'as is' worlds of actual lives. We human beings are the amphibious creatures whose lives unfold in the mixture of both media. This is the fresh meaning I wish to bring - via some of Winnicott's most enigmatic insights - to the expression *cultural experiencing*. I have risked the proposition that the worlds-within-worlds that constitute the obvious contents of human culture (play, sport, song, painting, film, theatre, ritual, prayer, pilgrimage, travel, therapy, etc.) have their source and their vocation in liminal experiences *between* worlds. They

**Commented [BW4]:** Could you add a one paragraph conclusion? It feels like it ends a little abruptly now. It'd also be nice to gather the different insights from the chapter together again in brief. Finally, it will be the end of the book and thus will be the final word of the project.

are provoked into becoming by the liminal experiences that they in turn serve to resolve. They are the source of an inventiveness that necessarily transcends personal existence, but that in transcending it, affords the realisation of its continuity. This insight is often concealed by the fact that, for the most part, each of these LATS shows up as having a light, superficial and airy side focussed solely on the easy pleasures of leisure time. Far from plunging into life through its moments of crisis, they seem more like a momentary artificial distraction from real life: a sensual reward between phases of work. And so they can be and increasingly are. And yet, beneath this comic surface each has a tragic side which does nothing but confront us with the problem of our unfinished finitude: we are not what we think we are. Thus the song-writer Townes van Zandt proclaimed the existence of only two types of music: zipadee-doo-dah and the blues.

Let me end by returning to *Arrival*. What is most difficult to digest is surely contained in the *tragic* aspects of the film. The heptapods are here because they need humanity if they are to save themselves in a future only they can see. The clairvoyance that is their bitter-sweet gift to Banks requires her to find the courage to carry on – not just despite, but because of what the future will bring. The death of the child we see born at the beginning is echoed in the promised continued life of the heptapod species following the death of the alien visitors. Could death itself be that which we have taken in that is the most difficult thing to digest? King Oedipus put out his own eyes when he finally understood how his failure to perceive his own destiny had enabled it to unfold. Of course, the best of comedy laughs in the face of all this, like Monty-Python's *Brian* whistling on the cross.

## References

- Andersen, N and Stenner, P. (2020) Social Immune Mechanisms: Luhmann and Potentialization Technologies. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 37(2): 79-103.
- Greco, M. and Stenner, P. (2017) From paradox to pattern shift: Conceptualising liminal hotspots and their affective dynamics. *Theory and Psychology*, 27(2): 147-166.
- Freud, S. (1920/1984) 'Beyond the pleasure principle'. In *On metapsychology, the theory of psychoanalysis*. Pelican.
- Friston, K.J., (2010) The free energy principle: a unified brain theory? *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 11: 127-138.
- Kerényi, C. (1976) *Dionysos: Archetypal image of indestructible life*. Princeton University Press.
- Langer, S., K. (1978) *Philosophy in a new key: A study in the symbolism of reason, rite and art*. Harvard University Press.
- Scott, M., A. (1908) *The essays of Francis Bacon*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Simondon, G. (2020) *Individuation in light of notions of form and information*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Stenner, P. (2005) An outline of an autopoietic systems approach to emotion. *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*, 12 (4): 8-22.

Stenner, P (2017) *Liminality and experience: A transdisciplinary approach to the psychosocial*. Palgrave.

Thomassen, B. (2016) *Liminality and the modern: Living through the in-between*. Ashgate.

Tucker, I. (2018) Digitally mediated emotions: Simondon, affectivity and individuation, in T.D. Sampson, S. Maddison and D. Ellis (Eds) *Affect and social media: Emotion, mediation, anxiety and contagion*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Turner, V. (1982) *From ritual to theatre*. PAJ Publications.

Valsiner, J. (2014) *An invitation to cultural psychology*. Sage.

Van Gennep, A. (1909/2010) *The rites of passage*. Routledge.

Wrbouschek, M., & Slunecko, T. (2021). Moods in transition: Theorizing the affective-dynamic constitution of situatedness. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 62, 100857. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016>

Zumwalt, R.L (1982) 'Arnold van Gennep: The hermit of Bourg-la-Reine' online version <http://www.aaanet.org/committees/commissions/centennial/history/090vangenneppdg>, page numbered 1-11, downloaded 5 May 2021 (originally published *American Anthropologist*, 84, 299-313).