

SPACES OF UNCERTAINTY

MY LIMINAL JOURNEY...

Body text imagined in France
Composed in London
Written in the air, between London & Vancouver
Sent from Vancouver
And corrected in London

We are on the 6th of January 2005. It is 11h33 am. My approximate position is 53° of latitude north, and 15° of longitude west. I left London about 2 hours ago. In exactly 14.42 hours, I will be in Vancouver, but betwixt and between, I have to spend 12.42 hours on the Bowing 745, piercing the sky above the Atlantic Ocean and some of the 50 states of America, in total 7604 kilometres.

I am not in London any more, and not in Vancouver yet. I occupy the place between two countries, two cultures, two lives.

Maybe this is the reason why I was so fascinated with the concept of liminality, why it spoke so directly to me. And this is why I chose it as a symbol of this paper.

The word "liminality" comes from the Latin word "limen" which means "threshold" and describes that place in-between one social status and the next. (1)

So "liminality" or "the liminal" is a transitional space, neither one discipline nor another, rather a "third-place" in-between.

And then, space implies boundaries separating "here" and "there", "there" being the end of the journey ; of my liminal journey ; of your journey through this paper.

See you on the other side of the gate...

We are obsessed by boundaries : visible or invisible, obliged or wilful. Spatial, temporal and human boundaries divide man's life into parcels of space, slices of time, and states of mind.

I am walking in the street without even noticing that I am surrounded by hundreds of boundaries : the road that separates the two pavements, the wooden gate separating me from Mr and Mme Dupont's property, the N°19, itself separated from the N°21 by a high green hedge, separated from N°23 by an horrible brick wall, separated from the next street by another road, separated from the next neighbourhood by a small blue panel, separated from the next town by a red-framed white panel, separated from the next country by the customs, separated from the next continent by the sea, separated from the next planet by a black hole, separated from the next galaxy by...

I am not walking in this street anymore... I can see the Planet Earth from the top. And while I am observing this colourful pattern, my gaze is stopped by something happening here and there : this wonderful patchwork of spaces is strangely moving. As I get closer I can see people fighting and dying on the frontiers separating the countries, which keep going ahead and going back.

I ask for an explanation: "- Why do all these men seem to fight for these frontiers ? What is a frontier ?" "- A piece of nothing, of no man's land", tells me Georges Perec, "an imagery limit". (2)

What I understand from this statement is that frontiers are just lines or walls and sometimes even invisible. And yet, millions of men are dead and are still dying because of these lines by trying to cross them to reach the other side, or by defending their property, and even aiming at conquering some more ones.

Now, I am back in my house, feeling more secure and at ease. Here, at least, I can dress the way I want to enter my kitchen or leave my bathroom.

Doors divide the space where we live in several slices of activities : I have my breakfast, diner, and lunch in the kitchen, I sleep in my bedroom, I watch the TV in the lounge. And I go over from one space to another one just by opening doors.

Could you imagine a house without doors ; that is to say without separation, transition, passage, break in continuity ? Georges Perec once visited one but the house still presented several levels to separate the different rooms.

As for me, I am living in a single multifunctional room, with a cooking area near the entrance, a studying area near the window, and an eating area in the middle. But still : the entrance door, the window, and the walls, separate me from the outside.

Men need boundaries, but not only in space. In time as well : we need calendars to give boundaries to days, months, years, centuries..., we need hands to our watch to arbitrary mark the hours, minutes, and seconds...

And Nature gave us seasons that we decided to call spring, summer, autumn and winter.

Suddenly I feel tired by such a multitude of interwoven boundaries. I am going to bed... Tomorrow is another day... somebody's birthday on Earth. In few years this lovely newborn will start to go to school,

(1) It was used by Arnold Van Gennep (1908) in his treatise on rites of passage.

Victor Turner later expanded on this in his work on the Ndenbu of Zambia, explaining that those in the liminal state (during a rite of passage) were neither here nor there, and in fact between the structure of society.

(2) *Species of Spaces and many Pieces*, Georges Perec, 1997

he will pass exams, leave school, get her first job, get married, have his first baby, through to retirement and the final Frontier of Death... But before that he will have had a lot of sleeping times, and unsleeping ones, working times, ill times, entertaining times, loving times, lazy times, peaceful times, wealthy times, sad times, wonderful times...

So, as space and time, our life is marked by boundaries, deeply rooted in our cultural and ritual preoccupations. Indeed, some religions come with human in the different stages of his cyclic life, through rituals, like the initiation of adolescent boys into manhood, while doctors and psychotherapists help those who need help to find their way and go through bad times of life.

While I am writing this, I just notice that I reached the middle of this paper, of my "liminal journey". I have crossed the frontiers of my mind and I am now entering the betwixt and between of my thoughts.

The concept of the "betwixt and between" liminal state is everywhere in our contemporary western culture : liminal journeys, liminal worlds, or liminal creatures.

If we think of liminal journeys first, it reminds us wedding ceremonies where the "threshold" ceremony is followed by a "liminal" honeymoon, or the "sabbatical year", this break of more or less one year that some students decide to take during their studies to take stock of their situation and think about what they have done until now, and what they really want to do afterwards.

There are also these funerary ceremonies where the period from death to inhumation (or cremation) is equally a kind of "liminal" journey for the dead. As for pilgrimages, the destination and the journey itself is invariably liminal.

That makes us think of more spiritual journeys like voodoo cults, rave parties, people under drug effect, whose mind's floating between consciousness and unconsciousness in a sort of "delirious trip", or else pop festivals such as the "classic" Woodstock, which, at a different level, is also possible to be seen as a sort of liminal social movement.

Now, it seems very hard to me to define concretely this "betwixt and between" liminal state in term of space. Is it a kind of unreal and floating world, transcendal space, something immaterial without real dimensions, without beginning or end ?

I rather think that more than a space it is a kind of zero point, or zero dimension.

The French writer Georges Perec, had always been attracted by "zero point of reference, origin, departure", like the equator, 0°C, meridians, sea-level, as the center of everything.

It is like these crossroads where I have always thought that it could be interesting to spend one day or at least some hours without doing anything. Magical places but also dangerous, place of suicides, gypsies, witches, outlaws and ghosts, a meeting place of areas and place of nothing at the same time, "Crossroads are not a place but, like sex, an intersection". (3)

The Bermuda Triangle, as a mortal and mysterious intersection between Bermuda, Puerto Rico and Florida, and famous for its numerous disappearances of ships and planes, can be a good example, as well as Black holes in Space. We can also talk about magic gates as a zero point between two worlds, the gate separating Present and Future in the movie *Stargate* (4), or the door separating our proper world to a parallel world, in *Sliders* (5), an American series that chronicles the adventures of four "travellers" moving between parallel realities searching for the world they first left.

And while we are crossing together these liminal worlds, we meet on our way, and without any surprise, witches, sphinxes, and other man-animals, gods and goddesses, all the folklore and mythological heroes like Achilles or Oedipus, all the tales' creatures, Cyclops, giants, androgynes, half-man/half-woman, the Third sex, the Third eye, Shamans,... all these creatures that are neither this-nor-that... or simply those "marginals" who are simultaneously members of two or more culturally distinct groups.

My head is suddenly shaking in all the directions. It is as if I was under effect of drugs. All these "thirdjourneys", "thirdplaces" and "thirdcreatures" are crossing in my head... I don't feel the same than at the beginning of this journey... I feel something more... or perhaps less...

(3) Anthony Weir (pers.comm.)

(4) *Stargate*, by Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich, 1996

(5) *Sliders*, Fox television, United States, 1995

“Liminality allows a person to transform from one social state to another” (1), which suggests that before this rite we were different. What do we lose and what do we gain after getting over a transitional stage ?

If everybody could print and stick on all the walls and trees of the city what they lost during their different stages of life, this is what the city would look like:

“I lost silence by starting playing guitar”; “I lost my virginity this very day”; “I lost my confidence in him when he lied to me for the first time”; “I lost my cold blood”, “I lost my liberty when I married her”; “I lose one year of my life every year”; “I lost my childhood... and my innocence with it”; “I lost sight after this accident”; “I lost my best friend”; “I lost my dreams when I woke up”; “I got lost...

...to find more about myself”. Because a transition, a passage is about losing to get more experience, maturity, freedom.

According to Victor Turner (1) “liminality refers to the ambiguity of the ritual realm, where everyday reality is transformed into a symbolic “communitarian” experience which thereafter affects the individual’s lived reality”.

In other words, rituals, transition, liminal spaces provide us the opportunity to assess our life and that this can induce personal and social change.

Liminal state enables the individual to question traditional ways of operating and to recognise new possibilities.

By transcending our own boundaries, we reach an unknown dimension of our personality.

“God created The Earth (...) and Heaven” (6), and betwixt and between, he placed small creatures whom he gave the name of Humanity and decided that from birth to death, these creatures would live from passage to passage.

Our own life is a passage, sometimes difficult, ambiguous, contradictory, with crisis, self questions,... like “What am I doing on this plane to Vancouver ?”

I thought that a new liminal journey in my life had started when I got on this plane, and that it would end once arrived in Vancouver, having thus the impression of having overcome distance, of having erased time.

But suddenly, Georges is whispering to me : “What can we really know of the world ? What quantity of space can our eyes hope to take in between our birth and our death ? How many square centimetres of Planet earth will the soles of our shoes have touched ? (...) The world, no longer as a journey having constantly to be remade, nor as the illusion of a conquest, but as a rediscovery of a meaning, the perceiving that Earth is a form of writing, a geography of which we had forgotten that we ourselves are the authors.”

This is exactly what I can feel now, after few hours on the planes : more than a geographic trip that I firstly thought this was, it is a personal journey, an experiment, a “rediscovery” of myself that I engage now.

I’m looking through the window... I don’t recognise the landscapes anymore. It seems that I just lost all my references. It seems that my liminal journey is starting now...

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