

Liminality and ambiguity in artwork



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How the artwork may signify an ambiguous of liminality, as well as psychological space of neither here nor there.

This paper explores the concept of Liminality and ambiguity by drawing of sources, from Arnold Van Gennep, Victor Turner to Bjørn Thomassen, Homi Bhabha and others. Liminality has been interpreted in the context of rituals by van Gennep (1909), and then turner (1967) developed his influential concept of liminal experience by referring to it as a transitional and marginal state. Also, afterwards, Bhabha (1994), with the original concept of hybridity and “ third space”. The experiences within the liminal temporal, geographic or psychological space, being in between of two cultures, marked by a sense of “ double consciousness” in the migrant, giving way to liminality of identity. Through an art based practice, I explore the process of liminality and characteristics of transition within the liminal experience through the creative process of making arts and artworks. I will investigate on this critical debate in my effort to understand a social and theoretical aspect of Liminality within visual works of contemporary artists such as Shirin Neshat, Pati Solomon Tyrell/FAFSWAG, Lalla Essaydi.

The term liminality is derived from the Latin word 'limen', meaning threshold. (Late 19th century: from Latin Limen Limin-' threshold' + -al.) It describes the experience of an in-between position, limbo or suspension, between two states, Places, or things. The concept of the liminal state has been associated with different anthropological, social and physical conditions. Liminal states can be temporal like twilight or take place as rituals, in situations such as a graduation ceremony. They can occur in places of betweenness – airports, borders, windows, doors, shores or states

of between relating to consciousness, as one wakes up or enters a dream state.

Further to this liminality, has also been both self and externally applied, as an identifier of inbetweenness, to people , in situations of gender, nationality status ,

(immigrants), legal status,(people on remand -and therefore charged but not tried) , ethnicity, and in terms of human status itself – in the case of the fetus and debate around abortion.

Finally, liminality is found in discussions around religion, as a dynamic within folklore, in ethnographic research, and as a trope employed in popular cultures, such as novels and short stories, plays, films and TV shows, music and other media.

Rites of passage

Arnold Van Gennep (1873-1957), French ethnographer and folklorist, best known for his studies of the rites of passage of various cultures. His major work was *Les Rites de passage* (1909), in which he defines “ rites de passage” as “ rites that accompany every change of place, state, social position or certain points in age”(Turner, 1967, p. 94). He suggested that rites of passage are any life cycle ritual that which marks an individual’s or social group’s transition from one social state to another, over passage of the time. In his book, van Gennep noted: “ I have tried to assemble here all the ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another”(Gennep, 1960, p. 10).

To weigh the importance of this transition, Van Gennep singled out the rite of passage as a special category which subdivided into three components: “rites of separation”, “transition rites”, and “rites of incorporation” (Gennep, 1960, p. 11).

The first phase, preliminary rites or rites of separation “comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions” (Turner, 1967, p. 94).

It is a period of separation from the old position and standard, a metaphorical “death” (Turner, 1967, p. 94). During the second phase, the intervening liminal period or rites of transition, “the state of the ritual subject (the “passenger”) is ambiguous; he passes through the realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (Turner, 1967, p. 94). This stage involves a period of transition in which the participant is no longer in the old, taken for the granted stage, but not yet in the new. Arpad Szokolczai, Professor of Sociology and author, defined that two important characteristics are crucial to these rites. First, “any rite must follow a strictly prescribed sequence, where everybody knows what to do and how. Second, everything is done under the authority of the master of ceremonies, the practical equivalent of an absolute ruler whose word is Law though only during a rite, when there is no law” (2015, p. 17). The final stage, the post-liminal rites or rite of incorporation, “the passage is consummated.”

During this stage, as Turner explained, the ritual subject, the individual has a reliable condition with the rights and responsibilities. He is expected to follow

the standard, moral and structure of that society and binding with the required social position in that system(1974, p. 95).

For groups, as well as individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then acting again, but differently. Moreover, there are always new thresholds to cross: the threshold of summer and winter, of a season or a year, of a month or a night, the threshold of birth, adolescence, maturity and old age; the threshold of death and that of afterlife-for those who believe in it (Gennep, 1960, p. 189).

Liminality

The term liminality was first conceptualised by Arnold Van Gennep and later through the work of Victor Turner (1920-1983), a British cultural anthropologist, whom best known for his work on symbols, rituals, and rites of passage.

Turner published his book *The Forest Symbols*, which contained a famous chapter entitled *Betwixt and Between The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage* in 1967. Turner's attention was on the middle stage of rites of passage, the transnational or liminal threshold stage. He defined " transition as a process, a becoming, and in the case of rites de passage even transformation"(Turner, 1967, p. 94). He noted, " The subject of passage ritual is in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, ' invisible'" (Turner, 1967, p. 95). He regarded liminality to be a " period of ambiguity; of marginal and transnational state"(Turner, 1967, p. 94). For the individual, Turner furthermore suggests " Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the <https://assignbuster.com/liminality-and-ambiguity-in-artwork/>

Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of idea and relations may arise ” (Turner, 1967, p. 97). Turner realized that liminality “ serves not only to identify the importance of in-between periods, but is also a useful tool in developing our understanding of how people respond to liminality as an experience they undergo: the ways in which personality is shaped by liminality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience.” (Thomassen, 2009, p. 14).

The concept of liminality is recently taken up by Homi Bhabha, an Indian English scholar and critical theorist, Professor of English and American Literature and Language, and the Director of the Mahindra Humanities Center at Harvard University. He (1994) uses the term to describes a state of being in-between here and there, in-between cultures and in-between places. Bhabha introduces the term, hybridity, to refer to the state of being at the border of two cultures, marked by a sense of “ double consciousness” and “ in-betweenness” in the migrant, that gives way to liminality of identity. Hybridity, for Bhabha, is, therefore, a subversion of single, unified, purist notions of identity, supplanted by a sense of identity that occupies multiple cultural positions.(p.)

The term Liminality used by Bjorn Thomassen, an anthropologist and social scientist (2015) refers to something elementary and universal: “ the experience of finding oneself at a boundary or in an in-between position, either spatially or temporally. ” (p. 30). As Thomassen pointed out, “ Life is made of routines and repetitions“ Individual experiences all kind of liminality

states. Living without that is not likely and “ Social life would be void without it”(2015, p. 30). He stated further that liminality is about “ how human deal with changes in different social and cultural contexts. It could be personal like falling in love or to a collective event such a natural disaster (2015, p. 30). Human beings repetitively go through all kind of liminal experiences. Turner argued that each rite of passage has three stages of “ separation”, “ transition” and “ reincorporation” within itself too. However, some of the rites would be more developed than the others according to the purpose of the rite. For instance, at a funeral, the rite of separation would be more prominent than in other rituals, such as a wedding.

Liminality and ambiguity in Artist's works

Many artists, including the artists who are highlighted in this paper, have employed the notion of liminality and ambiguity within their works. They have addressed the different rites of passage, especially in-betweenness and transitions, displacement, belonging, memory, identity and hybridity from their perspective through their works. They are Individual artists that I strongly believe, they have developed hybrid characters and created a form of arts that navigate their own liminal experiences. Through this paper, I will analyse their artistic works which are similar to my art topics and their conceptual approach that engages with the concept of liminality and of liminal thresholds as a means to visually express these invisible states.

Turner (1982) suggested, “ liminal experiences in modern consumerist societies have largely been replaced by “ liminoid” moments when creativity and uncertainty unfold in art and leisure activities”(cited in Thomassen,

2015, p. 34). Turner (1974) offered that “ Prophets and artists tend to be liminal and marginal people ”...in their productions we may catch glimpses of that unused evolutionary potential...”(p. 128).

Brenda Elliot PHD in psychologist from Saybrook University, California , in the article, *The Arts in Psychotherapy* , stated that artists use the metaphor in their Arts “ consciously” and “ unconsciously “ to communicate of self (2011, p. 97). Furthermore, Jeff Malpas, philosopher and professor at the University of Tasmania in his article *At the Threshold: The Edge of Liminality* , (2007) highlighted that how artists are always concerned with liminality, in the way that their works has sense of being “ at the edge” and also they also explore their own liminal state. Malpas also added, “ The time and space of liminality is the time and space of indeterminate and the opaque, the time and space of possibility and the question”.

Shirin Neshat (born 1957) is a contemporary Iranian visual artist based in New York. She is known for her works in film, video and photography. Many of Neshat’s photographs, videos and feature films have focused on themes of exile and homeland. In her earliest works she explores the sociopolitical and psychological dimensions of women’s experience in contemporary Islamic societies, her subsequent video works departed to the notion of gender, society, individual and group.

Her works generally address identity, cultural and gender, the experience of being caught between two cultures, as well as issue of displacement, belonging and memory.

Neshat's video installation *Soliloquy* (1999) encounters notions of gender, self-identity, cultural, displacement and nationality. *Soliloquy* consists of two projections. One screen shows Neshat, veiled, walking through a traditional cityscape resembling her native country of Iran. On the opposite screen, Neshat navigates the modern streets of New York. *Soliloquy* is a comment on her experience of standing at the threshold of two cultures and living in the liminal zone between two places as her home. The parallel screens highlight the contrasts between Eastern and Western worlds, contemporary and traditional, individual and communal. To understand Neshat's intentions it's possibly useful to consider cultural critic Edward Said's explanation of the state of exile. In his essay 'Reflections and Exile', Said (2002) indicated, "For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally (p. 186). *Soliloquy* makes visual the state of longing and dislocation, explores the feeling of in-betweenness, and moment of transition. Turner described liminal beings, as being "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial (Turner, 1974, p. 95). Such thresholds are evident within this artwork. In *Soliloquy*, Neshat employs ambiguous images within her works an attempt to illustrate a wandering person, the artist herself within a liminal space and time in which it comments on the fragility of human consciousness or her life itself within her work. Neshat sees herself as a hybrid and living between two cultures. "I can never call any place home, I will forever be in a state of in-between," she also

emphasises that, “ my work reflects who I am, as a person who is bi-cultural...”(cited in Broude and D. Garrard, 2005, p. 20).

Globalisation raises challenges to traditional values, while at the same time endorsed accesses to various opportunities for inspiration and creativity. In works by Moroccan-born photographer and painter Lalla Essaydi (1956), the process of representing her global or hybrid identity is done both through symbolism within her imagery as well as using models from European art for the compositions of her paintings. Her hybrid and creative works directly refer to both binaries of west and east and betweenness. Her works are habitually about her memories, questions about the status of the states of the woman in Islamic culture, which are portrayed within a liminal space of neither here nor there. “ Liminal spaces are dynamic spaces of possibility where individuals and cultures come in contact with one another creating interstitial conditions for new communities of learning” (Sameshima & Irwin, 2009, p. 7). Essaydi wrote:

“ When I am in Saudi Arabia, they call me the Moroccan. In Morocco, they call me the Saudi. In the West, I am someone from a different culture. I had to create my own space. My work gives me a sense of belonging that I couldn't find in a physical space.”

Essaydi's photographs are technically impressive. Her work focuses on Arabic female identity explored through a 19th-century orientalist style; She performs hand-paints Arabic calligraphy in henna on different surfaces, such as textiles, bodies, and walls.

Transgender individuals are people whose gender identity and/or gender expression does not meet with gender norms associated with assigned sex at birth.

They form a group of people who are not entirely male or female and identify as

genderqueer or non-binary. " Individuals who change gender roles and refuse to conform in socially prescribed ways of gender expression often somewhere between female and male"(Dentice and Dietert, 2015, p. 70). In other words, as Turner would say, they enter a liminal space. Transitional beings such as these are considered ambiguous as the liminal condition causes them to " elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states as positions in cultural space" (Turner, 1974, p. 95). Dentice and Dietert, Associate Professors of Sociology at Texas A&M University Central Texas (TAMUCT) argue that some gender transition from one gender identity to the other are not conforming individuals experience liminality while others maybe embrace this space, while others accept their liminal status with trepidation(2015, p. 70). Turner's liminality theory here demonstrates how individual transition from one gender identity to another, and some other individual negotiate to remain in between." The liminal experience gives transgender individuals the freedom to transcend structural constraints and to refashion their identities" (Dentice and Dietert, 2015, p. 76). Dentice and Dietert explained further that liminality " opens up the possibility for freedom, rebirth and eventual social change for gender non-conformists that fall under the broader transgender umbrella" (Dentice and Dietert, 2015, p. 76). Pati Solomona Tyrell is a Samoan artist who explores <https://assignbuster.com/liminality-and-ambiguity-in-artwork/>

queer identities through artworks that explore ideas of the body adornments and ritual. In the 'Aitu FAFWAG' series, Tyrell's incredible portraits celebrate being young, queer and pacifika. In his video and photograph, he honours "The tradition of fāgogo by sharing the responsibility of telling this story and allowing artists to respond to them or own cultural heritage, unpacking the colonial gaze placed on queer brown bodies to return gender and sexuality diverse identities back to their oracle status." If Turner, in his analysis of Ndembu ritual shows "how ritual passages served as a moment of creativity that freshened up the societal make-up" (Thomassen, 2009, p. 14). Then Tyler takes the idea of ritual in another direction.

His works focus on the contemporary visual art portraits, drawing upon personal experiences that attempt to establish identity visually. In my opinion, the general objective of his portraits series is to scrutinise how and to what extent these forms of portraiture generate a collection of transgender experience. He confronts his audience with the gaze and engaging them to look at those portraits, by representing his body in female personae and placing himself in liminal states of in-betweenness. The ambiguity of his portraits offering a gay male identity bond with a/transition to a female transgender identity. A ritual, emotional, physical and social aspects of transition and presentation of queer space. It is a state with many probabilities "between two conditions, yet fully inhabiting neither" (combs, 2002, p. 249, quoted in Elliott, 2011, pp. 96-103).

Conclusion

Liminality according to Thomassen is a universal concept: “ Culture and human lives cannot exist without moments of transitions, and those belief and important spaces where we live through the in-between. Such transitions mark us, they stamp our personalities, and that is the way it will always be”(2014, p. 4).

Liminality in my own experience is not a concept that can be explained in certain. It is a transitional process that accompanies with ambiguity. It is a world of probability in many directions. It is an emotion and a fear of indefinite future, and the same time it is self-assurance and hopefulness. The product of liminality is upon the individual to provide the instruction according to their inner constraint. As Thomassen explained, Liminality refers to “ moments or periods of transition during which the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction. For those reasons, the concept of liminality has the potential to push social and political theory in new directions”(Thomassen, 2014, p. 5). My research intends exploring how this might happen through the production of artworks.

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