LIMEN & TEXT

TRANSITIONS SEMINAR NEWSLETTER 12 January 2024

Bimonthly, edited by M. Aguirre

The *Transitions Seminar* is a permanent initiative set up in 2019 by the LIMEN Research Group. It convenes approximately on a bi-monthly basis, online since 2020. It provides a forum for debate on liminality and related issues, and a research-training ground for PhD candidates, as well as functioning as a venue for the current *Transitions Project*. It is linked to The Gateway Press and the websites *LIMEN & TEXT*, *The Northanger Library*, and *The Janus Gate Project*.

http://www.limenandtext.com/rst.html
http://www.limenandtext.com/index.html
https://northangerlibrary.com/
http://janusgateliterature.com/

FORTHCOMING EVENT

Verónica Frejo, MA

will speak on

"*Critical Role*: Embodied Liminality in Role-Playing Games"

on TUE, February the 20th,
at 10 a.m. (CET),
via Teams (see link below)

ABSTRACT

The resurgence in popularity of tabletop role-playing games (commonly abbreviated as TTRPGs), especially *Dungeons & Dragons*, in the last decade has come hand in hand with a new phenomenon, actual play, which consists of a group of people recording themselves playing TTRPGs for others to watch, often in an episodic manner. Recent academic discourse has made use of Erving Goffman's sociological frame theory (*Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, 1986) and Gary Alan Fine's application of it to role-playing games (*Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, 2002) in order to delimit the layers of an actual play show. Also notably, Daniel Mackay, in his Fa*ntasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (2001) denotes similar frame divisions. These are the social frame, gameplay frame, and character

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frame. While it is acknowledged that these frames are permeable and often traversed by the players, a clear-cut division between them prevails. Applying a liminalist approach to actual play analysis, however, suggests that the thresholds between frames are not as unequivocal as they may appear. Instead, while there are, indeed, defined instances of traversal through them, I propose that there is often an overlap of two or even all three frames. This coalescence, far from causing confusion among the players at the table or the viewers, shapes a liminal persona in the players that is characteristic of TTRPGs.

The talk will last some 30 minutes. Here is your Teams link:

https://urldefense.com/v3/__https://teams.microsoft.com/l/meetup-join/19*3ameeting_NDIwZDZhMjktMjM0NS00NzBkLTgwYTYtZTU4ZjVlM2Y0ZjVl*40thread.v2/0?context=*7b*22Tid*22*3a*22fc6602ef-8e88-4f1d-a206-e14a3bc19af2*22*2c*22Oid*22*3a*222618df3b-c74a-4e43-9f80-18f47d76e245*22*7d__;JSUlJSUlJSUlJSUlJSUl!!D9dNQwwGXtA!UxlYnNg2aXXUWy2x3bQUQLT7xXtV6P4sbWeH1nefcEsNC-zWvOkArMOAF7Xx7cGro7dyw6vbKl1yyg$

NOTES, QUERIES, RESPONSES

Not without some hesitation, I take the liberty to set up a new section in this Newsletter. If it turns out to be viable, it will accommodate notes, comments and brief articles that may be of use to researchers into liminality. These should by rights go into a proper journal of liminality studies, but no such exists at present. Contributions to this section are welcome. The following note invites comments.

A NOTE ON THE SEMANTICS OF THE WORD 'TRANSITION'

Manuel Aguirre

The premise to this note is the need for an *atelic* model for liminality, one that will focus on the in-between stage of a process rather than on its resolution. It is not always easy to perform the kind of Gestalt adjustment required to grasp the concept of process in abstraction from its beginning and its end, but a clue may be found in the semantics of the word 'transition.'[1]

Dictionaries define it as *a movement or change from X to Y*. Samuel Johnson writes: 'Transition: Removal; passage from one to another.'[2] The *CODCE* concurs: 'Passage, change from one place or state or act or set of circumstances to another.'[3] The *AHD* includes the following among the senses of the word:[4]

> **Transition** n.
> **1.** Change from one form, state, style, or place to another.
> **2.** **a.** Change from one subject to another in discourse.
> **b.** A word, phrase, sentence, or series of sentences connecting one part of a discourse to another.

[1] My thanks to Belén Piqueras, who first suggested to me that, in the study of transitions, an excursion into etymology might be profitable.
[2] *Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Alexander Chalmers (London: Studio Editions, 1994).
[3] *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (5th edn, 1972),
[4] *American Heritage Dictionary* (https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=transition).

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According to the *OED*, when the word entered the English language around the 15th century, its original sense related to that of 'transitivity' in grammar, but towards the middle of the 16th century a second sense appeared:[5]

> **2.a. (1545—)** A passing or passage from one condition, action, or (rarely) place, to another; change.
> **3. (1550)** The action or act of passing from one subject to another in thought, speech, or writing; a phrase or passage used to pass from one subject to another.

A going from X to Y, where both X and Y are previously defined and understood, is the central sense according to these sources.

However, Latin *transitio*, from which the English term derives, did not quite mean this. Ernout and Meillet give it as *Aller au-delà, passer*[6] ('to go beyond, to pass'). The entry in *Etymonline* is instructive:[7]

> mid-15c., *transicion*, in grammar, from Latin *transitionem* (nominative *transitio*) 'a going across or over,' noun of action from past-participle stem of *transire* 'go or cross over.' c. 1600, 'transitory, not durable,' from Latin *transientem* (nominative *transiens*) 'passing over or away,' present participle of *transire* 'cross over, go over, pass over, hasten over, pass away,' from *trans* 'across, beyond' (see **trans-**) + *ire* 'to go' (from PIE root ***ei-** 'to go').

To be precise, one meaning of the Latin verb *transire* was, according to the *OLD*, 'to come or go across *from* one place *to* another,' (senses 1-6).[8] However, a different meaning obtains in senses 7-11: 'to proceed, be in transit (across a region), pass through,' 'go through,' 'go past' or 'by'; 'overtake,' 'go farther than,' 'surpass,' 'overstep, go beyond (limits, standards, etc.).' This is in line with Latin *transitio*, which meant 'a going across or over, a passing over, passage' (and, in one sense, 'a passage, entrance');[9] 'the action of going across or past, passage' (and again, in another sense, 'passage-way, doorway').[10]

According to these renderings, Latin *transitio* denoted a going-through or going-across, not a going-to. It centred on the in-between event (not on its origin or outcome) and on the intermediate site (not on the sites of departure or arrival).

English has equivalents for these distinctions. Certain verbal expressions focus on the result of an action or motion: 'reach,' 'arrive (at, in),' 'get to,' 'attain' are resultative and 'conjunctive'—they bring the agent *to* some place or goal. Others such as 'leave,' 'start from,' 'depart,' 'abandon,' 'quit,' 'take off' (in the relevant senses) are inchoative and separative or 'disjunctive' in that they focus on the point of departure. Yet others like 'cross,' 'pass,' 'traverse,' 'go beyond,' all focus on the event taking place on a limen; not on the points of either departure or destination, but on the site through which the movement occurs.

A presupposition of place-from or place-to can of course be read into Latin *transitio*, but it is not *in* the word, whereas the notion of place-through is consubstantial to its semantics and sanctioned by etymology. Not motion-towards or motion-away-from but motion-through is its central meaning, neither inchoative nor resultative but processual.

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[5] *Oxford English Dictionary* (https://www.oed.com/dictionary/transition_n)
[6] A. Ernout et A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine* (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1985).
[7] *ETYMONLINE* (https://www.etymonline.com/word/transition).
[8] *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Glare (1982; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992)., under *transeo*.
[9] Charlton T. Lewis, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
[10] *The Oxford Latin Dictionary.*

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In light of the above, when and how did this semantic change take place? How are we to account for the fact that all dictionaries define English 'transition' as 'change *from* X *to* Y'? I suggest that a clue may lie in history. The oldest occurrence of the word with our modern sense dates back to the mid-16th century, that is to say, to the Renaissance, a time when the scientific revolution was commencing, when western aspirations towards mastery over nature began to include a determination to control or, at least, predict all stages of a process, including its end. Our modernity stresses both origins—the *causes* of change—and resolutions, the cessation of instability—the *effects*, the aftermath of change. Lat. *transitio*, meaning 'a going-through,' almost immediately upon its adoption into English seems to have gained (aided by the 'from X to Y' connotations associated with certain senses of Lat. *transire*) the sense of a *completed* process, of displacement from start to finish.

Understanding the etymology of English 'transition' may help grasp the notion that the liminal stage in a process is characterised precisely by its middle event; both beginning and end are contingent and cannot be appealed to in a definition of the liminal. A suitable model for this event should therefore be *atelic*—unmindful of an outcome—and concentrate on the process (the transition itself) rather than on its inception or its result. As part of the *Transitions Project*, work is currently being conducted towards the construction of an atelic model for liminal events.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS IN THE FIELD OF LIMINALITY STUDIES

George P. Hansen, *The Trickster and the Paranormal* (Bloomington: Xlibris 2001)

> 'The central theme developed in this book is that psi, the paranormal, and the supernatural are fundamentally linked to destructuring, change, transition, disorder, marginality, the ephemeral, fluidity, ambiguity, and blurring of boundaries. In contrast, the phenomena are repressed or excluded with order, structure, routine, stasis, regularity, precision, rigidity, and clear demarcation. I hesitate to offer this very general statement because, by itself, it will almost certainly be misinterpreted; much of the book is devoted to explaining it.' (Blurb)

Massimiliano Vaira, 'The Permanent Liminality. Transition and Liminal Change in the Italian University: A Theoretical Framework and Early Evidences,' in Jelena Brankovic, Manja Klemencic, Predrag Lazetic, Pavel Zgaga (eds.), *Global Challenges, Local Responses in Higher Education* (Rotterdam: Sense Publisher, 2014), 191-208.

Árpad Szakolczai, 'Coping with Permanent Liminality: Social Understanding and Action through Theatre in Late Communist Hungary.' *Soc. Sci.*, 12:12 (2023), 652https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/12/12/652.

C. G. Johnsen & B. M. Sørensen, '"It's Capitalism on Coke!": From Temporary to Permanent Liminality in Organization Studies.' *Culture and Organization*, 21:4 (2015), 321-337. https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2014.901326

M. Bamber, J. Allen-Collinson, & J. McCormack, 'Occupational Limbo, Transitional Liminality and Permanent Liminality: New Conceptual Distinctions.' *Human Relations,* 70:12 (2017), 1514–1537. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726717706535

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Christine Mady, 'Transformations of the Beirut River: Between Temporary and Permanent Liminality,' *Urban Planning* 9 (2024), 6963, https://doi.org/10.17645/up.6963

H. Siganporia and F. G. Karioris, 'Rupture and Exile: Permanent Liminality in Spaces for Movement and Abandonment,' *Culture Unbound*, 8(1) (2016), 20–25. https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.168120

Hazel Andrews and Les Roberts, eds., *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, Experience and Spaces Inbetween* (London: Routledge, 2012).

Hazel Andrews and Les Roberts, 'Liminality', in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, eds. N. J. Smelser and P. B. Baltes (Oxford: Elsevier, 2014)

> 'This article explores the concept of 'liminality,' tracing its development from the work of the French ethnologist Arnold van Gennep, to the pioneering theoretical anthropology of Victor Turner, and goes on to consider ways that ideas of liminality have informed more recent discussions and debates, particularly in relation to the anthropology of experience, tourism and mobility, and place and space. Arguing that what is understood by 'liminality' today encompasses a wide array of meanings and theoretical associations, the article examines the extent to which the concept finds resonance with a rich and diverse field of social, cultural, and geographical enquiry.' (Abstract)

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