TRANSITIONS SEMINAR NEWSLETTER 19

Bimonthly, edited by M. Aguirre

March 2025

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/

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1. FORTHCOMING EVENTS

The *TS Newsletter* is scheduled to appear soon after the 15th of alternate months; I am issuing this number two weeks earlier than usual due to a surge in seminar activity. I am pleased to announce two forthcoming talks, both of them related to the latest phase in our running *Transitions Project*:

I.

Tareixa García de Polavieja
(Universidad Autónoma de Madrid)

will speak on

Navigating the Labyrinth: Oscillation and Negotiation in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*.

on TUE, March 18th
at 10.30 a.m. (CET), via Teams

(The talk will last some 30 minutes, to be followed by Q&A.
A link will be provided a few days before the talk).

ABSTRACT

Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* is renowned for its intricate and multifaceted narrative, blending elements of detective fiction and metafiction to create a richly layered text that challenges conventional storytelling. The trilogy's narrative complexity arises from its shifting focus between the mystery and the act of writing, leaving many plotlines unresolved and characters disappearing. The text's indeterminacies and intertextual references challenge readers to continuously interpret the story, questioning the reliability of language in depicting reality. By outlining these narrative shifts, this talk aims to elucidate the dynamics of the narrative structure at work in *City of Glass*, showing how the interplay between different narrative levels in Auster's text is deliberately designed as a labyrinth to embark readers in an ongoing reading process characterized by oscillation and negotiation.

II.

Verónica Frejo
(Universidad Autónoma de Madrid)

will speak on

Liminal Negotiation in Video Games: Generating Narrative in an Interactive Medium

on TUE, April 1st
at 10.30 a.m. (CET), via Teams

(The talk will last some 30 minutes, to be followed by Q&A.
A link will be provided a few days before the talk).

ABSTRACT

Fiction defamiliarizes reality; it makes us seek new knowledge, acquire new perspectives. To do so, it plays with our expectations, sometimes satisfying them, others subverting them. This back-and-forth process of information projected from text to reader generates a threshold, or limen, and readers engage in constant negotiations of these thresholds. These limina represent not only any choice characters make in response to their world, but all the other ones they could have made instead. Readers undertaking the process of unraveling a text similarly face these negotiations, as in order to properly understand and follow the narrative, one must solve the tension these transactional points set up. This is the case, at least, for traditional texts.

The goal of this talk is to reinforce the cornerstone hypothesis that narrative is formed through negotiation of the threshold—a phenomenon that does not simply consist in 'crossing' from a to b—and then to expand on it by proving that it can be applied to non-traditional, interactive texts: video games. And it is precisely interactivity which marks the main difference between written fiction and that of video games, since despite the latter having creators, it is their players who decide, in varying degrees, the what, when, where, and how of the characters they control within the pre-planned narrative and layout of each virtual world. Thus, this medium presents a unique system of threshold negotiations which accounts for the player-character liminal entity co-generating narrative in real time instead of just acquiring pre-established knowledge from the text.

2. NOTES

This section is open to notes from readers, and contributions are welcome. Notes should not exceed by much the 1000-word limit.

Further Thoughts on the Threshold Chronotope

M. Aguirre

In previous issues of the *TS Newsletter* I have sought to illustrate different aspects of the *threshold chronotope*;[1] it is time to go for some panoramic view of it.

The concept was coined by Bakhtin as one of several types of spacetime settings which, in his view, are the fundamental component of narrative and condition plot, characterisation and much else. The *chronotope of the threshold* is, he argued, typically found in 'threshold, staircase, front hall and corridor.' These are transit spaces, and contrast with living space. What happens in them enjoys, in Bakhtin's view, the status of a critical action or event, and we can retain this notion so long as it is conceded that 'crisis' is a relative term, as the event can last centuries, and not be felt as a crisis by those who live through it.

The threshold chronotope can also be 'a street and square that extend those spaces into the open air' (248). This is a fundamental insight: *we can have extended thresholds*. We deal not with a point in space and a moment in time but with a *domain* of experience varying in width and duration.

But in what sense can a street be a 'threshold chronotope'? Only by comparison with other spaces that are *not* viewed as liminal: residential, for instance—houses, flats, apartments—or work spaces. The same goes for corridors, staircases or vestibules, which are threshold chronotopes only in contrast to, e.g., rooms. And here emerges a second observation: *the threshold is a relational concept*. A vehicle in motion is a threshold chronotope if we gauge it par rapport to its points of departure and destination, or as viewed by a person occupying a stationary position. But there are vehicles—'Recreational Vehicle (RV),' 'motor-home,' 'trailer,' 'camper van' or 'tiny house on wheels'—which are designed to remain parked on a plot of ground on a more or less permanent basis. The liminal quality of these is diminished, when not cancelled, since for most intents and purposes they are stationary. A third reflection can be extracted from this: *liminality may come in degrees.*

In Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, adventure time begins as soon as the children enter the realm of Narnia through the wardrobe, but when they return after years of action, barely a minute has passed in ordinary time; this is not surprising, for the world of Narnia is *contained* within the limited space of the wardrobe. Conversely, time speeds up in the legend of Bran, whose three-year sojourn on the Island of Women turned out to have lasted three centuries in Ireland; or in Irving's 'Rip Van Winkle', so that one night on the Catskill Mountains turns out to have lasted sixty years in real time. Certain peculiar spaces foster unusual forms of time.

[1] See 'The Limen as Chronotope,' *The TS Newletter* nº 13 (March 2024), pp. 3-5; 'Ursula K. Le Guin and the Chronotope of the Threshold,' *The TS Newsletter* nº 16 (September 2024), pp. 2-3.

A different departure from ordinary time can be found in the film *Groundhog Day.* Here, the protagonist is stuck in the same day, which duly recurs every morning. Trapped in both time and space, he cannot leave the town of Punxsutawney, and events keep recurring in the same locales, with minor variations from one day to the next avatar of the same day.[2]

A third take on the threshold chronotope contemplates it as *a domain of deprivation*: it is what Turner aptly called it, 'a place that is not a place, and a time that is not a time.' The plight of the speaker in the Spanish *Romance del prisionero* is illustrative: while all of nature rejoices in May and serves love, 'I lie in this prison, / And do not know when it is day / Nor when night comes, / But for a little bird / That sang to me at dawn. /A crossbowman killed it, / May God give him his just reward.'[3] *An unchanging monotony of place and time shapes the liminal chronotope of the prison.*

Yet another variation is found in the myth of Elysium. Homer has Proteus foretell that Menelaos will not die in Argos but be sent to the Elysian plain, 'where the easiest living exists for men. / No snow is there, not much winter, and never rain […].[4] This myth of ease and steady mild weather reaches the love poetry of Pierre Ronsard. In one song, his poetic voice assures his lover that 'one single ship will take us both to the Elysian Fields,' where they will promenade 'under the shade of ever-green laurel trees': 'there sweet April's immortal season / Goes on without change; / The Earth, without labour, from her rich bosom / Yields all manner of things.'[5] Privation is one essential mark of liminal territory; in the Spanish *romance* it portended loss, but here it betokens absence of decay, of mortality, of effort, of change: in other words, *the threshold chronotope can be a site of unchanging plenitude.*

It makes sense to view these as different manifestations of one chronotope of the limen, its central feature being that *its time and space run at variance with our conventional understanding of them*. The liminal displays extra-ordinary attributes simply because it is what ordinary space is not. Thus, it can stretch, contract or shape a loop; it is relational, as it depends on the spacetimes next to it; it can exhibit degrees of liminality; it is denoted by privation and emptiness, or else by plenitude; it imprisons, or else liberates. Hence it does not enjoy a solid, always-the-same identity but 'inflects,' depending on what criterion of normalcy, ordinariness or stability we start out from.

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[2] We tend to think of labyrinths as spatial constructs; but temporal labyrinths have been popularised in time-loop films and series. Wikipedia offers a dynamic list of (currently) 76 films dealing with this topic (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_films_featuring_time_loops).

[3] *Que yago en esta prisión, /Que ni sé cuándo es de día / Ni cuándo las noches son, / Sino por una avecilla / Que me cantaba al albor; / Matómela un ballestero, / Déle Dios mal galardón* (*Romancero antiguo*, ed. Juan Alcina Franch, vol. 2 (Barcelona: Editorial Juventud, 1971, pp. 481-82) (my translation).

[4] *The Odyssey*, trans. Albert Cook (New York: Norton, 1993), IV.563-68.

[5] *Dans les champs Elisez une mesme navire / Nous passera tous deux. … [nous] irons sous les ombrages / Des Lauriers tousjours verds … Là du plaisant Avril la saison immortelle / Sans eschange se suit: / La terre sans labeur de sa grasse mamelle / Toute chose y produit* (`Plus estroit que la Vigne', in *Selected Poems of Pierre de Ronsard*, ed. St. John Lucas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), pp. 119-20) (my translation).

3. NEWS.

The European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities (ALLEA, https://allea.org/) has released the following statement:

> ALLEA Statement on Threats to Academic Freedom and International Research Collaboration in the United States - ALLEA

4. PUBLICATIONS RELEVANT TO LIMINALITY STUDIES

- Merle A. Williams, ed. *Hospitalities: Transitions and Transgressions, North and South* (New York: Routledge, 2020). ISBN: 978-1-003-11243-3 (e-book).

- Kevin Thwaites & Ian Simkins, *Experiential Landscape: An Approach to People, Place and Space* (London: Routledge 2007, especially chapter 5, pp. 69 ff. (under TRANSITION).

- Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or The Multiplication of Labor* (Duke UP, 2013).

- Jerry Brotton, *Four Points of the Compass: The Unexpected History of Direction* (Dublin: Allen Lane / Penguin Books, 2024). While not directly dealing with liminality, it harps on the relative and shifting nature of cardinal points throughout history, and has much to say on the ambiguous status of 'the West' as a direction, a threshold, a place and an ideology.

- The University of Lancaster ran a research project between 2017 and 2020 titled 'Chronotopic Cartographies.' One spinoff of this was LITCRAFT, which used Minecraft tools to produce complex visual maps of literary texts for the digital medium. See https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/chronotopic-cartographies/detail/#:~:text=The%20chronotope%20of%20the%20threshold,%2C%20the%20public%2C%20the%20city.

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