

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

GRAHAM ST JOHN (Ed.) *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008, 343 p., index.

This volume, edited by Graham St John, has the potential to successfully rejuvenate Victor Turner's theory of performance, particularly given the present shift toward "processual" rather than structural understandings of sociocultural life. Turner wrote primarily in the 1970s and 1980s, but his status as a cultural theorist was "ambiguous" because of his proclivity toward "postmodern ways of thinking" (11). Turner's theoretical evolution away from a structural-functionalist interpretation of culture and toward an understanding of society's becoming, occasionally ostracised Turner from some academic circles. However, this theoretical inclination is undoubtedly the motivation behind St John's text.

Perhaps most renowned for his theory of liminality, Turner argued that liminality is significant in its capacity to form new sociocultural symbols, models, and ideals. Liminality apparently enables "creative actors" to shape "more apt or interesting ways of living" (7). According to Turner, liminal genres assume collective and integrated actions of cultures typically associated with sacred communities (10). Conversely, liminoid genres emphasise the voluntary and fragmented nature of society which are associated with the "social critique, subversive behaviour, and radical experimentation" found in secular cultures (9). Liminality encompasses both concepts. The processual formation of sociocultural structures occurring in the margins is what arguably fuelled Turner's theoretical development. As Turner states, liminality is the subjunctive mood of culture. This theme is successfully maintained throughout the theoretical developments within the chapters of this text.

An impressive selection of analyses conducted through diverse disciplinary lenses (including media and communication, sociology, religion, and anthropology) explicate the need for a revival of Turner's multifaceted theory. St John's thesis is clear. While many of the chapters engage with prominent critiques of Turnerian theory, the primary goal is to "reanimate, renovate, and repurpose" (18) Turner's theory in light of contemporary performance discourse.

St John commences the book with an expansive twenty-eight page introduction, which contextualizes the Turnerian framework. This includes a brief biography highlighting Turner's academic development, his significant relationship with his wife Edith Turner, and his embrace of religion. While at times the lucidity of the writing is compromised, St John compensates by providing a brief yet sweeping overview of the key theoretical underpinnings which encompass Turner's theory. St John succinctly articulates the significance of social dramas such as ritual and festival as well as outlining in detail the mechanism by which Turner

distinguished between liminal and liminoid performances. Moreover, a brief discussion of how “spontaneous communitas” function as sites of a collective awareness which have the potential to facilitate a “re-evaluation of social systems” successfully establishes an exceptional context within which to situate the subsequent chapters (7). St John concludes his introduction with detailed chapter summaries which clearly map the subject layout of the text. His introduction ensures that prior knowledge of Turnerian theory is not obligatory, enabling the text to function on two levels. First, the writing and content are accessible, making the book appropriate as an introductory performance theory text for an undergraduate readership. Second, the chapters engage with the traditional Turnerian model in a manner which propels the original theory in new directions appealing to magnanimous and multidisciplinary performance theory enthusiasts.

Each of the seventeen chapters explores Turner’s concepts in diverse ways resulting in an expansion of the traditional theoretical parameters and a renewed sense of the relevance of Turner’s seminal theory. The contributors engage with Turner’s multifaceted theory in two ways. While some seek to rejuvenate Turnerian theory by applying it to diverse contemporary performances, others amend and revise the framework to increase its relevancy in light of changing Western cultural practices. St John weaves the two approaches in a manner that not only retools the traditional theory in light of critiques, but also asserts its significance in contemporary performance discourse.

Perhaps one of the best articulated applications of liminality in a contrary way is Ian Maxwell’s chapter on the ritualization of performance. While Turner saw ritual and its production of liminal outcomes as liberatory and “ultimately eufunctional” (60), Maxwell warns against the overemphasis on positive outcomes of liminality. Instead, Maxwell’s use of the famous 1933 Nuremberg Nazi rally illustrates the potential for dystopian outcomes of ritualized performances. Like many other contributors to the text, Maxwell successfully reaffirms the importance of the basic theory but cautions against applying it without critical assessment.

Amie Matthews’ chapter applies Turner’s concepts to contemporary youth travel practices in a way that parallels traditional rites of passage. Matthews effectively draws connections between the significance of experiential knowledge, the liminoidal relationships formed while travelling, and the development of communitas (187). Perhaps the most contentious aspect of Turnerian theory is the concept of spontaneous communitas, which according to Turner, occurs when “individuals interrelate relatively unobstructed by sociocultural divisions of role, status, reputation, class, caste, sex, age, and other structural niches” (7). Spontaneous communitas is widely criticised for over-generalizing and homogenising individuals and individual experience (217). Matthews highlights the potential for heterogeneity within communitas by making the concept more applicable to contemporary Western experiences.

Carole M. Cusack and Justine Digance’s chapter on consumer culture and identity, as well as Margi Nowak’s exploration of online forums, engage with Turnerian communitas formations. Cusack and Digance seek to exhibit the

liminality found in the sacred pilgrimage and rites of passage evident in the event called the Formal Fashion Spectacular. They argue that *communitas* are formed through the Formal Fashion Spectacular which are critical in the formation of the self (239). Nowak also asserts that *communitas* membership is a powerful mechanism for finding selfhood. Online participation assists parents in gaining strength from their collaboration with other parents (270). Lee Gilmore's analysis of the Burning Man festival explicates the need to be critical of the usefulness of *communitas*. Gilmore argues that in some sociocultural performances Turnerian theory is simply inapplicable. But despite this, Gilmore continues to think that Turner's basic insights are seminal (224).

In his push for theoretical development, Simon Cottle argues that in order for Turner's theory of social drama to apply to contemporary media performances in a significant way, Turner's four-stage model requires a fifth stage (120). This final stage accounting for the "ebbing and revivification" of social dramas more aptly demonstrates how mediated dramas have the potential to become potent symbols and catalysts for change (122). For example, Cottle examines the way in which cultural reflexivity impacted British racial identity through the mediated performance of a racially motivated murder. By revisiting the homicide years later the media effectually continue to negotiate identities.

Turnerian theory is also thrust in a more critical direction through Mihai Coman's chapter about the impact on national identity of media-controlled ritualization in post-communist Romania. Coman claims that "by ritualizing the coverage of events, journalists create the liminal..." (102). This analysis enhances traditional Turnerian theory by elucidating alternative sites which foster liminality. Moreover, by linking liminality to elite interests, Coman exemplifies the Turnerian focus on how structures are produced and reproduced through performance (3).

J. Lowell Lewis also explores Turner's concept of social drama. Instead of a media-focused theoretical expansion, Lewis champions the need for a distinction between spontaneous and planned forms of liminoid performance. Recognition of spontaneous "play" and its ability to deconstruct provide profound insights into sociocultural life, thus counterbalancing the overwhelming concentration on "ritual-like" performance and its ability to construct (55). Through his analysis of play, Lewis challenges Turner's assertion that ritual is the "primordial source" for significant sociocultural events; and asserts instead that play is actually more significant (46-47).

Graham St John challenges the supposition that liminal and liminoid performances are easily distinguishable and rigidly binary. Using the example of Electronic Dance Music Culture, he argues that some contemporary performance genres are neither clearly liminal nor liminoid but combine aspects of both concepts. According to St John, the liminal/liminoid and sacred/secular dichotomies are highly problematic (163).

One of the thematically odd features of this book is the organisation of the fourth section titled "Edith Turner." St John begins this section with Matthew Engelke's candid and noteworthy interview with Victor's wife. While the chapter helps

contextualise the personal side of the development of Turnerian theory, it does not fit with the flow of the preceding chapters. Barbara A. Babcock's submission in this section is also inconsistent with the thematic structure. Her chapter focuses little on Edith's substantial contributions, and instead emphasizes Victor's tendency to use feminine language. The result, in my opinion, is a somewhat disjointed text. Edith's influence on both her husband's life as well as the development of his theoretical ideas is indisputable. For example, Babcock states "although Edie was never officially a coauthor of Vic's publications until their *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978), she was always and indispensably there" (302, emphases added). In addition, Jill Dubisch's poignantly written and insightful chapter on Edith Turner's ability to capture "anthropology through experience" (334) clearly explicates the value of her work. However, segmenting her work into a separate section contradicts the reoccurring theme that she was an essential part of Turnerian theory in its entirety. Readers may be somewhat puzzled by the lack of continuity between this section, undoubtedly intended to be a homage, and the rest of an otherwise well-structured text.

Through this compilation, Graham St John and the contributing authors have rejuvenated Turner's diverse ideas about performance, making this volume a significant addition to contemporary performance discourse. Indeed, *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance* is an essential book for anyone interested in developing a primary understanding of performance theory. The editor has compiled an accessible and stimulating collection which will undoubtedly leave its readers with a profound appreciation for the Turnerian framework.

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