

# On “Cultural Liminality” and Some Representation Models

SILVIA FLOREA

**Résumé:** *Le concept de «liminalité» est utilisé non seulement en anthropologie, sociologie, théorie littéraire et études culturelles, mais il a réussi de définir les instruments critiques des approches contemporaines de la littérature américaine. Le besoin de voir au-delà de concepts d'«originalité» et de «subjectivité» surprend les moments et les processus produits au moment où les différences culturelles sont déjà articulées et légitimées. Ces espaces «d'interstice» génèrent un cadre obligatoire pour définir les stratégies de l'identité capables à mettre en évidence non seulement les signes de l'identité, mais aussi les arguments pour la coopération et le regard critique, nécessaires pour l'idée de société. Cette étude prend le modèle du «conflit social» de Turner – le concept de «liminalité», c'est-à-dire la transition des cultures – pour fonctionner comme générateur du choc culturel, avec des multiples significations dans le contexte contemporain.*

**Keywords:** *limit, liminality, cultural shock, hybridity, marginality, hybrid.*

This work aims to approach aspects related to the concept of discourse “legitimacy”, cultural practices and traditions, to the dynamics of the terms of legitimate, valid, acceptable and relevant. It starts from the premise that the analysis of the concept of legitimacy cannot be reduced only to the examination of value options of community, namely that the values are not the only elements influencing the general orientation toward social status, this attitude being affected by factors such as one's own interests and the “affective” irrational identification with it. Therefore, there is a distinction between central legitimacy, based on values, and para-legitimacy, based on other factors, such as affective factors or one's own interest. This work follows this generous path as it approaches the idea of cultural liminality in relation with the condition of “marginalization” and structural inferiority, discussed under the cognitive relationship of legitimacy. The demarche originates from Victor Turner's concept of “cultural liminality” as a transition between two cultures and asymptotically examines social groups, in this case the relation between “liminary”, “marginalized” individuals (the expatriated) and the so called “outsiders”. The idea of *cultural shock* is delineated and debated also as a form of transition between social and cultural groups, the discussion being confined to a general context where the idea of “legitimacy” is slightly complicated by cultural ethnical studies, when they confine themselves to racial, ethnical or genre representations.

The concept of *limit* includes a range of related significances, from the physical limit separating spaces, bodies and things to the borders between conceptual categories and schemes within a certain culture. It can be defined either in terms of “border” (which divides) or as

"threshold" (which both divides and unites) and can exist only in relation with the idea of "before" and "after". Hence, the interest for category limits and consequently in its transition is the focal point of a certain epistemological mutation, whose centre of interest is not the limit as a border, but the limit as a threshold, giving birth to a third space, of „*in-betweenness*“, to use one of Victor Turner's favourite terms. Both *liminality* and *hibridity* bring to the forefront the transitional, ambiguous and paradoxical element and they underline in the most general way the issue of categorization implying an uncomfortable combination of logical, linguistic and ontological elements. As critical concepts, the notions of „*liminal*“ and „*liminality*“ were first used by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, who in his work titled *Les rites de passage* (1908), examined the ceremonials accompanying the individual's „*life crisis*“ which he called „*rites de passage*“ and which he scrutinized in the context of primitive societies<sup>1</sup>. He identifies this liminality inside a specific cultural context and signals three major changes: *separation*, *transition* and *integration*. Along the years, the term of passage came to replace that of "transition". The initiated, the person submitted to the ritual, loses any social status he had before the ritual, steps into the liminal period of transition, eventually acquires a new status and is re-assimilated into society. Van Gennep's classification is also important because it includes a wide range of interrelated phenomena, such as territorial disputes, aspects related to nativity, rituals of initiation, engagement and marriage, burials. Noteworthy is, however, the fact that, in the context of his work, the rituals of initiation are only concerned with the separation of the individual from the mother culture, opening the passage to a society of adoption and therefore to a new culture.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., Victor Turner's scientific contribution became, without any doubt, instrumental. Although his concept of cultural liminality was later applied to modern society, it drew its origins from primitive society. For five years, he lived with the Ndembu tribe from Zambia, studying their way of life, while much of his early work is based on the experience accumulated in the study of tribal societies. Turner focuses his entire activity on the middle stage of cultural liminality – the transitional stage. He notices that in the liminality period, the individual is structurally if not physically "invisible"<sup>2</sup>, namely an ambiguous status socially and structurally. As compared to van Gennep, Turner further extends the use of liminality both to the study of liminal elements, features characteristic for individuals and communities as well as to symbolic genres belonging to society, including the intricate social structures of Western-type culture. In defining terms, Turner points out the essential role of liminality in undermining social definitions, more precisely cultural categorizations, as a rule made in terms representing opposing pairs like "or/or", now replaced by "both/and" or "neither/nor" as they are mentioned in his first three important studies on liminality: "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*", from *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (1967), „*Liminality and Communitas*“, from *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), and „*Passages, Margins, and Poverty: Religious Symbols of Communitas*“, from *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (1974). In all these, Turner discusses liminality and rites of passage from harmony to dissidence as a form of inner experience, a period that calls for a certain "vulnerability" of the ego and consciousness, essential for the fluency and fluidity of this process. How much frustrating they would be, the accumulations

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in point of alienation and the loss of an inner or outer landmark by an individual, make us witness in fact a complex inner journey which often may result in a migration and redefinition of the soul:

„The attributes of liminality or of liminal individuals (situated on the threshold) are definitely ambiguous, as the condition of these persons ignores or slides through the network of classifications which normally locate and position the states of mind within the cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are in mid position shaped out and enforced by law, habits, conventions and ceremonials. As such, their attributes, ambiguous and undetermined, are expressed by a variegated range of symbols... Therefore, liminality is regularly likened to death, invisibility, darkness, bisexuality, wilderness and the sun or moon eclipse“<sup>3</sup>.

This is the liminal phase between the rites of entrance and exit in the initiation processes into another culture and moreover it stands as the threshold toward another genre of experience enforcing its own rules. While in this liminal state, individuals are in-between social structures, now temporarily fallen, and in these fissures, in these socially structured interstices they become fully conscious of their own personalities. All the same, liminality is an intermediary stage between a beginning and an end, and therefore a temporary state which ends up only when the individual is reintegrated into the social structure. It can last awhile, until it reaches a dialectical point of transcendence and the individual finds his home. This piling up of obstacles and difficulties likely to stifle transition and create a more or less permanent mask was defined as a *cultural shock*. The concept of cultural shock is significant for they who are implied into a bi or multicultural community, who for various reasons were engulfed by the new host culture and for whom the encounter with a substantially different culture makes vibrate the natural foundation of their own epistemological framework, quite often generating a state of cognitive dissonance. Whether they really grasped the newly encountered culture is still an open issue; however, it is certain that these victims of cultural shock will never see their homeland and its values in the same way again. They crossed a border, a cultural liminality, according to Turner<sup>4</sup> and for they who survived the experience of a cultural shock, the trauma has not ended yet. Once back home, after a period of a-culturalization, they share a new experience, called *the re-entrance shock*, when they discover that that previous culture so familiar to them is no longer the same. It has changed along with them. At a different level, the deconstruction of identity and values facilitate the appearance of cultural and collective subconsciousness, and this gap emerges as the outer parameters of social system are experienced, resulting in a form of dissidence. The sociology of deviance abounds in examples related to the way in which such social behaviours are deemed to be marginal, only because they do not level up with the expectations raised by the main values structures. Along with this fissure in social etiquette, a crisis emerges leading to a clash of values. Since culture establishes the agenda for socialization, the individual is pushed up to redress the situation and he eventually surrenders. The final denouement is that the individual must reintegrate into the moral principles related to his culture, and according to the model of social drama developed

by Turner, socialization is never complete and acculturalisation consequently never ends. The new member of host society will introduce and experiment consciously and unconsciously a wide range of behaviours onto the new culture and many of them will linger on as grey zones of dissonance. I share the view that an in-depth study would help researchers in behavioural sciences to create a "buffer" able to appease the mighty impact of cultural shock on various social groups; many authors dealt, seemingly, with this phenomenon only tangentially and did not sufficiently focus on the structure of cultural shock *per se*, the components involved in the rites of passage from one social reality to another being overlooked or mentioned only superficially. Thus, many migration reports mention existing accommodation difficulties, but do not go deeper into the structural conflicts representing the source of cognitive dissonances to which immigrants are subject as well as the structural basis of these conflicts. Likewise, various studies deal both with social and psychological re-evaluation and linguistic traumas to be found in host culture but do not identify these factors in the rich database of intercultural theory of cognitive dissonance. The significance of these intercultural details within transition rituals go beyond the scope of this article, however discussion holds within the context of the social psychology of culture, where these details constitute successful applications for the concepts of liminality, hybridity and marginalization, where they can be further explored.

In "Passages, Margins and Poverty", Turner discusses about liminality as a cultural manifestation of communities („communitas“ as he calls them) in relation with marginalization and structural inferiority, his perception on the „margins“ of social structure being slightly different. Now, Turner uses the term of marginality to define the condition to belong simultaneously to two or more social or cultural groups and points out that marginal people, as well as the liminary ones, are facing the same state of transition, namely the expatriates, the shamans, the prophets, the mediums, the priests, the monks, the hippies and the gypsies<sup>5</sup>. Eventually, liminality proves to be a very slippery concept once taken out of its ritualistic context, where it originated and we seem to witness an overlapping and ambiguity among the three categories it defines, liminality, marginality and structural inferiority respectively; the borders of liminality are quite blurred and the difference is not obvious, according to Taylor<sup>6</sup>, who quotes the example given by Turner about the liminal nature of Christian existence. Turner considers that all Christians are liminary because they pass through this world toward the next world, an idea not new to Christianity, we would say. However, in another essay<sup>7</sup>, Turner writes about the people in monastic isolation (monks) as belonging to the same category with the outsiders. Taylor raises a legitimate question as to whether they can be seen as outsiders only because they opted for another social category, in which case their Christian liminal nature is questionable or they are rather liminal outsiders, in which case we witness an obvious contradiction in terms. The argument can be taken further when Turner supports the idea that this category of Christians represent liminal figures because they see themselves as temporary inhabitants of this world, ergo their liminal state ends up with death, but as it goes on their entire earthly lifetime, the idea of liminality as a temporary state is however pushed a bit too far...

In the incipient stage, the concepts of *liminal* and *liminality* challenged the accepted social structures and showed both the positive and the negative side of the spatial – temporal interface

undermining traditional categories. The current concentration on *hybridity*, a recently adopted term, takes place at a time when this process has been already grounded philosophically and, therefore, the hybrid, in an age of blurred frontiers, is just another name for the same model to represent the state of liminality. In more modern terms, cultural hybridity theory starts from liminality as an all-comprehensive cultural phenomenon, present in all the areas of cultural praxis. Just glancing through the volume *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism* (1997), a welcome and encompassing anthology of articles, one comes upon the main issues and research trends on hybridity at a time of cultural complexity.

In his introductory study, Pnina Werbner argues that as long as culture was defined according to certain categories, hybridity (actually described in the same terms as liminality) was a powerful analytical tool aimed to highlight the role played by symbolic hybrid. Nonetheless, in postmodern culture, multiplicity, complexity, in-defining and transgression have become dominant conceptual and organizational forms of culture. Thus, in Werbner's opinion, this new heuristic model for multi- and trans-cultural study tries to solve the enigma about the way in which hybridity succeeds to be at the same time transgressive and normal, and is seen as being dangerous, hard and revitalising despite its daily normality<sup>8</sup>. Cultural hybridity is above all embedded in many-faceted ambivalences, such as in the coexistence of anti-essentialism with the reloaded notion of ethnical communities, both from the viewpoint of cultural changes and also of the resistance to changes in ethnical, emigrant groups and nation-states, in the co-presence of certain dominant discourses and last but not least in the anthropological research which unfolds the fact that, although culture is a whole, it still perpetuates early notions of race, etc. In general, authors bring into relation the definitions of postmodern subjectivity or identity with regard to the notion of hybrid or liminality and the way in which new symbols about the issue of identity and associated domains are interrelated. Werbner argues that the challenge for future research is to develop new models of hybridity likely to remove the current pressure exercised on contingent hybridity.

„Even if we believe that they exhibit the transparency of hegemonic cultural suppositions, we have to admit the difference of interests various groups show in supporting these borders [...] this interest makes the experience of hybridity disturbing and shocking for some, revealing for others“<sup>9</sup>.

By way of conclusion, I may say that cultural liminality is instrumental in trading off the differences that make up the identity. The process-like, transforming and inconclusive formation of “border life” is not the outcome of given factual states, but instead a ceaseless renegotiation which simultaneously leads to new cultural features characterised by fluid and hybrid combinations, as well as the dissemination of “class” and “genre” primary conceptual categories into an aggregate of topics, differences and claims of identity. According to Papastergiadis,

„The positive characteristic of hybridity is that it invariably recognizes that identity is built up through a negotiation of differences and that the presence of fissures,

gaps and contradictions is not necessarily a sign of failure. In its radical form, the concept also underlines that identity does not represent the combination, accumulation, fusion or synthesis of certain components, but is an energetic field of different forces<sup>10</sup>.

## WORKS CITED

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“Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu