EDITORIAL

Space, ritual, absence: the liminal in South African visual art

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Transaesthetics and liminality in South African visual art

This eclectic and yet closely related set of articles were first presented as papers at a colloquium held at the University of Johannesburg, from 10 to 11 March 2011. The colloquium was convened by James Sey, Leora Farber and Bronwyn Law-Viljoen under the auspices of the *Visual Identities in Art and Design* Research Centre of the Art, Design and Architecture Faculty of the University of Johannesburg. In conjunction with a visual art exhibition of the same title, curated by Sey and Farber, colloquium presenters sought to interrogate the well-known trope of liminality in terms of its usefulness as a frame within which to understand and analyse South African visual art.

Both the colloquium and the exhibition brought to bear a broad range of interpretations of liminality in the analysis of South African art, as this collection of articles clearly demonstrates. However, in order to provide a contextualising framework for the concept of liminality as it is interpreted in the articles, it is useful to first delineate more narrowly how the concept of the liminal is understood in its original, usually anthropological contexts, and how it can be usefully applied to an understanding of specifically South African visual art.

The concept of the liminal refers to the state of the threshold. That which is liminal exists in an in-between state, not fully realised, fully understood or fully accepted into the socius. Things and beings which exist in a liminal state are properly at the margins, often not accorded a full legal, epistemological or psychological identity. As such, they acquire a range of different meanings and functions in society. Liminal spaces are those in which the normal rules and mores of society are suspended, thus allowing for transformation and new confluences to happen.

In his famous essay, *The accursed share*, Georges Bataille (1991:20, 21) writes:

> [m]an's [*sic*] disregard for the material basis of his life still causes him [*sic*] to err in a serious way. Humanity exploits given material resources, but by restricting them as it does to a resolution of the immediate difficulties it encounters (a resolution which it has hastily had to define as an ideal), it assigns to the forces it employs an end they cannot have. Beyond our immediate ends, man's [*sic*] activity in fact pursues the useless and infinite fulfilment of the universe.

The point Bataille makes here is both macroeconomic and ideological, in that it implies the key problem of profit for a global economy of expenditure. He continues:

> the living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of the system; if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit – it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically (Bataille 1991:21).

In the entirety of his meditation, Bataille (1991) favours a few areas of human cultural endeavour as expressing in a productively symptomatic way this general economy of excess: art, sex, food and gifts are among them. All of these are regarded as social phenomena bound up in a ritual exchange or circulation of meaning in which value is not attributable to the principle of surplus, and thus performs different social functions. All of these, with the notable exception of art, share some, but not all, of the key characteristics of the liminal in that they tend to be important markers of the status and identity of those who perform the exchange as either givers or receivers.

Regarding the apparently anomalous place of art in such a set of exchanges, Jean Baudrillard (1993:18, 19) writes:

> [t]here is much talk of a dematerialisation of art, as evidenced, supposedly, by minimalism, conceptual art, ephemeral art, anti-art and a whole aesthetic of transparency, disappearance and disembodiment. In reality however, what has occurred is a *materialisation* of aesthetics everywhere under an operational form… . Our images are like icons: they allow us to go on believing in art while eluding the question of its existence. So perhaps we ought to treat all present-day art as a set of rituals, and for ritual use only; perhaps we ought to consider art solely from an anthropological standpoint, without reference to any aesthetic judgment whatsoever. The implication is that we have returned to the cultural stage of primitive societies. (The speculative fetishism of the art market itself partakes of the ritual of art's transparency).

Baudrillard's (1993) vision of art in contemporary culture, which he terms a 'transaesthetics of indifference', is focused on the possibility of art having a 'ritual use'; one which would be more clearly understood from an anthropological point of view than a conventionally aesthetic one. The implication he draws from this, namely that, 'we have returned to the cultural stage of primitive societies', is a profound one (Baudrillard 1993:19).

In the first instance, his use of the term 'indifference' is not the common usage, and has more affinity with its use in the work of Giorgio Agamben (1998) – that of states of being or politico-legal identity which are co-extensive and mutually dependent but still opposed to each other. Baudrillard's (1993:18) point about 'materialisation of aesthetics under an operational guise' takes away, for him, the social power of aesthetic objects and practices. His argument that art should be restored to anthropology rather than aesthetics is, of course, to some extent polemical, but it raises the Benjaminian spectre of the relationship between "iconic" art and the sacred. The aesthetic realm per se, in Baudrillard's (1993) argument, has become 'indifferent' to the value of the aesthetic sign, and the aesthetic is thus indistinguishable from other contemporary phenomena such as economics and sexuality in it's over-determined dependence on self-reference and the symbolic realm. It has lost the ability to exist as a discourse of excess, in Bataille's sense. Baudrillard's suggestion that art should return to the anthropological is thus one Bataille would have welcomed, however ironically meant.

Baudrillard (1993:19) also suggests that such a function or role for art returns one to the 'cultural stage of

primitive societies'. This points to the way in which art formed one of the key demarcations of the difference between the natural and the cultural for earlier societies, a kind of bridge between an aesthetic regime of representation and supernatural or overtly religious phenomena. It is in this "anthropological" mode that art can be best understood as liminal.

And yet, so-called "liminal" art is also different to anthropologically-oriented liminal rituals. Such rituals most commonly involve a period of liminality for subjects undergoing what Arnold van Gennep (cited by Turner 1969:166) defines as the three rites of passage. These rites of passage usually obey what van Gennep (cited by Turner 1969:166) identifies as a tripartite structure of separation, namely, margin and reaggregation (reassimilation), or the preliminal, liminal and postliminal. As Victor Turner (1969:166) observes, the former set of terms refers to spatial conditions, whilst the latter evokes transitions within a particular space and time.

In contemporary societies, this strict sense of the liminal state as it is understood in relation to anthropologically-oriented liminal rituals has broadened. In rites of passage, the subject's rights and recognition of status or identity within their particular social structure is characteristically temporarily suspended; the subject only reacquires these aspects as it re-emerges from the liminal state and is reassimilated, or to use van Gennep's (cited by Turner 1969) term, 'reaggregated' into the socius.

Is it thus possible to suggest that art can represent this liminal state in a more sustained and coherent way, and, in so doing, comment on the forms of social ordering and assimilation within the society in which such art is positioned? The liminal has certainly acquired a broader range of different meanings and functions in contemporary society wherein it has come to attract not only power, magic, danger and mystery, but also suspicion and repressive control.

This broader range of meanings might be grouped into three distinct areas of theoretical and aesthetic attention.

Firstly, the liminality of spaces is becoming more of an object of attention. In the transit zones of hotels and airports, people are always moving from one place, and state, to another, and are therefore subject to different rules and controls to those which exist in society. Liminal zones are also spaces of spiritual or social power, which denote a place in which occurrences can take place outside the normal realm of social structure. These liminal spaces range from disputed political territories, to asylums and internment camps, to shrines, caves, seashores and crossroads. Liminal spaces thus can attract dispute and contestation, but can also represent a place in which no political or social action or decision can yet be taken, until the decision is made to exit the liminal zone. Examples of this are the science fictional spaces of the "Twilight Zone" and the "Interzone", as well as the insane asylum, where, while the inmate cannot have medico-legal or moral status as a full citizen, he or she also cannot be held responsible for their decisions and actions.

Secondly, liminal bodies are those always caught in a curious almost-becoming, a state of absence which is held in place, sometimes quite literally, as with the mythological centaur – a being which is both horse and man but simultaneously neither. The rights of a body to certain observances and status is held in limbo by the absence, for example, of citizenship in the case of the illegal immigrant, or the absence of clearly attributable, socially sanctioned gender and sexual object choice in the case of transsexuals, transvestites, bisexuals and, in some cases and places, homosexuals. Cyborg bodies constitute another clear subcategory of the liminal form.

But it is in the idea of liminal rituals, commonly a marker of the state between exclusion and inclusion from a social group that bodies and consciousness exist in a different and suspended state between two social categories; they are, in effect, in an altogether different realm that belongs to the liminal itself. The many rituals marking initiation into adulthood are prime examples of this perhaps most widespread of liminal phenomena. In the liminal ritual, the state of liminality itself becomes of interest, rather than the fact that liminality might buffer the two states of social exclusion and inclusion, as with spaces and bodies.

The many rituals that demarcate the state of an individual's 'sovereignty', or as Bataille (1991:22) puts it, 'the independence of man relative to useful ends', act as the means to also demarcate liminality, a type of being that has to be strictly policed and maintained as the reason for a necessary exception of the exercise of power in all political states. As Agamben (1998:22, 23) states:

> [i]t is not the exception that gets subtracted from the rule, but the rule that, suspending itself, gives raise to the exception and only in this way can constitute itself as rule, by constantly maintaining a relation to it. … The situation that is created by exception can neither be defined as a factual situation, nor as a situation of right, but institutes between the two a paradoxical threshold of indifference.

This paradox, for Agamben, is the paradox of sovereignty. He notes that,

> [j]ust as sovereign power is presupposed as state of nature, that is then maintained in a relation of exclusion with respect to the state of right, so does it separate itself into constituent and constitutive power and still relates to both by placing itself in their point of indifference (Agamben 1998:48).

Thus, if one assumes that liminal states of being and existence bear an epistemological relation to the state of exception as Agamben defines it, it is primarily in that they induce the exercise of the exception in sovereign power in order to police liminality itself. By doing so, the liminal, and its most extreme version, the *homo sacer*, illustrate the paradox of sovereignty and the violence it can commit.

Further complicating these questions is the extent to which the imposition of a state of exception is increasingly inherent in a globalised and highly mediated body politic. The concept of a global, free market-driven and largely democratic system that the fall of communism ushered in seems to be constantly in debate with itself about the roles and function of supposedly universal democratic principles. The use of torture in camps is one such debate, but another is the increasingly attenuated right to privacy which comes under threat from the rise of a globally mediated tabloid and surveillance culture.

Another crucial consequence of the globalisation of both labour and capital is the rise of the liminal categories of the refugee and the slum. As Slavoj Žižek (2008:424) puts it,

> [t]he explosive growth of slums over the last decades, especially in the Third World mega-cities … is perhaps the crucial geopolitical event of our times. … Since, sometime very soon, the urban population of the earth will outnumber the rural population, and since slum inhabitants will compose the majority of urban dwellers, we are in no way dealing with a marginal phenomenon. We are witnessing the fast growth of a population living outside state control. They are … not an unfortunate accident, but a necessary product of the innermost logic of global capitalism.

As Žižek points out, the key point that slum dwellers exist outside of state control in relatively unregulated areas of urban sprawl brings them into the same political category as refugee populations who present an administrative and macro-economic problem to national governments. Both populations exist in a marginal juridical-political state that is coterminous with the liminal state of exception. In Žižek's (2008:425) words, '[t]he defining feature of the slum-dwellers is socio-political, it concerns their (non-) integration into the legal space of citizenship with (most of) its incumbent rights … a slum-dweller is a *homo sacer*, the systematically generated "living dead" of global capitalism'. The general distribution and rapid growth of slums and refugee populations should lead to consideration of how the minority citizens of biopolitical states, party to the rights of such citizens, will dispense such rights over the majority of those existing in liminal states in slums and refugee camps.

As Baudrillard (1993:18, 19) observes, aesthetics is one realm in which, given a globalised regime of image-culture, celebrity and the circulation of representations, discursive or ritual power has become severely domesticated. In a South African context, the emergence from apartheid, and consequently, the mission to restore a postcolonial identity and socio-political agenda, gave rise to the need to undergo two major tasks of aesthetic introspection: firstly, how to resurrect its neglected and actively suppressed art history in the form of black and other indigenous art; and secondly, how to reconcile its new status as a nation with a new global discourse where otherness itself was becoming disavowed in favour of a discourse of global homogeneity and branding. The process by which this emergence was undertaken is symbolic in itself – the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) regulated the confession of sins, and, within its legislative boundaries, the dispensing of expiation. This therapeutic process for the nation is analogous to the treatment of a pathological symptom.

The nation state, as a phenomenon, lives in uneasy disequilibrium with globalisation. The programme of nation building at the level of culture and the arts in South Africa is partly driven by the country's position as a fairly successful emerging economy, and as an influential postcolony. South Africa's prominence as an authority on postcolonial political identity, with particular insight into the state of the postcolonial other is also driven by the international political prominence given to the civic use of the testimony to, and confession of, trauma which marked the immediate post-apartheid expiatory process of the TRC.

Yet, against both the national view and the global economic regime of the aesthetic, lies the lived experience of liminality in much South African art. South African visual art, especially in its contemporary guise, might be fruitfully reappraised as a unique treasure trove of the liminal. The liminal can be seen as a penetrating means to understand South African art because of its inherent demonstration of the mobility and fluidity of otherness, of the deflation of the notion that an inherent barrier exists between the experiencing self and the close but distant other, between the mad and the sane, or the imperial subject and its colonised objects.

South African art history struggled with the establishment and maintenance of a clear identity for the country's art, caught as it was for decades between apartheid state-sanction and underground agitprop and resistance. By definition, in such a scenario, artists working in conceptual modes, those influenced by movements elsewhere, or those (usually black) artists working outside of institutional systems, and thus outside of the framework defining their work as art and them as artists, were in liminal states of being and creativity.

The affinities between this subaltern position for many artists, as well as those working within the art system but who were counter-intuitive, or perhaps actually revelled in and used their position as liminal figures in the creation of work, is little explored or understood.

These affinities and anti-social or 'anti-aesthetic' – to subvert Hal Foster's (1983) provocative term – formations in South African art history, not only take place in a larger social and historical context, but also in a larger anthropological context of ritual as a liminal response to overt repression and as a means of maintaining a being in a state of exception. This is the background of separate definitions of madness and "outsiderness" dictated by race, of separate institutions to cater for those differences, of different and parallel epistemologies, even, eugenically ordered to exclude blacks and reduce them to *homo sacer* – that liminal state *par excellence* – in apartheid and colonial South Africa. Art, as a discourse and a practice, was not exempt from these exclusionary strategies, and South African art history has never really considered until now what such phenomena might mean for the country's artists who were affected by it in various ways.

It is precisely this consideration that the articles included in this themed edition of Image & Text seek to undertake.

The volume opens with two articles that theoretically frame and position the articles to follow. The first article, 'Video, migration, and hetero-temporality: the liminality of time', by world-renowned theorist and video artist Mieke Bal, concerns, in one sense, her recent work on migratory culture. However, this field is recontextualised by posing temporality itself as the liminal quality. By focusing on the increasing visibility and variety of migratory populations on one hand, and on the increasing ubiquity of video technology on the other, Bal argues that time represents a threshold for inter-cultural life – what she terms 'multitemporality'. More than this, she subtly argues that, 'video … can … provide an experiential understanding of what such a multitemporality means'. She terms the experience of this multitemporality heterochrony, and argues that, 'liminal in art, in culture, and in migratory experience, heterochrony can become the existential experience marked by difference-within that enhances a cultural encounter that performs, rather than declaring, "migratory culture" as the standard state of being in the world'.

While migratory culture is also a strand in the article that follows, 'Learning to squander: Making meaningful connections in the infinite text of world culture', its author, South African art theorist Ashraf Jamal is primarily concerned to correct the dominance of socio-economic explanations of globalisation in contemporary cultural studies. He argues persuasively for an aesthetic discourse of globalisation beyond the current hegemony of the discourse of multiculturalism. According to Jamal, in such a discourse, those liminal figures that are gaining prominence, such as the cultural tourist, the immigrant, and the exile, will form some of the nodal points for a contemporary aesthetics of the global *flaneur*.

Following these two magisterial statements of theoretical positioning, the remaining contributions focus on specific examples of South African case-studies of artists, groups of artists or artworks, by way of establishing an alternative art historical view of South African art through the lens of liminality.

These "case-studies" kick off with an idiosyncratic and delightfully incisive piece by Maureen de Jager, titled 'Remains to be said … the "um" in art and other disfluencies', on speech disfluencies in the discourse

of South African art. Working from a piece of sound art by student Romie Sciscio which comprised a collage of sound fillers – the "umms", "ahhs", and "I supposes" that fill gaps in most conversation – de Jager argues that such phenomena might be considered as examples of "liminal speech". She thereafter proceeds to analyse how such phenomena affect a discourse of "truth", such as that of the TRC hearings of the 1990s. In so doing, de Jager demonstrates with aplomb the type of aesthetic reading opened up by a consideration of the liminal.

The next article, by Anne-Marie Tully, titled 'Becoming animal: liminal rhetorical strategies in contemporary South African art', adduces the post-psychoanalytic phenomenological philosophy of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, as well as that of Jacques Derrida, to muse about the structure of animal metaphor in the work of two South African artists, Jane Alexander and Nandipha Mntambo. Given that the animal trope is a strong one in much contemporary South African art, Tully's discussion is a timely theorisation of the metaphor as art historical strand, and an illustration of the uses to which the concept of the liminal – in this case, the threshold between human and animal states – might be put.

The co-written article by Anthea Buys and Leora Farber takes a compilation of video art, curated by the authors, as its illustrative subject matter. Titled 'Interstices and thresholds: the liminal in Johannesburg as reflected in the video programme, *The Underground, the Surface and the Edges*', the writers focus on video work produced by South African artists, which, in different ways, is concerned with the city of Johannesburg. The city is considered a representative of the so-called "African Modern", and is conceived of as containing many liminal and marginal spaces, as reflected in the title of the video programme. Deploying Derrida's concept of a 'hauntology' – a spectral phenomenon emerging from two apparently contradictory forces – the writers build a reading of Johannesburg as riven through with uncanny spaces, ripe for aesthetic interventions such as those represented by the video programme.

Amanda du Preez's contribution, '*Die Antwoord gooi zef* liminality: of monsters, carnivals and affects', takes the local pop culture phenomenon, *zef* hip-hop band *Die Antwoord*, as an example of an important but underrepresented aspect of liminality, namely the carnivalesque. Analysing both the band themselves as a monstrous or liminal hybrid alongside the idea that the carnival provides a space for such hybrids to appear in society without sanction, du Preez goes on to argue the key dialectical point that such phenomena are, by their very nature, ephemeral, and, having broached the mainstream, are co-opted out of their liminal/monstrous state.

In 'Framing the debate on race: global historiography and local flavor in Berni Searle's *Colour Me* series', Kirk Sides considers the work of South African artist Berni Searle in his arguement for an 'outer-national' reading of the construction of racial identity through the trope of the nation-state. Sides proposes that the use of spice powders in the installation brings a different epistemological lens to bear through which to understand the construction of race and nation. Perhaps most crucially, Sides suggests that Searle's work demonstrates an "alternative marginality" which offers a different paradigm to the viewing of the apartheid past through the frame of the post-apartheid present – the paradigm of the liminal and outer-national subject.

In a focused art historical piece, albeit one that is concerned with the work of a contemporary artist, Mary Corrigall discusses Moshekwa Langa's work and public perceptions of his persona by the white-dominated

artworld of the 1990s. She takes on a series of the most pressing questions of recent times for South African art criticism and history, those of race and identity, particularly the standards of canonical value set about art by western and largely white artists, curators and critics. Corrigall reads Langa's work as a series of strategies about inclusion and exclusion, arguing that Langa's so-called 'reaggregation' into a contemporary western canon particularly that of neo-conceptualism should be contested by other critical models.

In 'Liminality, absence and silence in the installation art of Jan van der Merwe', Runette Kruger analyses the work of this South African artist, who also co-authors the piece. Kruger approaches Jan van der Merwe's installation and sculptural work as comprised of a series of implied presences paradoxically represented through their physical absence from the work. In this context, she adduces Martin Heidegger's post-Kantian philosophy, particularly his work on being, nothingness and time, in her argument that liminality, as deployed in van der Merwe's works, indicates an absence which implies a presence, and, following Heidegger, that time itself might be said to be liminal.

Finally, Bronwyn Law-Viljoen, in a discussion of the photographic and video works of Brent Meistre and Jo Ractcliffe, reverts to the trope of the landscape which forms a strong thread throughout South African art history. In the work of both artists, the landscape is represented in such a way that it seems to both erase history and re-demarcates it as a series of liminal zones, with military intent in Ractcliffe's photographs of abandoned Angolan war sites, and in various types of border markings in the case of Meistre's landscapes. Law-Viljoen furthers the argument through a close reading of two of Meistre's video works, suggesting that these works propose a new form of seeing which transcends the historical baggage of the landscape genre – that of circumspection, of seeing in the round.

Collectively, these articles represent a substantial new contribution to South African art theory and history. Nevertheless, much still remains to be done – critical work that can usefully be assayed through the concept of the liminal. If liminality can be understood as a lens to contextualise a particularly South African 'transaesthetics of indifference', there is a need to understand the relation of ritual to aesthetic meaning in South African society and history, as well as to understand the nature of liminal aesthetic experience in all its guises, so that practice and theory might, for once, embark on a road together.

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