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The privilege of subversion. Reading experiences of LGBT-themed events during Hull UK City of Culture 2017 through liminality.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, Grabher examines Turner's theory of liminality in the context of queer political aspirations of LGBT-themed events. The week-long event series entitled LGBT50, part of Hull's celebration of the title UK City of Culture in 2017, serves as a case study. Grabher draws on Turner's concept in light of the widely discussed transformative potential of the event. As the concept proposes a suspension of hegemonic structures and exploration of alternative models of living, the researcher regards the empirical realities of the LGBT50 celebrations through ethnographic research practices. Hereby, she correlates considerations of cultural actors and visitors in a call for a more nuanced understanding of the transformative potential of queer-labelled events.

KEYWORDS

Festive Events, Liminality, Gender, Sexuality, Ethnographic Research Practice.

INTRODUCING THE PRIVILEGE OF SUBVERSION

From the 22nd to the 29th of July 2017, a celebratory atmosphere took over Hull's city centre through the LGBT50 festivities. As part of the UK City of Culture in 2017, the week-long celebration became a crucial element within the 365 days of transformative culture offered by the culture company of Hull2017 Ltd. The event series set out as a commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the partial decriminalization of homosexuality in England and Wales. The first ever UK Pride Parade and Party initiated the week of celebrations and was followed by thematically focused lectures, film screenings, performances, and exhibitions. In the closing act, the central square was converted into an outdoor summer tea party. As the promotional material suggested, "Celebrate heroes past, freedoms gained and show solidarity with continuing struggles for LGBT equality at home and everywhere" (Hull2017 Ltd., 2017), the commemorative event series located itself between the past and the present – celebrating changing realities but simultaneously inspiring further transformations for LGBT communities in the city, the country and globally.

Commemorative, celebratory and transformative interests collapse in the LGBT-themed event series. My interest lies with the politics of the party, as Browne (2007) suggests. Interested in the political, transformative potential for gender and sexuality through the LGBT50 celebrations, I analyse the festivities through Turner's (1969, 1974, 1982, 1987b, 1987a, 1989) concept of liminality. In an ethnographic study of the commemorative week, I explore and embed the experiences of cultural actors and visitors within the liminal considerations of the event framework. I highlight how liminal experiences of LGBT50 effect the production of gendered and sexualized meanings on a personal, political and imaginary level (Browne, 2007). While such analytical structure reflects well the current scholarly canons, my empirical material invites further debates of the conceptual approach. In reference to theoretical critiques and empirical examples, I illustrate the limitations of liminality. Guided by the empirical material collected in LGBT50, I demonstrate that liminal experiences and expressions are a privilege. I argue that the supposedly radical, transgressive potential of liminality in LGBT-themed events faces exclusionary restrictions as subversive and disciplining practices are simultaneously enacted on festive occasions.

The discussion is, firstly, initiated by an introduction of the research field and methods. Secondly, I conceptually address liminality in relation to celebratory events and particular LGBT-themed festivities. Thirdly, I draw upon the accounts of research participants in order to respond to the conceptual considerations. I close the chapter with a discussion of the resulting

conceptual and empirical discrepancies, which immediately affects the liminal, political potential aspired to by LGBT50.

SITUATING THE RESEARCH

This chapter derives from the investigation ‘Gendering Cities of Culture,’ which forms part of the GRACE project (Gender and Cultures of Equality in Europe). My research focuses on culture-led mega-events such as the national title ‘UK City of Culture’ and international title ‘European Capital of Culture’ and questions their production of socio-cultural values with particular attention to gender equality. Hull, in its execution of the title in 2017, serves as a field site of the study.

Field

Kingston upon Hull, referred to as Hull, is situated in the county of Yorkshire in the northeast of England, at the junction of the Humber Estuary and Hull River. Dealing with the socio-economic consequences of being a post-industrial city, the bidding, selection, and execution of the UK City of Culture is an essential element within the city’s regeneration plan. ‘A city coming out of its shadows’ served as motivation for the selection panel’s decision in 2013 to grant the ‘badge of authority and national spotlight’ of the title to the city (BBC News, 2013a, 2013b; Hull Daily Mail, 2014; Redmond, 2009). The final evaluation calculated that the year included more than 2800 events, cultural activities, installations and exhibitions (Culture Place and Policy Institute, 2018: 70).

During the year of promised transformative culture, LGBT50 created a focal point and contributed to the programme slogan of ‘Freedom.’ LGBT50 framed as an umbrella encompassing ten different activities established by multiple stakeholders including, among others, the culture company Hull2017 Ltd., local charity Pride in Hull, and London-based queer arts collective Duckie (Hull2017 Ltd., 2017). While the week created a festival experience from an empirical perspective, from an organizational point of view the festivities were outlined as a series of events. Therefore, I use the generic terms of ‘event,’ ‘event series,’ ‘festivities’ and/or ‘celebrations’ as descriptors of LGBT50.

In the past fifteen years, the local charity Pride in Hull established LGBT-themed events in the city with particular focus on Pride Parades and Parties. Through hosting the first ever UK Pride Parade with 1500 parading participants followed by an outdoor party with 44,000 visitors, the event’s scale and size exceeded any previous experiences or expectations. The event and the following series increased visibility for gender and sexual minorities within the city and attracted media attention beyond the regional boundaries (Pride in Hull, 2018). In

addition to the large-scale Pride celebration, the LGBT50 festivities actively engaged Hull's LGBT population in multiple community projects. Initiated by Duckies and their affiliated artists, the craft workshop '50 Years for 50 Queers' and community dance project 'Into the Light' in association with Yorkshire Dance, fostered civic ownership and active participation of the community in the LGBT50 celebrations (Duckie, 2017; Yorkshire Dance, 2017).

Methods

The emerging field of event studies, and particularly methodological developments in critical event studies, serves to orient my work (Dashper, 2016; Finkel, McGillivray, McPherson, & Robinson, 2013; Finkel & Sang, 2016; Holloway, Brown, & Shipway, 2010; Laing & Mair, 2015; Lamond & Platt, 2016; Spracklen & Lamond, 2016). Due to my focus on experiential accounts of celebratory events, ethnographic methods appeal to my qualitative research interests. I work with in-depth interviewing techniques and participatory observation as core methods in the following analysis. The ethnographically-informed collaborative practice of 'observing participants' was developed explicitly for the purpose of this study (Grabher, 2018). In total, eleven cultural actors and visitors contribute to the analysis presented below. I am attentive to the different positionalities throughout the research participation but allow the two perspectives to imbricate as politics, practices and perceptions of the event merge. I use pseudonyms to refer to all participants. In representation of their professional capacities, I address cultural actors through their job titles and affiliated organizations or projects.

CELEBRATING GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Events studies and gender studies are entangled in my conceptual interpretation of the LGBT50 event series. Markwell and Waitt (2013) remark that investigations of festive events primarily engage with a lens of national, ethnic and racial contextualisations of the subject matter; little attention is given to the relationship of events, gender and sexuality. The subject is limited in its extent and history, but scholars in the field argue that festive sites illustrate these imbrications in multiple ways (Pielichaty, 2015). Particular events – predominantly LGBT Pride celebrations – generate rich discussions on the negotiations of gender and sexuality in festive contexts (Ammaturo, 2016; Baker, 2015, 2017; Browne, 2007; Eder et al., 1995; Hahm et al., 2018; Hubbard & Wilkinson, 2015; Johnston, 2007; Kates, 2003; Kates & Belk, 2001; Kenttamaa Squires, 2017; Luongo, 2002; Markwell, 2002; Markwell & Waitt, 2009; Richards, 2016; Waitt & Gorman-Murray, 2008; Waitt & Stapel, 2011).

For my analytical interest, I turn to anthropological conceptualisations of festivities and focus specifically on Turner's approach to liminality. In my gendered and sexualized reading

of LGBT-themed events, the temporal and transgressive characteristics of liminality guide my analysis.

The festive experience is conceptualised as a ‘time out of time,’ as Falassi (1987) suggests. The exceptional circumstances of the festive stands in contrast to the daily routine. Additionally, Turner outlines this temporal character in spatial terms:

Truly [the festival] is the denizen of a place that is no place, and a time that is no time, even where that place is a city’s main plaza and that time can be found on an ecclesiastical calendar. For the squares, avenues and streets of the city become, in [the festive occasion], the reverse of their daily selves. (Turner, 1987: 76)

Consequently, festive experiences are seen as a time out of time in a place out of place. Festival times and spaces are in the moment of festivities bound to a different reality, which disturbs and interrupts the continuum of day to day routines.

Hand in hand with temporal and spatial interruptions, I regard celebrations as generators of norms out of the norm. Turner describes the interruption simply: ‘[...] in liminality people “play” with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarise them’ (Turner, 1976: 60). Furthermore, I consider liminality as abundance, reconsideration and transgression of existent normative structures. Therefore, these acts of ‘defamiliarisation’ hold a potential of transgression and subversion of hegemonic normative structures, which creates a social limbo. The social structures, norms and relationships are discontinued; common rights and obligations suspended; boundaries re-defined; psychological and sociological constructs overridden; the social order appears to be turned upside down. Abrahams elucidates:

Festivals manufacture their own energies by upsetting things, creating a disturbance for the fun of it. [...] Festivals work (at least in their inception) by apparently tearing the fabric to pieces, by displaying it upside-down, inside-out, wearing it as motley rags and tatters. (Abrahams, 1987: 178)

Beyond the temporal, spatial and transgressive characteristics of liminality, Turner regards different types of festivities and their experiences. Dependent on the objective settings and circumstances of celebrations, he distinguishes between liminal and liminoid experiences. Based on the dualism of the sacred and the profane, Thomasson (2009) synthesises this distinction through the transitory feature, which is key to liminality. Therefore, liminal experiences are directed towards a change of status. Meanwhile, rather than directed towards resolution, the liminoid experience is “a break from normality, a playful as-if experience” (Thomassen, 2009: 13). Leisure activities and in particular LGBT-themed celebrations are predominantly discussed as liminoid experiences and circumstances. The participation is

voluntary and its liminal experience optional, as the occasion does not aim for a resolution or transition. Rather, the creation of an experience of altered norms in the moment of celebration is the objective of the festive encounter.

Independent of their liminal or liminoid characterization, the temporal, spatial and transgressive characteristics of disturbance of the daily routines serves as anchor point for my analytical interest and reading of LGBT-themed events. According to Turner's conceptualizations, festive practices indicate a potential for the re-evaluation of power dynamics. Shifting structures enables explorations of alternative models of living.

Turner (1974) argues for the necessity of such breaking points in strictly structured and stratified societies. He proclaims society's desires to become visible within the liminal expressions of festive encounters. Therefore, I understand liminal experiences as an active and creative momentum, which allows the individuals, the collective and society as a whole to explore and negotiate alternatives to the dominant status quo.

The transgressive, subversive potential of liminality gained popularity in scholarly discussions and studies of LGBT spaces and communities (Standstrom, 2002; Thumma & Gray, 2005; Villarejo, 2003). Explorations of alternative models of living respond to the negotiations of marginalized expressions and identifications of gender and sexuality. Liminal experiences generate a discussion about gender and sexual relations beyond the heteronormative binary. With particular hindsight on celebratory events, Kates (2003) and Browne (2007) illustrate such considerations of liminality in LGBT-themed events. Kates (2003) outlines the subversive potential of liminal characteristics of events through his analysis of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in Sidney. He highlights how the event invites re-negotiation of conventional meanings of gender and sexuality. Browne (2007) further elaborates on the debate, as she suggests that genders and sexuality are (de)constructed through the conditions that the festive event creates. In her analysis of LGBT Pride events in Dublin and Brighton, she strengthens the argument by pointing out that the festive mood invites critical questioning of gendered and sexualised codes.

LIMINAL EXPERIENCES OF LGBT50

Similar to Kates' (2003) and Browne's (2007) illustrations, empirical accounts of the LGBT50 celebrations allow me to explore liminality as a crucial experiential feature in the celebration of gender and sexuality. The subversive and temporal characteristics formulate a strong narrative in the research participants' experiences of the celebratory week.

Cheerful, joyful narrations collate with descriptors such as "powerful, magical and transformative" (Luke, 30s, male, choreographer, Yorkshire Dance). For research purposes,

Hull resident Daniel (30s, male) visits for the first time a LGBT-themed event in the UK. He situates himself in solidarity with the LGBT Movement but does not identify as part of the community. His summary of participating in the UK Pride Parade and Party strongly speaks of liminal experiences, as he outlines:

We abolish all rules and we break all taboos and we just do whatever we want. Gay pride would be some kind of artificial carnival or not artificial, rather a very purposeful carnival. Yes, it is a carnival in the proper term of avoiding all the taboos because we want to address all our sexuality and show the world that we want to be able to express our sexuality openly. (Daniel, 30s, male)

From a visitor's point of view, Daniel's narration captures the transgressive atmosphere, which affects interpretations and expressions of sexuality. With the reference to carnival, Daniel establishes a relationship between two events in order to contextualise his experiences with an associative event framework. On a conceptual level, such an associative relationship situates the narration as an expression of a liminal experience. Daniel's depiction resonates with the organizational interests of Pride in Hull, as outlined by one of the trustees, Jacob (40s, male). Jacob outlines that the charity shares a strong interest and awareness of the transgressive and subversive potential that LGBT-themed events entail. Focusing on the UK Pride Parade and Party, play with gendered and sexualised meanings is declared as a key element in their conceptualisation of the event. Therefore, the organisers explicitly grant space and time for such explorations during the event.

The transgressive, subversive experiences and organisational concerns connect immediately to temporal considerations of liminality. The above referenced research participants critically engage with the relevance of time in the event setting. Daniel refers to the temporality of the event experience in the following statement: '[In the event] we do crazy things because we can. Does it mean that we do that every day of our lives? No'. Daniel repeats the dualistic notion of liminal temporality as addressed theoretically through the 'time out of time' classification. He locates the transgressive potential in a timed context, which is opposed to the daily routines. 'Doing crazy things' becomes a momentary experience confined within the freedom of the temporal unit of the festivity. From an organisational point of view, Pride in Hull Trustee Jacob shares his observations of temporality as follows:

I know some people will do gender blurring when they are at pride, because there is kind of a permission to do that and more acceptable than maybe walking down on the street on an average day and not being in a party mood. (Jacob, 40s, male)

The former declaration of organisational awareness of transgressive behaviour is further reasoned in the considerations of liminal temporality. In the space-time of the celebrations, certain expressions of gender and sexuality take place, which might not be enacted in other contexts. Similarly to Daniel, Jacob situates the festivity in a separate temporality, which resonates with the ‘time out of time’ model. The two statements indicate a temporal separation and simultaneously refer to an exceptional setting in which formerly addressed subversive atmospheres and behaviours are accepted, permitted and to some extent even expected. Therefore, on an empirical level, the ‘time out of time’ is associated with the subversive potential, and it strongly determines the experiences and considerations of LGBT50.

The voices of such participants create an entrance point for the exploration of the LGBT50 celebrations and its liminal features of subversive and temporal characteristics. However, in the study of gender, sexuality and celebrations through liminal perspectives, the empirical material invites further explorations of the liminality beyond the prominent temporal and subversive characteristics. Below, I seek to understand how liminality and its transgressive, temporal effects affect cultural actors and visitors of LGBT50 on a personal, political and imaginary level of gendered and sexualized meanings. Hereby, I follow Browne’s (2007) analytical framework, as she explores the individual and collective impacts of liminal event experience for LGBT communities in Pride Parades and Parties in Dublin and Brighton.

Living Liminality

Browne’s (2007) first analytical perspective addresses liminality as a lived experience. Gendered and sexualized explorations of liminality affect individuals as well as collectives, as Thomasson (2009) argues. Therefore, the lived experience of liminality shapes gendered and sexualized perceptions of the self as well as the celebratory community. Even though perceptions, impressions and explorations are reflected upon by the different entities at different levels, liminality leaves its imprint on an individual as well as on a collective level.

The personal influence was a crucial point of discussion for organizers as well as visitors during LGBT50. In various circumstances, individual trajectories were celebrated as factors of success and legitimacy for the event. The diverse empirical material highlights liminality on a personal level. Due to space restrictions, I want to focus on Sophia’s (40s, female) narrative about her experiences of visiting LGBT50. Sophia is a very engaged citizen of Hull. As the quotation below indicates, she identifies with the LGBT community through her experience of transitioning genders. She regards the development of LGBT50 with a certain surprise and hesitations, as her personal experiences of Hull counters the progressive, inclusive and LGBT-

friendly image, which the celebrations promote. In preparation for, as well as during, the celebrations, Sophia engaged very actively with the festivities. The following statement summarises her transformative experiences on a very personal level:

I can see how and why the LGBT50 celebrations begin to relate to me and how through [a] learning [process], I could understand more about who I am. [I could understand] my own sort of confused understandings for being an LGBT person in the twenty-first century in Hull; [...] something of my LGBT-ness and something of my T-ness. It has sort of unlocked a lot of different things. (Sophia, 40s, female)

Sophia's narrative illustrates that gender is a lived experience, a social construct influenced and formed by social realities, which on liminal celebratory occasions are shaped, explored and further (de)constructed. Her empirical insight resonates with Markwell and Waitt's (2013) analysis of festive events. They point out gender and sexual identities are never pre-set. As Sophia shows through her experiences and the scholars argue in their analysis, liminal experiences of festivities create a space-time, in which identities can be (re)explored and developed.

As a social construct, gender and sexuality are further influenced through the communities. Following her personal account of living, exploring and negotiating gender and sexuality through LGBT50, Sophia further reflects upon the collective experiences, she shared with other residents:

I think it allowed people to come out of themselves so much – to feel like they could be in that environment and be themselves. It was so special, so special. We did; we became a family, did we not? Very supportive, we were all one, one people, one voice. (Sophia, 40s, female)

Her reflections refer to the participation in the community dance project 'Into the Light' and illustrate a collective expression of identity through the notion of familiarity.

In addition to Sophia's impressions, all cultural actors are very explicit about their interest and intentions for creating a collective experience, in which personal as well as collective explorations of gender and sexuality can occur. Jess (60s, male), artistic director and lead artist of the crafts project 'Fifty Queers for Fifty Years', outlines his aspiration to create a platform in which encounters can happen. He elucidates:

I wanted [the workshop] to be a coming together of people within the LGBT community. Experiencing each other in a creative, different way than what they would do normally. [...] There is very rarely opportunities like [this craft workshop,

where people] come together and actually being creative and making something and expressing something that is about you and about your history. (Jess, 60s, male)

As indicated in his statement, he hopes to create encounters under the light of crafting as a collective. The communal act of coming-together is central to his vision of the project and links into the events atmosphere creating a liminal experience for each individual engaged with the crafting collective. Within this community approach, the artist continues further, as he outlines the political interests that shape such communal encounters:

I mean how rich is that [coming-together]. I wanted this whole thing to be this big transformative experience for people to come together [...] and as we have been saying, when you are making things you are able to talk much more freely. There is a warmth in general in working like that. (Jess, 60s, male)

This final statement on the effects, impacts and aspirations links already the personal and political level of liminal experiences and the explorations of gender and sexuality. Similarly, Browne (2007) suggests that the lived experience of gender and sexuality in liminal event settings reaches beyond the immediate personal into the political sphere. While understanding the personal as political, liminality and its political implication for gender and sexuality allow me to discuss the impact, relevance and need for LGBT-themed events.

Doing Politics through Liminality

Following Browne (2007), in my further analysis, I address liminality in its political practice. While I understand the personal as political, the reference to politics hereby rather addresses the urban, regional and national political developments. Associations between LGBT-themed events and political aspirations are historically built. In its very existence, LGBT50 refers to the historical and present struggles for rights of gender and sexual minorities. Therefore, I further explore the political potential and aspiration of the liminal festive framework.

The political narrative centres on the relevance of visibility. Brian (40s, male), Hull2017 producer leading the project of LGBT50, captures this narrative and underlying intention as follows:

I do not think you get the opportunity to take over the city centre square and give it to a marginalised group of people and say it is yours for the day and we are going to pump a lot of investment into the best artists to make sure it is a very special one for you. Those [opportunities] do not come along. [...] That is what attracts me to it. (Brian, 40s, male)

The producer highlights the relevance of the space, investment and competencies as key effects for the political potential that the event creates. Additionally, he reasons his own interest in the project through such presence and visibility. While the rhetoric of visibility might indicate a ‘The Bigger, The Better’ ideology, Brian expresses clearly that his and the team’s intention is to introduce nuanced gender and sexual politics. Rather than quantitative, his interest is a qualitative visibility, which subverts mainstream narratives in subtle, gentle ways. He expressed initial hesitations in the appointment of the project due to its mainstream characteristics. However, the visibility, its related influence and liminal characteristics were a convincing element for his interests and commitment. The politically nuanced representation and continuous visibility allowed an ‘In your face’ (Sophia, 40s, female) effect. Sophia explains her enjoyment of the event series and its inherent political messages as unusual topics and issues receive wider attention in the city, region and even nation:

These issues are not normally talked about in public. Yes, you might go and talk about these issues in a gallery through some art work or whatever. But you are not going to talk about them on a Saturday afternoon, while people have got their bags from Tesco or whatever. This is in your face, being on your doorstep right there.
(Sophia, 40s, female)

Just as Sophia suggests, associated and contributing artists similarly express appreciation for the opportunity to leave political echo chambers and engage with different communities. Thus, visibility strategies shift away from solely regarding tangible manifestation of ‘doing politics’ through claiming spaces, infrastructures and monetary resources. Rather, research participants suggest a visibility and political potential through intangible strategies involving communities and different knowledges. LGBT50 explicitly embraced spatial, communitarian and therefore political visibility.

Creating Imaginaries through Liminality

Yea. So, we are creating memory. I think we are creating dreams and memories.
(Jacob, 40s, male)

Linking the personal experience with the political potential of events, the comment by Pride in Hull trustee Jacob introduces the imaginary potential formulated within LGBT-themed events. Sourcing from liminality, the transgressive attitudes are thought to reformulate social boundaries, exploring alternative models of living. The narrative accounts of research participants introduced such levels within the LGBT50 celebrations. Looking beyond the immediate personal and political effects of such celebrations, the exploration and imagination

of alternatives to hegemonic societal structures was omnipresent in the experiences and motivations of visitors and cultural actors. The Summer Tea Party, as the final act of the week-long celebration, was set in such considerations, as one of the producers explains: ‘It is our responsibility [...] we want to socially engineer a better society [...] we queer and [...] we are a bit out of mainstream of society and we are very creative as queer’ (Oliver, 40s, male).

Oliver relates the imaginary potential of the event to a queer ethos underlying his own professional capacities and the event’s narratives. The imaginary potential, therefore, frames the event. Doing things differently, outside the mainstream channels but simultaneously within the mainstream infrastructures informs his work, intentions and aspirations, which open perspectives for future imaginaries.

LIMINAL RESTRICTIONS – OR THE PRIVILEGE OF SUBVERSION

The above analysis of empirical material illustrates the immediacy and relevance of liminality within the celebration of the LGBT-themed event series LGBT50. The key characteristics of temporality and transgression are continuously present within the festivities. Furthermore, I outlined how liminality can be read into the personal, political and imaginary perceptions of gender and sexuality in the festivities according to the subjects of the individual and the collective. Even though, this empirical evidence supports the conceptual approach formulated through Turner’s (1969, 1974, 1982, 1987b, 1987a, 1989) liminality, the research material requires me to address conceptual and empirical critiques of the concept and its implication. While the commercialisation of LGBT equality in event industries is widely debated and discussed (Taylor, 2014), I am directing my attention towards the political limitations inherent in a liminal reading of LGBT-themed events.

The critical discussion is urged on by Alex’s (20s, male) reflections of his visit to the LGBT50 festivities. Expressed in various ways, the majority of the research participants agree with Alex’s doubt:

Suddenly we are all gay, we are all friendly and we are all happy. But I know people [...] that struggle day to day to be as they want to be on the streets in Hull. I read comments of people struggling and being bullied on the street. So these people a day before the pride and the day after pride would be bullied. [...] There was a part in me, which is just like of course you are going to go to LGBT50 [...] This is the one issue where you are ok to go out and be a social justice warrior and yea let’s all party. [...] This is one issue where everybody is coming out to party and say wow

look how well we have done. [...] But how many people in that street are actually going to protest. (Alex, 20s, male)

Alex formulates the restrictions of liminal readings of LGBT-themed events. His reflection introduces the question: ‘Where, when and who can be transgressive in order to explore and negotiate gendered and sexual norms and relations?’

Informed and inspired by this question through empirical sources, I turn to conceptual debates for further explorations of the critique. Aching (2010), Kendall (2006), Pielichaty (2015), and Ravenscroft and Gilchrist (2009) allow me to formulate a conceptual response to the empirical reflection. While using liminality for analytical purposes when looking at various events in different contexts and interests, the four scholars critique the conceptual framework of liminality through the disciplining mechanism in place. Pielichaty highlights: ‘This juxtaposes the festival between celebratory chaos and a social vehicle employed to maintain order and discipline’ (Pielichaty, 2015: 239). The disciplining practice is a rather subtle characteristic, which marks both the temporal and transgressive potential of liminality.

Aching (2010) and Pielichaty (2015) focus on the disciplining restrictions implied in the liminal temporality. Aching (2010) notes that the conceptualisations of liminality rely on a strict binary between the normal or ordinary and the abnormal or subversive. Alex (20s, male) points to such an exclusionary binary as he addresses ‘the day before and after the celebrations’. Pielichaty synthesises the risk of such a dualistic interpretation, as she points out: ‘Providing individuals with liminal space to momentarily lose themselves and behave in a care-free manner promotes the ethos of chaos as limited, constrained and restrictive’ (Pielichaty, 2015: 239). Alex’s (20s, male) observations in combination with Aching’s (2010) and Pielichaty’s (2015) discussion suggests transgressions are not only temporally restricted but are also continue to be conceptualised as abnormal. In the context of LGBT50 and LGBT-themed events in general, such conceptualisations are contradictory to the purpose of the celebrations themselves. The celebration of marginalised gender and sexual identities, communities and expressions are being permitted for a liminal, fixed timeframe. However, such permitted phases are still conceptualised as abnormal, which continues to mark LGBT-themed events in ‘otherness’, as Kendall (2006) elucidates.

In order to understand the consequences of these conceptual implications, I turn the discussion towards Kendall’s (2006) and Ravenscroft and Gilchrist’s (2009) consideration of the festive communities in LGBT-themed events. These scholars question for whom the liminal momentum serves. While Turner (1974) argues that the sustainability of the creative atmosphere comes into society through the imagination of societal desires, Ravenscroft and

Gilchrist (2009) highlight that subversion only serves the hegemonic mainstream. They point out that alternate, subverted structures, norms and conventions are explored within the knowledge and security of returning to routine again. Empirically and conceptually speaking, they question how liminality affects individuals and groups for whom transgressive liberties are not just a practice in a ‘time out of time.’ Identities for whom daily survival is the subversion of normative structures seem little regarded in the liminal conceptualisation of celebratory events. Kendall synthesises the critique as she points out: ‘While dominant groups voluntarily enter the liminal time/ space with an attitude of playfulness, the ritually marginalized are forced to masquerade in perpetual liminality’ (Kendall, 2006: 14). Even though the imagination of alternative models of living would be explicitly relevant for marginalized individuals and communities, vulnerable identities are further scrutinised as their daily transgression are accepted and promoted by hegemonic structures only in restricted, controlled occasions of the festivity. Anna (30s, female), a visitor in the LGBT50 celebrations, reflects on such risk, as she expresses:

Probably very easily, LGBT-themed event can lead this struggle towards some nice plastic fantastic product, where again many people would not find themselves. Then those, once again, would be outside of this and this box would just continue of this little bubble [of hegemony]. (Anna, 30s, female)

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I explored the concept of liminality through empirical material collected in the commemorative celebrations of LGBT50. As part of my ethnographic research practice, I gathered in-depth reflections of eleven cultural actors in and visitors to the event. Through their input, I discuss how LGBT50 can be read as a liminal event experience and how such experiences contribute to gendered and sexual meanings celebrated in the context of the event. From a conceptual point of view, Turner’s (1969, 1974, 1982, 1987b, 1987a, 1989) liminality characterises through the temporality addressed as a ‘time out of time’ model. Additionally, these temporal structures introduce a subversive and transgressive potential, which is widely discussed for the analysis of transformational, political aspirations of festive events.

I proved the relevance of the temporal and subversive structures of liminality in the LGBT50 celebrations through the empirical data. Beyond the basic, conceptual characterisation of liminality, I explored the personal, political and imaginary experiences, which liminal moments enable. Following Browne (2007), I discussed how personal influences and collective aspirations shaped the event, and analysed the importance of visibility as a

political interest. Furthermore, I outlined imaginaries, which cultural actors envisioned and desired.

Next to the affirmative analysis of liminal experiences in the LGBT50 celebration, the empirical accounts of research participants required me to critically discuss eventual limitations of the concept and its application in festive event settings. Observed by research participants and conceptualised by scholars such as Aching (2010), Kendall (2006), Pielichaty (2015) and Ravenscroft and Gilchrist (2009), subversion is a privilege. On the one side, the liminal experience is marked as a ‘time out of time,’ which makes transgressions equal to exceptional phases outside the hegemonic norms. On the other side, conceptually but also empirically, exclusions of identities, whose transgressions are not limited to the permitted timeframes of celebrated liminality counter the LGBT-themed events’ aspirations, as these individuals and communities are further marginalised.

Taking such critique of subversion into consideration, liminality serves as a strong concept for generating debate about LGBT-themed celebrations. However, the inherent power struggles cannot be disregarded, as disciplining practices and further marginalization are taking place in the playful explorations of gender and sexuality. In light of increasing institutionalization and ‘routinization’ (Thomassen, 2009: 22) of LGBT-themed celebrations, future research cannot be blind to the power dynamic and structural violence that shapes these celebratory occasions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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