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## Being in the zone and vital subjectivity: On the liminal sources of sport and art

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## **Being In the Zone and Vital subjectivity**

### **On the liminal sources of sport and art**

*Paul Stenner*

#### **ABSTRACT**

Following a discussion of Tarkovsky's film 'The Stalker', this chapter identifies the liminal dimensions of the experience of 'being in the zone' (BITZ) and in so doing offers a positive critique of the well-known psychological concept of 'flow'. Building on some provocative comments from Victor Turner, an argument is developed to the effect that BITZ experiences are characterised by forms of vital subjectivity typical of activities associated with the arts, sport and ritual. The chief features of vital subjectivity are described as suspended reality, self-occasioned performativity, liminal affectivity, sociality and bisociation. The chapter develops a process-theoretical argument which uses the Bergsonian / Whiteheadian concept of canalisation to shed new light on the ritual sources of art and sport and on the commonalities between ludic, aesthetic and sacred forms of experience. This enables a critique of over-zealous efforts to apply the concept of flow to work settings in ways which neglect the concrete realities of context.

#### **INTRODUCTION: STALKING THE ZONES**

*The Stalker* is a character played by Aleksandr Kaidanovksy in the 1979 film directed by Andrei Tarkovsky. The stalker does not spy on others, but smuggles people seeking inspiration (a scientist and a writer) into and out of a *zone* in which the normal laws of reality appear not to apply. The nature of *the zone* remains disturbing and mysterious throughout. Was it created by an industrial disaster, an alien crash

landing, a military experiment or some other event?<sup>1</sup> We are told that at the centre of the zone is a room and that those who set foot in it will be granted their *real* wishes. Ultimately, the characters cannot bring themselves to enter, leaving one wondering why: What were their *real* desires? What is *the zone*?

There are several resonances between Tarkovsky's zone and the zone that is the topic of this book: being in the zone (Bitz). Since it has become part of everyday slang, we can begin with its definition in the online Urban Dictionary as 'a state of consciousness where actual skills match the perceived performance requirements perfectly. Being in the zone implies increased focus and attention which allow for higher levels of performance. Athletes, musicians, and anybody that totally owns a challenge of physical and mental performance can be in the zone.' The online slang dictionary (2016) is even more concise: 'achieving an unheard of level of performance...' It adds: 'To have one's thoughts flow easily and creatively with regards to art, music, design, or invention. The achievement of a blissful, and fulfilling state of mind'. On a UK Channel 4 documentary, Sally Gunnell describes entering 'the zone' only twice in her career as a hurdler. She describes winning the final 1993 World Championship race as follows:

I don't ever remember coming off the last hurdle and... knowing that she was there ... right ahead of me... and it was only me sort of like fighting and going over the line and y'know I stood over the line and it was like my life was almost starting again, it had almost been on hold for that last, y'know, fifty two... seconds... and it was like "well what's happened", y'know, I didn't know that I'd actually won and that I'd actually broken the world record everyone thought "oh she's very calm" y'know, "she's just walking around", but I was looking to see, you know, what actually happened in that race. I had no idea - it was as though I'd just run my own, y'know, tunnel vision all the way round, I don't remember any of it... You feel as though someone's almost helping you. I must admit just because it... does feel so alien at times, y'know, as I said before it doesn't actually particularly feel like me out there and you almost get into its like a trance, uh you feel as though... someone's

watching you and just sort of like you know, pulling you round the track...

(Adapted from Locke, 2008)

Like Tarkovsky's zone, Bitz has mysterious and 'almost religious' qualities (Locke, 2008: 18), as if the ordinary laws of reality no longer apply within it. It also has its stalkers, including sports psychologists, positive psychologists and legions of managers and life-coaches who claim expertise and act as guides into and out of it. It also holds out the promise of satisfying the wildest *desires*, since getting into the zone can make the difference between success or failure: the one who enters can get what they may have wished for. Finally, both zones invite controversy and are 'made sense of' from multiple perspectives. There are those in Tarkovsky's film who wholeheartedly believe in the zone, and wish to turn its powers to personal or social advantage (like the writer). Others doubt its reality, or fear its malign potential (like the scientist, who it turns out plans to destroy the zone). A similar array of scientific perspectives can be discerned on the Bitz zone:

- First, taking a 'positive' perspective, growing numbers of positive psychologists now seek to discover the psychological mechanisms underlying the efficacy of the zone in order to master what Mark Banks (2014: 243) describes as a 'gateway to ecstasy'. Much of this stalker activity is traceable to the work on 'flow' undertaken – first in the 1960s - by the humanistic psychologist Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi. Bitz in this context is about flowing activities that are intrinsically motivating. Flow is about the intrinsic rewards that take the form of a 'holistic sensation' that follows from 'total involvement'. In his classic article *play and intrinsic rewards*, for example, Csíkszentmihályi (1975: 42) defines flow as 'a state in which action follows action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part... we experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present and future'. The basic theory is that a flow state is entered when the demands (challenges/opportunities) presented in a person's environment are optimally matched by their skills/capabilities. This optimal match would require a

fine balance, because if demands exceed skills, flow will be disrupted by anxiety, whilst if skills exceed demands, it will be replaced by boredom. To begin the process of testing this theory, all that is required is that the two variables be measured in some plausible way (usually the level of skills and demands is measured by some form of self-report sufficient to yield numerical values for each), and that self-reports of various subjective states (boredom, anxiety, flow) are gathered in a way that permits their mapping onto the various relations that obtain between skills and demands. Flow can thus be considered as a 'zone' because it is simple to graphically represent the changing relationships between the two variables (skills or competencies and demands or challenges) in terms of a separate field of flow distinguished, for example, from fields of anxiety and boredom (see figure 1). This raises the practical question of how to enter the zone by modifying the mix of variables in a real life situation. Later models add further detail by, for example, finessing boredom into shades that include relaxation and control, and anxiety into shades that include worry and arousal (Massimini et al, 1987). Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to review the findings and applications, this basic model has inspired a good deal of research and constitutes a massive research agenda within the growing field of positive psychology (see Snyder and Lopez, 2009). Its framing as the 'Psychology of Optimal Experience' (Csíkszentmihályi, 2008) has encouraged its enthusiastic uptake in the corporate world of business management, with numerous applications promising energised growth and increased revenue (e.g. Brusman, 2013).

Figure 1: a schematic representation of flow as a zone (adapted from Csíkszentmihályi, 1975).

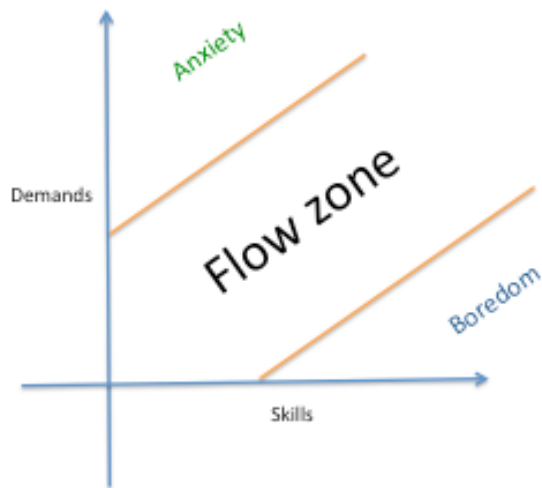


Figure 1: a schematic representation of flow as a zone (adapted from Csíkszentmihályi, 1975)

- Second, there are those who take a ‘critical’ stance, viewing Bitz as, at best, a discursive construction, and at worst as ‘a biopolitical instrument for managing dutiful workers’ (Banks, 2014: 243). From this perspective, workers in the ‘cultural industries’ (Taylor and Littleton, 2012) the ‘digital economy’ (Terranova, 2000), and beyond, are seduced into surrendering to all consuming work patterns by stories of creative flow. They must be reminded that the ‘gateway’ of Bitz is no less a discursive device in a fairytale than those many other magic portals of children’s stories, from the wardrobe in Narnia to Alice’s rabbit hole. Abigail Locke (2008), for example, concludes her discursive psychological analysis of the zone by suggesting that Bitz is basically a discursive resource for managing accountability stakes in a conversation. ‘Zone talk’, from this perspective, is simply a way of making ‘personal experiences publically accountable’ in ways designed to avoid looking boastful (Locke, 2008: 32). Hence when Sally Gunnell’s 400 metres hurdling world championship victory (1993) is described in terms of being in the zone, this is best

understood, not as ‘evidence of the zone’s existence’, but as a discursive device for talking about success without being immodest (since zone talk distracts from personal agency). Locke entirely brackets out ontological questions concerning the reality of experiences beyond discourse, focusing instead on the reality constructed within discourse, opening up an interest in how talk and text works to make up the nature of the talkers and writers.

- Finally, there are those, like Kath Woodward (2015a) and Mark Banks (2014), who view Bitz as a personally, ethically and politically ambivalent potential, and who seek to deploy it affirmatively and to resist its negative applications. I wish to extend and further explore the potential of this third perspective. It would be naïve to ignore the critical observation that concepts like Bitz are a growing part of the discursive practices of management, governance and advertising which increasingly presuppose a *vital subject* who lives for his or her feelings and craves intensity of experience (Greco and Stenner, 2013; Åkerström Andersen, 2013). If the concept of Bitz is acquiring an active social life in the domain of management and beyond, as Banks (2014) suggests, then this not unrelated to the fact that it promises something interesting to the manager: an individual operating at full-capacity and yielding maximum productivity with no need of extrinsic reward. It is therefore important to engage one’s critical faculties and ask how, where and why this concept is acquiring interest and currency at this particular historical juncture, and how the vital subject it presupposes might differ from the more rational, self-contained and decision-making oriented subject assumed by more familiar liberal techniques and media of governance. However, taking this stance need not imply that there is no experiential or psychological reality to Bitz beyond its discursive construction. On the contrary, the concepts of Bitz and flow may get at something important about human social psychology. A premature dismissal of the ontological dimension of what I will describe as *vital subjectivity* risks us losing site of the problem of who gets to exploit its potential, and in what name (Woodward, 2015b).

I deliberately add the word ‘social’ to psychology above, because any effort to articulate a third ‘affirmative’ perspective on Bitz must grapple with the tendency for

the positive / critical bifurcation to split along disciplinary lines whereby it is the psychologists who, for the most part, are positive and the sociologists who are critical. The danger with this division of labour is that it perpetuates the double illusion that, on the one hand, human psychology can ever *not* be social, and on the other, that it is fully *constituted* by the social. The important thing is to retain a strong sense of the social dimensions and contexts of Bitz, but without negating the actual occasions of experience that it implies. Going beyond narrow *interactionist* solutions to this problem (e.g. Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi, 2002: 90), I have found the concept of liminality useful for cultivating this *psychosocial* sensitivity (Stenner, 2015). With origins in the process anthropology of Arnold van Gennep (1909) and Victor Turner (1969), liminality scholarship has recently been advanced in a transdisciplinary direction by Arpad Szakolczai (2009) and his group (see Hovarth and Thomassen, 2008; Thomassen, 2014), and by Greco and Stenner (in press).

## LIMINAL ZONES

As is well known, Gennep (1909) first used the word ‘liminal’ in an anthropological context to describe the middle phase of *rites of passage* which mark and celebrate those moments where people or groups transit from one recognized social state or position to another (e.g. initiation rites). Liminal rites are thus *transition* rites in that they typically come after rites of separation (which disengage a previous social status or identity) and before the rites of incorporation ceremonially establish and recognise a new status or identity. The liminal phase is thus a phase of *becoming* or transition, and the rites often symbolize movement (a bride carried across a threshold in a marriage rite, for example), or involve trials and ordeals.

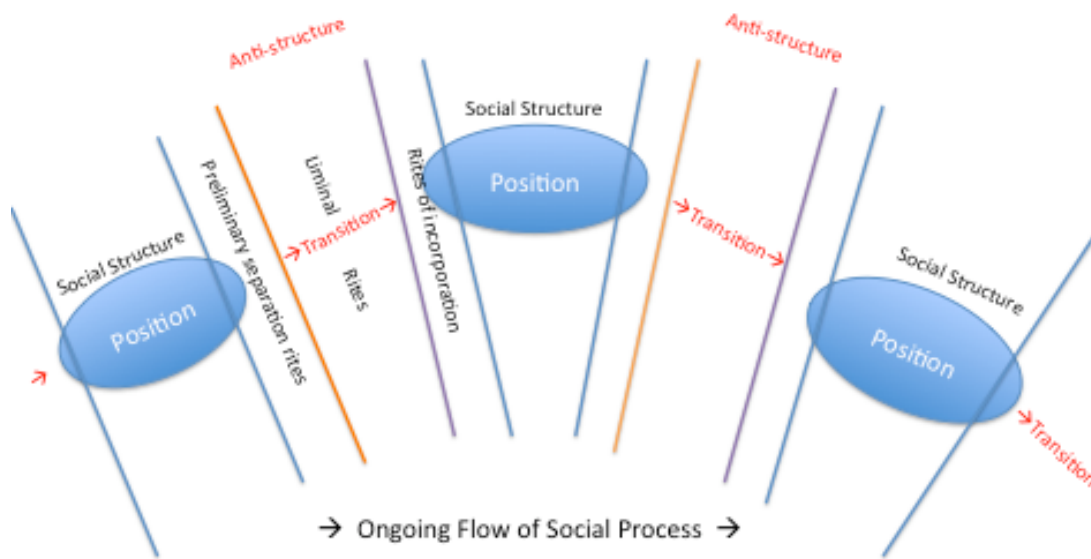
Through his own fieldwork and thinking, Victor Turner (1969) became interested in the betwixt and between qualities of liminal situations and in the experience of *communitas* they generate amongst the participants. *Communitas* is a collective experience characterised by being absorbed in the now, heightened awareness, and ‘an unmediated relationship between historical, idiosyncratic, concrete individuals’ (see Turner, 1982: 45). Turner emphasised how liminal rites are about taking participants *through* an experience of transition (or becoming) and hence involve an



artfully controlled suspension of the usual structuring conditions, and their replacement with activities carefully overseen by a master of ceremonies. The liminal rites afford an experiential encounter with a bigger picture beyond the usual socially imposed limits, since rather than encountering a familiar socially authorized world *structured* by those limits, one encounters and goes beyond the limits themselves (van Gennep [1909: 13] called this an encounter with the *sacred*). This suspension of what Turner (1969) somewhat problematically calls *social structure* facilitates passage by opening up a mixed and relatively de-differentiated space of possibilities during which genuinely transformative experiences can occur. Turner uses the word *anti-structure* to convey this more or less deliberate suspension of structural norms conducive to transformative becoming.

Gennep and Turner thus give us an image of society not simply as a set of *structures* – whether they be positions, stations, roles, statuses or whatever – but also as a constant shifting set of movements or *becomings* from one position, structure or status to another (for a recent critical re-working of this concept of structure see Greco and Stenner, *in press*). The non-profane nature of these *betwixt and between* movements and experiences gives them great collective and personal significance: for Turner liminal occasions ‘stamp’, as it were, a profound character of *communitas* upon the newly malleable subjectivity of the participants (Szakolczai, 2009). In contrast to the dominant ‘structuralist’ tradition of his time, Turner emphasized a processual approach which views liminal experiences of anti-structure as effectively the ‘quick’ of culture: a zone of potentiality that is the source of new cultural developments (see also Sutton-Smith, 2001). Figure 2 illustrates how this notion of liminality can also be depicted as a zone (of anti-structure).

Figure 2: Schematic representation of liminal transition as the suspension of social 'structure'



### TURNER ON FLOW: FROM LIMINAL TO LIMINOID

My intention is not simply to suggest that Bitz is more fully understood as a liminal experience. Indeed, superficially at least, Bitz experiences are quite different from liminal experiences. The latter are zones of becoming associated traditionally with transformations *between* different spheres of activity (the transitions between the positions in figure 2) whilst the former are about attaining fluidity *within* a given sphere of activity (i.e. within a 'position'). Because they entail a passage **between positions**, the latter are typically characterised by the *interruption* of the flows of action taken-for-granted in those positions, whilst the former are about being fully absorbed in a practice that has become habitual through long rehearsal (years of practicing an instrument, for instance). Turner (1982) himself recognised this difference in a brief discussion of Csíkszentmihályi's concept of flow. Turner (1982: 59) recognised profound resonances with own concept of *communitas*, but ultimately designates flow a 'structural' concept due to its highly circumscribed and apparently rule-based nature.

Although his arguments are brief and tentative, Turner urges against premature scientific operationalisation in favour of thinking flow in the broader historical and social context of changing forms and uses of liminality. This might alert us to the *content* of flow experience that is lost in the process of scientific abstraction, and hence to the possibility that there are different *kinds* and perhaps different *depths* of flow (59). He hints that flow takes different forms in ‘cultures which have developed before and after the industrial revolution’ (30). In pre-industrial (or more specifically, tribal and agrarian) societies flow experiences were/are concentrated in the *rituals* that punctuate the lives of tribes, moieties, clans, lineages and families, since these rituals manage and enact life transitions by way of ceremonies designed to induce the flow-like experiences that facilitate passage. Flow, in this context, is generative of *communitas* with its characteristic features (the vivid immediacy of the now, spontaneous responsive attunement, and a dissolving of the sense of ‘I’, etc). Given the thoroughly religious nature of these rituals, the flow experience is imbued with a sacred content or significance. In the modern societies that emerged after the industrial revolution, by contrast, the semantics of the sacred become less salient as ‘the flow experience was pushed mainly into the leisure genres of art, sport, games, pastimes, etc’ (58). These are what Turner calls the ‘liminoid’ spheres that progressively replaced the liminal experiences of rituals as modern societies came to emphasise individualism and rationality, and as the complexifying spheres of industrialized work increasingly separated from those of leisure.

The ‘flow function’ in modern societies, Turner thus suggests, was removed from the sacred sphere of religious ritual and given a ‘ludic’ significance as it was taken over by what he describes as the ‘non-serious, non-earnest genres, such as art and sport’ (59). The flow experiences of modern societies are thus characterised by *ludic* and *aesthetic* semantics, although semantics of the sacred may remain residual. I wish to take these themes a little further and suggest that what Turner mistook as the structural aspects of flow are better understood as distinctively liminal to the extent that they proximally concern the activities of liminoid specialists in the domains of art and sport.

## CANALISING FLOW: SPECIFYING THE LIMINOID OCCASIONING OF ACTIVITIES CONDUCTIVE TO BITZ

Csíkszentmihályi's concept of flow, for all its merits of clarity and rigour, and for all its claims to *interactionism*, is insensitive to the issues of historical and social context sketched above. In operationalising flow purely as a function of the ratio of challenges to skills, his definition appears like a scientific universal capable of detachment from particular situations, and hence of generalization *de jure* to any and all spheres of activity. This renders the content and context of those challenges and skills irrelevant, as if any optimal balance of skills and challenges will yield a flow experience. As we shall see in the penultimate section, however, the liminoid quality of those stubborn particulars remains important despite being methodologically disavowed. To acknowledge these disavowed factors we need to think in a psychosocial way which does not detach particular experiences from the social whole of which they are parts and hence does not treat a given experience as an internal event isolated from and 'interacting' with its external setting. Bergson's (1907) concept of canalisation is helpful precisely for rethinking such whole/part and inner/outer dichotomies, since it assumes that a given particular factor is always a canalisation – in ways peculiar to itself - of a broader totality of fact (for a fuller description see Whitehead, 1922). To keep this theoretical detour to a minimum, we will briefly reframe the defining components of flow by introducing the concept of canalisation to emphasise the neglected social dimensions (the quoted material below is from the definition in Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi, 2002: 90):

1. 'Intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment.' Flow involves canalisation in the form of the concentration of attention and activity on to a very narrow and strictly limited field abstracted from its background. The 'canal' (or groove) created in this deliberately narrow contraction of reality permits a *degree of intensity* of experience which would be destroyed by the intrusion of the excluded realities;
2. 'A sense that one can control one's actions'. The narrow and limited but intense domain created by the canalisation affords a domain of activity in which skills can more easily be adequate to demands, giving a sense of controlling events;

3. 'Action and the evaluation of the action unproblematic'. Also in this canalised domain the evaluation of action, both by self and by others, is clear, immediate and relatively unproblematic, so long as the necessary suspension of disbelief in the limited reality is maintained;
4. 'Experience of activity as intrinsically rewarding' – or 'autotelic'. The skilled activity that results is intrinsically rewarding, and self-reinforcing, leading to peaks of further refinement;
5. 'Loss of reflective self-consciousness [ego]'. The self or ego becomes irrelevant as it dissolves in the flowing unity of skilled canalised activity;
6. 'Experience of merging action and awareness'. An undifferentiated and harmonic unity of experience is made possible, but this can be destroyed or blocked by self-consciousness.

Foregrounding the idea of canalisation as core to flow experience thus allows us to ask, not just 'what are flow conducive activities?'<sup>ii</sup> but 'what are the actual social forms or domains in which these canalised zones of practice have been created and configured?' The two domains most heavily studied by flow researchers (and the two domains mentioned in our on-line dictionary definitions of Bitz) are, of course, Turner's liminoid spheres: sport and art. Csíkszentmihályi work began in the 1960s, for example, as a study of the creative process of artists and with wonderment at the fact that some of them seemed to persist in their work 'disregarding hunger, fatigue and discomfort'. The main early studies were, likewise, interviews with 'chess players, rock climbers, dancers and others who emphasized enjoyment as the main reason for pursuing an activity' (Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi, 2002: 89).

In sport, reality is canalised into a highly circumscribed space/time of activity governed by the artifice of deliberately contrived rules and aims that are abstracted, as it were, from broader reality. Sport (and play more generally) thus creates and presupposes a doubling of reality by way of a distinction between a reality of play happenings (with their own microcosm of rules and objectives) and a 'real reality'. The canal can thus be construed, not as a realm entirely distinct from reality, but as a fold within reality affording a (more or less deep and more or less narrow) protected

zone enabling experiences whose intensity can increase proportionally to their concentration within the canal (experience can thus flow in sport much as water flows along a canal).

In essentially the same way, in art (broadly understood) the artist restricts themselves to their preferred highly canalised medium of expression, whether their artifice be visual (paint or sculpture), auditory (music or poetry) or multi-sensory (theatre or film). A trumpeter, for instance, concentrates their physical activities onto the small movements that shape the sounds that emerge from their trumpet, whilst the activities of a painter are canalized into the happenings of their paint. Again, the doubling or folding of reality into a distinction between artifice and reality can be construed as a canalisation affording or occasioning enhanced intensity of experience. Following Turner's lead, I propose, moreover, that – historically speaking - the canals of art and sport could only be constructed on the basis of the more primordial canalisation supplied by ritual, with its particular way of occasioning experience by distinguishing itself as a form from its surrounding 'reality'.

### **THE EMERGENCE OF ART AND SPORT FROM RITES OF PASSAGE**

If we follow Turner's hint, the highly canalised 'flow conducive' *liminoid* spheres of sport and art spring from a shared liminal source in ritual. We must therefore briefly examine the proposition of the ritual origins of sport and art. Since it is not possible here to survey the vast (but largely separate) literatures on the history of sport and of art, I offer instead the following speculative observations based on a limited sample of relevant historical work. Let us turn first to the arts.

Religious ritual does indeed appear to be the mother of the muses in the sense that it forms their originary matrix. This proposition, to my knowledge, was first seriously researched by the so-called 'Cambridge ritualists' more than a century ago (see Cornford, 1914), and in particular by Jane Harrison (1913). This tradition, however, seems to have been largely ignored (see Calder, 1991), perhaps because the apparent rigidity of ritual seems antithetical to the creativity of art. For a Greek between the

sixth and the fourth century B.C., however, this connection would have been ‘a simple truism’ (Harrison, 1913:1). Attending Athenian theatre, for example, was an act of worship that took place only during high festivals (such as the winter and spring celebrations of Dionysos), on holy ground, with the front row of seats reserved for priests and with the actors wearing ritual vestments. On the eve of the performance a sacred procession culminated in the placing of an image of Dionysos himself in the orchestra accompanied by a bull also representing the God<sup>iii</sup>.

Harrison shows that the transition from ritual to art was accomplished in Ancient Athens by way of theatre. The novelty of the theatre was that the Dionysian rites enacted by the *Chorus* in the orchestra were observed by spectators in the *Theatron*. The *dromenon* of ritual (for example the Dithyramb or rites of Spring are a *dromenon* or ‘thing done’) thus passed gradually into the *drama* of theatre. Aristotle states this transition quite directly when he writes that tragedy ‘—as also Comedy—was at first mere improvisation—the one (tragedy) *originated with the leaders of the Dithyramb.*’

Historically speaking, this transition was a recent event. Stretching far back into pre-history, the masks now associated with theatre were born from the ritual masks worn by participants in the religious rites through which their wearers *became* their ancestral spirits or sacred animals, and through which they acquired new social identities and statuses (Pizzorno, 2010). Likewise, music, poetry and dance were born in the drum rhythms, chants and sacred songs which for tens of thousands of years have generated the ‘collective effervescence’ (Durkheim, 1912) characteristic of ritual (Dissanayake, 2006). Painting and sculpture too have their oldest roots in the cave art and stone carvings now thought to have been central to ritual practices dating back to the oldest stone-age records of human culture (Lewis-William, 2002).

Grasping the source of art in liminal rites is astonishing enough, but new confidence surely arises when it is recognized that a practically identical story can be told about sport (Guttman, 1978). The proposition that sport emerged from liminal rites also sounds odd today, either because the serious mysticism of ritual seems antithetical to

the ludic fun of sport, or because of the widespread belief (associated rightly or wrongly with Marx and Darwin), that sport needs no further explanation than that it prepares for work and enhances material survival (Sansone, 1992). In a recent visit to the *Pigorini* museum of ethnography in Rome, I learned that the rubber ball games played within most Ancient Mesoamerican civilizations culminated in something that was neither fun nor about utilitarian survival: the ritual human sacrifice of the losing team. The ballcourt of the Mayan ballgame was a liminal zone symbolising – much like the cults of Dionysios or Osiris - the transition between life and death and the overcoming of the latter (Blanchard, 2005). What we now think of as simple recreation originally symbolized the ritual re-creation of life from death, of spring from winter, of plenitude from nothingness, of fertility from barren dust. The holy ballcourt or *Teotlachco* of the Aztecs was ritually enacted as a battle scene (or what the Greeks would call *agon* from which our ‘agony’ is derived) between the sun and the forces of darkness, and these rites also culminated in human sacrifice designed to ensure future life (Leyenaar, 2001). Such a connection is far from being limited to Mesoamerica (see Sansone, 1988). On May Day in the Isle of Man, the Queen of May and her escorts used to fight against the Queen of Winter, and – although the losers did not lose their lives – they had to pay for the ensuing celebration feast (Harrison, 1913). The sport of bull jumping practiced by the Cretan Minoans was likewise an integral part of Spring fertility rites symbolizing the becoming of plenty and doubtless culminating in animal sacrifice (McInerney, 2011), and it is well known that the Athenian races at the stadium above the sacred way at Delphi were religious acts (Guttmann, 2002).

It seems that, although they came to differentiate themselves from their religious matrix as activities ‘for their own sake’ (a process deserving of further careful study along the lines of Szokolczai, 2013), the ecstatic *agon* of the liminoid spheres, whether that activity be ludic or aesthetic, seems to have been grounded in the sacred performance of ritual acts. This is not a vague hypothesis of the kind critiqued by Sansone (1992: 18), but a specific claim – deserving of further specialist attention beyond my competence - that these activities originate in the trial or test phase (i.e. in specifically *liminal* rituals) of rites of passage.



## A CHARACTERISATION OF THE VITAL SUBJECTIVITY TYPICAL OF LIMINAL EXPERIENCE

Accepting the argument so far, we must now ask: what is shared in common between the liminal experiences afforded by ritual, art and sport? This is complex, but the outlines can at least be sketched in the form of five tightly inter-related and mutually dependent features that would then jointly characterise what I call *vital subjectivity* (for background see Brown and Stenner, 2009; Greco and Stenner, 2013):

1. **Suspended ‘reality’.** The canalisations involved in all three domains serve to temporarily *hold in suspense* conventional reality and thus to differentiate what we can crudely grasp as a ‘real world’ from a realm of ‘play’, ‘artifice’ or ‘the sacred’. A ritual may well be a ‘thing done’ (a *dromenon*), but its activity is always cut loose - spatially and temporally as well as ‘existentially’ - from the mundane reality of ordinary practical activity that it serves to punctuate, and out of which it is canalised. Rituals, for example, take place on special occasions: births, deaths, initiations, weddings, birthdays, winter and summer solstices, spring festivals, etc. They mark the sacred ‘holidays’ from the more mundane and profane activities that make up the daily grind of everyday life, and it is obvious that this sense of an *event* is a quality they share with sport and art (although now this feature is more recreational than recreational as holidays have become simply holidays). This suspension of ‘the rules’ of ordinary reality canalises a comparatively safe space for experimentation with intensities of experience that would otherwise not be attainable. This, of course, is a characteristic of play more generally, which involves an imaginative abstraction from practical reality, or rather, from what we can call, once we have enjoyed that abstraction, reality.

2. **Self-occasioned performativity.** We might think of the differentiation and separation entailed by the first feature (‘suspended reality’) as a *staging* of experience were it not for the fact that this word is overly associated with the very *theatre* that, in Harrison’s account, served in the transition from *dromenon* to *drama* and hence from ritual to art. A theatre, which in Greek means a ‘place for viewing’, is a space in

which a performance is played out – whether it be sport-like or art-like. The concept and reality of a *theatre* is thus a common figure between the liminoid spheres of sport and art, but ritual proper is not ‘theatrical’ (in the sense of involving a clear and architecturally instantiated separation between performer and more or less detached observer) but *participative* and collectively enacted. Turner’s distinction between *staged* and *unstaged* liminal experiences is thus insufficient for our purposes, although it does get directly at the difference between experience of a real crisis (such as a natural disaster or a violent conflict, which are less like canals and more like rivers in flood) and the staged enactment of that crisis (see Stenner, 2015). Perhaps, then, a better description of this second feature is the *self-occasioned performativity* of experience, since this does not imply an actual stage, but does suggest an active and artful contribution in carefully contriving and selecting the circumstances for a distinctive *event*. A painted cave is, in this sense, not a theatre in the way the *Coliseum* was, but it does provide the carefully contrived occasion for the enactment of a ritual. We can thus talk of the *performative* nature of ritual, sport and art (as autogenetic or artfully self-occasioned activity), but without restricting the meaning of performance to that which is enjoyed as a spectacle in a liminoid theatre, on the one hand, and, on the other, without allowing it to mean any kind of act or activity whatsoever (see also Isin, 2014).

**3. Liminal affectivity.** There is something distinctively emotional and/or *affective* about the experiences self-occasioned by way of the enacted performances of ritual, sport and art. We might say that they are *about* affectivity, although this point requires careful qualification because this affectivity is quite distinctive (we must not forget that all human activity – even the most rational kind - is in some respects emotional and grounded in affective experience [see Stenner, 2015b]), and might thus be referred to as *liminal affectivity* (Stenner and Moreno, 2013, Greco and Stenner, in press). The performative nature of the acts at issue means that their attendant affectivity is experienced in a canal which is precisely suspended from the usual practical requirements of reality, permitting a distinctive self-enjoyment of affectivity. The emotional enjoyment and expression involved in sport or dance or song is obvious, but ritual too, according to Harrison (1913: 26) is a thing done in order to ‘recreate an emotion’ (see also Langer, 1988). For Harrison, this is the basic link

between ritual and art: ‘At the bottom of art, as its motive power and its mainspring, lies not the wish to copy Nature or even improve on her... but rather an impulse shared by art with ritual, the desire, that is, to utter, to give out a strongly felt emotion... by making or doing or enriching the object or act desired... This common *emotional* factor it is that makes art and ritual in their beginnings’. A rain dance, for instance, is not a practical way of causing rain, but it expresses the emotional value of rain through the medium of the self-enjoyment of the dancing bodies. These affective experiences are thus ‘autotelic’ (in Csikszentmihályi’s sense) in so far as they are autogenetic: we do them to/for ourselves, and for the sake of something that matters to us.

Whitehead (1926: 20) affirms both this link with emotion and with a suspension of practical reality in his definition of ritual as ‘the habitual performance of definite actions which have no direct relevance to the preservation of the physical organisms of the actors’. While departing from the usual rather dogmatic assumptions of evolutionary functionalism (e.g. Dissanayake, 2006), this definition has the advantage of including animal rituals, whose similarities with human rituals have long been noted by ethologists and anthropologists (see Lorenz, 2002). These, for Whitehead, spring not from biological necessity but from superfluous energy and leisure. Animal actions that are practically necessary (like hunting, feeding and mating) can thus be repeated ‘expressively’ for their own sakes, with each repetition repeating also the joy (or other emotion) of exercise, success, or whatever. In this respect, animals are thus certainly not restricted to the ‘necessities’ of practical reality (see Jordan’s contribution to this volume), but there is no doubt that the capacity to imaginatively abstract from the demands of the here-and-now expanded considerably due to the evolutionary growth of the pre-frontal cortex in human beings (a development which doubtless also enhances the communicative aspect of ritual noted by Lorenz, 2002). This third feature thus adds an ethological dimension to the question of why art and sport might have ritual as their basis. As Whitehead (1926: 20) put it: ‘emotion waits upon ritual; and then ritual is repeated and elaborated for the sake of its attendant emotions. Mankind became artists in ritual’. Ritual – and subsequently art and sport - thus excite and work with liminal affectivity for its own sake (as self-occasioned) and as a ‘somatic marker’ (Damasio, 1996) of value and importance.

4. **Sociality.** These experiences are social or collective in a basic sense, even if ostensibly ‘individualised’ in modern societies. It is obvious with team sports played in stadia and with dramas, concerts, and so on, enacted in theatres that these liminoid activities are subject to appreciative observation. The liminal affectivity they generate is not just enjoyed by the actors/players, but by those who spectate, and there is no doubt that the emotional intensity of the performance is intensified by this mutual enjoyment, which amplifies the mimetic and contagious aspects of the emotions involved. The same applies to rituals. Even if liminal rituals are not observed by a detached audience, their *collective* performance is nevertheless a decisive feature. Many drums beating together generate a collective intensity of emotion, as do many bodies dancing together, many voices chanting. A mask viewed by a solitary individual may just be a mask, but as part of a collective rite it can intensify experience and imagination, especially if carefully designed, and accompanied by the enchantments generated by several other ‘muses’ (song, dance etc) as part of an artfully contrived occasion. The feature of liminal affectivity thus combines with that of sociality to enhance intensity. As Harrison (1913: 36) puts it, ‘a meal digested alone is certainly no rite; a meal eaten in common, under the influence of a common emotion, may, and often does, *tend* to become a rite.’ As collectively enjoyed experiences, sport, art and ritual ‘collect’ the collective by engendering, marking and defining the social groups that enjoy them.

5. **Bisociation.** Last but not least, ritual, art and sport are not simply grounded on the differentiation of a ‘suspended reality’ (feature 1), but precisely *play the difference* between two or more ‘worlds’ thus abstracted. Play, as Bateson (1955) pointed out, presupposes during each event of its process this *difference* between itself and a ‘real world’. In this sense, play does not simply belong or take place in an ‘unreal’ world, rather – and like humour<sup>iv</sup> - it operates by way of a *productive juxtaposition of the two worlds its enactment creates and presupposes*. It is the mutual in-feeding between the two ‘worlds’ that lends play its educational or developmental value<sup>v</sup>. Play is thus ‘liminal’ in the special spatial sense that it operates ‘at the boundary’ or ‘on the line’ or ‘at the edge’ of the forms of psychosocial process that make up at least two worlds (see Greco and Stenner, *in press*). This, indeed, is the basis of Mead’s (1932: 49)

profound definition of sociality as ‘the capacity of being several things at once’, a capacity explicitly associated with the process of becoming and hence ‘the stage betwixt and between the old system and the new’. With respect to art, Arthur Koestler (1964) concluded something rather similar about the nature of what he called *the act of creation*. Creativity, he concludes, always operates on more than one plane simultaneously. He calls this feature *bisociation* and defines it as ‘the perceiving of a situation or idea... in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference’ (p. 35). Art thus also ‘plays’ the liminal ‘difference’.

It is helpful here to conceptually distinguish *liminal* activity (which always plays the difference between at least two planes, spheres or ‘positions’) and *pivotal* activity (which is centred within only one sphere of meaningful activity around which it ‘pivots’)<sup>vi</sup>. This distinction is obvious in rituals which involve passage from one ‘pivotal’ world (e.g. the status position of ‘child’) to another (e.g. the status position of ‘adult’) and hence involve a betwixt and between phase. The bisociation at play in ritual does not, however, simply play the difference between two ‘pivotal’ worlds, but also between the artfully enacted ritual and the troubled experience of real transition it implies (depending on the ritual, this might be the real intensity of birth, of puberty, of illness, of sex, of a crop harvested, of a death, and so on). In a comparable way, sport and art always imply the juxtaposition of two worlds of experience. The self-occasioned liminal affectivity generated in artistic activity is haunted by that generated by the often unplanned and unforeseen events of actual life, whether those be moments of beauty, love, terror, violence, wonder, or some other experience. The ‘other world’ at issue is, again, not the mundane world of pivotal activity, but an experiential world of distinctively important and often intensely transformative events. The tiger encountered on the bison-hunt haunts the beautiful images of pre-historic cave art, just as a massacre haunts Picasso’s *Guernica* or the thrill and beauty of movement haunt Degas’ sculptures of dancers. This is not a matter of implying a representational basis to art, but of recognizing that art – like sport and ritual – moves in the medium of affect (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994). As such, it always plays the difference between, as it were, the more or less ‘wild’ emotional experiences that befall us, and the artfully contrived, self-generated, *self-occasioned* experiences we performatively incite for their own sake<sup>vii</sup>. The liminal affectivity self-generated in the

‘canals’ of ritual, art and sport thus articulates against and reworks that which is generated in non-self-generated ruptures and transitions (‘rivers’). The autotelic vitality of *vital subjectivity* inheres in this juxtaposition of the impact of ‘real’ encounter, and the process of its creative re-birth.

### **VITAL SUBJECTIVITY, BEING IN THE ZONE, AND THE WORK/PLAY PARADOX**

The two kinds of liminal affectivity juxtaposed and described above exist in contrast to the pivotal and regularized ‘reality’ of the mundane life-world and its ‘natural attitude’ (Luis Flores, 1997). Vital subjectivity thus *flows* to the extent that it can be thought of as a relative *liquidation* of mundane experience (Turner, 1982: 58; Bauman, 2000). Such liquidation is, of course, necessary for genuine change, transition or becoming to occur. Ritual, art and sport can be seen in this light to be vehicles for such psychosocial liquifaction and *techniques for the generation, management and navigation of liminality*. As such, they come to develop their own specialised rules, techniques and structures, but these must not be mistaken for the mundane forms of ordered process that make up everyday life. This suggests that Turner (1982: 59) was premature in designating flow experiences as ‘structural’ to the extent that they are ‘induced by rules’. He missed the crucial point that a) the rules in question are those that pertain to the activities of liminal (or liminoid) *specialists*, b) that flow experiences are more commonly described by those specialists who have entirely mastered those rules and who can hence transcend them, using their skills in exceptional ways which often re-write the rules.

In stressing the liminal sources of flow, I am not suggesting that Bitz experiences are the limited preserve of maestros in the spheres of religion, art and sport as conventionally defined. As popularized by such texts as *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance* (Pirsig, 2004), they have the potential to be experienced in many spheres of activity, by many people, but only to the extent that vital subjectivity is at play in the activity or situation in question. For most of the time, and in most of our lives, this is not the case, and timing is everything. Much of ordinary life is, by necessity, familiar, repetitive and, as it were, relatively ‘cold’. In part this is because there is

work that *must* be done, whether we desire it or not, and in part it is because things work smoothly, as we wish them to. This point suggests that – benign democratising intentions notwithstanding - Csíkszentmihályi and his followers may have overestimated the ease with which flow experiences might be encountered in any and every sphere of life. In particular, they may have exaggerated the sense in which ordinary work practices might afford flow experiences: ‘A given individual can find flow in almost any activity ... working a cash register, ironing clothes, driving a car’ (Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi, 2002: 196).

The basis of this over-generalization of flow is, of course, the scientific model described earlier, which gives the misleading impression of precisely defining and measuring flow experience: if demands do not exceed the upper limit of skills and do not fall below the lower limit of testing them, we have flow. This model is so general that it can be applied to activity of any kind, since all one needs are skills and demands. In this way, I am suggesting, what was actually interesting in the first place about flow experiences gets abstracted away, leaving a psychological concept bereft of social content and context. In a classic example of what Whitehead (1929) calls the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, the model (which is in fact an abstraction) is mistaken for the reality, while the concrete actualities (e.g. the actual occasions with their distinctive features) are downgraded as anomalies that do not fit the model. Importantly, we see evidence of just this tendency when Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi (2002: 98) discuss some anomalous yet recurrent findings referred to as a ‘work-play paradox’:

LeFevre (1988) ... revealed a paradox about work ... significantly more time was spent in high-challenge, high-skill situations at work than at leisure... work life was dominated by efficacy experiences and leisure time by moments of apathy. *Despite this experiential pattern*, workers wished to be doing something else when they were working [i.e. leisure]... Motivation seemed insensitive to the actual data of the workers’ own experience, being driven instead by their cultural prejudices about work (viewed as what one has to do) versus leisure (viewed as what one freely chooses).

In simple terms, although working a cash register and driving a taxi might fit these authors' definition of a flow experience (high-challenge / high-skill), the magical motivation factor of flow tends nevertheless to be missing in the concrete work experience of their research participants (who prefer apathetic leisure to efficacious work). Although it may seem obvious to ordinary people, this finding is paradoxical and even upsetting for these authors. Rather than question their model, they make the somewhat implausible and insensitive move of blaming the workers and their 'motivation' for being 'insensitive' to 'the actual data' of their own reported experiences of skills and challenges. Seduced by the prejudices of their own model they can only explain this lack of fit by accusing the workers of 'cultural prejudices about work'. They are sufficiently vexed to do a study of the origins of this prejudice that work is what you have to do and leisure what you choose to do, and conclude, as if they were a disease, that: 'These attitudes toward work and play are already in place by sixth grade and intensify across the adolescent years (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997)'. This stance comes worryingly close to a pathologisation of the common sense of those several billion people who do indeed *have to work* if they are to support themselves and their families. What at one moment seems like a benign impulse to generalise flow experiences to all people transforms into the potentially oppressive gesture of blaming the worker for failing to properly enjoy their work (Cromby, 2011). Such pathologisation can be avoided if we de-paradoxify the work/play paradox by recognising the liminal nature of actual occasions of flow experience, and their relationship to vital subjectivity.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

Grasping the relationship between flow, vital subjectivity and liminal/liminoid experience brings us to a clearer understanding of why it might be paradoxical to try to 're-enter' the concept of Bitz back into to a mundane working world whose very 'suspension' and exclusion (via canalisation) made flow possible in the first place. One might observe that efforts to generalise Bitz to all domains of work (even those which do not sit too easily with the image of a sports star or artist working with no thought of food, comfort or a life beyond their labours) nevertheless continue



because, in part, they permit the expectation of optimal performance from workers. What manager would not want to harness selfless intrinsic motivation uninterrupted by self-consciousness?

But a more subtle analysis is also possible. In a recent book, Åkerstrøm Andersen (2013) describes the recent emergence and application in workplace settings of a range of new management strategies. These include what he calls ‘semantics and practices’ of *pedagogization*, of *love*, and of *play* (52). In the context of these semantics and strategies, employees are encouraged to view themselves as in a continual process of development, to play games together, and to construe their organisation as an intimate partner whose changing needs are to be anticipated and met. He argues that these constitute new *forms of organizational membership* and shows how they emerge as part of a general shift in the way in which organizations construe and enact membership. This shift from ‘formal membership’ to ‘membership as self-enrollment’ represents a profound change in the ‘constitutive conditions for organization’ (31). Core to Andersen’s argument is that these semantics and practices have emerged in response to the establishment of a new basic premise of organizations: the constant change that is required by the understanding that both organization and environment are transient, in process of becoming other, and essentially unpredictable. The new semantics and techniques thus respond to this basic problem of ‘how to create expectations based on the expectation of the unexpected?’ (1).

It should be clear that, in my terms, these semantics of pedagogization, play and passion are *techniques for the generation, management and navigation of liminality*, and as such belong within the genealogy I have sketched above. It is in this paradoxical context of managing a permanent liminality by way of fostering liminality, I suggest, that *Being in the zone* acquires its new salience as a management technique. This shift is obviously also related to the new dominance of information and communication technology, and with the rising importance in wealthy late modern societies of the service sector and consumerism more generally, but it also has an internal dynamic related to the historical unfolding of means for construing and

managing liminality. Employers and employees alike are increasingly obliged to think of themselves as creative, media-savvy innovators if they are to remain at the very front of the pack of runners that make up the sport of modern capitalism. Football league tables and transfer markets are thus becoming a core metaphor for a corporate world in a perpetual race to stay in front and to maintain its ‘transient economic advantage’ (McGrath, 2013). It is in this context that workers are invited to be *vital subjects*, energised to work beyond the call of duty at a superhuman level. They must be ‘in the zone’. They must, in short, be athletes of the body and artists of the soul, if they are to devote themselves body and soul to the corporation.

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<sup>i</sup> The mystery is heightened by the real-life knowledge that several of those who made the film, including Tarkovsky, were to die soon afterwards of a bronchial cancer associated with toxic waste from an abandoned chemical plant flowing into the Pirita river at the film location.

<sup>ii</sup> Csíkszentmihályi (1975: 55) defines flow conducive activities as ‘those structured systems of action which usually help to produce flow experiences’, but as Barnett (1976: 84) pointed out, he distracts attention away from these activities by stressing the psychological basis of flow as determined by the perception of the individual.

<sup>iii</sup> Harrison (1913) shows that in ancient Egypt too, the sufferings, death and resurrection of Osiris were enacted in the mystery play at Abydos and depicted in the bas-reliefs at Denderah. She evidently built upon Nietzsche’s (1967) findings in *The Birth of Tragedy* concerning the largely unrecognised influence of the Dionysian cult on Ancient Greek culture, and this influence was further supported once Linear B was decoded in 1951 (Szakolczai, 2013: 42). Nietzsche also stressed that the *Chorus* was the original player in tragedy, and pointed to the centrality of ritual feasting.

<sup>iv</sup> In his work on the ritual origins of Attic comedy, Cornford (1914: 2-3) notes that the word comedy derives from the Greek *Komos* which was the name for a festive procession, i.e. a ritual. The *Komos* constituted the final event of the second part in the comedies of Aristophanes (see also Szakolczai, 2013). Comedy is thus an important factor of vital subjectivity, although it is unclear whether comedy should be considered an art, a sport, or something more like the intoxicating substances often taken during rituals to intensify the liminal affectivity of vital subjectivity.

<sup>v</sup> Education, culture and play are etymologically connected in the Greek word *paideia*, pointing to the serious aspect of play recognised by Plato (see Szakolczai, 2013: 32). Vygotsky’s *zone of proximal development* is another zone worthy of consideration in this context, since it provides a developmental and processual dynamic crucial to any experience (see Papadopoulos, 1999).

<sup>vi</sup> This distinction allows a fuller comprehension of why Bitz experiences are often characterised by a loss of reflective self-consciousness. It is not simply that flow experiences absorb so much ‘processing power’ that none is left over for generating the sense of ‘ego’ (as often crudely implied in the literature). The issue is psychosocial. Pivotal experience is centripetal and hence tends to be ‘centred’ around the provision of clear identities (with attendant rights and obligations) recognized by others, whilst liminal experience has a centrifugal dynamic that dissolves or liquefies such identity in order to maximize potentiality for passage.

<sup>vii</sup> The late Townes van Zandt captures this distinction perfectly when he sings (in the song ‘To live is to fly’):

*We’ve all got holes to fill,*

*Them holes is all that’s real,*

*Some fall on you like a storm,*

*Sometimes you dig your own.*