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WORKING PAPER

The New out of Nothing

The Workshop between the Liminal and the Liminoid

DEVELOPING THEATRE

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Abstract

This paper attempts to read the term 'workshop' and to explore the mechanisms that enable this form of gathering to function. Our contemporary utilization of the term associates it with education and developing skills, yet it is neither a class nor a rehearsal. What happens in this exceptional space? What makes a certain group of people interested in gathering and participating at a workshop, which does not promise work or profit?

It is argued that the terms liminal and liminoid suggest an understanding of how workshops function. Both terms are removed from quotidian representations and they divide the time to pre and after. Victor Turner explains that liminal is where one works and liminoid is where one plays, thus the liminoid, which is a matter of choice, is free than the liminal. In the context of theatre, when theatre events become ritualized in terms of production and reception, and when attending a play becomes firmly coded to economic and social forces, workshops become a space to try new forms and techniques, and where one can choose without being judged academically or professionally.

Keywords: workshop, theatre, ritual, structure, activity, liminal, liminoid.

About the contributor

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Working Paper *DevelopingTheatre*

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The New out of Nothing: The Workshop between the Liminal and the Liminoid[1]

Ziad Adwan

[t]he goldsmith tested theory literally with his hands.[2]

Introduction and Definitions

In *The Moving Body* (2000), theatre practitioner/ teacher Jacques Lecoq expresses his views, which are the basis of his pedagogy at The International Theatre School in Paris, and explains several exercises that occupy the two-year course. Although based on several courses that inspire creativity, and improve physical skills, Lecoq mentions the term workshop only once, and then in a disapproving sense. Discussing clowns and masks as well as the web of relationships among actors, audience and masks, Lecoq states that by the end of the two years, students will be able to fully investigate themselves and to show themselves in front of others, unlike 'the case in the innumerable short workshops on clowning which are offered here and there, and which can only give a very superficial, reductive approach to work' (Lecoq 2000: 159).

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2 Sennett, Richard. The Craftsman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), p.62.

The term ‘workshop’ has been approached in recent years by many scholars who have explored the etymological origins of the term and the shifts in its meanings, qualities and values through the ages. A workshop is ‘a place where one experimented with materials and shared construction ideas with close friends and family’ (Argelander 1978: 4). In medieval times, the closed system of the workshop was one of its main attributes. A workshop was a small room or sometimes a house, where artisans manufactured goods. Thus it was ‘a place of work and a home’ (Sennett 2008: 75), and ‘a place of work and sale’ (Balme, Leonhardt 2019: 6) as well as a place where ‘labour and life mixed face-to-face’(Sennett 2008: 53). In the renaissance, trademarks and individual artists began to emerge from workshops, and the workshop became associated with artists who pursued originality. Thus when ‘the craftsman outward turned to his community, the artist inward turned upon himself’ (ibid: 65). Workshops were replaced in the eighteenth century by the factory and the studio, the first produces goods and the second produces art objects (Matthews 2012: 358). It re-emerged, as the practice we now know, in the early twentieth century when American professor of English literature, George Pierce Baker designed a playwriting course ‘to assist students with literary ambitions acquire the necessary skills and craft to further their dramatic ambitions’ (Balme, Leonhardt 2019: 7).

Whether in the medieval ages or in the twentieth century, the workshop has been always associated with education, since crafts need to be taught. The guilds in the medieval and renaissance times ritualised the education process that took place between the master or the craftsmen and their apprentices . The education process followed calendric and social-structural rhythms, and after spending years of learning and assaying, the young adult could be master in his own house (Sennett 2008:64).

Participants in workshops nowadays know that they are not in rehearsal spaces or in academic classes. Whereas in the Middle Ages workshops were passages for the apprentice to become productive in the economic sense, workshops today do not promise any income (except possibly for the instructor), and probably do not promise the participants a wealthy future. Quite the opposite: they are initiated to oppose the materialist and the capitalist engines of contemporary art production. In the following, I describe how the term workshop has been defined in several readings, and I relate the approaches of this ‘activity’ to the liminal and liminoid moments as articulated by Victor Turner in his analysis of rituals and social transitions.

Workshop and Ritualising the Past and the Present

Richard Sennett's book, *The Craftsman* (2008), explores workshops and craftsmanship and their attributes. In the prologue, Sennett stresses the significance of rituals and states that he is 'less interested in the ideologies of nationalism or jihad than in the ritual practices' (Sennett 2008:12) and concludes that the 'fatal marriage of religion and aggression might possibly be altered by changing the ritual practices in each' (ibid). Ritual requires a persistent attention, as the 'craft of ritual makes faith physical' (ibid). Sennett details in *The Craftsman* the passages the apprentice had to take in order to become the master of his own place;

> The stages of progress in a guild were marked out first by the apprentice's presentation of the *chef d'oeuvre* at the end of his seven years, a work that demonstrated the elemental skills the apprentice had imbibed. If successful, now a journeyman, the craftsman would work for another five to ten years until he could demonstrate, in a *chef d'oeuvre élevé,* that he was worthy to take the master's place. (ibid:58)

The specified steps an apprentice should take to change his professional, economical and 'educational' status create a series of passages, and sometimes these steps are accompanied by ceremonies. Sennett documents how knowledge could 'pass on by imitation, ritual, and surrogacy' (Sennett 2008: 64-65) and how the guild's regulations taught apprentices the ways to master their crafts. Yet, in response to the social change from medieval communes to court society the artist arose from workshops, and only a few renaissance artists worked in isolation. The workshop became the artist's studio, and together with the apprentices they 'put a new value on the originality of the work done in them' (Sennett 2008: 66).

Seeking originality was not totally prevented in the medieval times and the renaissance. 'Originality, is a marker of time; it denotes the sudden appearance of something where before there was nothing' (Sennett 2008: 70). Sennett explains that in these ages, originality and newness were not total breaches of the structure, but to work well, every craftsman has to learn from the experiences of resistance and ambiguity rather than fight them (ibid: 10).

In his article “What is a Workshop?” John Matthews links the workshop to the concept of newness. Building on Hannah Arendt, he draws distinctions between labour, work, and action. Labour is concerned with sustaining human life, while work is associated with productivity. Labour ‘never designated the finished product (Arendt 1958: 80), and ‘[t]o labour meant to be enslaved by necessity, and this enslavement was inherent in the conditions of human life’ (ibid: 53-54). It is ‘the labour of our body and the work of our hands’ (ibid: 85) to use Arendt’s words in her book The Human Condition (1958). Action is understood through negations: since it ‘does not necessarily produce or use materials [it is] unpredictable, irreversible and anonymous. Action does not construct’ (Matthews 2012: 354). It can also be grasped through its relation to other objects, as it ‘names the interaction which takes place between individuals [and] within the complex webs of already formed relations’ (ibid). In order to link this discussion to the worshop Matthews builds also on Arendt’s association of action with ‘natality’, or newness, which is the appearance of something that did not exist before and, crucially, which may not have been planned for’ (ibid).

Matthews asks whether our current utilisation of the term workshop is metaphorical. The conditional processes of learning a craft at a workshop through imitation, ritual, or surrogacy, require an assembly and an agreement between two parties. This may be between the master and his apprentices, or the workshop leader and the participants. According to Matthews, the relationship between action and togetherness can release creativity (ibid: 360). Togetherness requires faith and a common belief that the master/ workshop leader can lead the apprentices/ participants to mastering a craft and to more knowledge that can release creativity. The current utilisation of the term worshop associates it with the demand for creativity and ‘while some of this creativity can be contained within the paradigm of current craft practice some of it may be uncotainable’ (ibid).

Workshops between the Liminal and the Liminoid

Victor Turner’s distinction between liminal and liminoid spaces might suggest an understanding of what makes a workshop a workshop, and how in the process of transferring knowledge the need for newness can emerge in a strict system. Liminal and liminoid moments share the quality of dividing the time to pre and after, and betwixt

the moments, individuals and communities construct representations that 'are often reversals, inversions, disguises, negations, antitheses of quotidian, collective representations' (Turner 1985: 215). Turner stresses that these procedures create rituals and passages that enable the participants to create new codes, symbols, boundaries and objectives. Building on Van Gennep's definition of *rites de passage* that accompany changes of place, state, social position and age, Turner demonstrates that 'the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state' (Turner 1982: 94). Turner emphasises the characteristic of ambiguity, as this condition offers the space for people to elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate their positions in cultural space. The attributes of this phase are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions (ibid).

At the end of his article 'Liminality, Kabbalah, and the Media', Turner presents five differentiations between liminality and the liminoid. While both are moments removed from quotidian representations, the liminal is concerned with the collective rites that are constructed in calendrical, biological, social-structural transitions. It 'exists when all hangs in the balance, when change might be possible, the perilous moment when social structure momentarily has to loose its grip' (Turner 1985: 207). Liminal activities can be found in tribal, medieval and industrial societies. Liminoid activities emerge in industrial, democratic-liberal societies, and they 'tend to be more idiosyncratic, quirky, to be generated by specific named individuals and in particular groups `schools', `circles' and 'coteries'' (ibid: 215). Liminal characteristics can still be found in many religious, political and social ceremonies. Liminoid practices, found in arts and literature, use aspects from liminal phenomena to recreate new codes and debate established values in a way that is analogous to workshops' objectives to achieve originality and natality.

Thus, when the term 'workshop' was used to describe liminal practices or representations with firm regulations in the medieval ages, they came to mean liminoid in the way the term is used today. Balme and Leonhardt note that workshop has changed from 'a noun denoting pre-industrial labour to a catchword for various forms of experimental theatre practice to a verb meaning to improve or develop something by this format' (Balme, Leonhardt 2019: 5). Workshop, therefore, has moved from referring to the place of making goods to describing the process of the activity. Therefore

'workshopping as a format for transporting knowledge is applicable to any sphere of activity outside structured curricula' (ibid).

Turner states that '[o]ne *works* at the liminal, one *plays* with the liminoid' (Turner 1985: 216). Apprentices in medieval times were submitted to certain conditions and followed many calendric steps in order to become masters of their professions in their houses. 'In tribal societies, liminality is often functional, in the sense of being a special duty or performance *required* in the course of work or activity' (ibid: 212), Turner states. Not being clear whether the activity is a rehearsal or an academic class, participants in contemporary workshops know that they are in a place that is 'freer than the liminal, a matter of choice, not obligation' (ibid: 215), as Turner describes the liminoid.

In "Performance Workshops: Three Types", Ron Argelander associates twentieth century workshops with the avant-garde theatre community (Argelander 1978). It has become an activity that is used in the quest for originality in the same sense craftsmen sought originality in the turn from the medieval ages to the renaissance. But whereas in the renaissance learning was understood as copying, and teaching was ritualised, the workshop in the twentieth century has become a laboratory that combines different disciplines as Littlewood did when she fused the techniques of Stanislavsky and Rudolf Laban (Hodge 2000: 115). John Littlewood, who founded the Theatre Workshop theatre in 1945, denied the existence of any method or way of working that is beholden to a system (ibid: 113). She compared the work of Theatre Workshop as a jazz combo against the classical orchestra (ibid: 114).

Theatre from the Liminoid to the Liminal

Theatre in the twentieth century is seen by many practitioners and academics as a structure that has become conditioned to certain passages, or rituals, whether one approaches theatre as commercial entertainment, as elitist activity, or as an academic discipline. In his study of theatre uneasiness and embarrassment, Nicolas Ridout argues that a 'theatre performance fails to transport the spectator from the reality of his modern life, because it is, of course, part of modern life, part of capital' (Ridout 2006: 4). According to Ridout, the critical and artistic thinking of theatre, which seeks to oppose

or resist capital, for instance, cannot leave behind the practice and the institutions of theatre (ibid).

Even when theatre practitioners attempted to detach theatre from quotidian structures, they tend to slip into other liminal regulations. When theatre attempted to break from commercialism, the theatre companies tended to ritualise their togetherness and collectivity. John Matthews describes how theatre companies in the twentieth century, such as Grotowski's Paratheatre and Gardzienice's 'commune', 'sought to recuperate something of the medieval workshop model […] and this impulse might bind theatre training to the monastery, where such a model originated, via the figure of a 'holy actor' and might seek to oppose the commercialism to which it gave way' (Matthews 2012: 359).

The workshop also emerged to oppose academic acting methods at the established drama academies. Argelander argues that 'the theatre workshop was organized within a loosely structured performing group; the workshop itself functioned in two basic capacities: first and foremost, as a place to get away from dogmatic acting classes in order to explore new ideas and, second, as a practical way to make a production that could reflect the personal values of the group rather than the standard theatrical values of commercial theatre' (Argelander 1978: 4). Argelander quotes Joseph Chaikin's criticism of contemporary theatre teaching methods and why he formed and founded the Open Theatre in 1963. 'Our teachers have "arrived," and they never think of moving towards something new' (ibid: 5) Chaikin complained.

Victor Turner touches on the relationship between anti-structure and novelty, when he stresses that the liminoid (literature, drama and sport) is not an anti-structure to the normative structure but an auxiliary function to larger structures:

> The liminoid genres,[…] not only make tolerable the system as it exists, they keep its members in a more flexible state with respect to that system, and, therefore, with respect to possible change […] The normative structure represents the working equilibrium, the antistructure represents the latent system of potential alternatives from which novelty will arise when contingencies in the normative system require it. (Turner 1985: 213)

Twentieth century workshops, thus, are freer spaces to approach theatre. They give the time and space for the participants to believe the 'natality' or the irreversible eruption of 'newness' within structures the control the newness. According to Matthews, what makes the workshop unique is 'its capacity to sustain within an exclusive group the necessary conditions for an ongoing engagement in this state of apparent chaos' (Matthews 2012: 353). Turner explains the required freedom in order to achieve newness as a process whereby controls are suspended, '[w]hen the safeguards of quotidian social structure are removed, the dark side, the `other side' of liminality is exposed, for society and the selves that compose it have deep roots'(Turner 1985: 210).

Turner argues that nowadays theatre practices, which were considered as liminoid events, are becoming liminal when they, unintentionally sometimes, keep the cultural debris of some forgotten liminal ritual' (ibid). A good-night-out-theatre experience cannot be isolated from certain rites, codes, manners, expectations and economic values. Art production mechanisms have turned many experimental and challenging projects into a commodity that is trapped in the same cycle of production and consumption. Thus, labour becomes a commodity and artistic and theatre activities, even when they are in exclusive clubs, 'tend to generate rites of passage, with the liminal a condition of entrance into the liminoid realm' (ibid).

Workshops in this respect, can be seen as a liminoid space that can provide the conditions for another 'newness' or originality away from the ritualised manners of approaching theatre. They seek to detach and separate from the mundane life. Participants in workshops nowadays gather to avoid the rigid economical systems of theatre production and the solid hierarchy in educational systems, reflecting the need 'for liminoid spaces and times' (ibid). It is in workshop spaces that one can experiment with unfamiliar acting techniques such as Japanese classical theatre, or can combine Stanislavsky with Laban as it was the case in Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, or can go back to earlier and ancient practices, just because the contemporary art and literature have the 'stamp of the liminal upon them' (ibid).

Conclusion

The shift from ritualised learning through imitation to openness to natality is the shift from being in a liminal experience to being in a liminoid one. The interrelationship between the liminal and the liminoid suggests an approach of not only how workshop survived etymologically, but also to understand the necessity of workshops in contrast to the controlled engines of theatre productions and theatre academies. Participants believe that workshops are necessary even if they were 'practices that make nothing' (Matthews 2012: 359). The position of workshop between an activity that creates nothing and a place where new theatre techniques and ideas are developed, is understood in this perspective of liminal and liminoid activities. Thus, the workshop becomes a liminoid phenomenon when theatre practices and approaches themselves become liminal.

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