

Mind the Theory

History, Culture, & Language As Seen Through a Liminal Looking Glass

Words and images by Jasun Horsley, 2015

Part One: The Unbearable Lightness of Liminality



The Outer Limits (What is Liminality?)

Liminality can be understood as providing four different contexts: spiritual or religious, social, political, and psychological.

1. Originally the word was coined by anthropologists to refer to religious ceremonial practices, during which participants were led by *ceremony masters* from one state (and status) to another, such as in a *coming of age ritual*. The liminal stage is the intermediary one in which the initiate is on *the threshold* (*limen*) between his or her old status and a new, as-yet unknown one.
2. Socially speaking, liminality refers to periods of chaos in which old structures, institutions, traditions and mores, have all broken down or been destroyed, and in which new ones have not yet been established. People trapped in a liminal situation are not able to act rationally because the structures upon which their rationality was based have disappeared. Being in a liminal state

spells crisis for most people; emotions run wild, making clear thinking all but impossible. This leads to “mimetic” (imitative) behavior by those trapped in the liminal space. Situations of permanent liminality are known as *schismogenesis*. Societies can be stuck for a long time in this state, when the previous unity is broken but the various now inchoate elements are forced to stay together.

3. In the politics of liminality, the future is unknown. This means there can be no ceremony masters, because no one has gone through the process before, so there is no one to lead people out of it. This allows for the emergence of *false* ceremony masters who fill the void created by people’s need to be guided. These self-appointed leaders *perpetuate liminality* because their power and authority depends on the disorientation and helplessness of others.
4. In psychotherapy, liminality describes a stage in the individuation journey when a person’s old personality (ego) and the accompanying beliefs, values, and standards, have begun to break apart, but in which no coherent new self has as emerged from the “ruins.” In this process, the psychotherapist acts as ceremony master. He or she is there to guide the patient into a new, more individuated state of being. There are two problems with this arrangement, however. Firstly, that the therapist can only act as a ceremony master to the extent that he or she has gone all the way through the liminal journey of individuation (an extremely rare achievement). Secondly, more problematic still, the nature of individuation requires a new, more autonomous state of being, meaning that the person must go through it *alone*, and eventually reject *all external forms of guidance*, including (especially) that of the ceremony master (therapist). In a sense, to leave the liminal stage at an individual level means to become functional *within* it, to accept liminality as the human condition, not as a means to an end but as a never-ending end in itself.

These four contexts are four ways of looking at a single “thing.”

Neti Neti: The Medium is Still the Message So What is the Message?

Liminality is an inherently “spiritual” concept because it relates to the well-known spiritual principle of *Neti Neti*, not this, not that. *Neti Neti* refers to how, on the path to Truth, big “T,” the aspirant must carefully inspect every experience that comes his or her way and reject it. Like Buddha under the tree facing Maya, except that, in the end, Buddha *also* must be rejected as Maya.

The problem with writing about liminality is that writing itself is anti-liminal. Language is a system of symbols that creates the illusion of linear progression from a beginning to an end (each sentence and each word, this piece, etc.). Language and time are similar in this regard, and liminality, like limbo, implies a space in which time itself is suspended. There is nothing than can be said about liminality that doesn’t somehow do it a disservice. There is nothing . . .

I have attempted to address this by writing about the act of writing itself, as I am now doing. This creates a feeling of liminality for me the author and hence I presume for the reader too (and possibly also a

feeling of impatience). Is this an essay about liminality or is this the DVD commentary about how the essay was written? Neither? Both? Liminal, liminal, liminal.

I initially attempted this “essay” in the non-liminalist fashion to be more informative and less subjective or “creative,” but it did not work. You the reader must experience liminality, otherwise, by thinking you understand what it is, you will be preventing an experience of liminality from happening. Together we conspire to do this. All of society is like a collective defense against liminality, or not-knowing.

Liminality is like liberation: we like the idea of it but we do everything we can to prevent it from happening. If we didn’t, it would already have happened, because liberation, like liminality, is the natural and inevitable state of existence. Why? Because existence is nothing but perception, and perception cannot be anything other than liminal and free.

With that in mind, I will continue with this essay but exercise my RIGHT to be FREE to make associations that may seem unfounded, random, absurd; because that is what being in a liminal state is like, because liminality means LOSS OF CONTEXT, and because CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING. So perhaps liminality means stripping our experience *down* to the context, and when everything is context, nothing is. Or rather, what is left to be contextualized?

The answer is just this: you (i.e., perception).

This is all for you.

“Thou Art That”: Institutional Identity



Back to the four modes. There is no clear dividing line between religion, society, and politics. It is more of a continuum of “mores,” or modes of behavior. Underneath the religio-socio-political values—and the institutions that uphold and promote them (and enforce them)—is psychology. Psychology explores the formative experiences that give rise to the values that lead to the mores that create the institutions, social, political, religious systems, and so on and so forth.

What I really want to write about now is institutions. What are they, how do they come about, do we really need them and if so why, and when does a necessary, healthy institution become an unnecessarily evil (or “evil”) one?

I know someone who runs a local used bookstore. He takes care of his public image in town because it is good for business. At the same time, he is aware that having a local business helps to take care of his image by making him seem respectable. Having the bookstore gives him a sense of who he is and provides certain limits and cues to his behavior. It tells him “how to be.” Because he represents his business (which is an institution too, albeit a private one), his public personality is in service to his business. In a similar way, *institutions protect us from ourselves and in return we hitch ourselves to them and protect the institutions from us.*

The idea of *universal values* (morality) is common to pretty much all social systems. In order to provide the sort of guidance, support, and reassurance needed to create social cohesion and stability, institutions must give the impression of being unchanging, solid, and *fundamental*. They can’t be seen as merely the products of human minds trying to work out the best way to create social cohesion.

My friend’s bookstore runs along certain rules that he himself didn’t create but which he adopted and adapted from a larger social consensus about how used bookstores run. He can bring something of himself to it but not so much that customers feel unsure about the space they are entering. A bookshop is a kind of liminal space (any kind of business is) because it is a space for passing through, not one to remain in. Whether or into we enter into a bookstore, or any place of business, depends not only on whether we want to buy something but how comfortable we feel about entering, and also, how comfortable we are about *not* buying. The rules of the used bookstore are simple and universal: come in, look around, buy if you want to, leave without buying if you don’t find anything you like, and don’t take anything without paying for it. There are variables, such as whether customers can use the restroom, or how helpful the staff is, but these can be comfortably negotiated provided the main context has been safely established and is honored. None of these rules (except maybe the one about shoplifting) needs to be written down or stated to customers, at any time, because everyone knows the “doing” of bookstores.

Institutions are like concretized doings, and doings are the embodied expressions of institutions and the internal ideologies that both give rise to the institutions and are upheld *by* them.

Here’s another example. One of the books in my friend’s used bookstore is, of course, the Bible. The Bible is a book, but unlike other books, it can’t be seen as *just another book*. It can’t be seen as merely the product of human minds, because to do so would place it in competition with thousands of other books. It must be presented as the Word of God. This is an article of faith. There is no proof that it is the Word of God; on the contrary, it is demonstrably a book written by human beings. Yet the idea that those human beings were divinely inspired (that God intervened in human affairs to ensure the Book came into physical existence in the precise way intended), even though this too is a *human* idea, is enough to

provide cohesion and stability to the collective institution of Christianity. The same applies to The Koran and Islam, Judaism and the Talmud, and so on.

Now that I think about it, language would seem to be a key to how consensuses are created, which perhaps relates to how language is inherently *anti*-liminal.

The Problem with Problems

Whether they are religious or political (usually a mix of both), ideologies are value systems designed to create and maintain institutions that bring about social cohesion. This may be why psychology is generally left out of the equation when it comes to forming such ideologies.* (It may also be why I seem almost neurotically driven to include my own psychology in everything I write.) Simply stated, the difference with the psychological view of liminality is that psychology tends to view all ideologies as sourced in varying levels of *pathology*. Yet even as psychology recognizes ideology—and the social identity which it gives rise to—as a form of pathology, it also allows that there may be no realistic way to exist without it. At least, no way that can be talked about or proscribed, since to do so would be to reduce it to an ideology and a group experience (in a similar way that writing about liminality strips it of its liminality).

The function of religious ceremony, spiritual beliefs, social institutions, and political ideologies, and in a large part of psychological treatment too, is not to help us adjust to liminality and make our home there, but to reframe it as *a means to an end*. A necessary part of that reframing entails creating a new, arbitrary state out of the elements of the old, lost state, for the individual to then move “safely” into. An obvious example would be political elections: each time a new election comes around, the candidates emphasize all the problems (the social chaos, which is to say, liminality) that are current in order to offer solutions. Candidates then make promises which they summarily forget as soon as they gain the desired power to keep them. These are the *false ceremony masters* who pretend to know how to lead people out of liminality by misrepresenting the nature of liminality—for example, by omitting to mention that the problems they promise to solve are problems which they, or others like them, are responsible for having created (topical example: ISIS terrorist threat being the result of black budget US training and funding of the human elements who then form ISIS).¹

These false ceremony masters (i.e., politicians) perpetuate liminality while at the same time offering bogus solutions or *ways out* of the liminal state. This means that liminality must be both downplayed (seen as just a set of problems rather than something inherent to the social structures, ideologies, and

* Psychology, though it has some similarities to ideology, is different from ideology because it allows for the existence of the unconscious (rather than, say, God, or natural law) as the primary determining factor in human activity. As a result, it looks into the ways that values (and ideologies) are formed unconsciously, the determining factor being found not in any empirical truth or reality, but in an individual’s (or society’s) subjective experiences. To give one example, in “The Childhood Origins of the Holocaust,” Lloyd de Mause shows how the Nazi ideology (including the seemingly irrational hatred of Jews) can be traced back to the early, brutalizing experiences of German children in the generations who grew up to form the Nazi movement.

<http://primal-page.com/holocaust.htm>

institutions) and played *up*, turned into a SET OF PROBLEMS that can and *must* be solved, by introducing new values, new structures, new policies, new leaders, and so on, ad nauseum.

The problem is that the problems underlying liminality are not social problems but psychological ones. Hence they can't be addressed with social reforms or new ideologies. In fact, those social reforms, policies, and "new" ideologies are, as Freud said of religion, *symptoms* of the problem itself. They do not appear to be symptoms that bring about health, either, but ones that, by being misread and seen as viable forms of *treatment*, divert our attention *away* from the problem and onto a bogus solution. (An easy example: institutionalized religion offers a solution to the fear of death—not to mention poverty, social injustice, and a million other more tangible ills—that only postpones these problems and so exacerbates them, potentially at least.)

The problem, or rather, the psychological reality, that isn't getting addressed here is that most people *depend on a group identity for their psychological survival*. Most people need a sense of national identity, cultural identity, sexual identity, and so on, in order to know how to behave. The primary way this group identity is provided is via institutional values and valued institutions that we can trust in—except that, *we can't*. This perpetual liminality in which the very structures we rely on are by their nature unreliable makes most people highly susceptible to manipulation. All it takes is to undermine those institutions to cause a feeling of panic and then, since people are not trained to know how to handle an experience of liminality, they look to false ceremony masters to herd or entice them towards *apparently* stable ground. Anything to avoid the unbearable lightness of liminality.

The premise of this essay is that spirituality—which in its truest form is the quest to go beyond identity and into what looks like (from this side of the threshold at least) a permanent state of liminality—is now becoming a social, practical necessity. The increasingly deceptive and destructive waters of illegitimately perpetuated liminality and false solutions, dodgy group identities, corrupt institutions, etc., are rising. This creates an ever-more urgent climate in which neither option in any pair of options is viable, in which everything leads to a *double-bind* of potentially unbearable cognitive dissonance, a feeling familiar to us all as children, when we are damned if we do something, and equally damned if we fail to do it. The primary experience of being in a liminal state is *powerlessness*.

The only way to navigate these rising waters is to develop a capacity for liminalism, that is, for doing nothing (or not-doing, if you want to get Zen about it): loss of power, control, and even basic knowledge about what is true or false, real or unreal, in the face of increasingly insurmountable collective problems, and increasingly problematic "solutions."

Part Two: Dancing about the Ruin



Blood Cement: Concretizing the Abstract

In a recent conversation with paranormal researcher George P. Hansen, Hansen told me that liminality does not lend itself to abstract expression: it is very hard to talk about liminality in the abstract, Hansen said; you *have* to refer to concrete examples.

Liminality is anti-structure, and language is an expression of structure. It is both the result of structure and a means to impose structure *onto* things. To talk about liminality, then, is to attempt to drag language beyond the limits of what language is capable of expressing or describing. As the famous phrase has it, it's like dancing about architecture. (This phrase itself enjoys a kind of liminal status, being a quote with no precise source, most commonly attributed to the musician Martin Mull, who allegedly said, "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture." No actual record of this exists, apparently.)²

The point here is that, when we talk about liminality (or write about music, or dance about architecture), there is a disproportionate amount of room for error, or at least subjective interpretation, because the description tools aren't well matched to what's being described. Using concrete examples reduces this problem (in the case of liminality, at least) in a similar way to how using metaphors helps us understand abstract questions. Examples and metaphors speak to a more direct experience, that of the body and of

images, and they leave at least *some* of the interpretation to the reader or listener. This allows us to reach our own understanding, rather than having to follow the speaker/author's.

Fortunately, this loose series of essays began when the author discovered an example of liminality so striking (and well-known) that it inspired him (that's me) to *use it* as the basis for an exploration of liminality, a demonstration of how, as a lens through which to view history and human behaviors, it offers a whole new potential for clarity and perspective. A new context. This example is one that's raised (without any reference to, or apparent awareness of, liminality) by the US author and lecturer, Timothy Snyder, in a lecture he gave about his book, *Bloodlands*.³

In the lecture, Snyder makes a bold attempt to offer an explanation for the persecution of the Jews in Europe during the late 1930s. Snyder starts by pointing out that only a tiny percentage of murdered Jews were killed *inside* Germany; the vast majority was killed in Nazi-occupied countries such as Austria, France, and Poland. The reason Snyder offers for this is simple but surprising: the systematic persecution of the Jews depended on the nation where it happened *first being severely destabilized*. Since destabilizing Germany was the last thing on the Nazis' minds, persecution of Jews couldn't occur inside the national borders to the same degree as it did outside of them.

To illustrate his point, Snyder gives the example of Estonia and Denmark, both of which were Nazi-occupied during the 1930s. According to Snyder, while the Danish people rescued 97% of its resident Jews from death, the Estonian people cooperated in the *extermination* of 97%. The difference, according to Snyder, is simple: Denmark retained its sovereignty, its national identity (and consequently its stability), Estonia did not.

For a nation, or more precisely, for a people previously belonging to a nation or a social community who are identified with the institutions, values and mores that held that nation-state together, losing sovereignty means entering into *a period of liminality*.

What the Other Might Do: Preemptive Mimetic Violence

For a community or a nation to enter into a period of liminality, or *anti-structure*, means the institutions and social conventions begin to collapse. Individuals who belong to a community identify with the structures around them, both social and "moral". When those structures start to collapse, people's internal sense of identity soon follows. Which way is up and which way is down? What is acceptable behavior? There is no way to tell. Everything is suddenly "up for grabs." (Often literally, as in the recent case of Greece!)

To give a more current example, it has often been noted how, when inner city rioting occurs as a result of some social injustice, rather than directing the anger and frustration at the perpetrators, the rioters begin looting, destroying, and burning down their *own* neighborhood. Apparently this is because, without a sense of stability within their own community, people enter *a liminal state* in which they no longer feel safe *as individuals*. Reacting with panic, anxiety, and rage, individual survival becomes their only concern. "The other" then becomes anyone and everyone around them.

Simply put, as Snyder describes it, the people living in those European countries where national institutions were collapsing felt personally unsafe. Witnessing the people around them being killed for no obvious reason, they feared they would be next. The surest way to feel safe under those conditions—to escape the fate being inflicted on the Jews, gypsies, and other targeted groups—was to side with the conquering forces—i.e., the victimizers. If, on the other hand, the nation they belonged to retained its sovereignty, if the institutions remained intact, as in Denmark, the populace felt secure enough not to side (so quickly) with the invaders. Evidently, it even felt safe enough to identify with the victimized, and to choose to protect them.

In Snyder's thesis, the Nazis were fully aware of this fact. They recognized that the infamous *Kristallnacht* ("night of broken glass"), in which thousands of German Jews were rounded up and murdered, was an extremely risky move on Hitler's part. They were adamant that such tactics *should not be repeated within the borders of the Homeland*, because if the German people sensed that their institutions were unstable, they would panic and rise up—not in defense of the Jews but in fear for their own livelihood.

Snyder's reframing of the Nazi occupation of Europe and the persecution of Jews and other peoples is subtle but I think quite profound. He makes the obvious point that one of the main reasons the inhabitants of occupied countries cooperated with the Jewish persecution was that they feared not to do so would be to jeopardize their own lives and the lives of their families. But he also adds that this wasn't necessarily a *direct* fear of the occupying German forces. More likely, he says, it was a fear of their own neighbors (and even family members), of anyone who might report their activities if they chose to defy the Nazi invaders and rescue Jews. Is it so hard to imagine that, possessed by such fear, unable to be sure our own community members wouldn't betray us, many of us would choose to cooperate with the occupying Nazi forces?

This reading of familiar-to-the-point-of-contempt events isn't really surprising; once it's spelled out clearly enough, it even seems self-evident. But what's compelling (to me at least) is how it reframes the events that occurred in Europe during the 1930s, sourcing them not solely in the actions of the Nazis, but in the *imagination of ordinary people*. In the fear of *what the other might do*.

In periods of liminality, as the integrity of the community is undermined, individuals' sense of identity becomes unstable. The collective identity that arises in a time of liminality—chaos, upheaval, and trauma—is a *negative* identity, one that can affirm itself only by negating that which it is "not." The need for a scapegoat—an Other—therefore increases, as a way to reestablish some of the lost solidarity to the community. Within larger communities, such as a nation, an individual scapegoat is not enough, and entire groups are targeted. When the Other is identified as not merely a single individual but a large, and somewhat amorphous, group of individuals, it becomes less clear where the line between the community-identity being affirmed and the "other" being negated lies. The way to avoid *becoming* the other—to avoid being negated by the community—is to participate in the negation of the designated Other. To refuse to do so is to implicitly affirm the Other, which is to negate one's own identity.

This is an essential, mysterious fact about periods of liminality: *mimesis*, or unconscious imitation, *becomes contagious*. Simply put, by imagining the terrifying possibility of what their neighbors *might* do, many people during this liminal period in Europe *opted to do it first*. It was a case of *preemptive mimetic violence*: imitating not what others are doing but what we fear they might do.

This is also known as “Do unto others before they do it unto you,” and is sometimes attributed to the more psychopathic personality types. In fact, it’s something we have probably all been guilty of at one time or another. Anyone who has been in a long term sexual relationship will have experienced it. How many times have you *imagined* your partner or workmate was thinking or doing something you found objectionable, and reacted accordingly, only to discover the slight was all in your imagination? How many times have we judged another, out of fear that we were being judged?

Biologically, the ability to place oneself in another’s person’s shoes and deduce what they are thinking is known as *theory of mind*. Theory of mind is often seen as fundamental to empathy and compassion, or at least consideration for others, and it may well have been instrumental in causing those few who chose to rescue persecuted people in 1930s Europe (Jews, gypsies, et al.) to do so: an ability to imagine their suffering and to want to oppose it. It may have also been the primary cause of the opposite decision, to participate in the persecution. If so, it was on a much larger scale.

But what if mind itself is nothing but a theory?



Embracing Liminality

In the movie *The Matrix*, when Thomas Anderson is unplugged from the matrix, he undergoes some physical reactions: he seems unable to stand up, his eyes hurt, etc. After he finds out the truth, he throws up. Yet psychologically speaking, despite discovering his entire life has been a lie and that he is not who he thought he was, he remains essentially the same person.

In reality, if you or I, as individuals, were forcibly removed from the matrix of our social identities, if we had all value and meaning by which we have lived stripped away in an instant, not just externally but *internally*, what would even be left of us?

The movie can't show this of course. It can't show it because the most logical way to show it would be for Thomas to be reduced to a wild animal and a raving lunatic. It also can't show it because there is *no way* to posit an existence outside the social values we have grown up with from *inside* the framework of those same values. There is no way to dance about architecture. If *The Matrix* had faithfully represented Thomas' experience outside the matrix, it would have been a *completely incomprehensible movie*.

Religion (and spirituality), society, politics, and even psychology, may all have their own equivalent uses for liminality. But that is all they are: uses. Liminality itself can't be seen as a stage between states because that presupposes the existence of both a past and a future state surrounding it. The nature of liminality is like that of the gypsy or the wandering Jew: to be forever moving, without a nation, or even a name; to be a man or woman *between*.

If Snyder's treatise is correct (if my brief synopsis does it anything like justice), and if collective and individual violence is a *direct result* of the loss of identity, both national and individual, then one question that arises is, can a devastating loss of structure be met with a matching ability to relinquish our own *internal* structures? Is real unplugging even possible?

On the other hand, if the architecture of civilization is all coming down—if all roads lead inexorably to ruin—what's left to do but dance about it?

(I don't know the answer, but part three will attempt to dance around the question some more, looking at Rene Girard's theory of contagion (mimetic violence) and how the erasure of inner and outer borders—and the creation of a monoculture or collective "Borg" identity—may be the fastest route to global apocalypse. If we want it!)

Part Three: The Grammar of Living

Theory of Mind & Autism



I don't remember my childhood, except for a few fragments here and there. My best guess for why I don't remember my childhood (besides traumatic experiences, of which there were undoubtedly many) is that the me that remembers wasn't there at the time. It, I, had not been constructed yet.

There's a well-known example of a three-year-old who is shown a small object being hidden somewhere in the room while its mother is outside. The child is asked where the mother will look for the object when she returns; the child answers that she will look in the place where it is hidden. The child assumes its mother knows the location of the object because the child itself knows where it is. It hasn't yet learned to recognize (or theorize—since we don't really ever *know* for sure) that the other people (bodies) around it have a consciousness independent of its own.

There are lots of assumptions in the above paragraph. Whenever we use language we are falling prey to culturally conditioned assumptions passed down over the generations, through language. Language itself is a system of assumptions out of which, it might be assumed, a self-aware self constructs itself. Language creates a matrix or womb (commonly known as *the mind*) through which it can procreate and propagate itself. How and why? To know the answer to that we would have to ask language, and

language, like the UFO, like the magician, and like the government, lies. How do you know when language is lying to you? Its lips are moving.

Autistic people, at least the more severe or low-functioning kind, are said not to develop the capacity of theory of mind in the same way ordinary (neurotypical) people do. For the autistic person, as for the small child, everything is experienced as an extension of his or her own consciousness. This also is an assumption, assuming for example that a small child or autistic person experiences consciousness as belonging to them, or as existing in some way separate from their larger environment. The consciousness that has become embedded in the language matrix of “mind” and shackled to a mental self-construct, can only perceive everything through that lens, as belonging to a similar sort of selfness.

How can we think outside the box when thinking is contingent on the creation of boxes to think inside?

One thing we can observe with reasonable certainty is that autistics have difficulty adapting to social rules. They find it hard to adopt the correct behaviors because imitation (the means by which creatures adapt to their social environment) does not come naturally to them. They have to observe behaviors and copy them without every really understanding *why* these behaviors are being performed. That is something we all do as children (or so it seems safe to assume); most of us forget this and take on the imitated forms of behavior so completely that we end up believing they are generated internally and fundamental (like that mind-constructed self thingy) to *who we are*.

When I went to private, single-sex school in the UK—complete with uniforms and military training—never for a single day did I believe in the behaviors I was imitating. I learned to imitate consciously, as a means not to get into (too much) trouble. I was not so much imitating as imitating imitation. As a result, I learned how to get around the social norms being laid down, how to adapt them to more closely match my own internal sense of reality so I wouldn’t go completely insane. I literally re-tailored my uniform and turned the institution’s brand of conformity into an expression of my *lack* of conformity. Clever. Innovative. Necessary for my psychological survival. None of that would have been possible if I had fully taken on the institutional programs and internalized them. I would never have questioned the behaviors I was imitating, and I would have had no interest in adapting them to better fit my own interiority. Apparently for some of us, innovation is the only way to function.

Why do autistic children get imitation wrong (i.e., fail to be socialized)? According to the theory of mind model, it is because they can’t put themselves in the other person’s shoes—they can’t *imagine* the thinking that drives the desired forms of behavior. Neurotypical people, in contrast, having developed theory of mind, create *an internal narrative* to explain the behavior which they are imitating. The behavior then becomes innate and the mental self that is created to justify the behaviors becomes the internal prison guard keeping them in line, keeping them hardwired to the social matrix.

In a sense, you could say I lacked theory of mind at my school and that this was what saved me. I couldn’t image the sort of thinking that would motivate a desire to conform. For me, conformity was like psychological suicide. It was demonstrably insane, and that was how I viewed the educational system: as insane.

For most people, imitation is unconscious and internalized. They are like method actors who *become* the role they are playing—as compared to the kabuki theater of autistics. Autistics appear crazy or damaged to well-adjusted people, just as I was seen as a freak at my school. The degree to which I was tolerated—

I adapted my rebellion to ensure it didn't threaten the system I was rejecting—suggest that I had at least enough theory of mind to guess how insane people would regard my own behavior, and to adjust it accordingly in order not to get expelled.

It is telling in this regard that, in his *Bloodlands* lecture, Timothy Snyder points out how, during the late 1930s, those who stuck their necks out to rescue Jews were mainly outsiders and “deviants” (Snyder's word), *people who were already marginalized* (or who chose to marginalize themselves) *by society*. Like the gypsies persecuted by the Nazis, these outsider-types were people accustomed to being in a liminal state. Since they didn't belong to the dominant social group and yet co-existed with it, moving between the margins and the mainstream meant they were effectively on the inside and outside of society at the same time.

Ironically, such marginalized people (especially when self-marginalized) can have more freedom within a society than those more established in it (just as homeless people have more freedom, in a certain sense, than movie stars or CEOs, and just as I had more freedom at my school). This sort of bilingualism loosens the hold of the language/social identity and allows for an internal flexibility that amounts to ideological freedom. Marginalized people in 1930s Europe were more sympathetic to the plight of the persecuted people, not only because they could identify with them, but because they were *less threatened by the loss of stability*, or of identity, that was occurring at a group level—having never really felt like they'd had it to begin with.

Invasion by Language



A social identity begins with our family unit. As we grow older, it extends outward to embrace the idea of a “world” to which we, human beings, belong. The longer we live, the more we “expand our horizons,” the larger our social identity becomes. In the West, this is considered progress, ideologically speaking. It is often lumped under the liberalist notion of tolerance and inclusivity, while subtly or not so subtly endorsing and even *enforcing* homogeneity.

For example, socially marginalized people—usually following a period of persecution—are encouraged to identify, to take pride in, their marginalized status (gay pride, black pride, transgender pride, autistic pride, etc.), but only so they can be incorporated into the larger collective, integrated or, in the words of the Borg, *assimilated*. Marginalized groups band together to assert not so much their right to exist separately from the larger social community but their right to belong to it. Paradoxically, the right to be different is asserted not as an end in itself, but as the means to the opposite end, that of *becoming the same*. As a result, the category of sameness expands to include more and more races, sexual practices, neural divergences, and so on, just as the Borg expands the more races it can assimilate. Biological facts become “politically incorrect” because they undermine the ideology of equality that can only implement its agenda by erasing all differences between people, and eventually, the idea of individuality itself.

Transhumanist tracts often include some sort of orgiastic anticipation of a future, Borg-like hive consciousness erasing all differences between human beings, even while transhumanism is sold as the apotheosis of human individuality. The dominant culture pushing the transhumanist-homogenization agenda also holds up individuality as the highest value, an obvious irony rarely recognized, probably because the transcultural values that drive the agenda are truly “transhuman,” i.e., do not pertain to any sort of *human* experience—potential or otherwise. The problem is that ideology (any set of values sourced not in experience but in language) and individuality are mutually exclusive. When an ideology is formed around the idea of individuality, it can only become the opposite of itself—a Borg to shadow and assimilate the Starship Enterprise.

The Starship Enterprise had for its Prime Directive (its foremost ideological principle, in *words*) that of *non-interference*. It broke this code every single episode, not simply because otherwise there would be no show that week, but because the same set of values that created the Prime Directive was congenitally (so to speak, while lacking any genitals at all) blind to its own infractions. The values of human beings—including those on the Starship Enterprise—are not only firmly embedded into their behaviors but inseparable from those behaviors. In other words, Kirk and co simply did not—*could not*—see the recurring imposition of their values as a form of interference. To them it was always a form of assistance—of doing the right thing. As with American foreign policy (and domestic for that matter), “morality” overrules “law” every time, because those who create their own laws will always create the necessary loopholes to get around them.

Who or what the “those” refers to here (besides bureaucrats and plutocrats) is unclear, because once again language (and ideology) appears to be in control of human beings, and not the reverse. Probably this has to do with the law of the unconscious, namely that whatever we suppress or disown always controls us at a hidden level. Language only appears to be the creation of conscious minds; in fact, it is the means by which the unconscious constructs a mental self by which to operate in a world of objects and images. We are living in, or as, a never-ending series of remakes of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* in which we are snatched from infancy on, and the means of invasion is language. As for that

which invades—it is by definition beyond our comprehension, because that which creates language can't be identified by it. It is our "God."

The Evil Men Do

Rene Girard has pointed out that, in liminal states—stateless states, nations stripped of sovereignty—*mimetic violence rapidly escalates*. There's a conundrum here: imitation is necessary for socialization—the creation of a socialized self and the adopting of language—to occur. And where imitation and socialization starts to break down, liminality (lack of structure) increases and the collective and individual sense of identity begins to falter. At this point, mimesis kicks in with renewed fury, both boosted and distorted by the anxiety of social incoherence and identity loss. The society that is breaking down is at risk of accelerating that breakdown in a mad, mimetic and violent dash to try and restore order (Nazi Germany again being a handy template for watching the process in action).

Once institutions and group arrangements begin to break down, once the social cohesion begins to erode, people no longer know how to behave. In confusion, they look for charismatic leaders, "false ceremony masters," to guide them. Distress and confusion (panic) combines with the attempt to *imitate* what others are doing to relieve the tension. This is commonly known as mass hysteria. Since the greatest danger of this kind of lynch mob situation is that the members will turn on each other, the essential thing becomes to find *a common object* on which to release all that pent-up fear and rage. Enter the scapegoat.

I already looked at (in part two) how theory of mind might be a primary, perhaps not yet identified, reason for this escalation of violence. People attack each other—or more frequently join forces to persecute a weaker social member—not because they want to, but because they are in a state of near-panic and *don't know what else to do*. Worse still, they don't know what their *neighbors* are going to do *to them*. The more stressed they get, the darker their imaginings, and vice versa, in a rapidly escalating social frenzy of terror and rage. Since the hardest thing to do when everything is going to hell in a hand basket is nothing, it is the dark imaginings that many people act on, and act out—that act *through* them—making their worst fears reality. And yet no one is really "responsible."

"For evil to prevail, all that's required is for good people to do nothing" is the moral assumption that underlies and overrides any consciously contrived Prime Directive, from now to forever. The unspoken (because un-cogitated) assumption is always that one's social identification is equivalent with good, and that anything outside of that is akin to evil. The assumption is that being identified with "the good" allows for one to identify (and combat) evil, and vice versa, that recognizing and opposing evil affirms one's allegiance to goodness.

The reverse may be closer to the truth: for evil to prevail, all it takes is for "good" (socially adjusted identity, or "pod") people to get busy trying to eradicate evil in order to spread their version of good.

The third, generally unexplored option is that of not trying to beat the system or join it, but, as in my school daze, of appearing to join it as a means to pass relatively uncontaminated through it. This is the liminal approach of neither resistance nor compliance. It may just be the only approach that is not entirely futile.

Part Four: Neuro-Deviance

"I can't get no satisfaction."

—Unattributed

Those Who Walk Away



Have you ever had to walk out of a bad movie when you're sitting in the front row? Or make an escape from an excruciatingly boring social meet-up? Even if you don't mean it to be, walking out of social situations before they are over is equivalent to making a public *statement*. To visibly go against the will of the group you are part of is to risk incurring its judgment, and potentially its ire. If and when the shit hits the fan, you have already identified yourself as an eligible scapegoat.

When we enter a movie theater, use public transport, attend a lecture, hang out at bars and clubs, we tend to behave in specific, set ways because we know the "doing" of those social arrangements. Like actors in a theater or football players on a field, we have learned how to maximize the benefits of the institutions by going along with the rules and customs set down by them. It rarely occurs to us to question our behaviors, much less go against them. Like the afore-described "mind," subscription to institutions (or language) means implicitly going along with the laws that govern them—the grammar of social life—and hence internalizing those laws. We identify with them so totally that they become *that which identifies*. The matrix has us.

The good news (sort of) is that this indicates just how precarious the hold of the matrix (language) is. What other people do is determined by social institutions backed by religious and political ideologies or

value systems. Without these institutions and ideologies, human behavior as we think of it would quickly break down. Yet this idea is fundamentally opposed to the *idea* of ideologies and institutions, which depend on the belief that they *represent* human behavior, rather than shape and control it.

In the example of the movie theater, the moment a member of the audience breaks the flow of accepted behavior—walks out before the movie is over—the spell is momentarily broken. The audience members' attention is diverted from the movie to the rule-breaker, and, by extension, to the reality outside the movie.

They may begin to question their responses to the movie. Maybe they had been thinking about walking out too but suppressed the desire? Or maybe they had been loving the movie and now they are offended that someone else has “disrespected” it, and by extension their own experience. This reaction also takes them out of the movie, hence their resentment; and so on. The other thing that's indicated by this example is how powerfully impacted our idea of ourselves is, not so much by what others think about us, but what they *might* think about the things we value—or simply, what we *imagine* they might think about them. This clearly indicates our own doubts, or rather, a deep-seated but unconscious awareness that the social reality and language-based mental identity which we take as reality—the movie we are lost in—is nothing of the kind.

It's closer to a rumor that only reached us after millennia of Chinese whispers, but, inexplicably, was handed down in stone.

Dysfunction as Innovation

While talking about his novel *Starfish*, science fiction author Peter Watts asked a question about who is more likely to make scientific and technological breakthroughs—socially well-adjusted, emotionally healthy types raising families and working day-jobs, or dysfunctional, compulsive types constantly trying to win the approval of parents who never give it, ignoring personal relationships in pursuit of strange and eccentric goals. Watts' question is rhetorical. It does not take a genius to figure out that it is the compulsive, unsocial types who achieve the most significant breakthroughs.

Starfish takes “the metaphor of the people who are running civilization but who are dysfunctional, and it cranks the dysfunction up, and it cranks their isolation up, and it literally sticks them at the bottom of the ocean with their hands on a kill switch” (running the power grid for North America); then it sees what happens. As Watts sees it:

We build our civilization on the backs of those who are dysfunctionally driven to overachieve, but the entire species also has a venerable history of essentially enslaving each other and forcing people into menial groups. . . . The Rifiers [Watts' term for the series of novels beginning with *Starfish*] essentially encapsulates all of that and puts them in a high pressure cooker situation and then asks the question, “What happens when they find out how much power they have?” The problem is, they never have any power. No system is going to be stupid enough to give them that kind of power.

It is at this point, Watts says, he had to introduce a microorganism, Behemoth, to give his dysfunctionals “a fighting chance.” I have not read all of *Starfish* (I tried but I couldn't get into the characters and the

plot confused me), but I am talking to Watts next week, which is partially (but not entirely) why I shoehorned him into the tail end of this long essay, an essay I actually started some months ago. I am winging it, hoping to somehow incorporate this idea—that the outsiders of any given social group (the ones most likely to be scapegoated) bring the innovations necessary to keep that group evolving and surviving in the face of entropy (i.e., a natural universe with no presiding benevolent intelligence—no Prime Directive—to take care of us)—*into a resolution for this current piece*. I am not sure if it is going to happen (there are a lot of threads to bind together here), but just trying it makes this piece properly liminal.

Showing is so much more important than telling—especially when what’s being told is how language is a kind of sentient, nonhuman virus or implant that has taken over human consciousness and redirected it towards seemingly undesirable, life-destroying ends. Ain’t it?

Whatever can be thought—or formulated via language—is not to be trusted. If the matrix tells you it has you, don’t believe it. If the matrix (in the form of a drop-dead leather-clad dream chick) tells you it can’t tell you who you are, doubt that too. The way out is not to think the unthinkable; that just turns the abstract into more fodder for language. The way out is to follow unthinkable thoughts back, past the source, to a form of sentience that not only exists without language but that cannot coexist *with* language—because language has the peculiar effect of banishing such sentience by endlessly defining it (even as undefinable).

This is a metaphor for something else. Also a metaphor—a social and not a literary one—is the emergence of an innovative, dysfunctional sub-species within the human race—what I call neuro-deviants, shame on me—who are the inverse of those technologies (such as language) that *appear* to be here to save us, but which are really designed to further entrap us. They are the inverse in that they *appear* to be the problem, when actually they are a solution, one that’s only effective exactly insofar as it is beyond our comprehension.



Where No Borg Can Go

When a society or an individual enters into a liminal space, one thing that kicks in—that always kicks in when the unknown appears—is that old survival mechanism of fight or flight (and feed and fuck). As Watts has pointed out, consciousness as we experience it is really a trick of Nature that's geared not towards apprehending reality but only to surviving it. Denial and distortion is a fundamental part of survival, i.e., to existing at a purely physical level.

Language, lofty language, from Holy Books to idea-driven sci-fi novels to weird liminalist essays—poses as an attempt to transcend physicality and ascend into some mental realm of abstraction. Really, it came about as one more, one final, *the ultimate*, survival strategy, as a way to cognate death (name it) and God, Eternity, and all the other abstractions of the final concreteness, without having to be annihilated by those realities. A buffer that inserted itself between organic consciousness and its environment and that has whispered ever since, “Relax. Ye *shall* be as Gods.”

If our perception is fatally crippled by the organic drive to survive, it follows that the only way to perceive reality *as it is*, is to relinquish that drive to survive. To become increasingly dysfunctional is the only way for truly radical innovation (evolution) to occur.

This may be why Girard was so hung up on Christ: the example of turning the other cheek and of not resisting violence to Girard was the only cure for mimetic violence. Only when we no longer fear what the other may do to us, can we let go of the crazed impulse to do it to them first. Only when we cease to struggle to survive and experience the paralyzing mortality of the organism, without sublimating the fear into language-based fantasy constructs of divinity, can that which innovates—that microorganism that's even smaller than thought-language—rise Leviathan-like from the depths of the psyche and transform that which we thought we were, into that which we have always been.

Only, if this is true, then there is no need for this to happen, ever. That which always was will continue to be, regardless of any illusory matrices of thought-language-control which are built, demiurgically, around or on top of it. In such a version of events, this essay is as real as the imagined person who wrote it; and as the ones imagining themselves to be reading it.

I wonder if this relates to why I experience periods of deep depression and stagnation following (and preceding) longer periods of well-being and activity? When I am depressed, I tend not to want to do much besides eat food and lie around and watch TV shows or read good books. When I am “up,” I get busy pursuing my interests, write books, make podcasts, go for walks, have sex, and so on—in a word, I am *productive*. Nature, like capitalism, wants us to be productive, so it (like the matrix) endeavors to keep us happy, just not so happy that we rest on our laurels and stop producing.

The chicken and the egg of a positive outlook and positive action is difficult, if not impossible, to turn into cause and effect, however. Does being productive put me in a happier frame of mind (by keeping my death-awareness at bay), or does being content naturally lead to more positive activities? Bees don't make honey because they are happy, nor are they happy because they make honey. But it's just about ontologically feasible to suggest that bees *are* happy (or at least free from existential misery) and that they *do* make honey. (Apparently, the root of all our existential problems lies in that one word, “because,” and in its even more aggressive twin, why?)

In a similar way, dysfunction relates to dissatisfaction: they are mutually dependent on one another. (The only kind of unhappy bee is one that isn't "working.") And if innovation relates to dysfunction, it also relates, in a similar or even identical manner, to dissatisfaction. The less an individual is able to function within society—to receive the social implant of language and identity—the less satisfied they will be on the terms which define the idea of satisfaction to begin with (as London School of Economics alumni Mick Jagger so loudly lamented)—and consequently, the more innovative.

This would seem to suggest that depression, which is obviously closer on the human emotional spectrum to dissatisfaction than it is to satisfaction, is a necessary element to innovation, even though—or perhaps precisely *because*?—it leads to periods of intense inactivity or sloth.

The indication of this—I mean what it indicates *to me*, or maybe I am just *innovating* beyond my limits—is that both depression and innovation relate to a *non-biological drive* in the human organism, a prime directive that has little—maybe even nothing at all—to do with individual survival. Depression, dissatisfaction, and dysfunction all entail some form of *letting go of social drives*, and even some biological ones, since very depressed people are known to stop eating. As a result of or congruent with this letting go of social drives, a deeper and more mysterious drive to express emerges: one that pertains to hitherto unknown potentials, both at a physical and a conceptual—I dare not call it spiritual—level.

Simply put (he says, though actually I have no idea if I can phrase it at all, never mind simply), there may be something in the human organism that inspires it to move according to nonphysical, non-survival based cues, something that can be *exploited* by society as a means to keep it going (assimilated by the Borg to increase expanding), but which is not created or even engendered by society. This mysterious x-element appears to belong to another form of consciousness and agenda altogether. It is—metaphorically speaking as always—a microorganism so tiny that it effectively escapes the rule of matter and of language entirely—and therefore is not bound by time, either.

It is—or could be, if we let it—a veritable *Behemoth* waiting at the wings of thought, waiting to subsume us and then, once animated or *incarnated*, to boldly go where neither Starship nor Borg can ever follow.

And that, as they say, is all he wrote.

Photograph of Peter Watts, by Maria Nygård

¹ <http://www.ibtimes.co.in/iraq-crisis-isis-terrorists-were-trained-by-us-2012-syria-conflict-602594>

² The first known citations appeared in a music magazine in 1979 and an arts magazine the same year; the latter referred to it as a "famous dictum." The website Quote Investigator traces a similar phrase all the way back to a 1918 edition of the *New Republic*, however: "Strictly considered, writing about music is as illogical as singing about economics. All the other arts can be talked about in the terms of ordinary life and experience. A poem, a statue, a painting or a play is a representation of somebody or something, and can be measurably described (the purely aesthetic values aside) by describing what it represents." QI continues: "In 1921 the remark reappears in the form of a sphinxlike simile. The format of the comment uses the word 'like' once and the word 'about' twice. This conforms to the most common modern template. Writing about music is like ____ about _____. The first slot contains terms like dancing, singing, or knitting and the second slot contains terms like architecture, economics, or football." <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/11/08/writing-about-music/>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSEzEUKd1es>