
Book Review

ST JOHN, Graham, ed. 2008. *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books. ix +358 pp. ISBN 978-1-84545-462-3 (hbk). £47.50.

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Anyone interested in the ethnographic study of religion will at some point encounter the work of Victor Turner. This collection of essays dedicated to Victor Turner is a reminder of how important his work has been in understanding ritual performance. Many of these essays also caution not to simplify the work of Victor Turner. This edited collection not only indicates the strengths of Turner's work, but also many of the authors suggest some limitations of his work. Furthermore, these essays indicate the numerous ways, and different academic disciplines that Victor Turner's work can be used in analysing a wide range of cultural phenomena. In this collection there are essays that cover subjects as diverse as: political protest, a "New Age" festival in the Nevada desert, shopping, and the inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence.

Whilst it would be advantageous for the reader to have read at least Victor Turner's seminal work *The Ritual Process*, this is not an absolute necessity as Graham St John gives a good overview of his work in the introduction. St John's introduction sets the context for the remaining chapters. He gives a clear summary of Victor Turner's key ideas, in particular the concepts of social drama, liminality and *communitas*. St John also gives a brief insight into the three major influences on Turner's thinking: his love of theatre, his conversion to Catholicism, and his collaboration with his wife Edith.

The bulk of the book is divided into four sections. The first section focuses on drama and the media, the second on popular culture and rites of passage, the third section focuses on contemporary pilgrimage and *communitas*, and the final section looks more specifically at the work and influence of Edith Turner. This division, although it gives structure to the book, is somewhat artificial. For example, Amie Mathias' essay on backpacking, which is placed in the section on rites of passage could just have appositely been placed in the section on pilgrimage and *communitas*.

For students and scholars of religion this collection of essays is useful in a number of ways. First, it clearly gives the reader an idea of the strengths and weaknesses of Turner's ideas. For example, Ian Maxwell suggests that whilst Turner's concept of liminality as fructile chaos is useful, Turner himself is far too utopian in his view and "overlooks the potential of performance to effect radically dystopian changes" (p. 60). Secondly, these essays also remind us that the distinction between what is "religion" and what is "not religion" is not always clear. The essays by Graham St John on electronic dance music culture and Carole Cusack and Justine Digance on retail therapy indicate that ostensibly secular activities can have a religious aspect. St John suggests that "dancers may experience *ekstasis*...the condition

of 'standing out from the surface of life's contingencies.. [enabling] a more profound contemplation of being'" (p. 153).

Many of the essays, such as that by Lee Gilmore on the Burning Man Festival, look at the religiousness of popular cultural phenomena. The interaction between popular culture and religion is an increasingly significant area of study. However, Gilmore makes an even stronger point when he observes that the Festival itself consciously draws on the concepts of liminality and *communitas* in the way in which it is organized. This cautions scholars that the academy is not necessarily a remote ivory tower, and that theories are not always only heuristic devices, but can also feed back into the cultures being studied. Gilmore concludes "Burning Man bears witness to the recursive absorption of ritual theory in contemporary quests to create unconventional or innovative rites" (p. 224). Turner's theories on the ritual process are not only incorporated into counter-cultural events. In his essay Gerard Boland describes how he utilizes Turner's theories to structure an exercise for drama students. "Each of the elements of a 'rite of passage' is present within the processual unfolding of the experience undergone by each cohort of Theatre/Media undergraduates" during this three-day learning experience (p. 205).

Perhaps the most interesting section is the last section on Edith Turner. This section begins with extracts from an interview with Edith Turner herself. The main import of this section is methodological as it explores different approaches to undertaking ethnographic research, and different styles of writing ethnography. Two significant and interconnected methodological issues are explored in this section. The first issue discusses the debate of how much of the researcher's own experience of doing fieldwork should be present in ethnographic writing. The second issue looks at the ways in which religious experience, both of participants and of the researcher, can be evaluated. These two important issues are explored through the different ways in which Victor and Edith approached both fieldwork and writing of ethnography.

Whilst Victor Turner did not reduce ritual performance to a mere epiphenomenon, Edith suggests, because of the academic context of the time, that "he practically analyzed away the true meaning of the *Ihamba* ritual" (p. 291) in his book *The Drums of Affliction*. In this important text, based on the fieldwork that the Turners did in Zambia in the 1950s, Victor Turner explains the ritual in terms of its social significance. Shortly after Victor's death, Edith returned to Zambia and participated in the *Ihamba* ritual. Edith indicates that she actually perceived a spirit in the form of "a large grey blob" being exorcized from the back of one of the ritual participants (p. 319). In *Experiencing Ritual*, Edith utilizes her own experience to inform her account of the ritual. Jill Dubisch in her essay suggests that this is an "anthropology through experience and ritual" [author's emphasis], which is capable of acknowledging the "possibility of other realities." Dubisch (p. 335) concludes that "Edith's work both continues the Turnerian project and carries it in directions that Victor Turner himself suggests but did not go."

These essays also continue the Turnerian project and there is much in this collection to reward the reader. Victor Turner did not always fully develop his ideas, furthermore Turner was notorious for transgressing disciplinary boundaries. Consequently Turner's work is still relevant and can be utilized in a wide range of disparate subject areas. This book is consequently of interest to anyone engaged in ethnographic fieldwork, and to students and scholars in religious studies, cultural studies, anthropology, performance studies and the media. The strength of this collection lies in the fact that Turner's ideas are used critically by the authors, and not simply applied indiscriminately.

Reference

Turner, Victor. 1995. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.