

## Paul Stenner

### Reverie, flow and the idea of 'liminal affective technologies'

**Paul Stenner:** My name is Paul Stenner, I'm a social psychologist based at the Open University and I've been interested in recent years, in the concept of liminality as a way of rethinking the theoretical basis for social psychology, and I'm very pleased I've just finished a book that's come out, so I'm in the after-glow of this. It's called *Liminality And Experience, A Trans-Disciplinary Approach To The Psychosocial*.

I'm going to try to give you a sense of some of the issues that I discuss in that book and try and relate it to reverie, although I don't claim any expertise in reverie, though hearing that first presentation, I think there are lots of resonances between the concept of reverie and how I would think about liminal experience.

I was also very struck by this idea of looking for the ways in which experiences can be symbolised in music and song, so what popped into my mind during the last talk was a verse of a song by a Texan songwriter that I very much admire called Townes Van Zandt, who has a wonderful song called *To Live is To Fly* and I think the second or third verse of that song, it goes, imagine a Texan drawl, it goes, "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".

Now these holes are what I think of as sort of liminal gaps, and this distinction between the holes that you dig for yourself and the ones that fall on you like a storm, is a distinction that I would like to elaborate between what I call spontaneous liminal experiences that befall you, that happen to you, somebody close to you dies, there's a flood and your town is washed away, there's an earthquake, there's a war situation, these things disrupt the structured flow or the pattern of your life and the experience of that disruption can be considered a liminal experience of a spontaneous variety.

But I also would like to identify what I call devised liminal experiences, which are those experiences we do to ourselves, we produce the liminal affectivity as I call it, the particular forms of liminal experience, by engaging in practices that I call very generally, liminal affective technologies, to produce these effects in ourselves and to share them with other people, so I would consider a song as a format, as a liminal affective technology that is designed to work with our experiences, to convert them into a form that we can better understand ourselves and we can communicate with other people, at a level that's not at the abstractly discursive level.

But I also wanted to talk a little bit about flow because my hunch is that's probably the reason that I was invited, I'm not sure, I've written a chapter on the concept of flow in psychology so I want to say a few words about that, so we've got three concepts on the table that I suppose I'm exploring the relationships between, flow, reverie and liminal experience.

Flow is a psychological concept developed in the '60s at first by Mihaly Csikszentmihaly and his colleagues, a humanistically informed but also experimental psychologist and here's a little excerpt, not so little but forgive me, I'll read it out, this is from Sally Gunnell, she broke the world record in hurdling in 1993 and she describes her experience of that race, she says, "I don't ever remember coming off the last hurdle and knowing that she was there and this is what happened, she was actually right ahead of me all the way in but I don't remember this and it was only me fighting and going over the line, I stood over the line and it was like my life was almost starting again, it had almost been on hold for the last 52 seconds and it was like 'what's happened? I don't know', I didn't know that I'd actually won or that I'd actually just broken the world record and everyone thought 'oh she's very calm, she's just walking around' but I was looking to see what actually happened in that race? I

had no idea, it was as though I'd just run my own 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, as I said before it doesn't actually particularly feel like me out there, and you almost get into, it's like a trance and you feel as though someone's watching you and just pulling you round the track".

So a kind of nice, evocative experience of what she would describe as a zone experience and we can see in this account I think, at least some of the features that Csikszentmihaly identifies as characteristics of this being in the zone or flow state, an intense and focused concentration on what one's doing in the present moment, a sense that you've really got control over your actions but without this sort of deliberation, a sense that action and evaluation of the action is unproblematic, experience of activity as intrinsically rewarding or autotelic, she doesn't really mention anything about that but we can imagine the rewardingness of the feeling of that. A loss of reflective self-consciousness or ego and the experience of merging action and awareness, these are the features that usually define the experience.

And the basic theory is that a flow state is entered into when the demands presented in a person's environment, what's expected of you to do, are optimally matched by the skills, i.e. what you can do and this optimal match requires a kind of fine balance because if your demands exceed your skills, for example, you end up in the sort of anxiety part of the diagram, whereas if your skills are way in excess of the demands that are placed on you, you get bored, so you can easily see how, if you represent these two variables in a graphic way, you can invent a sort of zone that then gets called a flow zone, so there's a sort of whole industry of positive psychology that works with basically these two variables, measure the skills, measure the demands and then work out ways in which you can actually see the point at which people get into zone states and the idea is you could then predict when people will get into zone states.

Now, I'm quite critical of this particular model in my chapter largely because, it's beautifully elegant, you've got to admire the simplicity of it but of course, it abstracts from practically everything in the world, so the concrete nature of the experiences of flow that are being dealt with are rendered irrelevant by this sort of model and in fact, managers and business people become very excited about this flow concept because they can imagine that if you can actually get your workers into a flow state, they're going to be working all hours, so there's no surprise why this is flavour of the month amongst managers, but also some of the research finds that that doesn't actually work where you might expect to find flow state amongst bus drivers or taxi drivers, they don't seem to get into that flow state, and partly this is sort of ignoring the concrete context of the experiences.

But we could say that, we go back to reverie, we could say that flow experiences share with reverie the sense of being sort of extraordinary experiences in some sense, that involve some sort of desirable loss of identity in the midst of an activity, and I think superficially, it seems that flow seems to involve what you might call a sort of intensification of immediate perceptual awareness, that permits you to get deeper immersed into the now of an activity, whereas superficially, if you read reverie simply as daydreaming which of course, I think I'm already aware that we're not, reverie seems to be a withdrawal from immediate perceptual awareness and an immersion in the sort of futural imaginings or past recollections, so flow, when construed in this way, is about proximal experience of the here and now, while reverie is about distal experience of the no longer and the not yet.

This is quite superficial and actually it's going to be the mixtures of those things that become important but I think it's helpful to make a distinction between proximal and distal experience and to look at the relations between those modes of our experience.

Now, I mentioned that positive psychologists tend to neglect the actual concrete experiences that they're dealing with but there's no doubt, if you look at the literature, that it's dominated by two spheres of experience, the experiences of artists and the

experiences of people involved in the sports, so actually there's something quite specific about the arts and the sports that seems to relate to flow experiences that, I'm not saying that that means it's exclusively limited to those terrains but that those are the terrains that crop up over and over again, so we need to ask the question, what is it about art and sport, that these things have in common?

And I also want to relate flow states to liminal experiences and that means, because of course the concept of liminality has its roots in anthropology, the work of Van Gennep, for example, who wrote this wonderful book, "The Rites of Passage" in 1909, about this idea of a middle phase of a rite of passage, where you're transitioning from one status to another, you might be a young woman becoming an adult, for example.

And there, the terrain if you like is that of ritual, so we've got three terrains of experience that become interesting, the sacred experiences associated with ritual, the ludic experiences associated with sport and the aesthetic experiences associated with the various arts. So it becomes interesting to ask what these have in common and what I'll conclude is that these have in common the fact that they are liminal affective technologies, they're the means through which we do to, we produce in ourselves the feelings that are conducive to conditions of becoming other, of going through transformations.

I'll mention very briefly, I have a chapter on Alfred Schutz, the phenomenological sociologist, if we're going to talk about reverie and flow as extraordinary experiences in some respects, then this implies the concept of ordinary experience, so what do we mean by ordinary experience? Well Schutz is useful in this respect because he talks about worlds, various types of worlds and the core of what he would consider ordinary experience, is the world, a common sense world of daily life in which we adopt a sort of natural attitude that's associated with what he calls, "work", he has a special definition of work but it's a natural attitude in which we know who we are on the inside and we know what objects we're dealing with on the outside and we're engaged in involvements with those objects.

Now he contrasts the world of daily life with a bunch of other worlds, including the worlds of dream, play, painting, theatre, humour and religion, also scientific activity.

A liminal experience is precisely an experience of transition between worlds or between worlds of daily life, worlds of common sense, so as you transition in a rite of passage, for example, you're prepared for your new status and your new, the new expectations that are laid upon you by a new, if you like, set of social functions in society.

So to move out of a world of daily life, it's necessary to temporarily suspend the norms and the expectations which set the limits to that world and the suspension of limits is suggested in this word, "liminality", so there's a clear relationship, liminality implies a philosophy of limits.

It's as if during the routine daily life, the world of daily life, we're like horses that wear blinkers, that enable us to do our work more effectively and during a liminal situation, those blinkers are temporarily removed and this makes for an interesting sort of experience of transition, which is characterised by the kind of ambivalence and volatility that I think is really captured well by this distinction between reverie and rougherie, so this ambivalent potential.

When you're in this situation where you don't actually know what's expected of you and who you are and what's going on in the situation because you're at betwixt and between statuses, you're no longer what you were but you're not yet what you're going to become, this can rapidly oscillate between something very scary indeed or something quite exciting and of course, in a rite of passage, you will be held, as it were, by a master or mistress of ceremony who'll sort of help you through, who's been through this liminal situation, who is in some respects, a liminal specialist, for whom that means what would be a liminal situation for the participants involved or the passengers going through, is not a liminal experience for this expert because that's

what they do in their routine, everyday life.

Okay, it's not possible to simply identify being in the zone or flow states with liminal experiences and I should say a few words about that because it would be wrong to give the impression that there's a simple identity. In fact, in a chapter written in 1982 by the anthropologist, Victor Turner, called *From Liminal To The Liminoid*, Turner discusses Csikszentmihaly's concept of flow in some depth, in quite an interesting way and although Turner sees important resonances between his notion of what he calls "liminal communitas", the sense of community, affective bonding that is produced in ritual circumstances of transition, he's aware that flow is not obviously about the betwixt and between space, this transitioning space between worlds, that is typical of liminality.

In fact, on the contrary, it seems as if, for example, the flow state that Sally Gunnal gets into is produced by practice after practice, lots and lots of training, repetition, so Turner would see this as a structural thing, it belongs very much within a world, it's not about a transition between worlds or if you're a trumpet player, you practice and practice that trumpet until you've got it perfect, so you can get into a flow, there's nothing self-evidently about transition in that experience, on the contrary, it seems to be familiarity within a given position or status or stable world.

So liminal experience seems to be about the interruption of the flows of activity, in order that you can engage in a transition, whereas these [flow experiences] seem to be precisely about the intensification of that kind of [flow experience], so for this reason, Turner says flow is not a liminal thing, it's a structural concept. But at the same time he can't resist exploring the liminal nature of flow and he does indeed hint that flow is connected to liminal experience and he makes, I think, maybe a slightly simplistic distinction between the liminal and the liminoid, so the liminal is to do with flow experiences which are concentrated in rituals, the rituals that punctuate the lives of, for Turner, pre-industrial societies, the families, tribes, clans, lineages and so on, whereas the liminoid experience he associates with post-industrial societies and he talks there of flow experiences, rather than being concentrated in ritual scenarios, as being pushed into the leisure genres of art, sports, games, pastimes and so on and so forth.

So there is a dilemma, are these flow experiences liminal or not and I think the simplest way of resolving that dilemma is to recognise that actually, the experiences associated with the arts and the sports that Turner dissociates from the liminal in calling them liminoid, can actually be considered the activities of liminal specialists who are actually involved in questions of transition and transformation, but in a way that's not if you like, dependent upon the scenario of if you like, involved belief that you find in ritual circumstances.

And there it becomes interesting, to look at, if you start to explore the relationship between the spheres of sport and the spheres of art and ritual, you start to get quite interested in the idea that both the sports and the arts seem to emerge from the matrix of ritual and this is most clear in the work of Jane Harrison in the early 20th century, as one of the Cambridge ritualists who looks at the emergence of theatre in Ancient Greece and shows how, for example, the rites of the Dithyramb that were associated with rituals connected with Dionysus, gradually sort of evolved into the chorus of the structure of Greek theatre but instead of everybody participating, you get this structural distinction between if you like the chorus and the stage, and the spectators in the theatre who observe the activities of the actors, but effectively the idea is that gradually you've got this process of transformation, whereby the activities of the chorus, who would have originally been the players of the Dithyramb are improvised upon by the actors and this whole process is then observed by spectators, and so you get in the architecture of the theatre, a very interesting sort of distance from the forms of affectivity and the ways in which we make sense of them via ritual, that gives us this critical distance and that starts to explain why it is that in Ancient Greece, the emergence of the theatre is at the same time as the emergence of democracy and

the emergence of philosophy, this is all about a rethinking of what we make of liminal experiences.

We no longer make of them, in a theatrical context, a sacred experience, we make of them something more like an aesthetic experience but you can tell the same story about the origin of the sports, so as we're on the Ancient Greek example, the Olympic Games, for example, were originally a matter of sacred ritual but also rituals would contain sort of tests or trials or exercises of strength or endurance or of agility and so on, if you like the proto sports, so you can see in ritual, both the proto sports and the proto arts all very clearly in evidence, so imagine a ritual with masks being worn which symbolise proto theatre, music being played, drums, setting a beautiful scene for the ritual to take place in and so on.

So in short, I use these sorts of arguments to argue for a set of liminal affective technologies whose role it is, is to if you like, process the experiences that emerge from spontaneous liminal experiences and to render them into a form that is understandable and communicable and as such, provides the basis of communities, of collectives, of societies and so on, so roughly speaking we could say there are three genres of liminal affective technology and those are the ludic, the sacred and the aesthetic.

I'll stop there, thank you.