



## Performance as Shared Mindfulness

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### ABSTRACT

Initiating from a discussion on performance as a liminal/liminoid practice that has the potential to create a space in which participants become aware, challenge established assumptions about the self and society, and open the way to social change, and from a discussion on mindfulness as a cultural practice that is also related to awareness and personal and social transformation, this paper intends to demonstrate that performance has a shared mindfulness quality. Although liminality, within the framework of anthropological and performance studies literature has almost unproblematically come to denote something 'positive', something that leads to enhanced social justice and mindfulness (in psychology literature in particular), to well-being and compassionate action within the world, I suggest that the degree and direction of this change depend – among other factors – on the moral/ethical considerations to which performances engage participants. Levinas' thought on ethics as responsibility may contribute significantly to the study of the multiple and often contradictory experiences and meanings that performances, as shared mindfulness practices, generate.

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### Introduction

The investigation of the relationship between mindfulness and performance has mainly been an object of inquiry for cognitive behavioral and empirical psychology, (neuro)science, medicine and psychotherapy. This investigation has mainly focused on sport psychology and the role of mindful

awareness in enhancing athletic performance (Gardner and Moore, 2012; Jackson and Delehanty, 1995), but also on the integration of mindful-based interventions as an effort to enhance human performance in various other domains such as education, business, military operations and policing (Chiesa, Calati and Serreti, 2011; Purser, 2014; Stanley and Jha, 2009; Zenner, Herrnleben-

Kurz, and Walach, 2014). Moreover, in the past two decades there has been a growing interest in the exploration of the significance of mindfulness (defined as sustained and non-judgmental attention) for the performing arts. These studies investigate the effects of mindfulness on performance anxiety and performance quality, either with the application of various meditation techniques (Chang et al., 2003; Khalsa et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2008; Taylor, 2002;), or without it (Fatemi, 2016; Langer et al., 2009). There is a growing literature, thus, that discusses the positive effects that mindfulness might have on problems associated with normal healthy anxiety and stress, as well as problematic and disrupting symptoms of stage-fright for performers and artistic creativity and audience members' engagement with, and hence enjoyment of, the performance.

However, both tendencies in the literature that explores the relationship between mindfulness and the performing arts usually view mindfulness as a culturally neutral instrument in the pursuit of well-being, and approach (Western) performing arts as abstract and autonomous entities that stand outside of any specific historical, social, or cultural context. Chang et al., for example, argue that the results of their research indicate that 'meditation may be a useful tool for assisting performers in combating performance anxiety' (2003, p. 126), while authors use the phrase 'musical performance' without any reference to particular genres, groups of people, musical traditions or occasions, which are inextricably tied to specific practices, behaviors, expectations, and meanings (Merriam, 1964). Langer et al. show the positive effects of non-meditative mindfulness on artistic creativity and audience members' engagement in orchestral music performances, but they too present

mindfulness as a technique that 'may lead to not only a more "perfect" performance, but also a more unique and personal sharing of the music – one goal of truly great music-making' (2009, p. 133). The authors call upon musicians 'of all ages and ability levels [...] to break away from a practice-until-perfect mentality' and constantly search for novelty, which 'should lead to both higher levels of enjoyment as well as more insightful performances' (ibid.). The study, however, does not account for the fact that both pedestrian and academic (especially traditional musicological) discourses on Western 'classical' music, give emphasis to the idea that meaning is inherent in the text (the score), so that the performer's job becomes that of conforming to it, and performance remains 'a matter of getting it [the meaning] right, of adequacy rather than of contributing in a fundamentally creative manner to the generation of musical meaning in real time' (Cook, 2005, paragraph 6). Although this view does not always correspond to the actual everyday practices of performers and expectations of audience members' (ibid.), it does remain hegemonic and defines the criteria, according to which a good musician or a good and joyful musical performance are evaluated.

Departing from a discussion on the concept of liminality, as this has been developed by anthropologist Victor W. Turner and was later elaborated within the frame of performance studies, and from a discussion on the concept of mindfulness as this has been derived from the Buddhist teachings and elaborated within the frame of subjects such as sociology, anthropology, cultural and religious studies, I show that performance and mindfulness (in both Western and non-Western contexts) are not abstract ideas but cultural (or shared) practices, which may neither be

experienced, nor understood outside of particular relationships and specific social, cultural, and historical contexts of meaning making. Investigating the interrelationships between mindfulness and performance practices, I argue that performance has a shared mindfulness quality: it engages participants emotionally, viscerally, and intellectually, and through critical perspective and evaluation, it promotes awareness and transformation, and has the potential not just to make participants think differently or to change their views and beliefs, but to lead them to alternative ways of being and relating to others<sup>i</sup>.

There is a strong tendency, however, in the relevant literature to view this transformation as 'positive'. Both, meditation (Hunot et al., 2013; Sedlmeier et al., 2012) and non-meditation (Langer, 1989, 2005, 2009) practices of mindfulness are usually viewed (especially in psychological literature) as bringing significant improvements in psychological and physical functioning, and leading to well-being and compassionate action within the world. Liminality, too, within the frame of anthropology and performance studies, has almost been unproblematically identified with the transformational capacity of contemporary (especially experimental and avant-garde) theatre and performance art, and social change with enhanced social justice (Beeman, 2002; McKenzie, 2001). Change, however, is not inherent in performances as shared mindfulness practices, and when it happens, its evaluation as positive or otherwise relies, among other things, upon the moral/ethical considerations<sup>ii</sup> - that are closely related to the political - of participants in these practices. In this paper I suggest that performance analyses should shed light on these considerations and Levinas' (1998) thought on ethics as responsibility for the other may contribute to a

better understanding of the transformational potential of both performance and mindfulness.

### **Liminality in Performance: Social Interaction, Ritual and Theatre**

The concept of liminality was introduced by French folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1960 [1909]) to describe the middle phase of a three-part schema he developed for understanding rites of passage: separation (*séparation*), transition (*marge* or *limen*) and incorporation (*agrégation*). Van Gennep argued that the primary rites of passage were birth, marriage, and death, and sometimes puberty initiation. According to van Gennep, birth is the transition to life, funeral to death, and marriage to procreation. When children cross the threshold to adulthood, they have to overcome spiritual/psychic dangers through ritual: they are separated from the village, go through a change-of-status ceremony, and are then reincorporated into the village with a new status.

The concept of liminality, as introduced by van Gennep, was further elaborated by anthropologist Victor Witter Turner, who was concerned with social interaction, ritual, and theatre both in tribal communities and in the contemporary developed world. According to Turner, what connects social interaction, ritual, and theatre is the idea of performance and, more specifically, liminal performance. Influenced by van Gennep's processual model of analysis and inspired by the structural form of theatre, Turner introduced the concept of 'social drama' (1967) to embrace all transitions and rituals everywhere. Social dramas, which are a result of the conflict inherent in societies, have 'four main phases of public action, accessible to observation' (1974, p. 38): breach, crisis, redressive action, and reintegration. Put

simply, 'the social drama begins when a member of a community breaks a rule; sides are taken for or against the rule breaker; repairs—formal or informal—are enacted; and if the repairs work, the group returns to normal, but if the repairs fail, the group breaks apart' (Bell, 2006, p. 1). In Turner's four-phase model, the redressive phase is considered to be the most liminal because it is in the middle of the crisis and resolution, and it is in this phase that the liminal ritual may be enacted to resolve the crisis and provide an opportunity for the final phase of reintegration to occur.

One of the most significant characteristics of liminality is its in-betweenness. According to Turner's analysis of the rites of passage in the Ndembu, when a child crosses the threshold to adulthood, their journey is marked by notions of transition rather than the idea of static states. In this liminal state, the 'neophyte' enters a state of reflection, whereby change in his being occurs: a boy grows into a man. His condition is ambiguous because he is neither here, nor there, he is 'between and betwixt', and is often treated as sexless and poor; he has a physical but not social reality, he is a 'naked unaccommodated' man (1967, p. 98). The liminal, hence, may be described as 'a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations or ideas and relations may arise' (ibid., p. 97), as a realm of experimentation and freedom, the 'freedom to juggle with the factors of existence' (ibid: 106). Turner, however, acknowledges that 'this liberty has fairly narrow limits' because the neophyte will 'return to secular society' and 'become once more subject to custom and law' (ibid.).

Turner (1979 [1969]) also examined rituals and phenomena in complex societies and inquired into how other thresholds are experienced and how

people cope with them; his aim was to determine the underlying function of other rituals within the community, seeing this as a means of conflict resolution. He extends the range of social phenomena defined as liminal, including among other things, 'subjugated autochthones, small nations, court jesters, holy mendicants, good Samaritans, millenarian movements, "dharma bums" [. . .] and monastic orders'. These phenomena participate in the liminal in that they 'fall in the interstices of social structure', 'are on its margins', or 'occupy its lowest rungs' (ibid., p. 125). For Turner, there is a dialectical relationship between 'structure' (society's status and role differentiation, behavioral norms, and cognitive rules) and 'anti-structure' (those regions of experience in culture which are outside, in between and below structure) or between the 'indicative' and 'subjunctive' mood in Turner's language. This dialectical relationship 'reveals a *structural processualism*' (italics in original), which recognizes that 'society is in-composition, open-ended, *becoming*, and that its (re)production is dependent upon the periodic appearance, in the history of societies and in the lives of the individuals, of organized moments of categorical disarray and intense reflexive potential' (St John, 2008, p. 4). Understanding these moments as liminal, Turner sheds light on the ways in which individuals and collectivities are wholly engaged in the drama of life and seek to reach the roots of human experience.

Among the 'liminal personae', those participating in positive anti-structural activities, a feeling of camaraderie emerges, a feeling that Turner denotes through introducing the concept of *communitas*. *Communitas* refers to a generic bond and a sentiment of 'humankindness' that liminal personae created in a ritual performance. Deprived

of all distinguishing characteristics of social structure and treated all equally, liminal personae constitute 'a community or comity of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions' (1967, p. 100). *Communitas* and structure, however, also refer to two modalities of society, since society involves a dialectic process between the undifferentiated community of equal individuals and the differentiated and often hierarchical system of social positions (1979 [1969], pp. 96-7). Turner enumerates three 'distinct and not necessarily sequential forms' of *communitas*: 1) '*spontaneous communitas*', a 'direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities' that has 'something "magical" about it' and offers '[s]ubjectively [...] a feeling of endless power'. People relate directly to one another as they present themselves 'in the here-and-now' and understand one another 'free from the culturally defined encumbrances of [their] role, status, reputation, class, caste, sex, or other structural niche' (1974, p. 79), 2) '*normative communitas*', which is organised into a social system and involves a subculture or group 'which attempts to foster and maintain relationships of spontaneous *communitas* on a more or less permanent basis', a process that 'denatures' the 'grace' state of spontaneous *communitas*, subjecting it to 'law' (ibid., p. 80), and 3) '*ideological communitas*', which is often a discursive, utopian model used by religious or political groups, that is also situated within the structural realm. Ideological *communitas* seeks to retrospectively interrupt the flow-experience of spontaneous *communitas* through the intervention of an agent, to 'look to language and culture to mediate the former immediacies' (ibid., p. 79). Although he articulates *communitas* as in dialogic tension with social structure and does not imply that *communitas* can continue indefinitely,

Turner imagines *communitas* as the utopian product of liminality.

Although in Turner's thought *communitas* can be found everywhere, even beyond the ritual realm of small-scale and agrarian societies, he uses liminality 'in a metaphorical sense' when he refers to 'posttribal' societies (1977, p. 39). He argues that in societies of (post)modernity, there are quasi-liminal or liminoid elements, which he sees as 'descended from earlier forms of ritual liminality' or its 'functional equivalents' (ibid.): the arts, leisure, and sport. While liminality has a eufunctional attribute since ritual processes are redressive mechanisms, which negotiate crisis and breach and work 'for the good', ensuring the maintenance of the status quo, liminoid phenomena, like theatre and other performative genres, 'are often parts of social critiques or even revolutionary manifestos' (1974b, p. 86). By involving a kind of reflexive playfulness and experimentation, such phenomena, Turner explains, may generate innovation in self-understanding and perhaps even in shaking up social roles, hierarchies, values and established views. Also, while liminal phenomena consist of obligatory rather than optional activities, which 'invert but do not usually subvert the status quo' (ibid., p. 72), liminoid phenomena are optional, characterized by a '*freedom* to transcend social structural normative limitations' (1977, p. 42) and are often 'subversive, representing radical critiques of the central structures and proposing utopian alternative models' (ibid., p. 45).

Liminality within theatre and performance art – and Christian pilgrimage — became the focus of Turner's later work, and had an enormous impact not only on the anthropological study of cultural performances, but also on the discipline of performance studies. As McKenzie notes,

[t]heatre provided anthropologists and ethnographers with a *formal* model for “seeing” performance, for recognizing its forms in society, for conceptualizing the ways in which social meanings and values became embodied in behaviors and events. In turn, liminal rites gave theater scholars a *functional* model for theorizing the transformational potential of theater and other performative genres (2001, p. 36).

Indeed, Turner’s theory of ritual became the foundational theory of performance studies (Schechner 2013, pp. 52-88)—almost any form of performance was identified as having a ritual or ritual-like dimension—and liminality was identified with the transformational potential of theatre and other performative genres. The almost exclusive interest of performance studies scholars with performance modes that shape or reshape bodies, spaces, identities, and communities, led them to construct cultural performance ‘as an engagement of social norms, as an ensemble of activities with the potential to uphold societal arrangements or, alternatively, to change people and societies’ (McKenzie, 2001, p. 30).

In the heart of such approaches lies the concept of efficacy, that is, of the capacity of performance to not merely represent, or even model societal change or transformation, but to effect that change. However, according to Turner the difference between the liminal and the liminoid rests in the intended effect on those undergoing the liminal experience: where the liminal is accompanied by a significant alteration in a person or situation, the liminoid genres entertain and offer an enjoyable break from the tedium and routine of daily life. Schechner, on the other hand, argues that

the differences among ritual, theater and ordinary life depend on the degree spectators and performers attend to efficacy, pleasure, or routine; and how symbolic meaning and effect are infused and attached to performed events. In all entertainment there is some efficacy and in all ritual there is some theater (Schechner, 2003, p. 152).

As McKenzie notes, however, the ‘theory explosion’ (a term he borrows from Reinelt and Roach) of the 1970s and 1980s led to a change of the field’s model of choice: it shifted from ritual - and theatre - to performance art, and from an understanding of efficacy as transgression to efficacy as resistance, and the term liminal became rather marginalized. Although liminality ‘remains one of the most frequently cited attributes of performative efficacy’ (McKenzie, 2001, p. 49), the concept has now been transformed from an explanatory theory to practical strategy of subversive action. In his book, *Presence and Resistance* (1992), Auslander argues that the experimental theatre and performance art of the 1980s offered strategies of resistance that utilized representation and media forms to counter power from within institutions rather than seeking to transgress them from a site located beyond power. Although Turner’s work has been criticized as ‘largely a-political in character’ (Thomassen, 2014, p. 85), for contemporary avant-garde artists, liminality has become a methodology of artistic and political resistance (Wheeler, 2003). Instead of being understood as a by-product upon which artists may capitalize, liminality has become a quality that artists can intentionally produce, hoping to create renewed awareness and social change. Instead of occupying a structurally invisible in-between space, liminality forces itself upon the

structurally visible in order to draw attention to, and thereafter challenge the normative.

### **Mindfulness in Context**

The concept of 'mindfulness' has its roots in Buddhism, a religion that originated in India in the sixth century B.C. and spread to most parts of Asia and, in the twentieth century, to the West. There is an enormous body of philosophical writing that has been produced by the monastic and scholarly traditions of Buddhism (Kalupahana, 1976), while the many forms of Buddhism practiced throughout Asia have been shaped through processes of adaptation, hybridization and interaction with older animistic and shamanistic traditions, and other religions (Gellner, 1997; Spiro, 1982). Contemporary forms of Buddhism are also shaped by the wider forces of modernization, westernization and globalization, constituting thus a 'dynamic, pluralistic and even quarrelsome set of cultural traditions' (Harrington and Dunne, forthcoming, p. 2), which like other traditions probably ought to be referred to in the plural. Although as a pluralistic tradition, Buddhism includes a variety of views about mindfulness, it is usually related to the practice of meditation and the development of awareness, attention, and compassion, and is considered to be the path to enlightenment/awakening (Grabovac, Lau and Willet, 2011). The ongoing cultivation of mindfulness leads to insights into fundamental truths, and ultimately to the goal of reducing, and freeing from, human suffering.

Within the context of various Buddhist traditions, mindfulness is associated with different meditative practices and various ethical guidelines, which are determined by the Four Noble Truths: 1) human existence is characterized by suffering or unpleasantness (Pāli *dukkha*), 2) the origin of

suffering is craving or desire (Pāli *taṇhā*), 3) the cessation of suffering is attainable through the cessation of craving and 4) the cessation of suffering is attainable through the noble eightfold path of ethics, which leads to personal transformation and includes, apart from mindfulness, upright thinking, understanding, speech, action, livelihood, effort and concentration. The main goal of the path is to eradicate distorted cognitions (e.g. our belief in the permanence of things and the existence of an autonomous self) and replace them with wholesome qualities and capacities (e.g. clear comprehension and compassion) (Dunne, 2011).

What is often presented as 'the Buddhist view of mindfulness' is related to vipassanā, a form of meditation, which has its roots in Theravāda (Southeast Asian), Ch'an (Chinese), Zen (Japanese) and Tibetan Buddhism. Developed by reformist monks during the 1950s, vipassanā was presented as a move away from 'esoteric' meditative practices toward a more 'rational' and 'authentic' practice for salvation, accessible to monastics and laity (Van Esterik, 1977). Mindfulness (the English translation of the term *sati*—in Pāli and its Sanskrit equivalent *smṛti*) was understood to be an ethically positive perspectival awareness, which could be cultivated through meditative discipline, requiring morality, concentration, and wisdom.

Western countries discovered Buddhism – a word created by the Victorian imperialist colonisers attempting to understand and control 'Buddhism' for their own ends—in the nineteenth century. However, the broad expansion of Buddhist traditions in the West took place after the Second World War. Within the context of the New Religion Movements, as well as the New Age and counterculture movements, people turned to

'alternative' faiths, lifestyles, and political orientations<sup>iii</sup>, and came to view Buddhism and many other Eastern traditions (e.g. Hinduism, Taoism), as a therapeutic response to various Western troubles on the organic, psychological, and social levels<sup>iv</sup>. The democratization of Buddhism, a significant adaptation of the tradition in the 1960s and 1970s, rendered it congruent with popular Western values, such as democracy and gender equality, and made it more attractive to Western individualists (McMahan, 2008, pp. 31-3). Since then, the association of Buddhism with the pursuit of happiness and well-being has had a very strong impact on the reading(s) of Buddhism. Meanwhile, Western conceptualizations of mindfulness are generally independent of any specific philosophy, ethical code or system of practices, and thus place less emphasis on impermanence and the doctrine of nonself (Samuel, 2015), viewing mindfulness as a form of awareness<sup>v</sup>.

Academic discussions of modern-day Western mindfulness theory and practice emphasize the importance of attention and awareness in the pursuit of happiness and well-being, with or without the use of meditation. Characteristic of these two tendencies are the approaches to mindfulness by Ellen J. Langer and Jon Kabat-Zinn. Langer's approach to 'mindfulness without meditation' is a social psychological one that views mindfulness as 'an active state of mind characterized by novel distinction-drawing that results in being (1) situated in the present; (2) sensitive to context and perspective; and (3) guided (but not governed) by rules and routines' (Langer, 2014, p. 11). Langer elaborated her view of mindfulness as a solution to the problem of mindlessness, in which people make poor decisions and sometimes no decisions at all by exhibiting

routinized, stereotyped, primed, or authority-compliant decisions. When being mindless, people's behavior 'is predetermined by the past, closing [them] off to choice and new possibilities' (ibid., p. 12) and hence being victimized by the persistence of categories that existed only in the past. The mindful state, according to Kabat-Zinn (2011), is associated with a specific type of meditation in which attention and conscious awareness are focused on present-state thoughts, emotions, and perceptions of one's surroundings. His mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program involves techniques designed to promote relaxation, such as Hatha yoga and breathing exercises to ameliorate various symptoms associated with chronic pain, stress, anxiety, depression, and other chronic conditions.

Both approaches, however, use mindfulness as a synonym for 'bare attention', a sort of ethically neutral, open, non-discriminative and non-judgmental attending of the ongoing, moment-to-moment flow of consciousness. According to a widely accepted definition of mindfulness in psychological literature, 'Broadly conceptualized, mindfulness has been described as a kind of non-elaborative, non-judgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is' (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 232). This definition 'reflects the point of view of the therapist engaged in practical interventions' (Dreyfus, 2011, p. 43) and suggests mindfulness as a practice that allows people to disengage from the habitual patterns of discursive and affective reactivity, leading, thus, to a more reflective response to difficult circumstances of one's life, rather than remain prisoner of one's own habits and compulsions. It also allows them to



focus on what is taking place in the moment without elaborating on experiences in terms of past memories and future expectations leading them, thus, to see things as they really are and act in accordance with them rather than remain prisoners of their usual patterns of evaluative reactivity.

These approaches reflect a widespread assumption that the 'roots of Buddhist meditation practices are de facto universal' (Williams and Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 3), because they are based on universal modes of human functioning. This assumption has also been fueled by a growing body of research, which since the 1960s demonstrates the underlying neurobiological processes that may account for the positive effects of meditative practices on the brain (Chiesa and Serretti, 2010)<sup>vi</sup>. This assumption is also consistent with Buddhist teachings that the practice of mindfulness, although it may be adapted to different cultures and personalities, will lead to the same insights into the nature of mind for practitioners in all contexts. These insights, however, are not self-evident, but in both traditional and modern contexts, require background knowledge and training in how to interpret experiences and draw the right conclusions. As Sharf (1995) suggests, terms such as mindfulness do not gain their meaning through a correspondence relationship with the states of mind they purportedly refer to, but in relation to their contexts of use which may serve ideological and political functions depending on the context.

There is a growing literature on mindfulness, thus, that points to the implications that the extraction of mindfulness from its traditional religious, philosophical, and ethical framework and its transformation into a technique might have. Many critics have shown the conceptual ambiguities and the methodological challenges that arise from the uncritical use and misinterpretations

of central Buddhist concepts and the trivialization of other aspects of Buddhist practices (Gethin, 2011; Sharf, 1995). Although mindfulness is usually described as a form of awareness that is present-centered and non-evaluative, many scholars have noted that this description misses the original content of the term *sati*, which in classical Buddhist accounts meant 'to remember', 'to recollect'. In practice, mindful meditation requires remembering one's ethical and spiritual goals 'of trying to root out greed, hatred and delusion' (Gethin, 2011, p. 270) and cultivate wisdom, compassion and loving-kindness. It also fails to encompass the original concern of meditation with enlightenment, which in the monastic context required 'the renunciation of family, social status, and other attachments' and the engagement with 'study, ritual observance, and meditative practice' (Kirmayer, 2015, p. 452).

Much of academic analysis has shown that the popularity of secular mindfulness practice has been a neoliberal tool that reflects the changing frameworks of state responsibility and an increasing emphasis on the 'responsibility' of subjects to self-manage at a time of increasing privatization. Binkley, for example, argues that through self-help books, spiritual mentoring, business management, and relationship counseling, happiness becomes 'an asset cultivated by a solitary, psychologically truncated subject, for whom emotional self-manipulation is a simple technique' (2014, p. 2). Owing nothing either to the moral demands imposed by one's conduct toward others, or to one's place in a cosmological order, happiness has become 'an entrepreneurial project, [which] serves a specifically homologous function, providing an echo in emotional and personal life of a form of government that similarly envisions a life of entrepreneurship, this time played out in the realm of economic conduct' (ibid., p. 3).

The individualization and psychologization of well-being and happiness have been branded as responsible for the individual and moving attention away from the broader structural, political, or social inequalities that require redress. As Davies (2015) argues, stress, anxiety and depression are reframed as personal, not political problems, and the growing body of experts in 'resilience' training, mindfulness, and cognitive behavioural therapy advises people suffering from the strain of a physical context (such as work or poverty) not to change that context *per se*, but the way in which it is experienced. Within this broader cultural context in which Buddhist ideas are introduced, the lack of attention to the Buddhist doctrine of 'nonself' in mental health theory and practice does not seem accidental. The doctrine of nonself refers to one of the central assertions of Buddhist traditions, according to which 'a sense of oneself is just something that is produced within the ongoing mutual dependence and interaction between everything that exists', and a key element to Buddhist insight 'is the realization that the awareness of the self as separate is essentially misleading and illusory, a mere by-product of the ongoing process of *samsāra*' (Samuel, 2015, p. 494). This assertion, however, is in tension with Western values of individualism embedded in mindful therapies, its primary concern being with pre-ordained and separate individuals (the personal self) and with their adjustment to preexisting social contexts.

Approaching the individualization and psychologization of practices of mindfulness as both the symptom and the cause of neoliberalism, however, allows us to view these practices as only top-down interventions and ignore 'the diversity in motivations, experiences, and efforts of people

practicing self-governance and the collaborative nature of the political processes by which it is promoted' (Cook, 2016, p. 156). Practices of mindfulness could also be viewed in a Foucauldian sense, as technologies of the self, or otherwise said as practices that

permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power (Foucault, 1997, p. 177).

However, as Foucault argues, these practices of the self are 'not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group' (ibid., p. 291). There is no single universal human nature—it is perpetually reinvented through human choice and action and is of a definite, historical kind.

### **(Beyond) Good and Evil?**

In the previous chapters we saw that both (meditative and non-meditative) mindfulness and performance are practices that can neither be experienced nor understood outside of specific social, cultural and historical contexts. Contrary to the popular understanding of mindfulness as 'bare attention' and an ethically neutral way of paying attention to whatever happens to consciousness, mindfulness should rather be understood as 'a socially mediated enactment that aims to disrupt the structures of everyday life, opening a space in which new forms of identity and experience can emerge' (Kirmayer, 2015, p. 461). Performance,

too, although in close contact with everyday life (Read, 1993), disrupts its structures and presents its materials in meaningful forms; due to liminality and 'performative reflexivity', 'a condition in which a sociocultural group [...] turn, bend, or reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, codes, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal rules, and other sociocultural components which make up their public "selves"' (Turner, 1987, p. 24) becomes a potential agent of change.

Performance, thus, has a shared mindfulness quality: it demands concentration and presence, is characterized by intersubjectivity and intercorporeality and, through reflection and evaluation, promotes awareness that may lead to transformation of existing structures and identities. Transformation and change, however, are not inherent in mindfulness and performance practices. As we shall see next, performance, viewed as a shared mindfulness practice, may also lead to affirmation of existing identities and structures. Moreover, the degree and direction of awareness and change (when these actually take place), that is, whether they will lead to broadening traditional social boundaries, wider acceptance of difference and hence to enhanced social justice, or to destruction of the self and society, depend, among other factors, on the ways in which people reflect on what sort of person one should be, how they want to live, and responsibility for others. These are ethical considerations—closely related to the political—that refer to particular categories through which participants in these practices experience and interpret the world, but also to how researchers describe and analyze the world, and they are historically and culturally specific (Fassin, 2012; Laidlaw, 2014).

### ***Intersubjectivity and Intercorporeality***

Since the 1960s and 1970s, anthropologists and performance studies scholars have established a conceptual and methodological framework in the study of performance that reveals a passion for and faith in the relationship between liminality and the antistructural<sup>vii</sup>. Stressing values of embodiment, presence and transgressive politics, they have focused on ritual activities and marginal objects of study, privileging forms that in some manner resist or are outside of mainstream Western cultural traditions, such as experimental and political theatre, performance art, street demonstrations, or festival traditions from various parts of the world (Schechner, 1985; Turner, 1982)<sup>viii</sup>. More recently, they have also placed emphasis on performance as a site of emergence of postmodern aesthetic practices and on the role of performance as a liminal genre in the construction of various—racial, ethnic, class, and gender—identities (Jones, 1998; Muñoz, 1999; Phelan, 1993; Schneider, 1997).

Liminality, however, at least in Turner's view, is a way for society to manifest itself: 'man is a self-performing animal—his performances are, in a way, *reflexive*, in performing he reveals himself to himself' (1979, p. 72). It is a way for society to open up its essential codes of behavior and values, to either play with and re-assemble them in novel ways (the ludic element is very important), or to confirm their existence. But instead of addressing the often socially conservative effects of liminal behaviors outlined in Turner's anthropological theory, 'the relatively rare instances of schism and radical transformation quickly came to the fore', and '[l]iminality almost exclusively became a space and time of transgression and subversion' (McKenzie, 2001, p. 51)<sup>ix</sup>. Turner's account of the formation of *communitas* was largely read as a 'plea for people to engage uncritically in *communitas*-inspired

action, defying the social order by inverting, or even perverting, its structural demands—as if *any* kind of destruction is useful or normatively sound' (Thomassen, 2014, p. 83).

This tendency, however, is also rooted in Turner's own views. For Turner, theatre (experimental theatre and performance art in particular), as a liminal/liminoid genre, 'expos[e] the injustices, inefficiencies, and immoralities of the mainstream economic and political structures and organizations' (Turner, 1982, p. 55), facilitating thus not only an enlightening critique, but also the potential to effect societal change and to do so for the better. This positive effect of performance is rooted in *communitas*, the utopian product of liminality/liminoidity, which is viewed by Turner as a transitional moment of 'grace' that transcends all difference and offers the possibility of salvation. During this state of 'grace', individuals are removed from all context and fall into 'anti-structure', that is, into a state of 'liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity etc. [...] from social statuses, enacting multiplicity of social roles and being conscious of membership in some corporate groups such as family, lineage, clan, tribe, nation, etc. [...]' (ibid., p. 44). This 'liberation' of an innate humanity is experienced in the gut, as a flow of connectedness, which Turner (ibid. pp. 55-6) compares with the experience of flow as defined by Csikszentmihaly and MacAloon:

Flow denotes the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement [...] a state in which action follows action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part [...] we experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which

there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present, and future ('Play and intrinsic rewards', unpublished).

Turner does not identify flow with *communitas* (as conceived by Csikszentmihaly), but rather claims that '*communitas* has something of a "flow quality"' (1982, p. 58) and is something more fundamental and prestructural than that generated within the rule-bounded circumstances generative of flow experiences. In modern complex societies, liminoid practices have 'taken over the flow-function in culture' (ibid., p. 59) hinting at a universal *communitas* in which all possible humans are rendered into a transcendental unity. In addition to the language of subversion, liberation, salvation and grace, Turner's schema provides a means with which to think through belongingness (to a community, to others, to a place, to an idea, to a cause) and does so in a manner that is predicated upon a fundamental assertion of faith in a fundamental human goodness.

According to Lewis, Turner's 'flow' appears as an empirically grounded intercorporeality and intersubjectivity, as a shared experience of the participants who share touch, smells, sights, and sounds. His *communitas*, 'the important dynamic that exists between person and group in the constitution of embodied experience' (2008, p. 53) during transitions and rituals, resembled Christian fellowship. Although alongside the human potential for liberation, he also places the opposite tendency for destruction, Turner would not envision negative community pressures, such as those towards prejudice and racism. According to his own speculation, 'not all or even the majority of 'utopian' models are those of 'ideological *communitas*' [...].

There are many hierarchical utopias, conservative utopias, fascistic utopias' (Turner, 1982, p. 49). Having considered the possibility of a fascist *communitas*, if only briefly, Turner discounts it tout court—such *communitas* cannot be real *communitas* – because for him *communitas* utopia 'is found in variant forms as central ingredient, connected with the notion of "salvation"' (ibid.)<sup>x</sup>.

Drawing on an ongoing discussion on intersubjectivity and intercorporeality that follows from Merleau-Ponty's lead on phenomenological theory, Lewis seeks to understand 'how intersubjectivity might arise through common corporeal experience' (2008, p. 53), and notes that 'events can lead to conflict, to the refusal of commonality, to violence against those who are not part of the in-group. Even attempts at intercorporeal merging might result in rejection, denial, or revulsion on the part of some' (ibid., p. 54). However, although Lewis acknowledges that many forms of 'contemporary performance' that explore themes of violence or isolation may contain some communicative intent in trying to evoke these feelings, he concludes that most performances' intention is considered to be 'toward enjoyment, entertainment, interest, and the creation of positive (or troubling, but not entirely disruptive) group feelings that result merely from congregation in audience' (ibid.).

Intersubjectivity and inter- corporeality are significant dimensions of mindfulness practices, too. Although mindfulness is often viewed as an inner state of mind that exists within isolated individuals and meditation as a personal and individual practice, they can only be understood and experienced in a 'relational context' (Stanley, 2012). People's ability to be aware is always predicated upon, and displayed within their relationships with one another, whereas the

thoughts they encounter in mindful relationships during solitary meditation are also social. Mindfulness is collective and shared not only because it carries with it the traces of those from whom one has learned (how to practice and interpret this practice), but also because despite the absence of direct verbal communication, people participate in shared experiences. Based on a two-year ethnographic study of vipassana meditation practices in meditation centers in Israel and the United States, Pagis argues that from a phenomenological perspective, intersubjectivity - the joint consciousness of interacting individuals - 'is not a given situation' or

a simple product based on sharing norms or values, or on sharing the same language. It is a complex experience cultivated in the micro levels of existence, from social interactions to individuals' minds. It is, therefore, a process requiring constant production and maintenance, in which a constant dialectic between self and other takes place (2010, p. 314).

Although those who share a meditation center make up a community of strangers, they are not alone:

They are not alone not only in the physical sense, but they are not alone in experience. They spend time in other minds: they react to the movement and non-movement of others, they feel comfort when they learn that their experiences are 'normal', and they assume that the others understand their experiences since they participate in a similar event (ibid., p. 323).

As intersubjectivity and intercorporeality in performance may not always lead to liberation and salvation, they similarly do not necessarily lead to positive transformation and compassionate action

toward the other in mindfulness. Far from being limited to the present or to a mere refraining from passing judgement, mindfulness is closely related to memory and the ability to keep relevant information active so that it can be integrated within meaningful patterns and used for goal-directed activities (Jha et al., 2010). Mindfulness is not just 'bare attention' or an ethically neutral way of paying attention to whatever is happening to consciousness, but it may be used for multiple (and often contradictory) purposes such as in the use of mindful training in Japan in the military training of Samurais and Kamikaze pilots (Victoria, 2006), or in a practice for socially engaged Buddhists (King, 2009), who have made analyses and criticisms of militarism, religious power, the hierarchy of the caste system, etc.

Intercorporeality and inter- subjectivity in performances as shared mindfulness practices do not refer to identical experience, since, on the one hand, embodied experiences are one part of the meaning of an event that can never be captured in discourse (Lewis, 2008, p. 52), and on the other hand one's position in an event framework (performer, audience or instructor, practitioner), as well as other cultural, ethnic, gender identities, give one a different perspective on the meaning of this event. Analyses should thus shed light on the multiple—and often contradictory—experiences and meanings that are created within the frame of one or various similar events, which cannot be separated from the moral/ethical considerations in which these events engage participants. Although engagement with ethics has been viewed with suspicion by some anthropologists (and performance studies scholars) because they involve moving their focus away from social relations and onto 'the individual', 'ethical subjects

are by no means necessarily co-extensive with human individuals', and they 'can only be understood as emerging and sustained through historically instituted institutions, practices, and relations' (Laidlaw, 2014, p. 179). Levinas's (1998) approach to ethics as a responsibility that arises when we encounter the other could enrich researchers' understanding of the ethical dimensions of *communitas* and liminality, and contribute significantly to the investigation of the transformational capacity of both performance and mindfulness.

### **Responsibility**

Much of the existing work on ethics in performance is based on Levinas' thought, because his emphasis on the face-to-face encounter with the Other suggests some kind of relationship to theatre similar to the encounter between audience and performer (Grehan, 2009; Ridout, 2009). Phelan, for example, analyzes Abramović's performance, *The House with the Ocean View*, as an illustration of how 'live performance might illuminate the mutual and repeated attempt to grasp, if not fully apprehend, consciousness as simultaneously intensely personal and immensely vast and impersonal', and notes that 'the public nature of Abramović's meditation, rendered the performance an experiment in intersubjectivity' (2004, p. 574). She draws on Levinas's argument that 'it is in the face-to-face encounter that ethics is distilled' (ibid.), and argues that live art is extraordinarily important (in contradiction to technologies) because 'this is the point where the aesthetic joins the ethical' (ibid., p. 575). For Phelan, what makes performance unique is its ability to resist commodity and to lead both the observer and the performer to unpredictable and unscripted transformation.

For Levinas, ethics comes before ontology, insofar as he defines the qualitative difference of the Other as that which transcends Being: a responsibility to relate to that which is irretrievably separate from us is where the problem of existence begins. It is not that our freedom comes with responsibility, for Levinas; rather, our 'responsibility for the freedom of others' precedes our own (Levinas in Mullarkey 1999: 108). And, in this sense, the Other constitutes an absolutely fundamental ethical demand. When the other calls us we have no option but to respond. In this realm of openness, subjectivity is interrupted in a manner that requires one to listen to and hear the other: 'Responsibility for the other, going against intentionality and the will, which intentionality does not succeed in dissimulating, signifies not the disclosure of a given and its reception, but the exposure of me to the other, prior to every decision' (Levinas, 1998, p. 141).

For Levinas, however, the ethical subject is not someone bound by universal truths or ideals, and he does not presume a particular type of response as *the* ethical one. In fact, the only thing that is certain is that the subject will respond. Although Levinas does not guide the subject in terms of how the response might operate, subjects who have specific cultural, racial, social, and other affiliations, draw meaning from the world and are shaped by it (Grehan, 2009). Thus, each subject's relationship to the other must be considered within a wider political context, which, for Levinas, is not conceived as a totalizing structure, but as something that one is obliged to acknowledge in the face-to-face relationship with the other. He uses the idea of 'le tiers/the third party' (by which he refers to society, law, government and politics) to explain that the ethical relationship with the other is not a singular or isolated relationship; it is one between

the other and other others, in the social domain (Levinas, 1998, pp. 156-62). This interplay of ethics and politics informs the ways in which subjects read events as they unfold in the world around them, as well as the ways in which they might respond to or engage with a performance.

From a Levinasian point of view, the audience in a performance is an audience as long as people encounter the other onstage, and due to liminality, this encounter has the potential to make participants reflect in complex, contradictory and hence productive ways on the function of both response and responsibility<sup>xi</sup> in the specific context. Elements like presence, physicality, shock and heightened emotional states, which have been intentionally used in performances such as Schechner's, Schlingensief's, Fusco's, or Gómez-Peña's, in order to create liminality, collapse the dichotomies between the aesthetic and the social, put spectators in a crisis situation and assume a response to the claim of the other through their obvious involvement in the performance (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). In the case of performances such as Abramović', too, which involve the artist's self-injury, performances demand an ethical choice as to whether to inflict pain and injuries on the artists or to put an end to their ordeal, as some spectators did in *Rhythm 0* and *Lips of Thomas*.

In the case of (overtly or not) political performances that do not intentionally create liminality, but 'interrupt or destabilize dominant ideologies' and 'do not present singular answers or tell unified stories' (Grehan, 2009, p. 21), participants, too, may also 'become intrigued, engaged and involved in a process of consideration about the important issues of response and responsibility and what these might mean both within and beyond the performance space' (ibid., p. 5). Although these performances may not demand

active action in the sense that spectators might leap out of their seats and make obvious ethical choices, they drive them to find ways of changing things personally and politically. People may go to these performances with predetermined ethical views, but they also go there seeking for a space that allows a pluralism of views and responses, a space that creates 'ambivalence' (ibid.). Through this ambivalence, subjects are motivated to find new ways of thinking about and responding to important social and political issues. Awareness and responsibility may not always include involvement in direct political activism aiming to change a situation, but also thinking differently and engaging in discussions with others about events, ideas, and values, affecting, hence, subjects' place and their relationship to the former within the world.

However, in order to find a space for response and responsibility, or ethical engagement, the subject may become silenced in the process. Levinas' approach has been criticized for overemphasizing the Other, a view that may lead to negation of the self and thus to inhibiting the possibility of ethical exchange (Ricoeur, 1992). As Grehan (2009) suggests, however, if we view Levinas's proposition as a shift from an absorbing focus on the self to the other, as a shift to hearing, connecting and being open to (or touched by) the other, it could offer a productive way of understanding the multiple ways in which people deal with western values of possession and consumption within the context of a globalized and individualistic world.

Levinas's notion of ethics primarily as responsibility or responsiveness to the Other, rather than as a moralistic judgment, may be compared to the Buddhist call for and promotion of critical self-examination<sup>xii</sup>. As we have already seen,

mindfulness, within various Buddhist traditions, includes conceptual reflection, worldly knowledge and ethical-meditative self-knowledge. Although it is commonly seen as departing from self-interest and individual happiness, it cannot be dissociated from responsibility for what one does or does not do, that is, from how the self interdependently exists in relation and response to itself, others, and the world, without fixating either identity or difference (Nelson, 2013). For Theravada Buddhism, for example, the self is very much a relational self (Bodhi 2000: 884), because individuals and cultures construct identities, a sense of constancy, out of the attachments they make to the phenomenal world; based on illusions of permanence, identities allow them to deal with the suffering that characterizes human existence. For Levinas, identity is constructed through experiences of exposure and vulnerability that the encounter with the Other generates. In order to master existence, the subject consolidates itself: "The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it. It is the primal identity, the primordial work of identification' (1969, p. 36).

For those practicing mindfulness within the frame of Theravada Buddhism, therefore, ethics emerge through a dispositioning of the self, that is, through stepping aside and realizing its implication with others in the world. In order to pursue liberation from suffering, the self needs to distance itself not from the world as it is, but from a clinging to permanence that often constructs the world as we want it to be. The doctrine of nonself, that is, that there is no *a priori* self but only the self we have created as a result of our experiences, enables a kind of awakening to a self of transience



and change (Verter, 2013). This, in turn, compels us to imagine responses to the world other than the usual ones dominated by our own habitual attachments. And because the self is part of a changing world, the idea of nonself creates another kind of relation, an ethical relation, not only to ourselves, but also to the world.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Mindfulness has been part of performance training in the West for a long time. Constantin Stanislavski (1955 [1937]), Jerry Grotowski (1991), Eugenio Barba (2006 [1991]), Peter Bridgmont (1992), Michael Chekhov (1993), Peter Brook (2000), Yoshi Oida (2006, 2007), and Philip Zarilli (2009), for example, draw upon eastern mindfulness practices to train their actors, while Beckett and Ionesco re-contextualized theatre as a landscape of ever shifting multivalent meaning so as to encourage present moment awareness in their audiences.

<sup>ii</sup> Morality usually refers to the moral norms and values that govern collective and individual behavior, whereas ethics refers to ethical practices resulting from social agency through technologies of the self. Depending on the intellectual project and the philosophical tradition in which they are inscribed, some anthropologists insist on the distinction between the two concepts, and others do not. Since in everyday discourse there is no distinction between the two, in this paper I will use the terms interchangeably (Fassin, 2012).

<sup>iii</sup> According to Campbell (1999), New Religious Movements led to the gradual 'Easternization of the West', a process in which the West moved away from its traditional values (monotheism, human lordship over the natural environment, and a belief

in a single lifetime) and adopted an Eastern paradigm (pantheism and deep ecology, the human potential movement, and reincarnation).

<sup>iv</sup> As early as the 1930s to the 1950s, health was used as a metaphor to explain the condition of Western 'civilization' and its first attempts to 'turn East' (Conze, 1951).

<sup>v</sup> In the USA in particular there has been an explosion in the number of advocates and practitioners of mindful sex, mindful eating, mindful parenting, etc. This 'widespread and growing collection of people who practice (and those who actively promote in particular) techniques of awareness derived originally from the Buddhist cultures of Asia, which are typically grouped under the label 'mindfulness in twentieth first century America' (Wilson, 2014, p. 9) constitute the mindful movement.

<sup>vi</sup> The compatibility of Buddhist meditation techniques and Western science, however, is not new. According to Samuel, it is related to the rhetoric about Buddhism being a scientific and empirical tradition, rather than a 'religion' that 'goes back to the growth of Buddhist modernism in Sri Lanka in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', 'and has little to do with Buddhism as it was actually practiced in the lives of most Asian Buddhists until recent times' (2015, p. 489).

<sup>vii</sup> For reviews, see Auslander, 2003; Carlson, 2003; McKenzie, 2001; Shepherd, 2016.

<sup>viii</sup> In Turner's view, liminality is not identified with marginality. He used the term marginality to define the state of simultaneously belonging to two or more social or cultural groups (e.g. expatriates) and insisted that marginality should not be confused with true 'outsiderhood' (being outside of the social structure), which characterizes individuals such as

'shamans, diviners, medium, priests, those in monastic seclusion, hippies, hoboes, and gypsies' (1974a, p. 233). Marginals too should be distinguished from liminal entities: 'Marginals like liminars are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity' (ibid.).

<sup>ix</sup> A similar approach could be traced in Artaud's view of theatre as a means for radical change. Artaud critiqued his contemporary European culture for its logocentrism, rationalism, and individualism, and suggested that in order to overcome the above, theatre should 'induce trance' (1958, p. 83)—'classical' states of liminality in the spectator. Theatre would, thus, allow spectators to 'attain [...] awareness and a possession of certain dominant forces [...] that control all others' (ibid., p. 80).

<sup>x</sup> In his book *Crowds and Power* Canetti sheds light on the fundamental amorality that exists at the heart of *communitas*, of 'the actual experience of equality familiar to anyone who has been part of a Crowd'. He claims that what strengthens this feeling of equality is the direction towards a goal: '[the crowd's] constant fear of disintegration means that it will accept any goal' (1978, p. 29).

<sup>xi</sup> Lehmann sees 'the mutual implication of actors and spectators in the theatrical production of images' (2006, p. 186) as an activity that is both 'aesthetic' and 'ethico-political', and calls for theatre to develop 'a politics of perception, which could at the same time be called an aesthetic of responsibility (or response-ability)' (ibid., p. 185).

<sup>xii</sup> There is a growing literature that investigates the relationship between Levinas's thought and various Buddhist traditions (Kalmanson, Garrett and Mattice, 2013).

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