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Angela Moore

Transliminality in Hedwig and the Angry Inch

“Ain’t much of a difference between a bridge and a wall”- Hedwig

Hedwig and the Angry Inch began as a play (1998), became a movie (2001), and recently moved into the world of Broadway Theater (2014). Although the aspects of the story change as the text moves between performance venues, every version of Hedwig and the Angry Inch is full of stories and symbols that present an interesting perspective on significant, life-altering shifts or rites of passage. Although the predominant storylines involving these rites of passage remain fairly consistent across versions of the performance, I will be looking specifically at how the film represents rites of passage.

Arnold Van Gennep outlines a three phase process for “all rites of passage or ‘transitions.’” These phases are described as “separation, transition, and incorporation” (Van Gennep 11), and they have been used by anthropologists as a framework for understanding ritual process and transition. The middle (margin) phase is often referred to as the liminal phase, and is characterized by notions of invisibility, loss of communal presence, and identity in flux. Victor Turner has written much about this particular phase, and this phase will hold much significance in analyzing Hedwig and the Angry Inch.

The film takes place both in present time and through flashbacks. The flashbacks allow Hedwig to tell the story of her liminal journey to the audience through her own reflective, auto-biographical voice, and thus, there is no third-person perspective to help navigate the realm of her interpretation of the past. However, there is a third person perspective available in the “present story” to help the viewer navigate the influence that Hedwig’s liminal past still has on her. While the three-phase process of transition outlined by Van Gennep is present in the back story of the film, Hedwig’s present story focuses on a fourth stage.

Before going any further, here is a brief synopsis of the story:

The Backstory (given in flash backs):

1 Hedwig/Hansel’s physical appearance of gender changes throughout the story and Hedwig does not discuss preferred gender pronouns. As such, I feel there is no correct way to use pronouns in reference to her, but as the movie synopsis refers to her using female pronouns, I will do the same for most of this analysis. However, Hedwig is not vague about being born a boy and as such, when I discuss that part of her life I will use male pronouns. I am aware that doing so may imply notions of gender essentialism and wish to avoid those assumptions as best I can.
Hansel, a young boy is born in the same year that the Berlin Wall goes up. As he grows up, he wants to find love, and eventually feels certain that the love of his life is somewhere on the other side of the Berlin Wall, “But how to get across?” (Hedwig and the Angry Inch). He eventually falls for a male, American G.I. who agrees to marry Hansel so that Hansel can cross the wall. However, in order for Hansel to get married to a man in Germany at that time, he has to pass a full-body inspection, as a female. The sex-change does not go according to plan, and Hansel (now Hedwig) is left with a “Barbie doll crotch” or “angry inch,” (Hedwig and the Angry Inch). It is important to note that Hansel does not undergo a sex-change operation or change his name to Hedwig because he wants to become a female; he does to in order to leave the police state of East Berlin. In many ways it would be more accurate to refer to Hedwig as a drag queen or cross-dresser than a transsexual or transgendered person, as he does not discuss feeling like he is a she or having a desire to be anything other than male.

Not long after Hedwig and her new husband settle into Junction City, Kansas, her husband leaves her for a younger looking man. Coincidentally, this happens on the day that the Berlin Wall falls. “The Germans are a patient people, and good things come to those who wait,” the television echoes as Hedwig cries over her lost love (Hedwig and the Angry Inch). She scrapes by on odd-jobs, begins to embrace her new feminine self in full drag, and—deciding to give her love for music a second chance—puts together a band.

Eventually she meets Tommy, a young male whom she falls for in a much different way than she fell for her first husband. She and Tommy write and perform music together, but he eventually leaves her too, thus concluding the backstory and catalyzing Hedwig’s present-story struggles.

The Present Story:

The film opens with Hedwig playing a show at a small venue that appears to also be a buffet restaurant of sorts. She reveals that Tommy Gnosis, a popular musical celebrity, has stolen all of his songs from her—they had written them together. This is the same Tommy who she later reveals she was in love with. The parts of the film that take place in the present depict Hedwig and her band as they follow Tommy Gnosis’ tour in attempt to get Hedwig the credit, fame, and monetary reward that she deserves. This tension is resolved near the end of the film with an unpredictable turn of events; I will spend most of this article attempting to analyze those events and what they may reveal about a fourth phase in the process of transition, so I will resist the urge to try and sum them up just yet.

The Liminal Stages:

As briefly aforementioned, Arnold Van Gennep outlines three phases associated with completing a rite of passage. Van Gennep describes pre-liminal rites as those that are gained after achieving a certain amount of loss, or metaphorical death of part of the self—the phase of separation, (Van Gennep 21). Hansel, in the process of becoming Hedwig, literally loses the part of his body that makes him male, and not because he wants to. He crosses over the Berlin wall, leaving his mother and everything he has known behind, opening him, now her, to the possibilities of the west. Hedwig is separated from her past in that she no longer has the same name, same gender, same home, or any access to her family.

The second stage—in which the liminal rights are earned— involves a set practice overlooked
by some form of governing body. The marriage and body inspection administered, as well as Hedwig’s flight to America, all involve oversight by some sort of official body, all require a prescribed order of tasks to be completed before the person is allowed through. Her American G.I husband, as well, represents a governing force in her life, as she does not begin dressing like a female until she meets him and does not seem to enjoy doing so until after they separate.

Victor Turner argues that in this stage, “the subject of passage ritual is… structurally, if not physically, ‘invisible’” (Forest of Symbols 95). While Hedwig is with her husband, living in Junction City, her identity does not seem to exist on its own; she is female because she had to be to marry her husband, not because she wants to be. Her desires do not seem to exist or matter in this stage, and she does not appear to have any friends, connections, or hobbies outside of her husband. After her husband leaves she begins to regain her own identity, but when her ex-lover becomes a celebrity with the music they wrote together and she receives no recognition or attention for her work, she again is presented with a type of social invisibility. She struggles against this invisibility for most of the “present story” in the film.

Turner also describes the person in the liminal period as “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony” (Ritual Process 95). This, along with feelings of invisibility, remains true of Hedwig long after what appears to be her liminal stage. Her physical body, neither male or female, does not fit into any custom or convention, and her position as a foreign, transsexual, glam/punk-rocker places her far outside of what is considered customary. However, her ambiguity does not prevent her from eventually returning to a state of recognition and acceptance within society. I make note of this because, although aspects of Hedwig’s situation make her seem permanently liminal, she does not fit in with current definitions of permanent liminality.

Turner describes “marginals” as people who remain in the liminal stage; “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” (Dramas, Fields 233). While Hedwig’s body remains betwixt and between, with no physical resolution to her genital ambiguity discussed, by the end of the film she has gained mass public support and acceptance for who she is, leading to an overall tone of resolution. But that’s jumping ahead a little bit. She reaches the post-liminal, at least somewhat, long before the end of the film.

Post-liminal rights are associated with the process of reorientation and readjustment. Hedwig has a hell of a time here. After her husband leaves her (and the Berlin Wall comes down) she begins to come to terms with physically appearing to be a woman, on her own, in western society. No longer does she dress like a woman in relationship to her husband; now she dresses like a woman because she appears to find power in it. She “pulls the wig down from the shelf” and begins to seem to enjoy how many options she has for recreating herself with hair and makeup— creating a life of her own. She begins to integrate into society by forming bands and babysitting (amongst other “odd jobs”) to create a life of her own, instead of using her husband as a go-between into the world. It is important to note that in the jobs she does, both babysitting and the odd (alluding to sexual) jobs, payment typically occurs “under the table,” unregulated by institutional economic policy. So, while she has created her own life and can support herself in western society while looking like whatever type of woman she wants to, she
also maintains some level of distance from formal societal institutions.

By the time we even get close to Hedwig’s “present story” in the film, she has already lost some parts of herself, been invisible, been betwixt and between, and then redeveloped her own identity— her own appearance, her own hobbies, own friends, own income, and even her own romantic adventures and heartaches— separate from her husband (i.e. the person who initiated her liminal journeys). She has reintegrated in many ways, but remains outside, in between, and invisible in others.

While in this semi-post-liminal state, Hedwig falls in love with a man, really a teen, named Tommy who, although probably too young for her, almost matches her in rebelliousness. They write music together, and most of their songs convey Hedwig’s stories and beliefs about the complications of her life— her liminal journeys. One day Tommy physically experiences Hedwig’s permanently liminal genitalia, is obviously disturbed by it, leaves her, takes all of their music and becomes famous and incredibly rich off of the songs they wrote together, songs about her life. He denies that they have any connection, so Hedwig sets out to prove her role in creating the music. This is the present drama of the film, and this present drama seems to lengthen and complicate Hedwig’s liminal journey.

The Role of the Researcher:

While they are happily dating, Hedwig gives Tommy a stage name: Tommy Gnosis, invoking the Greek word for knowledge. This is the name under which he performs and gains fame. I pose that Tommy Gnosis represents the researcher. In one conversation he discusses curiosity as a virtue while defending Eve’s role in the story of Genesis: “Eve just wanted to know shit,” he claims in her defense (Hedwig and the Angry Inch). He is obviously enamored with Hedwig and wants her to teach him something. He asks her, “Hedwig, will you give me the apple?” (Hedwig and the Angry Inch).

However, the knowledge that Hedwig is able to share has come directly from her difficult, liminal life experiences. While Tommy has no issue singing about what Hedwig has learned on her journey, he cannot handle being in direct contact with the physical reality of what that journey means, what Hedwig had to experience so that she could tell those stories and write those songs. The researcher admires the pursuit of knowledge, seeks out interesting stories and information, uses them to make better sense of his/her own world and often to further his/her own career, but only sometimes wants to directly experience the stories and information he researches. If a liminal journey is co-opted, how is the journeyer affected? How is the journey affected?

For one, as I briefly mentioned before, Tommy’s fame causes Hedwig’s invisibility to become more of a tangible reality. When she and her stories were only heard and known by those who she chose to share them with, her invisibility was fairly normative and in her control. However, if her stories are visible, but she is not, if they are listened to, but she is not, her invisibility becomes a struggle, not a choice. This invisibility complicates Hedwig’s reintegration process, but this isn’t the only way the researcher impacts Hedwig’s liminal journey. The process of trying to take her stories back and gain recognition leads Hedwig into more emotional distress than she appears to have been through in many years. This emotional distress is expressed primarily in two ways: a difficulty being either Eastern or Western, and a difficulty being either male or female.

Both of the glam rock bands that Hedwig plays with in the film (one before and one after she meets Tommy) are comprised of people of Eastern origin. The first is made up of Korean women, the
second, mostly Eastern European men. These bands represent her connection to the East, to Eastern culture and values, such as the tendency toward collective-orientation (Hofstede 1984). In the process of seeking revenge and recognition from Tommy Gnosis, Hedwig begins to lose her temper more and more with her band which eventually leads to a break up, indicating a decline in her ability to function as an Easterner, as a collective. It is almost as if she feels pulled to be so Western, so individualist (seeking revenge) that she cannot cooperate with the reminders of her Eastern heritage, but she also doesn’t seem to be succeeding on the individualist/Western front either. Money grows tighter and tighter and Hedwig’s anger issues cause her manager to quit working for her.

In the “present story” she is also dating one of these bandmates, Yitzhak who, in the play is a former successful drag performer, and in the movie, is simply seen fantasizing about dressing in drag, but his history is not given. It is later revealed in the movie that Hedwig knows that Yitzhak wants to dress in drag, but throughout most of the film she does not offer him any advice or support, and instead is very controlling over him. While this relationship tension doesn’t directly point to Hedwig having difficulty being just a woman or just a man, it does reveal that she has difficulty with how she relates to dressing to drag. She does not support or engage with Yitzhak’s desire to dress like a female and seems to avoid the issue if it involves anyone other than herself, and as she is fairly open talking about anything in the film (including her “botched” genitals), the lack of discussion between these two characters (who arguably have the most in common of anyone else in the film—both have cross-dressing desires or tendencies, both have gone from an living in a more “Eastern” culture to a more “Western” culture, both play music in a glam rock band, both of them sing) speaks loudly.

Hedwig’s increasing present difficulty with being able to connect and work with other people, combined with her increased sense of invisibility indicates that Tommy’s co-opting of her stories—either directly or indirectly—causes Hedwig to revisit (at least partially) the liminal stage.

Reconciliation:

Eventually the co-opting comes to an end. After her band breaks up and her manager leaves her, she returns to “odd jobs.” Seemingly at random, Tommy drives up in limousine, indicates that he realizes he should give her credit, they make out in a car, get drunk, get in a wreck, and the news spreads all over the tabloids as Hedwig rises to stardom and the entirety of her story gets out. Post-wreck, Tommy attempts to deny any connection to Hedwig once more, but the scandal has already spread and his reputation is already destroyed. But Hedwig’s strife does not end just yet. The world knows that the researcher stole her story. The world knows that it’s her story. She has fame and money, has been accepted and admired by the public in magazines and on talk-shows but still isn’t quite readjusted—she has a breakdown on stage while performing, takes off her wig and some of her clothes, smashes the tomatoes she was using to create breasts, as well as a few instruments, and runs out of the music venue she was playing in, to the venue next door where Tommy is playing to an empty house.

There, Hedwig and Tommy stand on opposite sides of the room. He sings her a song that they wrote together, but changes the lyrics. In these lyrics, he gives her story back to her, something she apparently needed:

I’m sorry for I did not know, while I was just a boy, you were so much more

Than any god could ever plan, more than a woman or a man, and
Now I understand how much I took from you…
But with all the changing you’ve been through, it seems the stranger is always you. (*Hedwig and the Angry Inch*)
The researcher allows her to be the expert over her own life again, and—in a way that only a close friend or lover could—gently points out that maybe the liminal journeys she had been thrust into have brought her further away from herself than she wanted. Then something big happens.

Hedwig magically returns to the stage with her band of Eastern European glam rockers, including her present lover, Yitzhak. She sings a song, the first song in the movie that implicates and calls to a community: “and you strange **rock and rollers**, you know you’re doing alright, so **hold onto each other**,” (*Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, emphasis added). With all of the flash-back and musical story-telling about *Hedwig’s* life, this shift into communal-engagement through music stands out. It is almost as if, now that her stories are her own again, she can move on to singing about other things. This indicates not only a shift towards community, but also reconciliation with her band and thus, her Eastern and collective heritage.

She also reconciles many of her gender difficulties in this moment. When she returns to the stage she looks male—wig still off and tomato chest still removed—but not just male, she looks like Tommy Gnosis. Photos will undoubtedly explain this shift better than I can with words (see fig. 1-3):

A shift happens in this moment that is perhaps best explained by a metaphor introduced early on and continued throughout the film (and quoted at the beginning of this analysis): “Ain’t much of a difference between a bridge and a wall” (Hedwig and the Angry Inch).

When we think of a three-stage liminal journey, we conceive of it in a linear manner—lose something, adjust, then gain something else, something different. This model fits in with the idea that a liminal journey is like going through a wall. To get through a wall (without super powers or heavy equipment) would likely be very difficult and/or painful; it would take time and a lot of physical effort. You would likely lose a part of yourself (maybe some skin from a scratch, maybe your shoe gets pulled off, maybe just buckets of sweat), and once through, can assume that someone will eventually find the hole you made in the wall and fill it up, preventing re-entry. Besides, why would you want to cross back through a wall that you just broke your elbow trying to get to this side of?

Hedwig and the Angry Inch poses that making it through a wall is still a part of the liminal process, but is not all of the liminal process. While the liminal journey can feel like trying to walk through a wall, the very wall that holds the two sides apart is also the meeting point of the sides: what holds the sides together. Once we know both sides, can the wall become a bridge upon which to freely traverse?

In the final, communal coming together song, Hedwig extends a wig to her male lover and band mate Yitzhak, who, upon putting it on, transforms into full drag makeup and dress. So, in a sense, Hedwig does become that bridge; she is now able to extend a hand to help others cross the wall/bridge from appearing male to appearing female. She is also able to see that she, herself, does not have to choose between looking male or looking female, being of the east or of the west—the bridge is open to be crossed, even stood on at will. This film serves as an embodied testament to the idea that “the binary heuristic, useful as it has been, is no longer analytically or empirically helpful, relying as it did more on
categories than bodies for its warrant” (Linstead and Pullen 1288, emphasis added). Male and female, east and west are categories; Hedwig’s body does not fit into these categories.

Thus the binary liminal journey, from male to female, from east to west, goes from being a uni-directional transformation to a multi-directional experience. By the end of the film Hedwig seems much less restricted by binaries. She allows herself to be characteristics both of what she loves in a lover (Tommy’s make-up), and what she loves in herself, what she wants in a male and what she wants in a female. It may be worth noting that by the end of the film, she also seems happy, fulfilled.

Transliminality:

I pose this multi-directional liminal access as a state of transliminality (note that this is a state, not a stage or phase). This film gives us a story about a liminal journey that is not complete after 3 steps; it takes a 4th, and arguably a 5th. In these additional steps, a person on a liminal journey realizes that who she was before the liminal journey and who she is after converge in her, and that she can access her “before” or “after” self when she sees fit. The journeyer begins to see that the liminal journey is not a finite or linear process of change, but rather a process of gaining access to new aspects of identity, without necessarily losing the old aspects. It is a process of addition and multiplication, a process of increasing choices, not being forced to make them.

Transliminality cannot be accounted for by the kind of permanent liminality that Victor Turner outlines. Hedwig does not lack reintegration. She is not stuck in passage; she is free to use passage at will. Transliminality cannot be accounted for by the kind of permanent liminality that Arpad Szakolczai outlines either; she is not “frozen” in preparation, nor is she stuck in a permanent state of performance (the wig eventually comes off). She is not trapped in a ceremonial game like those of high court, and does not remain in “a state of frenzied suspension” once her performance closes (Szakolczai 214); the film ends with a sense of self-acceptance, social-acceptance, and resolve.

The idea of transliminality fits into much more than just *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. Puberty is often considered the go-to example of a rite of passage. The false binary present in puberty is kid/adult. Think of the happiest, most adjusted, satisfied and fun people you know. How many of them are able to just “be a kid” sometimes? How many of them let loose, play, or get really silly sometimes? Adolescence does not mean that childhood must go away completely. Many of the feelings and characteristics of children are still attainable by adults: feelings of innocence and wonder and excitement. Of course, as adults we cannot feel and act like children all of the time, but acting one way all of the time is not what transliminality is about. Acting one way all of the time is what transliminality resists.

When we go through puberty we don’t lose childhood, we gain access to adulthood, and then have the task of figuring out how to best balance those two worlds in our lives. When Hedwig goes from appearing male to female, although she loses the ability to be completely physically male like she was before, she does not lose the ability to look like a male, to speak like a male. She did gain, however, the option of looking female.

There is a definite sense of completion to this movie, and to Hedwig’s process. Her liminality becomes an act of identity, a process of overcoming binaries to become whole. All of the radical changes in Hedwig’s disposition and outlook that lead her to a sense of completion and peace happen in
the last 10-15 minutes of the film. These radical changes start picking up significantly after she and Tommy get into a wreck, but don’t really take full force until Tommy himself pays Hedwig the credit and apology she had been searching for. This implies not only that being denied expert-status over one’s own story can disrupt and complicate a liminal journey, but also that being allowed expert-status over one’s own story can heal and reframe a liminal journey.

A Counter-Research Narrative:

Recurring symbols throughout the film present a counter-approach to Tommy’s research methodology. Let’s rewind for a moment: the reason Hedwig wants to cross the wall is to find love. She does not agree to a sex change because she is uncomfortable in her body, she agrees to do it for love, and probably also to escape a police state, but as far as the movie indicates love is the driving force behind this whole story. The symbols that deal with love in this movie can also be interpreted as metaphors for research.

The theme of love is brought up in this film using a specific and consistent metaphoric interpretation. Love is discussed through the metaphor of cosmic lovers who were once whole together, but have been cut in half. Hedwig is trying to find her other half, only to find that she, herself, contains her other half. One physical example of this metaphor is when Hedwig has on Tommy Gnosis’ stage makeup and dress; she allows herself to be what she was in love with. According to the film, this allows her to become whole.

This presents a model of research vastly different than the co-opting model that Tommy enacts. While Tommy listens and reappropriates stories that he has not experienced, Hedwig takes into herself and physically embodies those whose experiences fascinate her. She physically embodies the glam rock icons she grew up dreaming about and eventually physically embodies Tommy, who acts as both her lover and her nemesis. She attempts to live their physical situation in order to make it part of her own, as opposed to learning about it from a distance. While the level of intimacy implied in these actions may seem overwhelming, I do not think it is a far cry from the intimacy that many of us feel with our research. Ethnography is largely based on attempted lived experience as a means for understanding the life of the other. Hedwig presents a kind of intimate ethnographic style, one in which the researcher and the researched become hard to separate.

Major Implications:

1. Research

The dangers of research and co-opting experience are real and may have profound effects on someone who is undergoing a major transition in life. We must let others be the experts of their own stories lest we risk trapping them in liminal duress.

Intimate ethnographic research allows us to blur the lines between the researcher and the subject(s) of research—it is both embodied and performative. Although a potentially messy way to research, this may be quite useful for creating both public and personal knowledge in that it asks the researcher to be impacted by both the logical and emotional perspectives of what and who they are researching.
2. Complicating the Liminal Journey

The liminal journey does not have to be linear or unidirectional. In fact, it may be more helpful to view it as nonlinear and multi-directional, as a process of gaining access to different aspects of self—more like gathering and less like trading.

Pushed past its three-phase framework, liminal journeys can lead to overcoming socially constructed binaries and notions of either/or (transliminality). In this analysis I have looked at this from the perspective of an individual liminal journey. However, liminality and transition periods happen both to individuals, and to cultures and societies. I think it would be fruitful to look for research sites in which larger groups have together experienced a state of transliminality and come to a place of fluid acceptance of both old ways and new ways as a collective.
Works Cited and Consulted


