



Essay

Ontological Distancing in a Liminal World

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Introduction

We live in a liminal world, Sardar (2010) has characterized it as ‘postnormal times’, a phase in which time is accelerated, complex and proceeding at different paces. Such a world is hard to navigate, our futures are unpredictable, we are always unsure about what is coming next. Futures Studies as a field has numerous toolkits that can help us live and understand through this liminal period of transition, such as: Causal Layered Analysis, Morphological Analysis, Integral Futures and Transdisciplinarity. These are all helpful and all appreciate complexity, and I will develop my ideas based on them, but their ontological and epistemic presumptions are not necessarily wholly congruent with the liminality of the world. This is not to say they do not admit liminality as a feature of the world, but to suggest that their ontological paradigms need refining if we are to learn how to journey through the period of transition we are living through.

My argument was developed in a context of being relatively new to Futures Studies, while also having a broad interest in metaphysics. Futures Studies grabbed my attention because of the importance of ontology in it (Poli, 2011) and since then I have developed a significant interest in it. However, because of my ‘freshness’, there are historical limitations to this paper. It is, however, hoped that this can also work to its advantage, by being able to add a new perspective. This paper should also be seen as theoretical rather than applied, it bases itself in the historic and current literature. Rather than results derived from a study, it is founded on reviewing the literature and philosophical reasoning.

I begin by discussing the four major stages Futures Studies has gone through, ontologically and epistemologically speaking. I then highlight specific examples of these presumptions in methodology, mainly by discussing the literature on the ideas listed above. After doing this, I propose the idea of ‘ontological distancing’ as a way to understand the possibilities of making decisions in the world we are living in. I argue this is better suited to a liminal world. Finally, I seek to ally distancing with transdisciplinarity, suggesting that they are congruent with each other. Distancing is a transdisciplinary idea due to its ability to incorporate a variety of ontologies and due to its concepts accommodating liminality (i.e through the included middle and the hidden third). With these ideas in mind, I will now begin a brief outline of the stages Futures Studies has been through.

Inayatullah (2013) has already provided a good exposition of the four different approaches to foresight. Firstly, there is the predictive approach which is based on empirical social sciences. This emphasises the use of evidence to make decisions in relation to the future. This presumes there is an exterior world which is language neutral, this does not, as will become clear, fit with the ontological pluralism of distancing. The second framework is the interpretive, this looks at competing images of the future, rather than making scientific predictions. It aims to examine the human condition by understanding that the future is not the same for everyone. The third is critical futures studies, which Inayatullah (2013, p44) describes as:

‘Critical futures studies draws its inspiration from poststructuralism. The task in critical futures studies is to make the universal particular, to show that it has come about for fragile political reasons, merely the victory of one discourse over another, not a Platonic universal. To do so, one needs discursive genealogies that attempt to show the discontinuities in the history of an idea, social formation or value.’

This, unlike the predictive paradigm, embraces the effect language has on the world. I suggest later through the

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concept of distancing that the predictive or critical frameworks are both not congruent with the liminal world we live in. One of language and the material world should both not be prioritised over the other. The fourth step in Futures Studies was participatory by engaging with individuals and groups it is possible to build Future(s) through stakeholders. I should add to this genealogy that Voros (2008) adds an extra paradigm to the history of Futures Studies after the predictive, that is post-positivism, which suggests that the world is imperfectly knowable. The genealogy I have provided will be useful in two respects. It provides the context to the Futures methodologies I will discuss below, especially the ontologies that guide them. Secondly, it provides the background to the discussion surrounding how we are best placed to live in an increasingly liminal world- which I suggest is done through what I call distancing.

How to live in a liminal world?

The world we live in is liminal in two ways. Firstly, following Sardar's (2010) postnormal times we can say that we are living in a period of acceleration and uncertainty. I shall elaborate on this more later. Secondly, certain other Futures Studies theories have already shown the liminality of the world. Firstly, Turnbull (1997) writes about the world and writes:

it is a process of knowledge assembly through making connections and negotiating equivalences between the heterogeneous components while simultaneously establishing a social order of trust and authority resulting in a knowledge space (p553)

Liminality is present because the parts of reality are in negotiation with each other. A further example of this is when Turnbull (1997) describes the 'star compass' of Pacific islanders, which allows them to understand which direction they are going in because of inputs from environmental factors (stars, reefs, weather, sealife, etc.). These various components are used to give the navigator a sense of their orientation, thus while travelling the navigator is in between these various 'markers' and has a cognitive map of their journey. Turnbull goes on to suggest that we should create a liminal space for local knowledge traditions:

The future for local knowledge traditions is, I believe, dependent on the creation of a third space, an interstitial space, a space in which local knowledge traditions can be reframed, decentred and the social organisation of trust can be negotiated. The future for local knowledge traditions is, I believe, dependent on the creation of a third space, an interstitial space, a space in which local knowledge traditions can be reframed, decentred and the social organisation of trust can be negotiated (p556).

This liminal space creates room for dialogue between different traditions, allowing boundaries to soften and shift. In Futures Studies, Poli's (2001) theory of levels of reality offers a useful lens for understanding this. He argues that material and mental phenomena are deeply interdependent, even if they exist on different layers of reality. "There are no societies without minds, just as there are no minds without corresponding societies" (p. 273). Rather than being entirely mind or wholly society, most aspects of the world lie somewhere in between—existing in a liminal state. Poli further proposes that reality is multi-stratified, meaning that different layers do not necessarily imply separate kinds of objects. Entities from different ontological levels can co-exist in the same space. In this view, liminality becomes not just a metaphor but a structural condition: a place can hold more than one meaning or reality at once—it need not be either/or.

A final argument for liminality comes from Tuomi's (2017) concept of ontological expansion, which suggests that reality is constantly expanding on an ontological level, as new things and combinations come into existence. They write (p.5):

our observable reality is full of objects that did not exist before. Steam engines, airplanes, submarines, satellites, gravitons, genetic scissors, computer viruses, and tweeting were not there for Kepler, Galileo, or Newton to observe. The set of objects that form the reality is constantly increasing, the attributes of existing objects are constantly refined and reinterpreted, and their characteristics evolve in a continuous

process.

Objects can thus be said to be in a continuous process of becoming, turning into new ontologies non-stop. They are thus in state that is not *either/or*.

With these arguments in mind, it could be raised whether this is just genuinely true for history and the world in general? Has the world always been partially real and constructed? If so, why is liminality particularly present in ‘postnormal times’? It is true, for example, that the medieval castle was constructed by humans and that it relied on material objects (therefore it relied on the mind and matter). Yet, if we take the genealogy of Futures Studies above, we can see that the world passes through phases where realness or construction takes a greater priority. Positivistic Futures Studies emphasised what exists factually, whereas critical Futures Studies mainly saw language as constitutive of the world. Because we live in ‘postnormal times’ and because we live in a multi-methodological environment (see the discussion of integral futures below), it can be said we live in a world where it is not always clear what is real and constructed- there is a plurality of ontological states.

I want to now proceed through an analysis of Futures methodologies, this will help establish whether they are suitable for understanding the liminal world we live in. I will suggest that while certain methodologies do have merits, a concept of *distancing* shall be more suited to the philosophical nature of the world.

Morphological Analysis

Developed by Zwicky, but brought to Futures Studies by Ritchey (2011), General Morphological Analysis (GMA) is a methodology for tackling complex, non-quantifiable complex problems. It involves using a ‘morphospace’ to set out all possible configurations and possibilities in relation to a problem. It works out which configurations are likely based on contradictory propositions. This highlights a problem for morphological analysis- it does not embrace the contradictoriness of a liminal world. That said, it does tackle complex problems, which require multiple perspectives (it breaks down a complex problem into pieces and then synthesises them to form a solution through an iterative process). However, as Ritchey (2011, p84) writes:

‘A morphological field is constructed by setting the parameters against each other in order to create an n-dimensional configuration space. A particular configuration (the darkened cells in the matrix) within this space contains one “value” from each of the parameters, and thus marks out a particular state of, or possible formal solution to, the problem complex.’

The final sentence highlights a key limitation of morphological analysis: it is not well suited to the ontologically liminal nature of the world we inhabit. This method focuses on fixed states or specific configurations designed to solve complex problems. While it allows for multiple possible solutions, each outcome is still defined and bounded—one state or another, rather than something in between. As a result, morphological analysis struggles to engage with the ambiguity, fluidity, and layered realities that characterise liminal spaces..

Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)

Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) is better but still not wholly suited as a way of navigating a liminal world. Essentially, Inayatullah (2005) describes the world as made of four layers. Firstly, there is litany which represents quantitative trends. The second layer is the social domain. The third layer is discursive. For example, an ideology that affects and underpins a policy. The fourth layer is myth/metaphor, which means the archetypes that shape our consciousness. Causal Layered Analysis does not suggest analysis should be done at one level. Inayatullah (2005, p3) writes:

By moving up and down levels of analysis, CLA brings in these different epistemological positions but sorts them out at different levels. The movement up and down is critical, otherwise a causal layered analysis will remain only concerned with better categories and not wiser policies.

It is also worth noting that CLA seeks, according to Inayatullah (1998, p817):

Rather a dialogue between the different levels is sought. Interaction is critical here. By moving up and down levels and sideways through scenarios, different sorts of policy outcomes are possible and discourse/worldviews as well as metaphors and myths are enriched by these new empirical realities.

These two quotes illustrate that CLA admits the existence of a plurality of ontological states, but it does not suggest these are present in the *same* space and time. For example, there is talk of ‘moving up and down levels and sideways through scenarios’ (Inayatullah, 1998, p817) and that CLA ‘sorts them out at different levels’ (Inayatullah, 2005, p3). This would seem contrary to my analogy of liminality and the idea of flux. Admittedly, Inayatullah (1998, p817) writes that Critical Futures, including CLA, ‘disturb present power relations through making problematic our categories’, but there is no indication that Inayatullah sees liminality as extending beyond interaction between layers i.e. the layers still exist, therefore I suggest that would indicate it is not liminal. This can also be seen through Poli’s (2011, p71) analysis of CLA, in which he writes ‘Inayatullah, on the other hand, tends to read the different levels ontologically: it is reality itself that is articulated between more superficial and shortlived phenomena and deep and long-lived phenomena.’ This suggests there are separate layers (albeit interacting) that endure differently in a non-liminal way - the layers can still be identified. Furthermore, the idea that language is constitutive of the world (Inayatullah, 2005) seems to rule out real and material from analysis, in spite of the role of litany. Therefore, while CLA might be better suited to analysis of the liminal than morphological analysis it cannot be said to fully appreciate the *flux* between the real and constructed.

Distancing is, however, a key part of CLA, and occurs at the third level (worldviews/discourse). Inayatullah (2015, p14) describes it in some depth:

Just as the Futures field has ensured that there are many futures ... we need to see the world through lenses of many selves; indeed: many selves, many futures. This challenges traditional identity maps and opens up space for distancing our awareness from the habit and practice of identities. Through this distance, new selves, and thus new futures, can emerge. This is not the search for the shadow but the realisation that each one of us exists in a constellation of identities, with different selves offering us different futures. The challenge, as with all foresight work, is to move from fragmentation to the preferred future, the integrated way forward.

Thus, our views and identities need to be distanced from us in order to open up possible futures. Later, Inayatullah (2022, p8-9) describes how to map and issue across different worldviews. According to Inayatullah (2022) we need to include the other in CLA, in order to lead to more robust strategies. He suggests researchers only often see the world from their perspective and to challenge the politics of the present we need to bring in new worldviews and objectivities (Inayatullah, 2022). This is achieved through distancing ourselves from our own presumptions and allows us to open up possible futures. This suggests that we should take an interpretive approach rather than an objectivist methodology, as shown by the idea we need to consider other worldviews. However, as will become clear below, *distancing* can also be seen as a position that acknowledges different degrees of realness, while also allowing construction.

Postnormal Times

The concept of postnormal times can be described as more suitable for the analysis of liminality. This should not come as a surprise because liminality is a key aspect of postnormal times. It is:

a time when little out there can be trusted or gives us confidence. The *espíritu del tiempo*, the spirit of our age, is characterised by uncertainty, rapid change, realignment of power, upheaval and chaotic behaviour. We live in an in-between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have yet to be born, and very few things seem to make sense (Sardar, 2010, p 435).

This seems to fit with the concept of liminality by implying an era of change from one stage to another, in which there is great uncertainty. Yet, I would ask; is this ontological, i.e. about the material or constructed nature of the world? I would suggest it is more of a theory of knowledge (epistemology) rather than giving a precise ontology. Sweeney & Sardar (2016, p7) write:

When complexity, chaos and contradictions come together, it should not surprise us that uncertainty is the result. The most basic variety of uncertainty emerges when the direction of change is known but the magnitude and probability of events and consequences cannot be estimated.

This shows how postnormal times is concerned with how to come to conclusions in a period of uncertainty, it does not make a statement regarding whether the world is ‘real’ or ‘not’. However, ontology is somewhat fused with epistemology and so we cannot deny the prospect that the world is inherently liminal through its ‘postnormality’. Above, I mentioned in my genealogy of Futures Studies that sometimes the real (e.g. positivism) has been prioritised over the constructed (e.g. critical) and vice versa. If we take this, we can see that the methods of investigation or critique have often depended on the ontological outlook (e.g. Critical Futures Studies is poststructural or postmodern). In this way, we can say that the uncertain epistemology of postnormal times may be the result of the plurality of ontologies we now have (think of the realisms and constructivisms behind Positivism, Post-Positivism, Interpretive, Critical, Participatory). My point here is while postnormal times does not necessarily offer a complete ontology, it can be used to talk about liminal ontologies. Its focus on complexity, contradiction and uncertainty can be seen as making epistemological statements about how we acquire knowledge. Furthermore, it suggests time can be accelerated. These ideas are pivotal for navigating a liminal world due to their embrace of change, but they do not necessarily see liminality as an ontological feature of the world, but rather an epistemological position. As such, postnormal times as a framework can only be partially helpful for navigating a liminal world.

However, postnormal times is not unique in terms of describing a period of change itself. Dator (2014, p496-497) also describes the pace of change.

For many years, I have used a metaphor that is natural to Hawaii: “Surfing Tsunami of Change.” I metaphorically see the future coming toward us in the present in sets of mighty waves that we must study carefully and prepare ourselves to “surf” for survival, fun and fulfillment. Unfortunately, the concerns dominating actual political and economic discourse and attention for at least the past 40 years have been entirely petty and trivial compared to the necessity of preparing to surf the onrushing tsunami. We are like picnic-goers, our backs to the beach, complaining about the sand in our sandwiches, the ants in our cantaloupes and who forgot to bring the hot sauce for our hotdogs. Meanwhile, the roar of the surf increases as the tide rises to wipe all of our petty concerns away.

Bell (1994), writing earlier, suggests we need to change our values to keep up with the pace of change that will come over the 21st century. Bell writes:

changing conditions include the recent rapid growth of the earth's human population, the increase in the scale of human interaction and interdependence which encompasses the globe, and the possible threats to the life-sustaining capacities of the earth itself from a variety of sources, such as resource depletion, global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, erosion of arable land, destruction of forests, pollution, and both conventional and nuclear war. The freedom and wellbeing of human beings in the twenty-first century and beyond require a new image of a desirable future, incorporating most of humanity's enduring values, to be sure, but also changing some (p19).

Therefore, postnormal times is only one of several similar theories of change. Change such as that described by Dator (2014) and Bell (1994) can be described as indicating that we were and still are in a liminal state due to the speed and magnitude of upheaval. Change itself, as above however, is not necessarily seen as ontological in these instances, it is relative to our recent and contemporary situation. This can be seen through the focus on recent history

and current events.

Integral Futures

If there is a part of Futures Studies more akin to distancing than anything else, then it is integral futures. It offers a framework for understanding the multiplicity of ontological states that occupy our world. Collins & Hines (2010), in a history of integral futures, describe the four quadrants that make up a substantial part of its theory. The first quadrant is the inner subjective world which can only be accessed through interpretation. The second quadrant is the behavioural quadrant focused on recognisable individual behaviour in the exterior world. The third quadrant is the collective exterior world- i.e. the physical world and its systems. The final quadrant is the intersubjective, which delineates culture, society and other aspects of the world that have a subjective aspect. These four quadrants therefore capture most of the different experiences we have in the world, whether objective, subjective, intersubjective, or interobjective. However, not everything can fit into these four quadrants, so as Slaughter (2008) says there a variety of other concepts. There are lines which represent human development stages (such as emotions and values). Also, there are states which are positions which consciousness is in (whether this is sleeping, meditation, etc). Finally, integral theory also allows the presence of types which are classifications of humanity, such as personality and participation types. Integral theory and Integral futures can incorporate an extensive number of ontologies which is necessary for living through a liminal world.

Still, I find it imperfect. The quadrant model organises our experience into four categories. As Conway (2022) notes, this doesn't mean Integral Futures ignores integration—on the contrary, it promotes an 'all quadrants' approach where each part is connected and cannot be understood in isolation. Yet, the model still divides the world into types: interior or exterior, individual or collective. This is a typological framework, not a liminal one. It assumes that experiences can be grouped neatly, even within a holistic system. Liminality, by contrast, suggests ambiguity and blurred boundaries. The differences between aspects of the world are not always as distinct as the four quadrants imply. The same critique applies to Integral Theory's use of lines and types, which also attempt to classify human experience. While its aim is to describe everything, this drive for completeness runs into trouble in a liminal world—where categories often overlap, and boundaries shift. This is where the idea of distancing becomes relevant.

Distancing: An Introduction

'Distancing' can be described as a theory that one can be in a relative position (or distance) in a network of nodes. These nodes are different points of realness and construction. To illustrate, I use an image of Franz Marc's *Blue Horse I*, which is an expressionist painting.

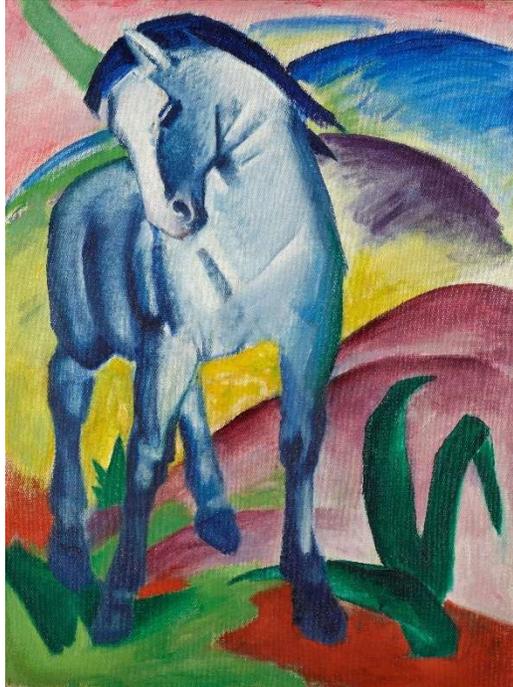


Fig 1: Franz Marc's *Blue Horse I*

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/82/Marc%2C_Franz_-_Blue_Horse_I_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg.

I will now outline the key features of *distancing*.

1. Everything is in a *network*, the horse is connected to the terrain it stands on, as well as the hills.
2. Everything has different degrees of realness or construction, the horse is a real animal, but the hills are out of proportion.
3. There are 'pockets' and 'overlaps'. An overlap is where something real is in the same place as something constructed, i.e. the horse is real, but the colour blue is the same location, but you do not get blue horses. A pocket can be described as a space in which there is an overlap, but instead one thing is bigger than another. Notice the middle hill in Blue Horse I, the purple encapsulates the yellow, yet the yellow is actually more expansive than the colour holding it in. If you are familiar with science-fiction think of the TARDIS from Doctor Who, which is bigger in the inside than it appears on the outside.
4. The network is flat, this means no priority is assigned to either point in the network in terms of fundamentality, it also means priority is not assigned to neither realness or construction, all nodes make the picture.
5. The network is in flux, because it is neither fully real or constructed, nor is any particular point. It can be considered neither in one ontological state or another it is liminal.
6. One holds a relative position or *distance* in a network, what appears real from one perspective may look more constructed than from the other. The further away from the horse you stand, the more proportionate it may look.
7. Finally, approximation is possible, we can say Blue Horse I's subject is mainly real, but the colours are subjective. This means it is possible to break down something into its parts (like in morphological analysis) and synthesise answers to come up with a reasoned 'guess' regarding an ontological state. Yet, one can never wholly get rid of liminality.

With the points above in mind regarding *distancing*, there are two things that need clarifying. Firstly, why is art a good analogy for the idea of *distancing*? Art has tended to focus on naturalism and abstraction; thus, it is a good monitor for understanding varying degrees of realness and construction (art has done both). Also, it reminds us that perspective or *distance* plays a role in the formation of ontological ideas, holding a position affects how we see an artwork.

The second question and more important in this context is what makes *distancing* a better concept for navigating liminality than the frameworks discussed through this journal? Firstly, *distancing* is maximally inclusive; it realizes there are varying degrees of realness or construction and it does not seek to categorise them. Rather, it states that things can be more or less real but cannot escape the effects of ontological *flux*. This means it does not categorise, it realizes that the world is inherently liminal and any attempt to capture it within a simple framework will not be possible, there is always something ontological that defies categorization. The flatness of a *distancing* network also prevents confusion, one does not prescribe importance more to one or the other, it is non-hierarchical, unlike CLA. This is advantageous because it means we do not ascribe importance more to one aspect than another, if we did so we would be reifying one part over another and this has the consequence of saying a state is more important than another, thus denying liminality- the idea that something is in transition and, in this case, constantly in transition. But why is *distancing* specifically good for navigating liminality? It recognizes the world is always in flux and that we can never escape this, but it also allows approximation (as discussed above) and this enables us to make decisions that are suitable for impact, but also tolerant enough of the variety and dynamism of the liminal world we live in.

Transdisciplinarity- An Ally?

While navigating a liminal world might be tough, I would seek to argue that once we ally *distancing* with transdisciplinarity it becomes substantially easier. With the multi-perspectives of *distancing* and a network of liminal nodes, we cannot study a subject or object in isolation. Several concepts of Nicolescu (2012) may be used in this context. Firstly, the Hidden Third argues that the subject and object are united, while retaining their independence. They are liminal, neither one nor the other. This view on objectivity and subjectivity allows us to see distance as a position in which one occupies a place relative to the ontologies under discussion. The other useful concept is the included middle, (Nicolescu, 2014) which states there is a third term between two different 'layers' that connects them. While the concept of a stratified reality does not correspond to *distancing*, the idea that there might a zone where something is neither one thing or another fits with the idea of liminality, in terms of transition, but also ontologically speaking. The final aspect of transdisciplinarity worth considering is its focus on using multiple disciplines in tandem, this is necessary due to liminality caused by different degrees of realness and construction, but also due to the position one holds in regard to these. Using multiple disciplines is not only advisable it is necessary if we are to understand a network of fluxing *distances*.

Conclusion

I want to end this paper by highlighting that if we are to navigate a liminal world, we need frameworks that embrace liminality it is fullness. The methods (perhaps with the exception of postnormal times) discussed earlier in this text seek to define states of being. However, in a liminal world, there is nothing that is in a state fully. Distancing allows us to approximate a relative position, while also accounting for the effects of flux. As such, it has a liminal ontology but can still be a tool for understanding a world in transition. We all occupy a *distance*, but this *distance* is undefinable, always in flux and always relative. Distancing embraces approximation, while never seeking to distort transition into a reified state. Therefore, it is suitable not only for liminality, but also to navigate the transitory world we live in- it is a liminal framework that allows us to make approximations.

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