

The Space Between

Intro: The Space Between isn't just a song from Dave Matthews Band, notorious shit throwing¹ and arguably alright but a popular to dislike group. It's also... something kinda strange.

Ben, have you ever been in a Target late at night? In a bus or airport terminal during its eeriest hours? What do you know about liminal spaces in horror/creepy context?

Origin:

For those new to liminal spaces, they are "location[s] that are a transition between two other locations, or states of being,"². For example, a gas station in the middle of nowhere: you're heading down to (A) Universal Studios at 3am from (B) San Francisco and you pass a shit ton of 24/7 gas stations where sometimes, you and your party are the only ones who seemingly exist. It's the space between *that* that matters here.

Place yourself in this space with me and Ben. Look around you. What's it like? It's 5am and the sky is starting to light up. Your friends are half asleep in the back seat, curled towards each other and you're at the gas pump. You're watching the numbers climb, 35, 36, 37, 37.78, 37.99. It's empty isn't it? You could be the last people on earth right now, with the gas station operator, but you would never know. You're just passing by, from this AM/PM to Universal Studios. You can't wait to get on the Jurassic World ride, but right now - It's 5am and you are pumping gas. It's empty around you. What's that like?

Another example is this: the space between the last holiday you celebrate in the year, up to New Year. It feels strange, doesn't it? If you have a job, it feels weird - to be going somewhere and doing all of this. Everyone at your workplace feels antsy - you have several days before the New Year hits. Holiday after holiday, you feel lacking. When's New Year? Can it come now?

Smaller even, one might say, is temporary. The hours you spend preparing for your friends' first time at your home. For a second: this state of being - of you, is liminal. You're the only one awake so far and every move you make is to an audience of you and your two cats. You exist, this house does too, but what's it like?

Let's zoom out for one second though: liminal space exists outside of this creepy meme world that you and I are in. It exists in psychology, politics, culture: think of rites, rites of passage, etc..

Arnold van Gennep originated the term in the early 20th century and this concept was later picked up by Victor Turner. It goes like this: "The word liminal comes from the Latin word 'limen', meaning threshold – any point or place of entering or beginning. A liminal space is the time

1

<https://blockclubchicago.org/2019/08/08/dave-matthews-tour-bus-dumped-800-pounds-of-poop-on-people-taking-a-chicago-river-cruise-15-years-ago-today/>

² https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Liminal_Space

between the 'what was' and the 'next.' It is a place of transition, a season of waiting, and not knowing."³

For our purposes... Liminal spaces are scary. Not saying they aren't outside of it, but more in that horror, eerie way.

This idea originated from a meme that was posted on *4chan*: what if one when you bleep out of reality (a la Thanos snap) you just end up 'in a maze made up of endless backrooms' (a beautiful sentence from our friend Karl Emil Koch of *Musee Magazine*⁴. You're there just going on and on and on without escape, turn after turn, yellowing wall after yellowing wall under fluorescent lights. If that evokes a sort of dizzying and claustrophobic feeling from you: that's what it's supposed to do, I'm pretty sure.

Turning again, to outside of the creepy space: "Being in a liminal space can be incredibly uncomfortable for most people", says mental health writer Theodora Blanchfield⁵. Our brains want to make sense of things, so it wigs out when it can't. The endlessness and uncertainty is not Gucci. Think about this - think of a text you sent to someone. If you're a WhatsApp user, you see the word 'typing' at the top near that person's name and they type and type for some time and then... just stop and then *don't* reply. Doesn't that just make you feel unhinged? What happened? It's *kinda* like that.

If you've ever been on the internet and scrolled through instagram pages (which I do recommend) like: *liminal.space.s* and *strangelyfamiliarpics* - you will have an idea of what liminal spaces are. You can of course also head on over to the subreddit: LiminalSpace but sometimes half of that page is just like this essay: people going on about what is and what isn't a LiminalSpace to be posted.

Some examples of Liminal spaces can be: airports, hallways, doorways, trains, airplanes, and bridges. You get the idea right? They're things that help you go from point A to point B. However you're receiving that info though, it's not always easy to determine that. While all those mentioned, and even the things I said above *are* liminal spaces, it's still kind of tetchy.

In one of these reddit threads I follow for this essay's purpose: here is a conclusion I came to about the idea of a Liminal Space: people are confused by it - is it just an empty room, a place without people in it? Could it be an empty house for sale during the pandemic? Is it just a space that's creepy and empty? Could it be an abandoned asylum in the middle of nowhere? Is it the idea of seeing a place in a way that we shouldn't be seeing? Could it be an empty airport that should be hustling and bustling instead?

From what I've read and seen though, a liminal space needs one very important thing: transition. It requires a space between. It's the stops between A and B.

³ <https://inaliminalspace.org/about-us/what-is-a-liminal-space/>

⁴ <https://museemagazine.com/features/2020/11/1/the-cult-following-of-liminal-space>

⁵ <https://www.verywellmind.com/the-impact-of-liminal-space-on-your-mental-health-5204371>

Like I mentioned before: it's like that am/pm gas station at 5am. No one necessarily hangs out at a gas station. It's a place people go to, to get to another place. That's the inherent use of a gas station. You get gas to get somewhere. The eerie addition to it is that it's 5am or some other odd time and moment, and it's extra empty and in the middle of nowhere maybe.

Getting back to our friend Karl of Musee Magazine, it is something of an "emotional space". It has "nostalgia, lostness, and uncertainty". When you go on one of these instagram pages and you see an abandoned mall - what do you feel? There's a sense of nostalgia there isn't it: for me, it's the mall trips every Sunday that were our rewards after our parents have dragged us to church at 8am. The lostness comes in the emptiness of the space: where are the people? Where have they gone? Is anyone coming back? Not us certainly.

Tying it back to horror once more: think of those scenic scapes that are often featured in horror video games, movies, and tv shows. They utilise the emptiness of space and the uncertainty of it. What happens when you turn and run and you can't leave? What if you're stuck here forever in this empty mall where you once shopped at Forever 21?

What makes it 'scary' or 'eerie', to me, is that it's all so familiar. Calling back to those instagram pages I mentioned, if you looked at a couple of them: it might be at one point, possible that you recall being *there* at one point.

Ben, I have an exercise for you and I'll send you these links one by one. What I want to ask you is for you to look at these photos and just tell me what feelings they evoke in you:

- <https://www.instagram.com/p/CYMvmMLOc2m/> - [image description: For those not joining us or seeing this photo: we are looking at an off angle image of a room without people in it. There are two white pillars in the third half of the room. The room is dark, with light coming from the camera and through a set of windows in the back. There are white tables and chairs.]
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXeUqWJuz1Q/> - [image description: This image is of a large empty space; there are many pillars to the left. To the right there are open doorways without doors, they are arched doorways. There's a bunch of lighting rigs on the ceiling.]
- <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbTIPyLAXRu/> - [image description: This final image is of a street; the upper half of the image is a street sloping up; the bottom half is a street coming down; it is night; no one is in the photos; the lamps light the space but it's still somewhat dark]

What did we learn here?

Well I learned what is and isn't a liminal space. There's the individuality in interpreting an image or a meme that centers on liminality, but there's still a unification in the idea - a criteria that says: yes, this is a liminal space.

Is it scary? Well, I think it scares us in a not so obvious way. There isn't a jump scare, there's no clown in the corner for you to notice minutes into looking at the image. It's this endless uncertainty - a discomfort in not knowing whether there is an escape in this image. It's the idea of knowing that something was once here but now it's not.

It's that gas station and the miles between you, Indominus Rex and way too expensive popcorn.

Research Notes

Definition:

- Liminal Space - "Liminal Space is a location which is a transition between two other locations, or states of being"⁶
- Definitions, beyond the space of horror/creepy places
 - "The word liminal comes from the Latin word 'limen', meaning threshold – any point or place of entering or beginning. A liminal space is the time between the 'what was' and the 'next.' It is a place of transition, a season of waiting, and not knowing."⁷
 - "Being in a liminal space can be incredibly uncomfortable for most people. Brains crave homeostasis and predictability, and liminal space is everything but."⁸
 - "The concept of liminality was first developed in the early twentieth century by folklorist Arnold van Gennep and later taken up by Victor Turner. More recently, usage of the term has broadened to describe political and cultural change as well as rites."⁹

Origin:

- "The popularity of images of liminal spaces and backrooms originally emerged when a meme on 4chan posed the idea that if one would fall out of reality, one would end up in a maze made up of endless backrooms: an existence comprised of infinite movement without beginning or end, trapped in an eternal process that is never resolved."¹⁰
- "A liminal space is the time between the 'what was' and the 'next.' It is a place of transition, waiting, and not knowing. Liminal space is where all transformation takes place, if we learn to wait and let it form us."¹¹

Sources:

- https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Liminal_Space
- <https://inaliminalspace.org/about-us/what-is-a-liminal-space/>
- <https://www.verywellmind.com/the-impact-of-liminal-space-on-your-mental-health-5204371> (Theodora Blanchfield)

⁶ https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Liminal_Space

⁷ <https://inaliminalspace.org/about-us/what-is-a-liminal-space/>

⁸ <https://www.verywellmind.com/the-impact-of-liminal-space-on-your-mental-health-5204371>

⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liminality>

¹⁰ <https://museemagazine.com/features/2020/11/1/the-cult-following-of-liminal-space>

¹¹ <https://www.reddit.com/r/LiminalSpace/top/?t=year>

- **Examples of Liminal Spaces:** Airports, Hallways, Doorways, Trains, Airplanes, Bridges
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liminality>
 - “During liminal periods of all kinds, social hierarchies may be reversed or temporarily dissolved, continuity of tradition may become uncertain, and future outcomes once taken for granted may be thrown into doubt”
 - “A trend in online photography communities in the later 2010s was the imaging of liminal spaces, with the intent to convey “a sense of nostalgia, lostness, and uncertainty””
- <https://bloody-disgusting.com/editorials/3614536/play-shadows-backrooms-game-brings-modern-creepypasta-life/> (Michael L. Sandal)
 - “In May 2019, the paranormal discussion board of infamous internet site 4chan featured a thread asking for pictures that felt “wrong” or “off” somehow.”
- <https://museemagazine.com/features/2020/11/1/the-cult-following-of-liminal-space> (Karl Emil Koch)
 - “Architectural spaces can provoke certain feelings just as human interaction does. They can represent times long gone, different periods of our lives, and situations in which we once took part or that we want to take part in. In this way, an architectural space functions in line with what it is: a container for our feelings and thoughts, from which we can recollect them again.”
 - “In the context of this new movement, liminal spaces, including so-called backrooms, are a type of emotional space that conveys a sense of nostalgia, lostness, and uncertainty.”
 - “In the context of this new movement, liminal spaces, including so-called backrooms, are a type of emotional space that conveys a sense of nostalgia, lostness, and uncertainty.”
 - “It is this uncertainty that makes corridors widely used in horror movies where they signal that something frightening is about to happen. Who doesn’t feel at unease watching Danny roll around the corridors of the Overlook Hotel in The Shining?”
 - “Moreover, liminal space is closely linked with time [...] Entering the liminal space between the dark and the light, you might vacillate between that boundary-free dimension and the world of form and structure. You aren’t sure where you are, what is real, and what is imagined.”
- https://www.reddit.com/r/LiminalSpace/comments/shlwel/all_too_often_found_in_here/
 - From reading this thread: people still argue the concept of liminality and what liminal spaces are.
 - <https://www.reddit.com/r/LiminalCircleJerk/>
 - Is it just an empty room, a place w/o people in it?
 - Is it just a space that’s creepy and empty?
 - Is it the idea of places we are seeing that we ‘shouldn’t really be seeing? An empty airport (b/c it is full of people all the time);
 - From what I’m seeing a liminal space is: a transitional space, place.
 - Target is a liminal space

- https://www.reddit.com/r/Target/comments/elxem7/til_target_is_a_liminal_space_glad_i_quit/
- <https://ifunny.co/picture/one-half-of-tumblr-target-is-a-cursed-liminal-space-2ITyEdaC5>

Image sources:

- <https://www.reddit.com/r/LiminalSpace/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/liminal.space.s/?hl=en>
- <https://www.instagram.com/strangelyfamiliarpics/?hl=en>

Videos:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rw57IWsaenw>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N63pQGhvK4M>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGajqw8ZIB0>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIfenTWvY4M>
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWIKLhJW_P8 - Tedtalk