

Festival Future
University of East London
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Festivals and Liminality

Festivals have concerned scholars in a number of fields, including: anthropology; tourism studies and political economy. Berzins' talk aims to give an overview of some theoretical approaches to the study of festivals. They have long been recognised as sites of communal cultural production and expression, and as loci for observing the operation of the symbolic economy and social power relations.

One view of festivals, often associated with the work of Victor Turner, is as liminal spaces that have the potential to break down and transform the conventional symbolic order. They can act as rites of passage, sites of spectacle outside the mundane, and involve a suspension of the normal social order. Transgressive behaviour is tolerated.

Berzins also touched on the phenomena of crowds – as opposed to individuals – and the power of the collective spirit, resulting in a dissolution of identity. In this space, difference and otherness dissolve in emotional community. Importantly, there is a flattening of the distinction between consumer and producer.

Belief in liberating power of festivals has been criticised as naïve. Featherstone suggests the form plays with the idea of disorder, but is not truly subversive. Lefbvre (1991) calls it 'pseudo-transgression', providing an illusion of transformation which serves only to further reinforce existing power relations.

The economic potential of festivals is very large, but we can't look at them separately from other social, political, institutional trends. Eg frenzy of cultural tourism - Berzins questions the validity of the distinction between 'authentic' and 'commercial' designations.

She presents various models of festivals, as a way to begin to analyse particular characteristics:

- ❑ A '**City of Festivals**', e.g. Edinburgh Festival/s – a series of festivals and cultural events taking place in one city, achieving a scale and reputation for that city as a 'festival city.' £127 million impact on the Edinburgh economy – successful model, many are trying to emulate. Edinburgh's festival grew organically, however, to be successful much inward investment is necessary to incubate the festival over time.
- ❑ A '**Grassroots Up**' Festival, e.g. Notting Hill Carnival – a festival that originated from a local community, but that has grown in scale and reputation into a significant cultural event. £93 million impact – over 10,000 carnivalists involved. Management issues throughout the years and has struggled to maintain community ownership and independence.
- ❑ An '**Artistic Specialism**' Festival, e.g. Hay Literature Festival, – a festival which focuses on one, specific art form, and may gain its host town/city a reputation associated with that art form or specialism. Festival started in 1988 by small group of

local people. Population of Hay is 1500, yet there are 39 bookstores – testifying to the significance of the festival to life in the town.

- A **'World in a Festival'**, e.g. Glastonbury Festival – an event with a reputation for its wide mix and critical mass of cultural experiences on offer in a specific time and place. 1970, had 1500 attendees paying £1 a ticket. Now 150,000 paying £125 each – resulting in £20 million turnover.

Tony Fegan, London International Festival of Theatre (<http://www.lifffest.org.uk>)

LIFT aims to make connections between elite theatre and tapping the energy of grassroots localities.

Transition of LIFT. Started in 1981, established a biannual festival which ran from 1981 to 2001, exploring aspects of contemporary international performance, eg De La Guarda. Especially concerned with taking performance out of conventional theatre spaces.

Started as a festival with no public funding, first public funding at end of eighties, when it established a small office. Began to move away from grassroots volunteerism, but the funding allows them to extend the audience to non-traditional groups, including schools. Also fed into programming – now largely commissioned work (much of which comes out of the learning programme).

The commodification of festivals in the 1990s left them with a crowded marketplace. In 2001 the previous festival structure was dismantled. Then began a 5-year period of consulting people about what was wanted. There was a focus on 'making the connection with the vernacular', which LIFT sees as part of its responsibility as publicly funded organisation to pay back and invest in the future, both as artists and audiences. LIFT has a strong concern with developing an active audience, blurring the boundary between performer and spectator.

There have been some dramatic changes of personnel, including the resignation of the founding director. The moment when the influence of founding individuals begins to lessen is always an important point for such organisations.

During this period of rethinking, the relationship between public and private space, and especially the privatisation of space, has become a focus. The result has been the idea of the New Parliament, a portable structure.

Early projects: architectural competition to design a structure that can be transported to different locations. LIFT is making efforts to decentralise curatorial role, and is inviting 8 international and 8 UK-based curators from a variety of cultural and social backgrounds to work with them.

Aaron Cezar, Metal (<http://www.metalculture.com>)

Metal was founded by theatre director Jude Kelly in 2002. There are bases in London and Liverpool. Metal's 'Aga-centred philosophy' is about bringing people together for creative debate and dialogue over food.

Metal works on transformation projects, working closely with local people to find out what is important to them, what issues need addressing, and finding creative ways of maximising local potential, through art and culture.

Examples: 'Switched On' - traders on Caledonian Road, between Kings Cross and Arsenal regeneration areas. Challenge of making the most of facilities in the absence of public space. Experience encouraged better communication between traders, later used for advocacy purposes.

Festival of Light on the A1, bringing people together on the Holloway Road, which usually divides them.

Aaron says his work is about 'creating a place for the propaganda of imagination'. Why here? Valuing place, and a sense of value for overlooked populations. Festivals as shared experience can promote a community of interest in local (geographic) communities. 'we are the community – the community is us', he says.

Both he and Tony made the point about artistic progressiveness compared with political sphere. Artists are often far ahead in their thinking, compared with the political and policy mainstream.

David Powell, David Powell Associates
<http://www.dpa-ltd.co.uk>

David Powell Associates is a small company that 'advises, researches and develops'. Its focus is community, culture, and regeneration. It is especially interested in the potential Olympic contribution to regeneration of East London, and its implications for community.

The future of the future: what issues will we need to be responding to?

- Environment, energy: the long emergency?
- Technology
- Policy and institutions of state (e.g. future direction of Arts Council)
- Demographics
- Globalisation

Audiences are looking for the perfect experience, the authentic experience. This is hugely commercial, and needs to be recognised as such. 'This is much more mainstream than we choose to believe, most of the time, although it doesn't feel like that to our bottom lines too often'.

There is a generational difference in sets of skills possessed by performers – from those with art, drama, but little music in the 1960s and 1970s, to those who have had e.g. circus training in more recent years. What effect will this trend, as well as the creation of e.g. the Luton Carnival centre have on practice and on the notion of festival?

Current brief: 'Campus of creativity' in East Sussex, with rehearsal space, space for making things, business units, etc., plus facilities for visitors/tourists, and ideally accommodation, small business start-ups, retail. How would this work outside of London? Given funding restrictions, the need to think in commercial terms to realise large projects.

Q&A

Q. *We know that festivals are about the people, and sharing the spirit, but they often rely on corporate sponsorship, so there is a question of ownership. How to reconcile?*

A. (KB) Not all corporate sponsorship is the same – not necessarily limiting or compromising. Public funding can also sidetrack an initiative's ethics and vision.
(TF) A lot of businesses are recognising that 'the community are us' – their workforce are the community as well. The responsible corporates are very conscious about how they maintain and retain staff. They also recognise, especially in London, the attractive nature of young, diverse audiences. Organisations have to define their own ethical limits.
(DP) as audiences we desperately want to believe that our experience is pure. People might be surprised at how keen business is to 'negotiate their way into your tent'. You might not have to go begging.

Q. *Technological innovation, especially with communications – what impact on festivals?*

A. (KB) Online experience often occurs alongside actual events.
(TF) There's also the environmental issue for a festival of international theatre – we are looking at how technology can help us avoid people travelling. Also, how do we humanise technology, and take control of it?
Technology (video, etc) now much cheaper, more widely available.

Post-war festivals aimed at social and economic rebuilding have run their course. Perhaps this is only one part of festivals' function. Festivals may well be shop windows through which to celebrate people's capacity to redevelop, rather than being the sole motor of economic and social regeneration.

(DP) One useful outcome of the Celebrating Enterprise project might be to clarify a definition of festival, as opposed to other outdoor events/art.

Q. *Public funders as mediators between corporates and grassroots? At present public institutions can be seen as benefiting from others' successes, at the same time as restricting their activities – at one moment encouraging independent initiative, then coming in and saying 'that's enough organic growth, thank you'.*

(PC) *Challenge of balancing nurturing and interference within public bodies.*

A. (TF) The transition from volunteerism to funded activities. What happens to your vision for the event, but also what happens to your own personal ambitions as you grow with it. 'The Notting Hill Carnival is a case in point. It's the biggest event of its kind in Europe, so they say, but it's completely outgrown its locality. It's kind of outgrown to a certain extent the connection to the local, although there are all the Mas Camps that make things and work very hard, there's an incredible dynamism in that... I don't go anymore because I can't see ... the authentic moments anymore, because really the authentic moments have happened in the Mas Camps not on the street, where there are too many people, and it's kind of random and everyone's fighting over the ownership of it.'
LIFT has resisted this temptation.
(AC) Luton Carnival will now have a building, with all this implies for management and organisation – how will this change the dynamics?