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Festivalisation: Patterns and Limits

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The rapid development of arts festivals in the past quarter century should not make us forget that such festivals are a relatively new phenomenon in Europe and that their current explosion goes hand in hand with a growing differentiation in the events/festivals market (Klaić 2008). Notwithstanding the long history of major events, the social, economic and cultural phenomenon that we associate with the ‘festivalisation of culture’ is much more recent. It is also linked to a plurality of causes, such as the evolution of democratic regimes (notably in Southern Europe), or the decentralisation of power in France (Négrier and Jourda 2007).



Figure 2.1: Eurockéennes Festival France (photograph Philippe Belossat)

What is meant by 'festivalisation' is the process by which cultural activity, previously presented in a regular, on-going pattern or season, is reconfigured to form a 'new' event, e.g. a regular series of jazz concerts is reconfigured as a jazz festival. Festivalisation also describes the process by which cultural institutions, such as a cinema, theatre, arts centre or gallery orient part of their programme around one or more themes or events, concentrated in space and time. Festivalisation therefore results in part from the explosion of festivals, but also from some 'eventalisation' of regular, cultural offers. The current situation in the European cultural sector shows an interesting tension between the two phenomena.

On the one hand, much research in the cultural field is still focused on building-based, traditional venues, fixed locations and seasons, i.e. the general idea of permanence. On the other hand, the recent focus on cultural development has led to increased attention being paid to cultural activities that are temporary and more ephemeral.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold¹. On the one hand, it relates festivalisation to more global trends affecting Western societies. The first section will discuss several processes that are at the heart of the transformation of our relationship to culture and particularly to the festivals sector. We make the assumption that festivalisation is something that goes beyond national and European borders and beyond the limits of the performing arts. In the second part of this paper, a critical analysis of these changes will be presented which will draw on research into festivals' audiences. It will focus on the differences in motivation, intensity, style and practices that exist within festivals' audiences. These differences are sometimes traceable to national characteristics (Bonet and Négrier 2011).

Festivalisation as a new cultural repertoire

The first part of the paper considers the development of festivals as expressions of larger developments that affect our relationship to culture. A festival, as an object, and festivalisation, as a phenomenon, can be argued to be the crystallisation of changes that have been identified by a variety of researchers in very different fields of cultural analysis. These developments, because they relate to different research fields, are generally treated separately. Here the object 'festival' enables us to ask questions that relate to both. This will be completed in two stages.

We will first note some categories of change and the associated trends that can be observed today. Figure 2.2 sets out six categories and trends with a classic,

older view on the left, and a more contemporary perspective that challenges it, on the right. We could identify further categories with a larger study, but nonetheless, these help us to characterise what the process of festivalisation could mean from a social science perspective.

Cultural permanence	↔	Ephemeral, 'presentism'
Asceticism	↔	Hedonism
Classical individualism	↔	Tribalism, new-individualism
Cultural legitimacy	↔	Eclecticism, diversity
Cultural specialisation	↔	Flexibility, tolerance, muddling
Cultural inheritance/legacy	↔	Cultural path

Figure 2.2: Changing trends in society's relationship to culture

The change from cultural permanence towards more ephemeral experiences is one that some might describe as a negative phenomenon. This is because the focus and legitimacy of cultural policies and decisions about which cultural activity merits public support are largely based around places, seasons and the primacy of cultural permanence (Dubois 1999). The spontaneous, unbridled and ephemeral vision of festivals' audiences and their relationship to culture and the arts appear less compatible with this model. The association with cultural permanence also created an association between policy, funding and cultural forms in which the audience brings a commitment to learning and the development of their cultural capital. By comparison, much contemporary cultural development is increasingly being influenced by what Hartog (2003) called 'presentism', i.e. a culture that lives only in the moment or in more or less random patterns, a culture Bauman (2011) has defined as 'liquid'. Permanent zapping, the 'gas' aspect of contemporary cultural practices (Michaud 2003), corresponds to what the philosopher finds in the world of the feast. They also correspond to some more concrete findings too: the decline in the market for subscriptions and increase in late booking by audiences for shows, except for those that the public rates as a truly exceptional event. Amongst others, we could mention here festivals such as *Glastonbury* in the UK, *Bayreuth* in Germany, or the *Paléo Festival de Nyon* in Switzerland, that can sell out several months before they run, on the basis of their reputation, not their programme, which may still be unconfirmed when the tickets are first offered for sale. The nature of our relationship to classical culture is changing and is being rebuilt according to new, distinct rhythms. Festivals are an expression of this development.

The transition from asceticism to hedonism goes hand in hand with this category. It is an old debate of philosophers and sociologists of culture (Veblen 1899, Donnat 2009), some of whom forecast the decline of a culture that socie-