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Festivals, Urbanity and the Public Sphere: reflections on European festivals

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“What is a festival?” is a deceptively simple question – but also a deceptively complex one. This is reflected by much of the literature on festivals, in which discussion of their multiplicity and heterogeneity, their complex etymologies and histories, as well as the expansion in the second half of the 20th century, and exponentially since the 1980s in Europe, has seen festivals transformed into one of the dominant formats in the current cultural realm.

However, beneath the apparent multiplicity, one major feature helps to clarify the issues at stake when considering their cultural significance: festivals tend to be either “‘traditional’ moments of celebration or... highly orchestrated mega-events” (Waitt, 2008: 513). The first are supposed to be the organic expression of a community; the second, which we may call post-traditional (Giorgi and Sassatelli, 2011: 1-11), are instead mostly associated with the contemporary culture industry and its rationales, their recent exponential growth seen as proof that we are faced by a non-organic, commercially driven phenomenon.

The distinction is relevant because, whilst traditional festivals have been studied, in particular within anthropology and folklore studies, as expressions of a given society and an entry point into its culture, values and identity, post-traditional festivals have been dismissed by some writers as banal, and banalizing ‘spectacles’ (Debord, 1994). Different approaches and literatures contribute to deepen this gulf, with contemporary festivals on the whole dismissed by mainstream social science and cultural theory and assessed in terms of their (economic) impact only. In this chapter, after a brief review of the dominant approach in urban festivals research, I try to uncouple these associations. That is, to explore the possibility that contemporary festivals, as expressions of the contemporary society in which they flourish, can provide a valuable analytical perspective on its public culture.¹

As hinted above, this chapter also has a thematic focus on *urban* festivals, or the relationship between festivals and urbanity. It does not come as a surprise

that, in a predominantly urban world, contemporary festivals tend to be urban too. The recent festival explosion has meant that today most cities have their own art festival. The majority of recently established festivals are devoted to more than one discipline or art, so that mixed arts festivals outnumber single genre festivals (PAYE, 2008; Allen and Shaw, 2000; Rolfe, 1992). Multidisciplinary festivals draw their specificity precisely from the combination of several artistic genres and types of events, usually reflected in an equally multifaceted mix of venues, audiences and aims (from 'pure' artistic to social activities) that also contributes to this type of contemporary artistic festival being on a continuum, rather than a clear-cut disjuncture, with community based festivals. So, whereas most festivals may stage events from more than one discipline (e.g. literature festivals often have a cinema section, music festivals include visual arts exhibitions, etc.), in mixed arts festivals no single genre dominates and defines the festival. As a result, many of these define themselves by referring to the location that hosts them. The urban dimension becomes a defining feature of most mixed arts festivals, in particular among the more established, international, ones.

Festivals and urbanity

Urban, mixed arts festivals are both intriguing and challenging for scholars. On the one hand, the 'mixed' nature of these festivals, means that their analysis cannot exclusively rely on any specific sectorial body of literature (e.g. music studies, film studies, art history, etc.) or genre development, such as those that kind be found for film festivals (Iordanova, 2009, Iordanova and Torchin, 2012), theatre festivals (Hauptfleisch *et al.*, 2007), or art biennials (Vogel, 2011). On the other, given that some of the major festivals in Europe and beyond are of this kind, empirical research has often concentrated on this type, either focusing on single festivals (see Bruce, 1975; Moffat, 1978 or, more recently, Jamieson (2004) on Edinburgh's festival) or comparing a few of them. Scholarly research on mixed arts urban festivals has drawn mainly from one of two bodies of literature, or, more rarely and mainly in overview articles rather than new empirical investigations, a combination of both (as in Quinn, 2005a, discussed below). In the first approach, contemporary festivals are compared to more 'traditional' community festivals, therefore reflecting on the possible relevance of the extensive anthropological literature on traditional, community festivals, for the study of contemporary, European or more generally 'Western' mixed arts festival, going back to socio-anthropological classics such as Durkheim (1912) and Turner (1982).

In his now classic definition Falassi noted that along with the major distinction between sacred and profane:

another basic typological distinction that is often made draws upon the setting of the festival, opposing rural to urban festivals. Rural festivals are supposedly older, agrarian, centred on fertility rites and cosmogony myths, while the more recent, urban festivals celebrate prosperity in less archaic forms and may be tied to foundation legends and historical events and feasts (Falassi, 1987: 3).

However, this seems to have given more legitimacy to the study of rural festivals, allegedly more ancient and rooted to community identity and, as noted in the introduction, may be associated with a dismissive account of contemporary, urban festivals. Falassi's own account is mainly geared towards such 'traditional' festivals, which are indeed the focus of most anthropological research. Authors following this approach have thus tended to look for traditional festivals in urban, contemporary contexts, as a result revolving around issues of loss of authenticity and invented traditions. Good examples that question the received clear cut dichotomy between traditional (authentic) and contemporary (inauthentic) are Piette's (1992) study of a Belgian carnival in the city of Binche, Azara and Crouch's (2006) work on the *Cavalcata sarda* in Sassari in Italy and Costa's (2002) study of the *Fallas* festival in Valencia in Spain.

Often, when studying contemporary arts festivals, only slight attention is paid to this literature, before turning to a second, distinct approach, which is also currently a dominant one. This is the so-called culture-led urban regeneration approach. Aimed at defining and assessing the impact of these festivals, the latter feeds a rich and developing literature, especially when considering a wider range of scholarship (including leisure and tourism studies, geography and planning, economy of culture). This field provides the majority of the literature on mixed arts festivals and further confirms the centrality of the urban context. The growing number of festivals in cities across Europe and the growing importance of festivals and more generally of big events (or even 'mega', such as World Expos and the Olympic Games, see Roche, 2000; Gold and Gold, 2004) within urban strategies, suggests that we need to consider relevant urban studies literature and pay appropriate attention to it.

In *Art Festival and the City*, Bernadette Quinn (2005a) focuses on the relationship of festivals to their urban settings, providing both a review of the literature and some insights from her previous empirical research on specific urban festivals (Quinn, 2003, 2005b). Quinn argues that we need more, and more multidimensional, research on festivals to assess whether they meet 'their undoubted potential in animating communities, celebrating diversity and