

# Culture, Society and Festivals: Cultural Studies' Perspective of Festival Research

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## ABSTRACT

*The review study maps out the topics of festival research which are adopted in the field of Cultural Studies, by means of an analysis of selected international English-language journals devoted to Cultural Studies which have been published in the last five years. Among the analysed journals are: International Journal of Cultural Studies, Space and Culture, Media, Culture & Society, and Continuum: Journal for Media & Cultural Studies.*

*The most common topics of the Cultural Studies' perspective on festival research are identified, i.e. festival audiences, festivals as a space where cultural identity negotiation takes place, festivals as part of the subcultural network, and festivals as a spectacle. A case study combining several qualitative research methods dominates the analysed examples.*

*This review is based on the assumption that Cultural Studies can provide an adequate background for specific topics of festival research and can expand its horizons beyond the currently prevailing Tourism, Management and Marketing investigations of festivals. However, the analysis also shows how scant attention is devoted to festival research by some leading Cultural Studies journals (e.g. Media, Culture & Society, International Journal of Cultural Studies). This is despite the fact that since the turn of the millennium, studies devoted to the cultural and social contexts of festival attendance and organisation have arisen across different fields of study.*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Context and Aim of the Review Study

The area of festival research is characterised by its interdisciplinary nature, diversity of topics, and more or less divergent theoretical and methodological approaches. There are probably two main branches or bases of recent festival research. The older one has roots in Anthropology and is represented by Alessandro Falassi's (1987) *Time out of time: Essays on the festival*, a seminal book which is still widely cited. The second branch, which has particularly influenced „literature studying event and festival impacts“ (García, 2009, p. 3), has its roots in Recreation and Leisure Studies and is represented by J. R. B. Ritchie (1984) and Donald Getz (1990, 1997).

It is particularly Donald Getz (2010) who tried to systemise knowledge about festivals and formulated Festival Studies as part of the wider field of Event Studies. On the basis of a review of „all festival-related articles published in English-language research journals through 2008,“ Getz (2010, p. 3) formulated three discourses on Festival Studies: Discourse on the Roles, Meanings and Impacts of Festivals in Society

and Culture, Discourse on Festival Tourism, and Discourse on Festival Management. It is necessary to mention that these journals were only those from the areas of Tourism, Leisure, (Arts) Management, Marketing, and Marketing Communication.

An effort for the concentration of knowledge about festivals to build one Festival Studies' discipline is also represented by the Film Festival Research Network, founded by Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist in 2008. In this case, there is one subject which interconnects more or less different research papers, and that is the film festival itself. And what is actually typical of researchers operating within this network is that they have similar backgrounds in the fields of Media Studies or Film Studies. On the contrary, Getz's Festival Studies are a less homogenous and somewhat artificial attempt, where the specific types of festivals as well as the used paradigms are thus not essential.

Taking into account research papers and studies dedicated to festivals for approximately the last 30 years, we can easily estimate that there is a greater interest in festivals in the fields of Tourism, Marketing and Management than in the areas of Humanities. This is indeed pointed out by Monica Sassatelli (2011, p. 12) in her essay written from a Cultural Studies' perspective, where a festival is conceptualised as part of the cultural public sphere. The Cultural Studies' perspective is at the core of this review. This review is based on the assumption that Cultural Studies can provide an adequate background for specific topics of festival research and can expand its horizons beyond the currently prevailing Tourism, Management and Marketing investigations of festivals.

The intent of the review is twofold. Firstly, it is a mapping of the topics which are adopted in the field of Cultural Studies for festival research. Secondly, this analysis examines how much space (if any) is devoted to festivals in the area of Cultural Studies. The review is based on an analysis of selected international English-language journals devoted to Cultural Studies which were published in the last five years.

## 1.2 Method

For the analysis, only international journals with a long-term focus on the area of Cultural Studies were selected. In so doing, four well-established journals were chosen. Journals specialising in a specific geopolitical and cultural area were excluded (e.g. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *French Cultural Studies*, and *Journal of African Cultural Studies*). The reason for this approach was to obtain a general view on recently used methods and topics related to festivals.

Table 1: Selected journals and number of reviewed articles

Number of articles from each journal	
International Journal of Cultural Studies	1
Space and Culture	3
Media, Culture & Society	0
Continuum: Journal for Medial & Cultural Studies	7

As the intent was to map the actual state of festival research, the 10 last editions of each journal were analysed (retrospectively from 1 June 2016). But the presumption that 40 volumes of 4 different journals would provide sufficient relevant research papers on the topic of festivals was refuted. There were only 2 research papers devoted to festivals. Based on this experience, the reference period was extended to from 1 January 2011 to 1 June 2016. Relevant research papers were then selected and analysed to create this study.

As Donald Getz (2010, p. 3) notes, a widely acceptable typology of festivals has not yet emerged. In this review, the general definition of a festival is a „themed, public celebration“ (Getz 2005, p. 21) that is held regularly at a same place. It is a (sacred or profane) time when community histories, values, ideologies and identity are jointly shared (Falassi 1987, p. 2). Festivals thus directly or indirectly affect all community members, and explicitly or implicitly refer to the fundamental values and worldview that are shared by the community and are the basis of their cultural and social identity (Delgado, 2016; Lee & Hsu, 2013). But as Melvin Delgado states (2016, p. 120), although festivals „can be a social capital bridge,“ they can also present the exclusion of some ethnic and racial groups.

This review is interested only in cultural festivals, as distinguished from parades (Delgado, 2016, pp. 101–130) or mega events (for definition of mega event see García 2004, 2009, 2012).

## 2. Festival Research in the Area of Cultural Studies

In the set of analysed research papers, three most frequently occurring topics could be traced. The topic of festival audience is the most consistent one. It is worth noting that all these papers dealing only with literary or writers' festivals and they were published in just one journal, i.e. *Continuum*. The more heterogeneous is thus a set of papers that are linked by topics of identity, power, and cultural tension between the old and the new, domestic and foreign. The last group of texts are those which in various ways touch on topics of subcultures, fandom and spectacle.

### 2.1 Towards Audience Research

As was already mentioned, there are three research papers devoted to audience, published in *Continuum*. These texts all refer to audience of writers' festivals (Johanson & Freeman, 2012; Driscoll, 2015) or literary festivals (Weber, 2015).

Katya Johanson and Robin Freeman (2012, p. 313) devote their case study to the *Eye of the Storm Writers' Festival* held in Alice Springs. The authors regard a festival as a return to a pre-modern reading-aloud style, in which an audience actively participates (Johanson & Freeman, 2013, p. 304). In this sense, a festival is a specific category of event where the experience of reading obtains a collective and social dimension, with a feeling of being part of a literary community (Johanson & Freeman, 2012, p. 303). The main aim of the research was to find what the motivation is to attend a festival and whether attendance heightens the reading experience. The authors found that the main reason for attending a festival is related to networking and a community get-together (Johanson & Freeman, 2012, p. 311). It is interesting that, even

during quiet listening, respondents experienced a feeling of „communal dialogue“ and felt a subtle pressure to interact with the writers (ibid.). The research results also show that a festival's size is important for participants, since they chose the *Eye of the Storm* because they believed that only truly interested participants meet at such a small festival and they would thus experience an authentic atmosphere. As this is a carefully selected case study (Johanson & Freeman, 2012, p. 308), examining only seven respondents in one festival day, its results cannot be generalised, as Weber (2015, p. 86) also points out.

Millicent Weber's (2015) article is more theoretical. For Weber, an adequate model of literary festival audience research has not yet been developed. And hence the audience at literary festivals is presented either as a „body of populist and popularising consumers, uncritically engaging with the mass culture produced and propagated in the festival setting“ (Weber, 2015, p. 85), or is situated within the context of „idealisation of particular qualities of the festival experience“ (Weber, 2015, p. 84). She therefore tries to create a scheme for the analysis of a festival audience through a combination of several conceptions of audience from Book History, Media and Communications Studies, and Theatre and Performance Studies. On this basis, Weber (2015, pp. 90–91) states that the individual experience of a participant may have several dimensions: aesthetic, cognitive, affective, and social. Each of these dimensions is intertwined with personal values, history, taste and expectations. These theoretical assumptions are then followed by an attempt at their validation through „a comparison with audience members' descriptions of their literary festival experiences taken from online weblogs“ (Weber, 2015, p. 90). It is a fairly questionable approach when she selects the appropriate quotes from a sample of analysed weblogs and connects them with specific dimensions to confirm their relation to the knowledge, values and expectations of an audience member. Although weblogs could be an interesting resource of otherwise inaccessible information, in the case of research of an individual participant's experience, it seems that it would be better supplemented by further data obtained through other channels and research methods (e.g. in-depth interviews with authors of researched weblogs).

Whereas Weber (2015, p. 7) proposes a multidimensional framework for understanding literary festival audiences, Beth Driscoll (2015) only takes up the affective dimension to explore an audience's emotional engagement through a large set of audience responses to the *Melbourne Writers' Festival*. Driscoll's case study is based on several assumptions. Above all, that audience members see themselves as actively engaged participants (Driscoll, 2015, p. 862), and this engagement is intellectual as well as emotional and intimate (Driscoll, 2015, p. 861). Much more interesting for festival research, although unfortunately not fully elaborated, is Driscoll's (2015, p. 862) conceptualisation of the literary festival as an institution creating an intimate public sphere, which is defined as an affective space of shared consumption and experience of social belonging. Social media such as Twitter then expand this affective space of an intimate public sphere (Driscoll, 2015, p. 869). For this reason, for the quantitative sentiment analysis of attendees' emotional response to the festival, Driscoll selected two datasets: tweets using the official hashtag #mwf13 and answers to two specific questions as part of an audience survey conducted online in 2013 by festival organi-

sers. What is absent from this research is a clearer definition of who the audience is. A dataset of tweets contains not only comments from attendees, but also from organisers and authors. As the final statistics do not distinguish between them, one cannot know how the organisers influence the final results. This is quite a different approach from that of Johanson and Freeman (2012, p. 310) who „avoided including participants who were involved in the ‘supply’ side of the festival.“ Driscoll examines the usefulness of such a method for audience research. However, she points out, that this method could rather function as part of a multi-method research. Here, it is necessary to recall that qualitative methods are what might be a contribution of Cultural and Communication Studies to festival research, as their quantitative assessment is the domain of the Tourism and Marketing investigations into festivals.

## 2.2 Where Cultural Negotiation of Identity Takes Place

A number of papers touches, in various ways, on a combination of programmatic components of Cultural Studies (especially issues of culture and power, social stratification and diversity, ethnicity and race). The link between these papers is their interest in the topic of identity which prevails over the others. As they concern identity, its cultural and symbolic power connotations, in a variety of contexts, I have summarised them under Laura Donnelly's (2016, p. 1) description of a festival as a form of „cultural display [that] can be powerful spaces of cultural negotiation“.

Khoo and Noonan's (2011) case study is devoted to the *Go for Gold Chinese Festival* in the small, former mining town of Nundle. Despite there used to be a strong community of Chinese miners in the town (Khoo & Noonan, 2011, p. 492), it was not before the sixth festival that the celebration of Chinese history and heritage became a central theme of this event. Khoo and Noonan (2011, pp. 494–495) suggest that this was a strategic decision and the *Go for Gold* is an example of an event where „clothing, decorations, food and music on display are part of the festival atmosphere and not a standard aspect of Nundle life“ (Khoo & Noonan, 2011, p. 498). In this connection, they claim that Nundle's effort „to build the perceived authenticity of Chinese-ness“ rather „erodes the regional authenticity of the event“ (Khoo & Noonan, 2011, p. 499). The authors hence want to open debate on some consequences of the festival for the local cultural heritage and identity of the place as well as its inhabitants. Khoo and Noonan (2011, p. 498) ask the important question at the very conclusion: „... what does it mean when a Chinese heritage festival is held without the major involvement of Chinese groups?“ Unfortunately, their research does not provide a clear answer to this.

The article *What's in the Bang?* written by M.A. Falzon and Ch. M. Cassar (2015), is also related to the topic of cultural heritage and identity of a particular population group. Falzon and Cassar focus on a specific topic related to the organisation of traditional Maltese festivals celebrating Catholic patron saints. And this is the issue of the fireworks that are an intrinsic part of these festivals and are so important that many festival groups have their own fireworks factories and fireworks committees. Falzon and Cassar (2015, p. 145) regard the noise made by fireworks as a cultural product and agree with Oosterbaan (2009) who argues that sound, the important element of public space, is an „essential constituent of identities“ and „an essential

marker of territoriality“. The fireworks at a Maltese festival function in this way, since they are part of the rivalry and competition among local groups (Falzon & Cassar, 2015, p. 144), as well as representing collective effort (Falzon & Cassar, 2015, p. 147). But the noise of fireworks can also be seen as a kind of violence. As Falzone and Cassar point out (2015: 148), fireworks are one of the most contentious issues of public contestation, their moderation is required, but their regulation remains in question. According to authors (Falzon & Cassar, 2015, pp. 149–150), the question of fireworks' regulations present a contradiction between the traditional and the modern, between Maltese identity and history on the one side and the modern state of Malta that is part of the European union (and as such of the “modern western society”) on the other side. Falzone and Cassar (2015, p. 149) state: „Noise, in this sense, sound that is neither spatially confined nor moderated, becomes a key signifier of underdevelopment, of a missed bus to civilisation.“

Identity of colonies and their inhabitants, as well as their relations to former or current colonizer, is also the topic of Laura Donnelly's (2016) research of *Rue Créole*, the *French Antillean Cultural Festival*. According to Donnelly (2016, p. 2), the festival construes a space that generates narratives, experiences and new memories and as such allows for displaced people to forge connections with their home (Donnelly, 2016, p. 2). But what if these events are organised by a dominant group (in this case study, it is the French government) and are consumed not only by diasporic Creole people (insiders), but also by non-Creole spectators (outsiders, as they are labelled by Donnelly)? This question especially concerns the mutual tension of different but coexisting cultural identities, cultural cohesion and negotiation. Donnelly tries to answer it by using the spatial analysis of two concerts which took place during Rue Créole. On the one hand, there is Akiyo's concert that presents the case of spatial dissonance as a result of differences between the organisers' vision and the insiders' wishes. And on the other hand, Kali's concert, where different social and cultural backgrounds, as well as visions and wishes, can result in a space that is simultaneously local and cosmopolitan, without either one dominating the other (Donnelly, 2016, pp. 8–9). According to Donnelly (2016, p. 11), spatial analysis of festivals as a site of cultural interaction „can allow us to gain a more complete understanding of the ways in which space changes in hegemonic situations, as well as open the possibility to better understand the postcolonial relationships“.

While Donnelly concentrates on the spatial aspects of the festival, or its influence on the manifestations of cultural identity and social differences, Kristie Jamieson (2014) moves to the area of „administrative imaginaries of culture“. The paper is not primary about the festival itself. It is rather a critical investigation of the global cultural network such as Creative City, which is seen as an internationalist institution, and its administrative imaginaries that legitimise both the global and local dimensions of the cultural identity of a place and its inhabitants (Jamieson, 2014, p. 293). Jamieson's term of internationalist administrative imaginaries refers to artificially, intellectually and administratively created concepts of cultural destination, which are part of economic and political decisions. The image of a cultural centre is created by local cultural policy and local government, for example, through organising festivals. And in the view of the paper, these concepts are not only confirmed but also influenced by some

national and international institutions. Administrative imaginaries, as Jamieson mentions, also influence urban identity since the internationalist administrative imaginary of an urban festival „validated and culturalized an affective urban identity that continues to permeate discursive networks of city planning,“ (Jamieson, 2014, p. 294). As such, administrative imaginaries seem not only to be an external image but an institutionalised image, confirmed by government and institutions as well as by citizens of the destination.

### 2.3 Spectacle and Subcultural Networks

The rest of the research papers can be grouped under the other Cultural Studies' interests: subcultures and spectacle. Both these issues are related to festivals, since festivals are usually organised and attended by people with similar interests and world-views, who share similar values or tastes. This indeed occurs in the case of festival audience research, as mentioned above. The festival audience prefers, or even requires, authenticity of the experience. But what is this authenticity and are attendees able to distinguish it from an artificially construed festival space? Khoo and Noonan (2011, p. 498) point out that a number of festival attendees, although they require authenticity and originality, enjoy the „activities and spectacle of such an event that are highly construed or mediated“ as well.

The paper by Kevin E. McHugh and Ann M. Fletchall (2012), touching on both of these issues, is a case study of the *Arizona Renaissance Festival (Ren Fest)*. The authors recall the transformation of Renaissance Festivals from the 1960s' counterculture to the currently mainstream one. They then arrive at the proposition that *Ren Fest* is a simulacrum „fixated on sign value and consumption“ and „imploding fact and fantasy under the playful ruse of a Renaissance-era marketplace“ (McHugh & Fletchall, 2012, p. 383). McHugh and Fletchall (2012, pp. 385–387) also confront the current Renaissance Festival's significance in the role and value of pre-modern carnivals and festivals. As pointed out by the authors, while pre-modern European festivals and carnivals were ritualised inversions of the social order (McHugh & Fletchall, 2012, p. 386), *Ren Fest* is „an example of the carnivalesque in contemporary society, restrained and sanitised, dampened by conventions of acceptable public behaviour“ (*ibid.*). Concurrently, festivals are no longer communal participatory carnivals, but the place of alienation and spectacular separation in commodity culture (McHugh & Fletchall, 2012, p. 390). It seems that only laughter allows attendees to „participate from within in the emotion of the other one who laughs“ (McHugh & Fletchall, 2012, p. 388)). Thus, for McHugh and Fletchall (2012, pp. 382, 387–390), *Ren Fest* is a catapult for escaping laughter, moments of „affect and emotion that arise spontaneously ... uniting performers and audience as *communitas*“.

The issue of a construed festival's display of spectacle can also be found in the paper of I. A. Celik (2016) who examines the representation of violence as part of a „scandalous framework“ of the 2009 *Festival de Cannes*. Because the predominant part of the article presents a thorough analysis of selected award-winning films, the article deals with the *Festival* itself only in its introduction and conclusion. However, merely in these few mentions, Celik opens up an interesting debate on the ethics of the selection of films, and the presentation and awarding of prizes within the Film

Festival network. According to Celik (2016), the *Festival de Cannes* has always operated within a „scandalous framework“, which refers not only to scandals about individual directors and films, but also to the policy of nominating films that transgress boundaries and break taboos. As this framework increases the economic value both of the selected productions and the *Festival* itself, there is a question that remains unanswered: Are these films selected for the Festival due to their high artistic quality, or is it just a marketing strategy of sensationalism? (Celik, 2016, p. 8)

Both aforementioned papers deal not only with the issue of spectacle but of sub-cultures and fandoms as well. They are connected to Nakajima's (2014, pp. 61–62) study of film festivals as social institutions, where an unseparated process of consumption and production takes place. In China, those film festivals with the highest profile are government-organised and screen only officially sanctioned films (in the sense of having passed censorship control). In contrast, as Nakajima argues (2014, p. 57), festivals for Chinese independent films are organised without government sponsorship. And because independent films are still considered as illegal by the State film bureaucracy, these film festivals often face government restrictions, and in some cases are held for only a small circle of insiders. As Nakajima (2014, p. 61) concludes: „without the alternative venues [film clubs and film festivals] and media of consumption [DVD and the Internet], Chinese independent films do not exist as a social reality. Even if individual films are produced, they cannot reach Chinese domestic audiences of any kind.“

A specific cultural network is also the topic of Rosa Reitsamer's (2012) case study of Female Pressure, a female-oriented network for musical professionals and activists in Electronic Dance Music scenes. This study is not primarily devoted to festivals. Nevertheless, it is precisely music festivals which become the basis for the third part of the article that deals with the network's activities „against discrimination and exclusion from club nights and music festivals“ (Reitsamer, 2012, p. 400). This is because music festivals, such as Mutek and Sonar, are criticised by the Female Pressure network for their unequal representation of women in their programmes and for invitations only to a select female DJ sector, usually not as a result of the festival's programme policies, but as part of gender stereotypes, which leads to the further reinforcement of gender differences (Reitsamer, 2012, pp. 406–407).

### 3. Conclusion

There are several methods of categorising the analysed research papers into more or less homogeneous groups. It was possible to group them according to their type (papers devoted to film festivals, literary festivals, cultural heritage festivals, etc.), or their purpose (festivals as economic instruments, rituals, etc.), or their size (huge, small, one-day, several-days, local, international, etc.). However, this review tries to capture the particular topics that represent the traditional areas of interest in Cultural Studies. As it is specifically these areas, i.e. Cultural Studies' perspective on festival research, which can contribute to the recent research of festivals. It is its critical insight that rather problematises the topic within a broader context, rather than the often articulated perception of a festival as a tool for culture-led regeneration, or as an instrument



of rapid cultural and economic development of a locality and its image (see e.g. Quinn, 2005; Richards, 2004).

As the review shows, there are approaches that differ from the content of the three Festival Studies' discourses formulated by Getz (2010). It is not usual for the Festival Studies to use of postcolonial theory, gender studies, the concept of simulacrum or spectacle, institutional construction of reality, or even the qualitative research of audience (rather quantitative questionnaires are used in the Festival Studies, but this is not the rule). From the perspective of Cultural Studies, festivals are rather the site where cultural and power conflict can occur and where cultural negotiations take place. Festivals construe a space for the generation of narrative, experience and memory. As such, they are a public sphere in which all involved actors actively participate and are simultaneously influenced by this sphere as well as shaping it.

Nevertheless, as the analysis of the selected journals shows, festival research does not receive as much attention as the reporting of festivals does in journals devoted to Tourism and Event Management<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In the reference period, more than double the number of articles was devoted to festivals in four Tourism and Marketing journals: Journal of Travel Research, Leisure Studies, Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing, and Journal of Sustainable Tourism.

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