

# Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere

*Edited by*

**Liana Giorgi, Monica Sassatelli  
and Gerard Delanty**



Routledge Advances in Sociology

# Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere

*Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere* provides the first major social-scientific study of contemporary arts festivals in the wake of their explosion in popularity over the past decade. It explores the cultural significance of these festivals from their location within the cultural public sphere, examining them as sites for contestation and democratic debate and as examples of a particular aesthetic cosmopolitanism.

The book approaches contemporary festivals as relatively autonomous social texts that need interpretation and contextualization. This perspective, combined with a diversified set of theoretical approaches and research methods, and guided by a common thematic rationale, places the volume squarely within some of the most debated topics in current social sciences. Furthermore, the multifaceted nature of festivals allows for unusual but useful connections to be made across several fields of social inquiry.

This timely edited collection brings together contributions from key figures across the social sciences, and is valuable reading for undergraduate students, postgraduates and professionals working within the areas of contemporary social theory, cultural theory and visual culture.

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# **Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere**

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and Gerard Delanty**

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# Introduction

*Liana Giorgi and Monica Sassatelli*

In the early days of sociological inquiry, beginning with Durkheim ([1912] 1995), festivals began to be recognized as instances of ‘collective effervescence’, and therefore as channels for expressing and consolidating a sense of community. This was as true of the arts festivals in ancient Athens (Ober 2008) as of the revolutionary festivals at the time of the French Revolution (Shiner 2001). Traditional festivals organized in various rural communities across the centuries to mark the change of seasons fulfilled a similar purpose. In contrast, contemporary festivals receive little attention from the social sciences other than as ritual performances in the context of anthropological studies or as impact factors in the framework of socio-economic assessments of the so-called cultural industry.

Yet, following Raymond Williams ([1961] 2001), one of the central figures in the sociology of culture, understanding societies is concomitant to exploring the ways in which people form communities. The study of communities is at the same time the study of communication in its various forms – whether in the political or legal–constitutional arena as proposed by Habermas (1992); in the context of social institutions such as religion, the school, the workplace or the social movement, as in traditional sociological inquiry (Giddens 1993); in the context of the old and new media or, indeed, in the framework of cultural exchanges and encounters. Moreover, culture is not to be understood only with reference to ‘national identity’ or even multiculturalism, but more broadly as including aesthetic forms of cultural expression, and hence also the arts. This is perhaps even more important today in view of globalization and the associated more general trans-national flows of capital, people and resources.

Against the above background, the present volume represents the first comprehensive social-scientific study of contemporary arts festivals. Besides looking at how arts festivals negotiate and communicate collective identities – how they have done so in history and how they do so today – we advance a new perspective by locating arts festivals as instances of the cultural public sphere. The latter concept is here used to refer to the articulation of politics and societal issues as contested domains through aesthetic modes of communication. In other words, we study arts festivals as instances of communication and community-building and we are also particularly interested in the ways in which they foster political opinion formation and political identities.

This is a very timely publication. During the past few decades there has been an explosion of festivals throughout the world and especially in Europe. This is the consequence of several factors: migration, cultural globalization and the erosion of the distinction between high and low cultures through the wider democratization of cultural taste, as well as related changes in the nature of the public and the audience. Some festivals are explicitly defined as sites for contestation and democratic debate; almost all carry political messages one way or another. In addition, post-traditional festivals are channels for experiencing and reflecting on internationalism and cosmopolitanism.

The authors consider examples of contemporary international arts festivals as relatively autonomous social texts or scenes that need interpretation and contextualization. Combined with a diversified set of theoretical approaches and research methods, and guided by a common thematic rationale, this places the volume squarely within some of the most debated topics in current social sciences. In this introductory chapter we elaborate on the main themes that underlie the book, and also present its plan and a summary of the individual chapters.

## Public culture

'Popular culture' is a redundant expression: all culture is 'popular' in some sense; it would simply fade away if it were meaningful to nobody (Griswold 1997). This is even more the case for '*public* culture', since we can certainly say that all culture is public: meanings are, by definition, shared understandings that we learn, produce and reproduce in and for interaction; even subcultures are public in this sense, although their reach may be more limited and self-enclosed. At the same time the concept of public culture is useful because the cultural sphere, unlike the political one, is associated with the private domain, especially in terms of the disengaged consumption of culture industry entertainment (Hartley and Green 2006; Gray 2006). Crucial in the idea of public culture is the constitutive dimension of reception or interpretation within the production of culture itself. Moreover, the notion emphasizes those dimensions of the multifaceted and contested concept of culture that precede and question the idea of *ex post* depictions or representations of social life, instrumental to the orderly divisions of the latter into separate groups (identified by culture as discrete units of 'way of life'). By insisting on the public dimension of culture, we are also forcing ourselves to recognize that culture – in its aesthetic forms as well – can be appropriated and influenced from different standpoints, and by different actors, agendas and taste preferences.

In this sense the notion of public culture is both more specific and more inclusive than the related, and recently much theorized and studied, one of 'public sphere'. It is more specific because it concentrates on the cultural dimension, whilst the public sphere encompasses others, and has a strong focus on the political dimension in particular. It is more inclusive because it is less predicated on the national configuration as a term of reference – as studies on

the public sphere have been – seeing it as a distinctive feature of modern, national (and mostly Western) societies. Not surprisingly, therefore, it has proven difficult to rework the notion of the public sphere to apply to a world no longer exclusively organized according to national cultures and canons. This is probably most evident in the European context: whilst several models of a European public sphere have been put forward – ranging from a supra-national, overarching and EU-based public sphere through the idea of Europeanized, but still nationally based, public spheres to that of inter- or cross-connecting public spheres emerging mainly from sharing debates and the cross-fertilization of discourses (Delanty and Rumford 2005; Eder 2006; Giorgi *et al.* 2006) – none seems to have settled the matter. The very notion of a sphere, with its implicit suggestion of wholeness and exhaustiveness, hardly fits with the ever-changing, unfinished process of Europeanization that, as an increasing amount of research demonstrates, contains processes both of convergence and of increased pluralization and can mean different things in different contexts and for different agencies – as some of the chapters on European cases in this book also show.

Indeed, within the public sphere, some aspects have been more studied than others. Particular attention has been given to those related to strong institutions, such as religious or political ones, that have always been conceived of as primary sources of identity formation and therefore terrains of key debate. However, there are other milieux that can be thematized as sites of public culture. Among the most neglected, until recently, were those related to artistic or cultural expressions in the restricted sense of aesthetic artefacts and activities, since these were considered as mere epiphenomena. It is somewhat ironic that this should be the case, given that the very notion of the public sphere as formulated by Habermas in the 1960s took inspiration from literary criticism (Habermas [1962] 1989). He elaborated the concept of the public sphere – the mediating instance between the private and public authority, through the vehicle of public opinion as the product of the free debate taking place in the discursive space the public sphere creates – referring to the literary critical discussion that found a home in London's coffee houses, France's *salons* and Germany's *Tischgesellschaften*. It is from this initial 'literary public sphere' that a public sphere proper developed, where the civil society of the rising bourgeoisie allowed the 'public use of reason'. This literary origin of the public sphere, however, has not been the subject of as much critical attention as other aspects have been (mainly its dimension of exclusion and inequality: see Fraser 1990). The same is true of Habermas's account of the decline of that sphere under the pressure of cultural industry and media development and the related shift from a 'reasoning' to a 'consuming' public, clearly under the influence of Horkheimer's and Adorno's original critique of the culture industry. The diagnosis of the decline of a culture-debating in favour of a culture-consuming public sphere has opened the way for the dismissal of the cultural dimension as merely an illustrative example and not the real thing. Today this dismissal is less tenable, not least because the standard notion of the public sphere that is



premised on the sharing of a common culture (so that a domain of common concern can be identified and inclusivity made available, at least in principle) has become much more problematic in the current conditions of cultural fragmentation. Public sphere theory can be significantly revived by a renewed interest in its link with cultural forms (Jones 2007). A cultural public sphere, as argued by Jim McGuigan – and as he explores further with specific reference to festivals in his contribution to this volume – ‘refers to the articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain through affective (aesthetic and emotional) modes of communication’ (McGuigan 2004: 435). This volume contributes to investigating this link, both theoretically and by offering a range of empirical cases of post-traditional festivals.

### **Post-traditional festivals**

Now, what do we mean by post-traditional festivals, and why is it important to concentrate on them as sites of the cultural public sphere: that is, on their cultural significance? As with all ‘posts’, the term suggests a critical relationship with forerunners and, in particular, with the role they were given in (allegedly ‘traditional’) societies and are still given in the study of them. Indeed, one could equally, and more simply, say ‘contemporary festivals’; however, by implying in a way that all contemporary festivals are by definition non-traditional, this apparently less controversial expression betrays a more evaluative notion of tradition (or lack of it).

Traditional feasts and festivals constitute, symbolically, a renewal of the past in the present, a way of recalling the origins – whether mythical or historical – of a community of men [sic]; they are occasions when cultural and national identity can be re-asserted and feelings of self-awareness and participation in common experiences reaffirmed ... Feasts played an important role in the past and nowadays there is a new interest in their socio-cultural function as the quest for self-identity and self-assertion unfolds within modern societies.

(Metraux 1976: 7)

Taken from the introduction to an early double issue of the UNESCO journal *Cultures* that was dedicated to festivals, and although still formulated in a pre-postmodernist language (little aware of gender issues or challenges to the nation as the taken for granted site of identification), this quotation is illustrative on a number of levels. Most importantly it shows how deep-seated is the idea that festivals are important to social and cultural (re)production. Secondly, it advances the idea that this does not only apply to traditional festivals and traditional societies.

Unfortunately, the subsequent observation by the author, that unlike festivals in ‘traditional communities’ their heirs’ significance for contemporary society has not really been investigated by social scientists, remains true over

thirty years on. The point, of course, is not only to study the ‘survival’ of traditional festivals within contemporary society, as this author still recommends, but to study the significance of contemporary, post-traditional festivals as well, treasuring the lessons from that socio-anthropological approach so successfully applied to traditional ones. Traditional festivals have been considered relevant and revealing of the societies they emanate from; this can and should be taken up for contemporary festivals as well – these, too, can be seen as revealing of the modern societies they emanate from. The tendency within some academic circles to assume the decline of culture (and of festivals) because of the growing influence of the market and the cultural industry has led to their dismissal as irrelevant in terms of community building, cultural debate, and also politics. Even if this were the case, it ought to be shown through empirical inquiry rather than hastily assumed in the course of a normative debate.

### **Festival narratives and conflicting realities**

As James English puts it in his contribution to the present volume, there are two apparently conflicting views of arts festivals – as there are more generally of the public sphere or of the notion of ‘publicity’, understood broadly to refer to all means of communication, mediated or not. The first is through the lens of an optimistic reading of Habermas, in terms of communicative action, i.e. as opportunities for realizing a discourse about public good(s). The second is through the more competitive lenses of Bourdieu (1995), which emphasize structure and the means of drawing and reproducing distinctions within societies. According to Giorgi *et al.* (2006) writing on the emerging European public sphere, these different views of the public sphere are not necessarily to be treated as inherently contradictory. Rather, as suggested by Appiah (2005), following Kant, they can be judged as differences in perspective (cf. Giorgi 2009). The communicative action approach is a theory of action – as its name suggests – and therefore places the emphasis on agency. By contrast, the field approach is a descriptive–analytical theory, which is more interested in understanding patterns and structures and the power relations between them. Both approaches are valid, and both have something to contribute to the understanding of the dynamics of the public sphere, as well as of the cultural public sphere and hence also of festivals. The first approach demonstrates how ideas, beliefs and norms inform festival organization and shows that only on this basis is it possible to create content, which, in turn, brings forth ‘effervescent’ experiences. The second approach shows the way in which these contents (often idealistic) are embedded in the real world of industrial power-relations, networks and scarce resources. The latter act as constraining factors, limiting the scope and outreach of content and determining what can and cannot be realized. But, ultimately, it is the underlying beliefs, norms and values – however watered down they might sometimes become through their insertion in the real world of power relations – that enable persons as citizens to abstract

themselves from their specific and individual viewpoints and participate in activities that contribute to the building of (political) communities – national or trans-national.

All contributors to this volume struggle with this duality – and, unsurprisingly, given their different value orientations as persons, citizens or professional social scientists – they all display different preferences when concentrating on their subject of study, i.e. one or another arts festival, or when assuming a comparative perspective. But the main added value of the present volume is the way in which it starkly demonstrates how both of these approaches are valid and important for understanding the dynamics within the emerging global public culture and how it plays out in different nations, cities, genres, audiences and other group collectives. It is not possible at this stage to entirely specify the contours and boundaries of this public culture or the political identities these might eventually bring about. But what can be said is that contemporary societies, and especially the educated middle classes, which have grown in numbers as a result of social democratic policies over the last half century, are ‘culture hungry’ – to borrow a term from Bennett (1999) writing about the foundation of the Cheltenham literature festival back in 1949. What is more, the ‘culture’ that is craved cannot be easily classified into the traditional canonical configurations of high- or low-brow, or by nationality, genre or orientation. There is a certain conspicuousness in the idea of festivals and their audiences – which some sociologists of culture like to refer to as ‘omnivorousness’ (see also Regev in this volume) in order to emphasize its never-gratifying character – but what this also denotes is an excess of curiosity. How deep or sustainable this curiosity is and what it ends up implying in terms of our future societies and politics can perhaps not yet be established; but what it does suggest is that – unlike what cultural pessimists or those who herald the end of both history and democracy might fear – it is not a negative notion and is certainly a necessary, even if not sufficient, condition for radical political thought.

### **Plan of the book**

The present volume is based on empirical research carried out by different authors in different contexts. The first couple of chapters, by the authors of this introduction, present the overall theoretical framework. Based on this, the subsequent contributors examine different festivals and advance their own theoretical reflections. Different perspectives are offered by different authors: thus Papastergiadis and Martin consider also the changing role and function of the festival curator; McGuigan looks at the role of corporate sponsorship; English considers the social geography of festivals and, in particular, of the film industry; Fabiani and Regev explore the expectations of festival audiences, whilst Roche as well as Cummings *et al.* concentrate their attention on the cosmopolitan values mediated by festivals. Finally, Segal and Blumauer as well as Chalcraft and Magaudo reflect on the impact of festivals on specific artistic genres – film and music respectively. In his concluding chapter, Gerard Delanty

recaps the book's main arguments and draws conclusions for the future of aesthetic cosmopolitanism and public culture.

In summary, the book's chapters advance the following arguments.

Echoing what was said in the previous section, in the first chapter of this volume *Monica Sassatelli* questions the frequent normative assumption in sociological studies of festivals that post-traditional festivals are 'less' than traditional festivals in the sense of displaying a 'loss' in terms of 'authenticity'. Using Simmel's concept of sociability, developed in his short analysis of world exhibitions at the end of the nineteenth century, she reminds us that sociology had always had problems with its attitude to 'entertainment', especially when the latter began to get entangled with the modern relations of economic production and consumption. Simmel, on the other hand, chose to view world exhibitions as 'social phenomena that continue to exist after the original function for which they emerged fades' and as phenomena that tell us something about the specific 'modern' form of sociability within urban spaces. These are not only spaces of alienation, as they have often been depicted in literature (think, for instance, of Dickens); they are also spaces of diversity and over-stimulation, with all the positive and negative connotations this might entail. Festivals, suggests Sassatelli, ought to be studied in a similar manner, i.e. not as 'time out of time' experiences (Falassi 1987) but rather as social phenomena to be contextualized in the particular settings and contradictions of modern societies. It is also for this reason that it is counterproductive to always think of festivals, or public culture more generally, in terms of dichotomous either/or categories, i.e. either as economic urban regeneration projects or as instances of aesthetic and reflexive cosmopolitanism.

Taking up this perspective, *Liana Giorgi* takes a look at literature festivals, focusing especially on the Hay-on-Wye Festival, the International Literature Festival Berlin and the Borderlands Festival. Literature festivals are comparative latecomers in the festival scene, and yet they display several similarities, in terms of rituals and objectives, to the literary salons of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that paved the way for the emergence of representative democracy and the democratic public sphere of the twentieth century. Obviously, Giorgi argues, the contemporary literature festival is a different 'social fact', in Durkheim's sense, from the literary salon – not least because the social and economic conditions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are very different from those of earlier times. In both times, however, the function fulfilled by literary events is that of creating a space for discussions and debates that transcend the purely political, social or personal and rather seek their dialectic intersection. It is also for this reason that it would be wrong to see literature festivals – and festivals more generally – as mere expressions of the profit-making logic of capitalist societies as it spills over into the cultural realm.

A similar viewpoint is adopted by *Nikos Papastergiadis* and *Meredith Martin*, who explore the explosion of the art biennale across first- and second-tier cities around Europe and Asia by considering the multiple ways in which this phenomenon is situated in contemporary urban and cultural landscapes. Today,

the authors argue, culture is used for promoting both urban regeneration and social integration – in the ways indicated by McGuigan and Fabiani (see below) – but it would be wrong to view it merely as a mirror of processes of capital flow and cultural exchange. Rather, culture critically takes on these processes, and it is for this reason that global public culture has no fixed identity – neither territorially nor administratively, and also not with respect to value commitments. This is also well reflected in the genealogy of the Venice Biennale, which grew out of the ‘salon era’ of international pavilions into a multidisciplinary survey of contemporary trends in visual arts. This change is partly driven by – but is also driving – the role of the curator. His or her function is no longer that of interpreting, classifying or even canonizing art forms, but rather that of creating a platform for a dialogue as to what art is or might become.

Taking a more critical view, *James English* considers that festivals can be viewed in one of two ways: seen through the early Habermas lens, they represent vehicles of communicative action, providing an international arena for the exchange of new cultural forms and the broadening of tastes; viewed through the lenses of Bourdieu, they are instead instruments for the reproduction of relations of economic domination and for the exploitative deployment of symbolic capital. By exploring the emergence and growth of African film festivals during the last few decades – largely through the economic and symbolic support of French cinema – he shows how both of these approaches are correct and legitimate in a way, with one or the other dominating at different points in time. At present, however, and insofar as African film is concerned, there is definitely an asymmetry in favour of Western (French) national cultural politics. The fact that many African countries are not supportive environments for individual artists aggravates this trend. It is for this reason that in this specific case colonization continues to be a useful and applicable narrative for understanding the operation of the festival circuit. This is what English calls the ‘unhappy features of cinema’s [current] symbolic geography’, which does not mean that it does not also nurture small, minor and third cinema.

In a similar vein, *Jim McGuigan* undertakes a critique of the regenerative festival idea, which informs much contemporary economic investment in cultural mega-events in old and new urban spaces. Culture, including popular culture, sometimes articulates issues that are marginalized in mainstream and traditional political discourse, and thus entails an awareness raising or even a potential radicalization, at least in the long term. However, cultural policy is today much more concerned with economic efficiency based on commercial and promotional assumptions than it is with cultural enlightenment. It is for this reason that the ‘regenerative festival’ intervention logic cannot be taken at face value but must always be questioned and scrutinized anew. McGuigan does this with reference to the 2000 Millennium Dome project in London and Liverpool’s 2008 European Capital of Culture festival. His research shows that the Millennium Dome project in London was dominated by corporate sponsorships dressed up as public–private partnerships, of which only very few were

‘associative’ in character, i.e. not directly seeking to influence content and representation. In Liverpool the situation was slightly better, but still, overall, the event was used primarily to advance regeneration according to the neoliberal economic logic.

*Jean-Louis Fabiani*, relying on research carried out on French festivals, in particular the Cannes Film Festival and the Avignon Festival, views cultural events as spaces driven by dialogic reason, created to expand national citizenship in the democratic sense while still maintaining the nation-state as their main cultural reference. Their targeted audiences are the educated middle classes, and, considering the expansion of the latter over the years, it would seem that the democratization logic driving festivals is working as intended. At the same time, the asymmetry between the artist (as the producer of knowledge or aesthetics) and the audience (as the passive recipient of this artistic codified experience) is maintained and reproduced. The expanding cultural diversification of festivals is, however, leading to the shift of the national–international boundary frame originally used to legitimize (French) festivals’ identities as ‘national’ objects engaged in cultural (international) diplomacy. In turn, this creates a new or different framework for the understanding of citizenship.

*Motti Regev* is also interested in the festival audience. His research, which focused on four Israeli festivals, namely the Israel Festival Jerusalem, the Red Sea Jazz Festival, the Haifa International Film Festival and the Jerusalem International Film Festival, reveals the ways in which international cosmopolitan festivals serve the cultural tastes of the educated middle classes, which are best described as ‘omnivorous’ in their conspicuousness, i.e. their abundance and extravagance. Festivals, according to Regev, are conspicuous in terms of their rites of display and consumption – just consider the concentration of so many ‘shows’ from so many countries in so few days – and in their dramatization of events as ‘special’ either with respect to representing prominence or for featuring the less well known. It is also not surprising, argues Regev, that small countries, as also second-tier cities, are especially interested in launching arts festivals. Internationalism is the opposite, perhaps, but also an important reference point for national culture (Cinar 2010); therefore, without the enlightened eclecticism and humanist openness that characterizes the omnivorous cosmopolitan middle classes (and their festivals) it is also no longer possible to sustain the distinction, as such, of nationality – an oxymoron perhaps, but one that underlines the contradictory nature of modern civilizations.

*Maurice Roche*, writing about the historic development of mega-events such as world Expos and the Olympics, thinks that their cultural significance lies in their minimalist cosmopolitanism, namely in representing instances of peaceful coexistence or the proof, perhaps, that the latter is possible. In addition, their proclamation and advancement of human rights, multiculturalism and anti-racism are not mere marketing strategies but authentic symbolic representations. In this respect, the significance of such events is not diminished but is rather amplified through mediatization. Through modern means of communication

the 'public' or audience of such events is increased many times over, thus also increasing the scope and extent of this 'mediated cosmopolitanism'.

Joanne Cummings, Ian Woodward and Andy Bennett look at the ways in which festivals – and music festivals especially – are contributing to raising young people's awareness about environmental sustainability and a low-carbon society. Their conclusions are based on research carried out on five Australian festivals, the Peat's Ridge Festival, the Big Day Out, the Falls Festival, the Homebake Festival and Splendour in the Green Festival. All of the festivals employ or advertise various environmental sustainability approaches such as organic waste composting, recycling or the use of biodegradable cutlery. The authors consider this 'greenism' of festivals an expression of cosmopolitanism understood as placing local interests in the context of global concerns. Music festivals have been pioneering in this respect.

Jérôme Segal and Christine Blumauer trace the development of the Cannes Film Festival since its inception following the end of the Second World War, and show how this grew out of a project of French cultural diplomacy into an arena serving both political and economic (film-industrial) interests. At the same time the festival is a ground – and a leading one at that – for presenting and discovering new talent and new film genres or approaches. It has achieved this by placing a strong emphasis on the '*cinéma d'auteur*' and by allowing the parallel running of different sections or programmes. Besides the official section, which is used to attract and present prominent film and stars, the several parallel sections such as the 'Directors' Fortnight' or 'Cinéfondation' provide the opportunity to new directors from around the world to present their work and find distribution channels.

Finally, Jasper Chalcraft and Paolo Magaudda report on their research on two world-acclaimed music festivals – the WOMAD festival of world music, which has several localities, and the Sónar Festival of electronic music, which takes place in Barcelona. They show how music festivals, however different they might be, are not only locally embedded – both in defining their localities as public spaces and also in that they are dependent on the local scenes of cultural institutions and networks for their existence – but, at the same time, really global in helping ferment music scenes that transcend national borders. This might be especially important within the contemporary music field, given that revenues from labels are on the decline, thus raising once again the value of live performance.

The present volume hopes to engage and reinvigorate a social-scientific and theoretical interest in arts festivals and their meanings and implications for cultural citizenship in the twenty-first century.

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