

Cultural Diplomacy:
Arts, Festivals and Geopolitics

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with
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FESTIVALS AS

PLATFORMS

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Festivals as Social Dramas and Metaphors: Between Popular and Subversive

Aleksandra Jovićević

My study of festivals, as social dramas and metaphors, is based on the idea that the social world is a world in becoming and not a world in being, always in a process of changing and transition, and that festivals reflect best these changes, in a symbolic and metaphorical way. Departing from the anthropological studies of Victor Turner, who coined the concept of social dramas and metaphors, as a method for analyzing social processes, I will try to apply it on live festivals with artistic and intellectual agenda, as forms of cultural performances.¹ Understanding this methodology means comprehending how these festivals are produced, how they are staged in a focused manner, how they are contextualized within larger social and political events, and what their long-term impact is. The events and festival industry has been growing exponentially and with that growth, there is an urge for creating new methods and innovative ways to examine and study this expanding phenomenon. Social dramas are always embodied in all kinds of live festivals that in turn have a paradigmatic function to make visible the most profound values of a given culture. According to Turner, such paradigmatic functions also serve to provide the outsider with “a limited area of transparency in the otherwise opaque surface of regular, uneventful social life” (V. Turner, 1992, 82).

I would like to single out two categories by Victor Turner, as crucial for analyzing festivals, such as his well-known notions of *liminality* and *communitas* (V. Turner, 2008). For Turner, the liminal is a moment in and out of the time, a state in which the society is restructured, reclassified and where the social roles, and statuses are redistributed. In festival terms, the liminal is a moment of discontinuity of the usual (historical) time in which a new (symbolic) time takes place, causing a representative standstill and a temporary collapse of social order. Liminality refers to any condition imposed from the outside or on the peripheries of everyday life, turning the regular time into the sacred time and the regular place into the sacred space.

Therefore, festivals belong to the liminal moments, as those practices where social structure is temporarily breached, reflected and restructured by means of collective actions in public that presuppose both bodily movement and affective-experiential aspects and their symbolization, which rely on pre-existing language and symbols, or advance the new ones. However, in modern societies liminal practices are often *liminoid*, being the result of professional cultural and artistic work and the professionalization of human play. They promise change but in fact they are only homeopathically healing the endangered social equilibrium.

¹ See Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974; and *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play*, (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982, 1992).

Communitas, or social anti-structure is a more comprehensive notion and deserves a more extensive elaboration. Festival is a potential community, a community in becoming, and carries a possible connotation of togetherness: the community and equality among people when social order and social roles are suspended. According to Turner, there are: a) spontaneous or existential communitas, which breach the norm-governed social structure and directly confront it. It is immediate and usually short-lasting. Its main power and quality is the experience of participating; b) the ideological communitas which comprises history and theory, conceptualizing previous communities, and may offer a utopian model of society; c) the normative communitas which is organized into perduring social system and thus can be very slow and long lasting.

The festivals could be broadly defined as spontaneous or existential communitas because they are immediate and short-lasting and create a possibility of equality and participation. They are extraordinary events, in an extraordinary place, at an extraordinary time for short-lasting communitas. The origin of the word festival comes also from the Latin word *festum*, which means a time of celebration, marked with special observances; feast; a periodic season or program of cultural events or entertainment; gaiety, conviviality (Webster, 1589). In today's world festivals have lost their ritual, sacred character and are rarely connected to certain religious and state holidays. The term festival refers to a far more diverse, complex and multi-faceted reality that combines different artistic and professional visions, where identities of certain cities and regions are confirmed and internationalized. Victor Turner made a useful distinction between ceremonies and rituals: "ceremony indicates, ritual transforms" (V. Turner, 1992, 82).

Currently, there are about four to five million regularly re-occurring events and festivals around the world, such as community festivals, parades, fairs, carnivals, art shows, etc., but that number is not definite and is hard to estimate. For the exact number, one should constantly check the sight of International Festivals and Events Association (IFEA), which exists for already 62 years. In addition, each country has its own association: for example, the British and International Federation of Festivals for Music, Dance and Speech contains evidence on about 300 festivals annually in Britain and beyond (France, Italy, Malta, Spain, etc.) but that number is certainly much higher, if one takes a look at the local festivities. According to the IFEA brochure, festivals and events are among the most successful and important tolls available to communities, cities, states, regions and countries and they enable the increase of tourism, job opportunities and enhance the quality of life in places where they are staged. It was already Richard Wagner, a founder of the first musical festival in Bayreuth in 1876, who has recognized the festival as *an ideal cultural product*.²

In this huge number of festivals, there is little space for festivals with artistic and intellectual agenda. And among these festivals, although rare, there are festivals that are trying to create, influence and reflect contemporary culture but also an

2 For further study of festivals, see Dragan Klaić. (2012). *Resetting the Stage. Public Theater Between Market and Democracy*. Bristol, UK and Chicago, USA: Intellect Books. pp. 135-155., and/or D. Klaić, (2014). *Festivals in Focus*. Budapest: Central European University Press. Before his premature death in 2011, Klaić (b. 1950) was considered a leading expert in festival studies. He was the founder and a Chair of an international and interdisciplinary platform, The European Festivals Research Project (EFRP) that does not exist any longer, but which, for several years, gathered many scholars from around the Europe and was focused on the dynamics of artistic festivals in contemporary life.

exploration and representation of the turbulent collective experiences in the 20th and 21st centuries. If we have in mind Zygmunt Bauman's assumption that "the mission of art is supposed to lead to extending freedom by preventing the rules governing reality to become fossilized" (Z. Bauman, 2008, 20), then the role of the artistic festivals is far greater than the definition of IFEA. This is especially true for Europe, where population changes by migration almost daily, while artistic communities are transformed by guest appearances and nomadically inclined members: styles, ideas, trends and innovative cultural practices pass the boundaries of territories, cultures and languages. If the festivals could be defined as cultural performances in which a cultural content is "organized and transmitted on particular occasion through the specific media", then they can be considered specific and particular manifestations of culture without which the culture would be an abstract category.³

2.

My case study is Italy, where, like in every European country, there is a large proliferation of festivals of every genre in almost every city, being it small or large. In a country, which is ideologically torn apart, and in the midst of a huge economic crisis, *festivalization* of its culture also reflects this division, since almost every larger town has several festivals or even festival venues, of different political or economic nature. Among these, there are also festivals of "serious" intellectual agenda, such as festivals of economy, philosophy, communication, ideas, science, etc. and as such represent a certain generalization but also popularization of serious intellectual and scientific discourse. It seems that we are dealing here with a sort of carnivalization, a kind of mini World Expo, for the latest inventions and big names, placed into a pseudo intellectual framework. These kind of festivals represent a certain vulgarization and simplification of serious research and experimentation, especially because they attract a large number of ticket paying audience (at a symbolic price from 2 to 5 Euros), who attend these events to amuse themselves and not to study. For example, the latest Festival of Communication in Genoa (September 2016) was dedicated to divulgation of Umberto Eco's theories, who seems to have a status of a pop-star, and it has brought together biggest names of international scientific research in different disciplines, along with philosophers, journalists and artists from various fields, while the main prize was given to the famous Italian actor, Robert Benigni. This four days festival was presented in a form of scientific carnival without a real impact on the larger society.

However, on the second thought, even if considered mere entertainment, such festivals can be seen almost as an opposition to today's society of Empire, a concept coined by Michael Hardt and Toni Negri to define a new political order of globalization (M. Hardt, T. Negri, 2001). This society of Empire is, first and foremost, present in electronic media that are placed in the center of social life, from which any serious cultural content and debate has been expelled. Therefore, these festivals, even if they are de-centralized and marginal events, could represent a counter point to an overwhelming new populism and anti-intellectualism that is reflected not only in Italy, but in almost every postmodern society, and not only in the electronic media,

3 See Milton Singer *Traditional India*, Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1959, 1970, this on p. XII; and also Catherine Bell, "'Performance' and Other Analogies", in Henry Bial (ed.) *The Performance Studies Reader*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, pp 88-97.

but also in the larger political debate, as well as on every level of social life, university included. Therefore, the festivals with intellectual and artistic agenda promote a quality debate, otherwise absent in the wider society and perhaps they could become an instrument for social change because they assert alternative modalities of thinking and debating. These festivals also create the only space in which intellectuals can exist as public figures.⁴ Perhaps new ways of social exchange will emerge thanks to those festivals – because, although they can be criticized from an instrumental viewpoint, they can be considered successful from a point of view of education and emancipation of the audience.

The importance of the audience is perhaps a major change introduced into the theater since the 60's and is reaching its full swing nowadays. Empirical sociological analysis of the theater and enormous influence by post-structuralism became the foundation for many major studies in the field. What spectators “do” during the live performance, how they act, react and make sense of what is presented to them became a central issue in the performance studies, but also in the reception theory, anthropology and neurosciences.

Most of the scholarly work and theory concentrates on the attempt to theorize the corporeal, affective, as well as cognitive activity of the audience (a long list is led with the works by Anne Ubersfeld, Richard Schechner, Patrice Pavis, Erica Fischer-Lichte, Hans-Thies Lehmann, Bruce McConachie, F. Elizabeth Hart, Nicola Shaughnessy, etc. to name the few).

In her book, *L'école du spectateur*, Anne Ubersfeld focuses on the spectator, who is not only “the object of the verbal and scenic discourse, the receiver in the process of communication, the king of the feast”, but also “the subject of a doing, the craftsman of a praxis which is continually developed only with the praxis of the stage” (A. Ubersfeld, 1982, 303). Ubersfeld identifies various ways in which the spectator performs this activity – generally with reference to instructions given by the text, the performance, or the performance situation – and various sources of audience pleasure. There is a pleasure of discovery, of analyzing the signs of performance, of invention (when the spectator finds her own meanings for the theatrical signs), of identification, of experiencing temporarily the impossible or the forbidden, and finally there is the total pleasure suggested by the Indian notion of *rasa*, found in *Natjasastra*: “[*Rasa*] is the union of all affective elements plus the distancing that gives peace” (A. Ubersfeld, 1982, 342).

However, Ubersfeld does not conclude her book on this harmonious note, but on a suspended one of limits and “desire as lack”. Since *rasa* can almost never be attained during the performance but only after, through appreciation, memory, analysis, interpretation, and theory, then ultimately the spectator must experience the “absence” of the performance, the lack of total fulfillment of total presence, both physical and intellectual. If one is ready to accept the role of the spectator that also

4 For many years, Roberto Saviano, Italian writer and journalist, known for his book *Gomorra* (2007), and who was forced to hide from Neapolitan mafia, and was banned from many TV shows, would just show-up in the official program of these festivals but unannounced officially. The same could be said about the late Nobel prize winner, Dario Fo, who was a public enemy number one of Berlusconi and his government and was impeded, although not officially, to appear in any of state television programs.

means that one is ready to accept this condition of unfulfilled desire. In this sense, the festival audience is in a perpetual quest for something completely different and more compelling, almost a discovery of what they do not encounter in everyday life.

On many occasions Bertolt Brecht stressed that “the audience is a collection of individuals, capable of thinking and reasoning, of making judgments even in the theater; it treats them as individuals of mental and emotional maturity, and believes it wishes to be so regarded” (B. Brecht, 1979, 78). In this way, artistic and intellectual festivals, in fact, reflect the revival of interest in the public sphere and resume the terms of Plato’s polemics. Plato confronted the so-called poetic and democratic community, with a true, “choreographic community” where nobody remains a motionless spectator, but where everybody is moving according to “the communitarian rhythm, which is determined by the mathematical proportion” (J. Rancière, 2009, 5). According to Jacques Rancière, Plato placed the question of the spectator at the heart of the discussion of the relations between arts and politics. Rancière formulates community as a different performance of bodies that occupy certain place and time, as bodies in action, as opposed to a mere apparatus of laws, a set of perceptions, gestures and attitudes that precede and pre-form laws and political institutions. The festivals, where all those forms of spectacle, such as dance, drama, performance art, etc., place bodies in action before an assembled public, remain the only place(s) of direct confrontation of the audience with itself as a collective, because the festival audiences are different than any kind of audience. It means that festival remains the name for an idea of the community as a living body and it conveys an idea of the community as self-presence, from an elite audience (Bayreuth) to the audience from the suburbs (LIFT Festival in London).

It should always be remembered that when we speak of theater and performance that we are dealing with a live art form, made anew each time, which creates a sort of an alliance between each person there at that moment, or “the active body of community enacting its living principle”. (J. Rancière, 2009, 5). Artistic and intellectual festivals also hide in them a possible revival of the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which is supposed to be the apotheosis of art as an organic form of life but actually proves to be a diminishment of some strong artistic egos. The strategy that Richard Wagner has formulated in his essay, “The Art Work of the Future” (1849), is that the artists should overcome the distinction between various creative genres. Overcoming boundaries between various media would require artists to form fellowships, in which creative individuals with expertise in different media would participate. Furthermore, these artists’ fellowships must refuse the inclination to adopt themes and position that are merely arbitrary or subjective, while their talents should be used to express the artistic desire of the people, who are ready to collaborate with each other on an equal basis, and could represent a formation of a new multimedia artist, who is at the same time a writer, composer, theater director, designer, choreographer, video artist, performer, and a critic, or even a *producer*, a term coined by Walter Benjamin. According to Benjamin, “only by transcending the specialization in the process of production, that in the bourgeois view, constitutes its order can one make this production politically useful; and the barriers imposed by specialization must be breached jointly by the productive forces that they were set up to divide” (W. Benjamin, 1978, 230). For both Wagner and Benjamin, a synthesis of artistic genres is more a means to an end: the unity of individual human beings, the unity of artists among themselves, and

the unity of artists and the people. The crossing of the borders and the confusion of the roles should question the theatrical privilege of living presence and bring the stage back to a level of equality, where the different kinds of performances would be translated into one another, entering “the growing, molten mass from which new forms are cast” (W. Benjamin, 1978, 231).

According to Boris Groys, a tendency toward collaborative, participatory practice is certainly one of the main characteristics of contemporary arts and thus festivals where they are presented. “Emerging throughout the world are numerous artists’ groups that pointedly stipulate collective, even anonymous, authorship of their artistic production” (B. Groys, 2012, 197). Many of these collaborative practices are geared towards motivating the audience to join in, to activate the social milieu in which these practices unfold.⁵ Obviously, we are dealing with numerous attempts to question and transform the fundamental condition of how modern art functions, precisely on the blurring of radical separation between artists and the public. For this reason, many postmodern performance artists have tried to regain common ground with their public by enticing them out of their passive roles, involving political or social engagement: “When the viewer is involved in artistic practice from the outset, every piece of criticism he utters is self-criticism” (B. Groys, 2012, 200). This decision by the artists to give up their exclusive authorship would seem primarily to empower the viewer but also the artist. “This sacrifice ultimately benefits the artist, however, for it frees him from the power that the cold eye of the uninvolved viewer exerts over the resulting artwork” (B. Groys, 2102, 201).

This brings us back to the key question of what does specifically happen to the theater audience, and thus to the festival audience for that matter, which would not happen elsewhere? Is there something more interactive, more common to them than to the individuals who watch together a television show transmitted directly, or participate at the same time an online performance on the Internet? According to Rancière this “something” is just “the presupposition that the theater is communitarian by itself” (J. Rancière, 2009, 4). This also recalls Alan Badiou’s idea of an event, of representation, because “a theatrical representation will never abolish a chance and in a chance the public must be counted” (A. Badiou, 2004, 97). The audience is a part of what completes the idea, and without it the artwork could not be finalized. Meyerhold considered the spectator a fourth creative artist in a theater production: “We produce every play on the assumption that it will be still unfinished when it appears on the stage. We do this consciously because we realize that the crucial revision of a production is that which is made by the spectator” (Meyerhold, 1969, 256). On many occasions, Heiner Goebbels confirmed almost the same idea, saying that an audience of a few hundred is always more intelligent and sees more than a small directorial team of few people, and as a consequence his work is never finished without an audience. The collective power, which is common to the spectators, does not represent their status as a collective body, but it is within the individual power of each spectator to translate, in her own way, what she is looking at and participating in.

In this constant search for emancipation, the spectator will slowly transform herself into a new kind of a spectator, who has more empathy and understanding for the performance in front of her than an average, traditional, spectator: she will reclaim

⁵ See Boris Groys op. cit., and also Clair Bishop, *Participation*, London: Cambridge, MA 2006.

an individual power to translate and interpret directly, in her own way, what she is looking at and sometimes even participating in. The common power of both the performer and the spectator will then become the power of the equality of intelligence. This power binds individuals together to the very extent that it keeps them apart from each other, but enables them to find with the equal power their own way through a performance. This could be the principle of the “emancipation of the spectator”. The effect of this idiom cannot be anticipated. It calls for the spectators to become active as interpreters, who try to invent their own translation in order to, appropriate the story for themselves and make their own story out of it. “An emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators” (J. Rancière, 2009, 22).

Festivals produce organized public, which is an abstraction on which modern democracies continuously count on, because this public can get mobilized occasionally in the moments of crisis. Most of the festivals are performative but also cognitive acts and they echo variations of representative democracy, generating and reformulating public life, even if these changes are very slow or marginal. Therefore, the revival of interest in the festivals with intellectual and artistic agenda represent a direct response to the restricting changes in the public life and accompanying media. If we, today, are witnessing that the cultural elite (as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, and noted in recent researches by John Goldthorpe) is disappearing, than we can also conclude that this cancellation of limits between high and popular culture, seemingly futile and immediate, could bring a greater, albeit capillary impact on the society. It can create a new relationship between the intellectuals and the rest of the society, making it almost an underground endeavor for the new *communitas*. The festival audience(s) can represent a passage from the spontaneous or existential *communitas* to the ideological one that can offer a new model of the society. Every public interaction, thus the festival, can be considered a political act, promoting and projecting forms of citizen’s participation in the state: “To be in an audience is above all to *play the role of democratic citizen*” (S. Goldhill, 1997, 54).

Jürgen Habermas, in his *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, examines the rise of the bourgeois public sphere in 18th century as a third instance that mediates between society and state (J. Habermas, 1962, 1989). Being excluded from decision making in absolutist states, the audience started to gather in alternative spaces. Habermas envisages the liberal, public sphere as a public body that transmits the needs of a bourgeois society to the state. “As the public sphere is primarily a discursive arena located between private individuals on the one hand and state bureaucracy and business on the other, it occupies a crucial role in the functioning of so-called free or open societies” (C. B. Balme, 2014, 4-5).

According to Christopher B. Balme, any discussion of the public sphere must begin (but not end) with the seminal work of Habermas. His text went through several critical interpretations since its first publication in German in 1962, as well as its belated publication in English in 1989. It has often been noted that the English translation of the German word *Öffentlichkeit*, as a “public sphere” was not adequate to the original, because the German original connotes more the presence of people rather than a space, although in a collectivized and abstract sense. The German word can also connote group of people or something presented “in public view” and thus implicitly spatial. Therefore, according to Balme, the public space, as theorized

by Habermas, “is primarily a discursive and not physical space”, and should be understood as an institution embodied by people. “Its constituent elements – freedom of access, freedom of speech, autonomy and equal status of participants – form in the best of all possible worlds a central precondition for democracy” (C. B. Balme, 2014, 6).

Richard Senneth, in his *The Fall of the Public Man* (1977) gives a historical perspective on what he calls the end of a public culture, his well-known study of changing forms of public and city life. In this book, the public life of the past was described as a *theatrum mundi*, in which all men were considered actors because they acted. However, in 19th century, the belief in the expressive powers of individuals who together build a common social order was lost and it has been delegated to professional artists. Furthermore, the commercialization and commoditization of culture and media, as well as changes in political organization, especially the emergence of pressure groups and lobbyists, have largely taken over the process of opinion making from private citizens and relocated and professionalized them, making this difference even deeper. (C. B. Balme, 2014, 6) Thus, festivals, as utopian *communitas*, could be defined as different mechanisms by which private issues are made public, through specific procedures and protocols and the festival audiences, as their most important asset for attaining the ideal of equality.

In his *The Ignorant School Master* (1991), Jacques Rancière, analyses the life and work of Joseph Jacotet, to argue in favor of a pedagogical methodology that would abolish any presupposed inequalities of intelligence such as the academic hierarchy of master and disciple. For Rancière, equality should not be thought of in terms of a goal to be attained by working through lessons promulgated by prominent social and political thinkers. On the contrary, it can be a very axiomatic point of departure whose sporadic reappearance via disturbances in the set system of social inequalities is the very essence of emancipation. This also brings us back to Turner, according to whom, what is interesting about liminal phenomena, such are the festivals, is the blend they offer of “lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship” (V. Turner, 99).

It is also important to understand the private and public categories are not naturally given but always socially constructed and in constant change. Therefore, seen as social dramas and metaphors, the festivals are no longer attractive only for their aesthetic and entertaining dimensions, but for their potential social and political impact. In this sense, these kinds of festivals can become a new social tool for emancipation, because they offer new modalities of social criticism and resistance. A central argument of this paper is that the artistic and intellectual festivals, seemingly marginalized, cannot be reduced to pure entertainment, nor can the festival audience be reduced to the regular pleasure seekers. The subversive potential of such festivals require a more profound study on the dynamics and synergies that are created between the “performers” and the “audience” that together form new *communitas* during these liminal events, through which they could regain their social and political efficacy as in previous times.

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