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By, Owe Ronström Professor in Ethnology, Gotland University, Sweden. August 2011

Intro

Saturday the 20th of August 2011 the 19th Menningarnott, culture night, was celebrated in Reykjavik Iceland. Between 8.30 and 23.30 356 events were presented, ranging from the small and informal, such as free hugs in a main city street, to the large formal, such as the rock and pop concerts outdoors by the central Arnarhóll park, and the concerts with jazz and classical music in the prestigious new Harpa concert Hall by the harbor, and to the grand and spectacular, such as the fireworks that ended the whole thing. Somewhere around 100 thousand Icelanders participated in this huge event that consumed a large part of the cultural budget.

The event took place in downtown Reykjavik, the streets were jammed with people, restaurants overcrowded. Much centered around the Harpa Hall, Reykjavik’s new and spectacular landmark, planned and built during the heydays of the Icelandic banks, and completed in due time for the inauguration during this year’s Cultural night. A very expensive building, and much debated among Icelanders, who fear that the building will swallow the little there is for culture production in the country these days.

To the ethnomusicologist the culture night, and the Harpa house, speak about festivalization, cost efficiency, alternative life modes, and about density, visibility and attention in a globalised world. In my paper will reflect over these themes in an abstract and theoretical mode, starting with the festival phenomenon as such, and continuing through a number of characteristics, implications, and effects of festivalisation.

More festivals

Festival is an old phenomenon in Europe. The word, which is derived from Latin festa and festivus, was used as an adjective from the 14th century, and from the late 16th century as a noun. There are a number of words in the same family, feast, festivity, fest, that point in the
same direction, a suspension of ordinary life, a focus on expressive forms like food, clothes, music dance, often with a distinct spiritual component. In older times most festivals were held under the auspices of the church, and part of the religious calendar.

Towards the end of the 20th century, festival began to be used as a generic term for a large array of celebrations that carry few or no religious connotations. (alongside a number of other words, such as feast, gathering, party, and later also more academic concepts such as rite, ritual, tradition, etc.) The world has been festivalized. One the one hand a small number of homogenized festival formats have spread over the world, produced by people with similar interests, education and positions, following a similar institutional logic and practice, presented and perhaps also consumed in similar ways.

On the other hand festivals have become diversified. Today all kinds of calendar events, markets, meetings, feasts, religious and secular rituals, are more often than not called festivals. There seem to be a certain attraction and cultural energy in the word, that turns festival into a black hole that sucks in and consumes all kinds of events and gatherings. Especially during the last decades festivals have turned into folk feas ts for all kinds of people, with all kinds of music and a large variety of non-musical activities.

Behind the spread of festivals is among other things a growing tourism. The festival industry provides the experience, and the tourist industry provides the audience, and the result is large festival geographies, especially in summers. Several hundred large festivals are arranged only in Europe during two or three months, the number of smaller festivals is literally countless. (The big festivals are connected by a set of highways, along which a small selection of artists travel. Access to these highways are effectively controlled by gatekeepers in the festival organisations.)

With the words of the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth we could describe the festival as a ”vessel of meaning”, that can be used in all kinds of ways, and filled with all kinds of contents. As so many other phenomena in the post-modern, hyper-capitalistic world, it is constituted by a dichotomic structure, at once uniting and separating. At the one level the homogenizing, globalizing, and formatting forces, and at the other the diversifying and localising forces. As more and more phenomena are included, the complexity at the one level decreases, while at the other level it increases.

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1 Barth 1969
Cost efficiency
An explanation to the increase of festivals is that however expensive they are, many of them are nevertheless cost-effective events, for audiences, arrangers, and musicians. For relatively low investments of money, time and energy, audiences gain access not only to many different artists, but also to foods and goods from distant places, as well as meeting old and making new friends. For the arrangers all musical events – including festivals - are risky undertakings. But with many different kinds of artists it is possible to spread risks more effectively, and at the same time reduce the total costs per artist. Co-ordination between festivals and shared costs for artists and PR, also contributes to increased efficiency. To many musicians festivals is a means to reach large audiences with small investments. So, the increase in numbers of festivals can by and large be understood as an answer to the growing demands of the market economy on maximization of profit and continuous rationalization and effectivisation also in the fields of music.

Types of festivals
We are concerned here with music festivals. Most festivals contain music, but not all festivals are music festivals. A concert is a highly formalized and focused event, limited in time and space, most often indoors and with one or a small number of successive acts. A festival is typically a larger and less formalized and focused event, containing many acts, from one big stage, or from many different smaller stages, and distributed over longer time and larger space, often outdoors, which in North Europe of course means summer season. Festival behavior typically includes moving around, eating, drinking, smoking, small talking, and having a day out, sometimes even several days- and nights.
There are several easily distinguishable types of festivals. One type especially common in the world of rock and pop music presents many acts on a few large stages over a rather short period of time (most often a weekend) and in a limited, often fenced, space. Another type, more common in the world of classical music, consists of a large number of separate concerts, distributed over a week or even a month. Yet another type, “the carnival”, is characterized by a large number of non-staged, sometimes even improvised ad hoc performances in streets and squares, in close interaction with the audience, sometimes so close that the border between performers and audiences disappears.

A fourth type, a combination of the three first, is the “cultural day – or night” phenomenon which has spread to many large cities during the last decades. The Menningar nott, or Culture night, in Reykjavik the 20th of August started 8.30 in the morning, and ended with a big fireworks show at 23.30. During this day alone 356 events were presented, from free hugs in a main city street, to formal concerts in the new Harpa concert Hall by the harbor. Somewhere between 50 and 100 thousand Icelanders participated in this huge event.

In all these types of festivals the performances are loosely connected in time and space, by a common festival area, a theme, or simply by a common organisation and PR.

**An alternative arena**

From the late 1960’s the Woodstock festival became a model for a new type of festivals, focusing on music, but typically including also many other activities. Many of these festivals were large inclusive parties, attracting a large numbers of visitors that came to explore new forms of social interaction, in search for alternatives to the established world. In Sweden a number of such festivals were organized in parks in the big cities, by young people without former experience and institutional anchoring. The festivals as such were framed as “alternative”, and much of the music at these festivals was indeed new and experimental “alternative” rock or pop music. What was considered alternative was also a heightened awareness, stronger aesthetical, emotional, sensual and spiritual expressions, leading to a heightened presence, individually and collectively, an intoxication in several respects.

As instruments of social and cultural change festivals transmit and transfer knowledge, technology, mediate between individuals, groups and cultures. Often festivals are projected as instances of “time-out”, where people may take part in something different, new and more intense than ordinary everyday life in mainstream society. This makes festivals important
potential spaces of intercultural interaction, where one can come to understand what one does not understand. New things can be born and tried out, that may eventually challenge or threaten precisely those aesthetics, ethics, values, symbols, representations that are displayed and controlled.

Even if the large festivals today are commercialized, standardized, globally formatted, they still carry a memory of having been alternative to the establish order, which explains some of the extraordinary social behavior that have developed in and around many festivals.

**Festivalization**

The increasing number and importance of music festivals has lead to a number of changes in musical practices that could be summarized as festivalization. Here are a number of such changes:

**Audience behavior and musical expression**

One aspect of festivalization is an adaption of music and audiences to its medium, a process that has been named mediaization. An effect of such mediaization of festivals is a change in audience behavior. Festivals in important ways relate to concerts as television to cinema. While concerts and cinemas are highly formalized and focused performances, television and festival audiences normally engage not only in that what is presented, but also in many other forms of social interaction simultaneously, such as chatting, eating, smoking, etc. For that reason festivals, as television, have difficulties in catching and maintaining the audience’s attention over a longer period of time, which calls for more and stronger effects. To be able to penetrate the intense flows of impression that characterizes festivals, festival music is often charged with more and stronger forms of expression (higher sound, more light, flashier clothes, dance, props etc.), and increased foregrounding of new and strong effects that could raise attention. To this raised level of expressions and effects, festival audiences in the same way as television audiences typically answer by “zapping”, repeated changes between different stages and performances, which lead to a spiral of constantly raised levels of expressions and effects.

**Density**

Much cultural production today is about raising density. Good examples are the results of heritage production, such as museums, world heritage sites, and of entertainment, as in theme
parks and Disneylands. A problem for many places and activities is that they are too scattered, which makes them difficult to embrace and experience. The solution then is to condense, to produce more experiences per hour and square meter, to give visitors an overview and at the same time a feeling of being encompassed. Raised density is a key condition for the feeling of entering into another world, which is a prerequisite for the illusion of another time, another place, another life. Raised density is a also prerequisite for visibility, which, in turn, is necessary for the production of attention, which I will soon come back to.

Raised density has many interesting consequences. One is that musical life becomes split up between a long production period, with small resources, low intensity, low visibility, (big investments but small revenues,) and a short period of distribution, sale and consumption, with high intensity and visibility, large resources and audiences. This in turn leads to raised levels of esthetic expression.

**Producing the local for global consumption**

Many large festivals today are produced by locals for global tourist markets. Tourism is one of the world’s largest export industries. What makes the commodities of the tourist industry different from other types of goods is that it is actually only their images or narratives that can be exported. The tourist industry therefore has to transport the consumers to the goods instead of the other way around. This makes visibility at a distance a precondition. Raised visibility is perhaps one of the most important driving forces behind the production of tourist destinations today. Raised visibility can be profitable in terms money of course, but it is often attention and recognition that is the attractive resource that the production is organized to gain.

Festivalization fits into this, by being one of the ways to produce the local for global export.² To be exported and marketed the local has first to be transformed, by an often large-scale remaking and packaging of the festival place, and by a reformulation of the stories about the place and its surroundings. To make a difference festivals have to work on their distinctiveness, and create a brand that can be launched on a global market, where of course a large number of similarly distinctive festivals already compete. The necessary branding is not only about creating new attractive stories for the global tourist market, but more importantly to actively overwrite and replace already existing local narratives. It is thereby places are

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² Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:153
transformed to destinations, which in turn make them possible to be sold as images and then to be visited and consumed by anonymous masses without previous local knowledge.

Raised density, homogeneity and distinctiveness are thus aspects on one and the same reification process that produce festivals. Tourists are the main targets for the process, their presence complete and confirm the transformation from concrete place to abstract destination.

Three economies

Festivals are deeply embedded in at least three different economies. One is the monetary economy. The music festival of today is a part of the global capitalistic market economy. Such festivals are complex events, in which music is but one of the commodities that are presented, advertised and sold.

Another economy is the symbolic, where the currency is cultural status or value, cultural capital. A successful festival can create large revenues in terms of cultural capital to artists, producers, and not least to politicians and administrators.

A third is a growing attention economy, where the currency is such visibility that can produce attention. The idea is that raised density can create raised visibility, which in turn is a prerequisite for attention. But, as Micheal Goldhaber has pointed out, to most of us visibility is not a scarce resource today. We are awash with information about things to see to the extent that the problem instead is one of choosing and sorting. Seen from the perspective of the producer, it is attention that is in short supply. And since ‘economy’ is a term for how limited resources are distributed in a society, we may speak of an attention economy.

In contrast to information and visibility, attention is a subjective process in human consciousness that cannot be bought or sold, but can be created, accumulated, transferred, and redirected. People who already have attention can be paid to redirect their audience’s attention to something else, which is what happens when celebrities are used in ad campaigns. When the celebrity names or points out someone or something, attention is transferred. However, it is by no way certain that those who get attention can keep it. Attention must constantly be supported if not to disappear. The risk that someone else steals attention away is ever present. As Goldhaber puts it: “Attention is a limited resource, so pay attention to where you pay attention.”
These economies interact in interesting ways. In a money economy visibility is a means to make money. In an attention economy money is a means to buy visibility. Neither money nor visibility can ensure growth of cultural capital. On the contrary, too much money or visibility can lead to a devaluation of cultural capital. In a money economy profitability is to produce long series that can be distributed widely (“broadcasting”). In an attention economy profitability is reached through production of difference, and the distinctively different is visible only if produced in small numbers. As you are all aware of, music has become a major vehicle for producing and dramatizing differences of all kinds. This has made music festivals especially important for investments in attention economy. Because music is already in the focus of attention of so many, music has moved from a peripheral position to the very centre of the postmodern economies. But as attention is a very competitive market, paradoxically it will most probably end up producing differences that are similar (Lundberg, Malm, Ronström 2000).

**Exchange bureaus**

Yet another reason for the spread of music festivals in recent decades is their role as a kind of exchange offices, where attention, cultural and social capital can be exchanged to other hard currencies. As I have

They produce great visibility for relatively low costs that can lead to high attention, which in turn can lead to higher status and eventually also recognition. The visibility can be sold, as can the attention be re-directed.

A distinct trend during the last decades is the effectivisation and maximisation of the factors that produce visibility that may lead to attention. Festivals are often cost effective in this respect, which is a reason why festivals are so often used by individuals, groups, private companies and state institutions that want to increase their attention capital. Big companies, often brewers, telecom and IT companies, can buy visibility for money that is then distributed to artists, in exchange for redirecting attention to the company. Individuals and organisations with cultural capital can sell their services to festivals (for example as opening speakers, guests of honour etc), which in turn might raise the visibility and attention for the festival as such as well as for the artists. Often individual artists or groups perform as representatives for a collective of some kind, an ethnic group, a local community, a region, or a nation. The visibility and attention the artist can achieve can easily be transferred to this collective, which
makes festivals important potential resources for groups that consider themselves underprivileged, and therefore strive to raise their status and recognition in society.

**Individualism and collectivism**

Festivals are important also as collective manifestations in an era of growing individualism. The 19th and 20th century was the era of mass movements in Europe, or more precisely, masses in motion, culturally, socially, and not least geographically. Workers party demonstrations, large folklore events, and social movements like scouts, choir singers and the German “Vandervögeln, are among the congenial expressions of the type of sociality and collective ethos that dominated. What they all have in common is an emphasis on forms that symbolizes group cohesion, from marching, to singing and dancing, and a discourse that centers on strength, vitality, community and national unity. To set everything in motion was the core of modernity, moving forward became highly valued, to stand still meant stagnation and death. To organize bodies in motion became to organize a society in motion, towards the utopian vision of a society where people organically belong together, *Gemeinschaft*.

Today, to many such visions have become dystopic. The collective ethos has been replaced by much more individualized life strategies. If earlier we found a collective of individuals, today we more often than not find individuals forming ad hoc collectives, relating themselves to a center, but necessarily to each other. In today’s Europe rock concerts, large sport events, riots and festivals can be seen as congenial expressions of a new “postmodern” ethos, a new form of relation between society, group and individual.

**Conclusion**

Festivals are effective arenas for distribution of messages and communication of symbols and signs. They both produce and express many of the tendencies that that are summarised as “postmodernity”. On the one hand a stress on mixes, bricolage, eclecticism, crossover, blurring of genres and categories. On the other a purification and reification of expressive forms and styles, in order to produce fast and clear-cut messages. With the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman a prime effect of festivalization can be described as a strive for “greatest possible impression on shortest possible time” (Bauman 1994), or with words of the Russian semiotician Boris Uspenskij “largest possible number of signs in smallest possible space”.3

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3 Lecture at Gotland University, Visby, autumn 1999
Festivals are also examples of a general increase in emphasis on the production of difference and distinctiveness. Festivals are a strongly globalised type of arena that often presents local musics tied to specific cultural identities. Festivals can produce desirable visibility and attention capital at the same time as they can contribute to rapidly devaluing and even consuming the capital for those who have partaken of it. Festivals are instruments for control of musical and cultural resources, as well of the aesthetics, ethics, values, symbols, representations etc of the presented musics. Festival organisers thereby become controllers of political and ideological power. Festivals are also increasingly important as exchange offices, where economic capital can be changed to cultural and vice versa. All of this makes festivals into tools for both social control and cultural change, which together go to explain their increase in numbers during recent decades and that so many different actors have used them for so many different purposes.

4 While formerly in the field of folk music knowers such as ethnomusicologists, folklorists, ethnologists, have been at the centre of such power, today it is the makers who have taken control over much public performances of folk music.