

Where do we belong? Festivals conquer the urban texture

*“The Festival is an apolitical no-man’s-land,
a microcosm of what the world would be like
if people could make direct contact
with one another and speak the same language”.*

Jean Cocteau

*“When politics, imagination and glamour are in synch,
when the festival planet and the real world cross paths
– those are precious, magical moments”.*

Christiane Peitz

Neither Jean Cocteau nor I want to affirm the absence of political ideology behind the festival’s programming, core element of the festival’s architecture, especially of film festivals. Most of the time artistic choices are dictated by political and economic factors. However, festivals are *social events* bringing people physically together and in direct contact with one another. A sort of “microcosm” as Jean Cocteau rightly states. This reflection comes to my mind when looking at the social and cultural current phenomenon such as the recent proliferation of film festivals around the world. I consider this phenomenon as an expression of the changing nature of the audience that more than ever before is seeking for interaction, participation and, last but not least, *physical reappropriation of the local dimension in its urban area*.

From a physical and cognitive perspective, the urge for a reappropriation of local identity and belonging to local community has become much stronger and pertinent now that we are witnessing the advent of a world strongly influenced by digital technologies and the Internet. In particular, looking at film festivals, despite their large use of the Internet as a social virtual platform for gathering like-minded people and sharing information, the festival in itself, as a social event, still plays a nodal role since it is able to *render culture permeable in the urban texture*. People start to organise in new and alter-native ways pursuing not only a more participative role in the cultural life but also a new design of their life in urban spaces.

From the arty independent middle class film festivals to the more politically based ones, such as activist film festivals (e.g. from the bigger and general “Human Right Watch Film Festival” to the smaller and more specific “FISahara Film Festival), the phenomenon grows at a surprising pace with almost 1,000 festivals per year, not counting the smaller community-based ones. Looking at these forms of cultural behaviours we can detect a *newborn form of approaching and managing culture* by enhancing the permeability of culture in the urban texture, especially the local one.

Today we are assisting to a change of paradigm in the way economic and social transactions are approached. A trade of intangible resources is gradually replacing the monetary system. One can easily mention the Internet and the *trade of knowledge and information* that is taking place in the online hybrid space. In such a regard the arts and culture stand as examples of socio-economic activities that generate specific benefits which are not precisely measurable although they strongly affect the surrounding environment.

Virtual gathering is a frequent phenomenon in our society. The advent and the outstanding growth of

social community in the Internet can be interpreted as *a desire for community* by the ceremony of gathering and the sharing of common views and commitments. Therefore festivals might be enhanced by the virtual gathering through online social networks, although they ultimately can't just be reduced to this. Looking at relatively small arty local festivals, as for instance the Branchage Film Festival, the London's Onedotzero Film Festival or the Flatpack Film Festival, we can say that these middle class arty film festivals, although they don't have a heavily political commitment, express a reaction against the rampant virtualism experimented in the most recent years. So that as Branchage founder Xanthe Hamilton says about the last edition of Branchage Film festival: "The people who stood in the open air to watch Potemkin *generated a real sense of community- one you can't get on YouTube* [emphasis mine]." (Michael, October 2010).

Festivals in general can be seen as forms of ritual able to enhance solidarity, participation as well as a sense of social cohesion and togetherness. In fact, drawing from the sociologist Emile Durkheim, myth, symbols and ceremony build the common understanding necessary for solidarity. In particular, one of Durkheim's best-known scholarly contributions is his treatment of *the role of rite and ceremony in creating and sustaining culture and community*. Ritual binds individuals to the community and produces shared thoughts and knowledge (1912/1965). The festival more than a trade event is inscribed in our society in terms of a *cultural ritual that creates an emotional bond*.

The Free Film Festival (FFF) is a powerful example of such a cognitive power. The project started in 2010 with the first edition of the completely voluntary run free film festival in the neighbourhood of Peckham and Nunhead. Today it is a growing community group, a non for profit organisation that promotes free film screening in neighbourhood venues thanks to many volunteers and the partnership with community organisations and other supporters. *FFF brings people together from across the community to actually enjoy, discover and celebrate their local urban area*; the festival is ultimately the expression of an on-going and active reappropriation of the local dimension as well as local identity of the audience.

The rise of the "feel good" factor of people enjoying and experiencing a sense of communal togetherness in their local area is a manifestation of the *positive externality* of culture: it may seem to generate only intangible benefits, but it actually generates a strong rise in the monetary value of real estate and buildings, as well as in the power of attraction exerted by specific urban areas; it can build the basis for more tangible outcomes and *promote a socially and economically consistent urban rehabilitation*.



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