

Music Festival Experience: Cyclic Place and Cyclic Sociality

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Music festivals, especially those held outdoors on greenfield sites over a number of days, may become intimately associated with the locations which host them. For a few days each year, these sites take on a life of their own, with their own accommodation, entertainments, social experience, retail opportunities and policing. They form temporary villages or towns that are constructed and annually re-constructed in their own image by festival organizers and attendees, and increasingly mediated through traditional and online media by organizers, sponsors, broadcasters and festivalgoers. In this presentation I examine the spaces and places of such events and introduce a number of theoretical elements based on my research, some of which has been published in the book *Music Festivals In the UK – Beyond the Carnavalesque* (Anderton 2019) and in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music, Space and Place* (Stahl and Percival 2022). My particular focus is a consideration of repeat attendance as reflected in spatial identifications, loyalty, and personal and collective meaning-making. I will begin by briefly discussing the existing literature on festivalgoer motivations before elaborating on my ideas regarding cyclic place, meta-sociality, and cyclic sociality.

What motivates festival attendance?

The fields of event management, tourism and leisure studies have often explored the motivations of attendees for music and arts events, identifying a broad range of factors such as socialising, family togetherness, group identity, entertainment and hedonism, as well as more specific characteristics such as the content of the programme, and the perceived uniqueness of an event (Getz & Page 2016: 297). Such studies tend to support the ‘seeking – escaping’ view of tourist motivation (Iso-Ahola 1980, 1983); in other words, a combination of the need to escape from the everyday environment of life and work, and the need to experience an activity or situation that is personally rewarding in some way or meets social needs such as belonging and interpersonal contact. Similar factors can be found in Martijn Mulder and Erik Hitters’ recent article in the journal *Cultural Trends*, which draws on data from the Dutch PopLIVE project. In comparing concerts with festivals, they found that for festivals ‘togetherness’ was especially important – something also noted by the Association of Independent Festivals, whose Ten-Year Report from 2018 showed that ‘camping with friends’ and other ‘people attending’ were more important than an event’s headliners in driving attendance (AIF 2018). Mulder and Hitters’ also found and that ‘unique experience’ and ‘being there’ were less important for festivals, though in the context of their study it seems that ‘being there’ is defined in relation to seeing a particular performer, rather than the broader social experience of attendance. As Dave Laing (2004) notes, for festivals ‘the key thing is to be present at the event... not necessarily to see or experience a particular act. The latter is the motivation to attend a concert.’

In my own field research at British music festivals (initially reported in Anderton 2007), I identified four key motivational themes: freedom from everyday life; the search for authentic experience; socialisation and its associated sense of belonging; and transcendence of the self (Anderton 2019). Underpinning all of these was the ongoing effect of what I’ve termed the countercultural carnivalesque on popular culture and the mediation of music festivals – the merger of countercultural ideas from the late 1960s (and their refraction through 1980s and 1990s rave culture) with traditional theories of carnival excess, albeit in the more commercial context of a professionalising, corporatizing, and sponsor-heavy music festival industry (Anderton, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023). The countercultural carnivalesque provides a backdrop to contemporary understandings of music festivals within both official and unofficial media: a set of stereotypes and images such as notions of liberation and escape, of self-expression, of transgression and hedonism, of carnivalesque inversions and spiritual awakening (Flinn & Frew, 2013). These stereotypes, which may be commercialised and sanitised in the contemporary market (Anderton, 2008, 2019), can be regarded as underpinning the marketing, promotion and mediation of music festivals, and as providing a frame through which audiences themselves discuss music festivals through social media, as

well as how they behave onsite. Examples include the relatively open use of drugs of varying kinds, of day long drinking, and of dressing up or being playful with identity in a festival atmosphere where freedom to do these things and others may be expected and celebrated (dependent of course on the particular expectations associated with individual events) (Anderton, 2023). On a related note, the sociologist Colin Campbell has argued that the consumption of products and services is a form of ‘imaginative pleasure-seeking’: that people want to ‘experience in reality the pleasurable dream which they have already enjoyed in imagination’ (1987, 89). In the music festival context, we can extend on this idea by focusing on repeat attendees and their reasons for coming back to an event year after year. As Alex Thomson of Green House Group notes, ‘A lot of festivals rely on repeat attendees’ to be profitable, and it is ‘the general atmosphere and overall vibe, character and quality of a festival [that] is more important than [the] music’ (AIF 2018). This is certainly what I found in my own research, and thinking about repeat attendance allows us to move beyond the typical audience research of the event management and tourism field to think about broader factors involved in festival attendance.

In particular I want to consider the sense of belonging that may be engendered by festivalgoers’ repeat attendance and its relationship to the imaginative as well as material construction and reconstruction of a coherent ‘sense of place’ – one imbued with both personal and broader cultural meanings.

Sense of place to cyclic place

I argue that while outdoor music festivals may be temporary in their physical existence, festivalgoers who return to the same event and site year on year may cultivate a recognisable ‘sense of place’, defined by the geographer Edward Relph (1976: 45) as a ‘persistent sameness and unity which allows [one place] to be differentiated from others’. For a few days each year, a music festival takes on a material form that is perceived by festivalgoers to be a ‘real’ place, with its own history, rules, culture and meanings. The imaginative as well as material construction of this festival ‘place’ is fostered further by its representation in media and memory, and by its cyclic nature, since it is annually reconstructed in its own image.

This conception of ‘cyclic places’ draws on sociologist Henri Lefebvre’s tripartite distinction regarding the production of space, in which he argues that spaces are produced through the spatial practices of everyday activities and routines, through the meanings and symbolism that people give to them, and through their representation in formal documentation and marketing. I argue that we should also add the informal media created by festivalgoers themselves. Characterising a music festival as a cyclic place recognizes that while festivals may be regarded as sites of transgression and the countercultural carnivalesque, there is no necessity for this to be the case – music festivals can take on many forms and meanings, and individual festivals themselves may be understood in differing ways by the numerous individuals and groups who attend them. In this sense, I also draw on the work of geographer Doreen Massey who argues that places are formed of multiple narratives (stories, memories, beliefs, mediations) that are centred on particular geographical locations (Massey, 2005: 130). With regard to outdoor music festivals, these narratives allow relatively stable place-images to emerge over time, while also providing room for variation from year to year. They develop their own histories, behaviours, landmarks and rules that are shaped through the interaction of organizers and festivalgoers and are re-created or re-enacted on an annual basis, fostering a sense of place, belonging and familiarity.

However, this sense of place and belonging will vary between different groups of attendees, such that they develop their own sense of place which is linked to their own lived experience and memories of the event. Thus, multiple narratives (Massey, 2005) or heterotopic understandings (Foucault, 1986) may be recognized. Due to the importance of these narratives, cyclic places are necessarily mediated, for instance, through festival marketing, through the previews, reviews and other coverage found in traditional and online media, and through the activities of festivalgoers in discussing, anticipating and remembering festivals through a variety of social and online media (see Morey et al. 2014). Together these form a virtual version of a festival that continues to reinforce expectations and place-images throughout the year. Such mediations also allow new attendees to gain an understanding of a festival and to guide or model their expectations regarding the social norms and behaviours to be found at an event.

Music festivals as cyclic places are also characterised by a combination of continuity and change due to ever-changing social interactions, mediations and performances. The mix of people, music, activities and tastes will change over time, and while the festival’s overarching sense of place may remain familiar to regular attendees, each year’s event will feel slightly different as it is performatively reconstructed. This offers a sense of difference or

novelty to an event, helping to keep the festival experience fresh, while maintaining its overall identity and sense of familiarity and belonging.

Place-image to meta-sociality

In *Music Festivals in the UK: Beyond the Carnavalesque* (2019), I introduced the concept of ‘meta-sociality’ to refer to how an event’s over-arching identity and image forms a shared frame of reference for attendees which is supported by ongoing formal and informal mediations; hence, a co-construction between event organisers, festivalgoers, the media and others. I see meta-sociality as akin to an overarching and loosely-shared sense of togetherness that is related to the festival’s event image but which is much more diffuse than that associated with notions of subculture, scene, or neo-tribe. This collective understanding or shared social imaginary of an event will be known to and understood by most attendees, and allows an event to be annually reconstructed in its own social image while still allowing for many different groupings and individual experiences to be present within a single site. It helps to guide festivalgoers’ beliefs about a music festival’s identity and meaning (what Lefebvre calls ‘spaces of representation’) and to guide their behaviours during it (termed ‘spatial practices’ by Lefebvre). In other words, it is how an event’s sense of place, and the narratives told and/or representations circulated about it, become incorporated into festivalgoers’ social imaginaries of the event, and how these imaginaries are then embodied and performatively reproduced by them in situ. This may include such things as ways of listening, dancing, dressing, and interacting with others, beliefs about the flattening of social hierarchies and divisions, tolerance towards excessive drinking and recreational drug use, and acceptance of lowered standards of personal hygiene – all of which are strongly associated with the countercultural carnivalesque (Anderton 2008, 2019). Indeed, we might think of contemporary music festivals as, drawing on the work of the historian Jay Winter (2010) (discussing a very different context), as ‘sites of second-order memory’. In this formulation, second-order memories are those which are associated with music festivals as a cultural phenomenon, rather than those personally experienced. They are the narratives that are told about the past, and in the case of music festivals, are interwoven with the countercultural heritage of festival culture. For instance, the meanings, stories and imagery of events such as the 1969 Woodstock Festival or the 1971 Glastonbury Festival. Such narratives offer continuity between the past and the present, and an imaginative resource for framing contemporary experience. They can also be tied more directly into the mediated history of individual festivals. For example, recent documentaries about the Glastonbury Festival that include stories told about classic performances, and once-in-a-lifetime moments. They become part of the mythology of a festival, whether or not the current attendees were present or not. Glastonbury’s creation of a stone circle in 1992 is another example, where the circle imaginatively connects the festival site to a prehistoric landscape, pre-Christian spirituality, and the turning of the seasons.

In terms of spatial practices, behavioural norms will vary from festival to festival and within different parts of a festival site (see also Tjora, 2016). For instance, you can find a closely attentive and supportive form of listening within the Club Tent of the Cambridge Folk Festival (related to the typical atmosphere and behaviour of a folk club), but can also find sporadic outbreaks of dancing, cheering and shouting at that event’s Main Stage (which has a style more akin to a pop or rock concert).

As with cyclic place, the meta-sociality of a music festival may become more cohesive over time and with the repeated citation of behaviours, beliefs and understandings (whether on site or through mediations). In this sense, the acceptable range of actions, behaviours and meanings related to an event will become both normalised and associated with a particular place. And, as noted earlier, while there is a recognisable, overarching meta-sociality (the broad frame within which a music festival is understood), individuals and groups in attendance will also bring their own narratives, histories and sense of place, which will interact with (or potentially conflict with) the overall meta-sociality. Music festivals are not only sites of second-order memory, but places that are suffused with the life histories, experiences and memories of the people who attend, and where they collectively experience it with others, this enhances their sense of belonging and togetherness, driving repeat attendance.

Sociality – cyclic sociality

Outdoor music festivals attract a range of people with multiple motivations and multiple overlaps in terms of their social relations and social groupings. Some of these social groupings are relatively stable, such as families, pre-existing friendship groups and fan-based collectives; others are more cyclical in nature: for example, where

festivalgoers meet up with particular people on-site each year but have little or no contact with them during the remainder of the year; still more are ephemeral: making the acquaintance of neighbouring campers and people in queues, or simply the chance encounters and co-presences of the arena crowds. The sheer scale and diversity of on-site interactions and activities makes generalisations about the social life of music festivals difficult. One way to conceptualise this is to think of music festivals as representing a gathering of the tribes – a term derived from the 1967 Human Be-In in San Francisco, but also used by George McKay (2000) to describe the Glastonbury Festival and by Graham St John (2017) to refer the many psy-trance events that are held globally each year. In this conception, music festivals are focal points for translocal (or perhaps virtual) scenes to congregate together. Yet, even where this may be supported to an extent, for example at genre-centred events such as Bloodstock or at fan-centred events such as Fairport's Cropredy Convention (run by Fairport Convention) or the Beautiful Days festival (associated with The Levellers), these events still attract many people who would not consider themselves to be part of such scenes or fan collectives, yet they may be regular attendees, attend with or form social connections with other groups of festivalgoers, and develop strong affective bonds with specific events – a personal identification with a festival and its place that creates feelings of attachment and belonging – what Edward Relf termed 'insiderness' (1976: 51-5).

I describe this as an event's cyclic sociality – where, on an annual or regular basis (Covid notwithstanding) the social meanings, mediations, and performativities of groups of people (however they are connected with each other) are reinforced, strengthened and renewed on site. There are multiple and shifting socialities within a festival, which are framed by the event's broader meta-sociality, but can be recognised in separation from it. They are formed through personal mythologies of the event and of place, through memories, social connections and regular activities or uses of a site: they are, in Winter's (2010) terms 'sites of memory' which are given form through spatial practices. These may include a range of things such as always seeking to camp together in the same area of a site or with the same people – a way of domesticating and in a sense owning the festival space in such a way as promotes a sense of belonging, and which renews social relationships. The same may be true of specific areas of the festival arena. For instance, at one event I saw a group of friends co-opting a part of the arena field by carrying in a sofa to mark their place. Another group organised themselves so that they could hold up cards with letters on that spelled out messages to the artists on stage – something that they would do each year. I've also seen the creation of 'events within events', such as campfire-style singalongs and parties through to mini-raves, which were going on in the camping areas even though there were artists performing on stage in the festival arena. Such creativity and use of space has been recognised by some festival organisers, who deliberately offer greater scope for participatory activities and co-creation. Good examples are the Burning Man events held in Nevada and around the world, and the Boomtown festival in the UK (see Robinson 2015a, 2015b). A sense of ownership and belonging helps to promote repeat attendance and to explain why the headliners of an event are not as important to festivalgoers' motivations to attend as it is at a concert, and why 'being there' is, at festivals, about the experience of such cyclic socialities and the meanings and activities and the memories and stories created, as well as of renewing acquaintances and bonds with others, whether familial or otherwise. Such bonds and narratives are wrapped up in the meta-sociality of the festival and in its cyclic place, overlaying each other in complex ways.

To conclude, I would argue that festival researchers and organisers need to focus more on repeat attendees and their motivations. We need to understand not just why people choose to attend a festival – and the demographic and spending data that festival surveys typically provide – but to delve deeper into why they return year on year. How do they make use of and think about *their* festivals in spatial and social terms? How do *their* particular narratives of a festival (their cyclic socialities) interact with the broader social and cultural narratives of a festival's meta-sociality? How does this affect their use of the site of the festival, and can such knowledge be used by festival organisers to enhance the festival experience and promote longevity and loyalty for their event?

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