**Festival Spaces / Festival Places: Ephemerality, Continuity and a Sense of Place**

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**Abstract**

Music festivals 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. Drawing primarily on British examples and theoretical developments presented in *Music Festivals in the UK. Beyond the Carnivalesque* (Anderton, 2019), this presentation examines the spaces and places of such events in terms of their ephemerality and continuity, and of the distinctions made by cultural geographers between *space* and *place*. It also introduces the new concepts of ‘cyclic place’ and ‘meta-sociality’ which emerged from the research and, it is argued, can be applied to a wide range of outdoor festivals.

**Note**

The following presentation script is based on material published in Anderton, C. (2019) *Music Festivals in the UK. Beyond the Carnivalesque* (Routledge) and in Anderton, C. (forthcoming) ‘Festivals’ in G. Stahl & M. Percival (eds) *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music and Place* (Bloomsbury).

**Introduction**

My research examines the commercial sector of popular music festivals in the UK and draws on perspectives from cultural economy, cultural geography and events management. For this presentation at the *Burning Man and Transformational Event Cultures* conference, I thought I’d focus on the transformation of spaces into what I’ve termed cyclic festival places, and what this might mean for the success or longevity of events, as this is a part of my research that I think crosses over well to events such as Burning Man.

I argue that past theories of music festival spaces and places have tended to focus on their temporary or ephemeral nature rather than on their annual reconstruction. This is something that I explore in my book and will look at here today, because while festivals may only last a few days each year, they live on in memories and mediations throughout the rest of the year and they can feel just as ‘real’ as any other place that you only occasionally visit. In fact, to visit a festival site outside of the time of the festival can be quite disorienting as the familiar atmosphere, landmarks and so on are absent. In a sense, the site feels like it’s waiting for the return of the festival.

To explore my ideas, I need to discuss the differing conceptions of space and place that have influenced my way of thinking about music festival places.

**Space and Place**

One way to think of the difference between space and place is to describe space as a physical area of landscape that can be represented, for example, on a map or a plan, or viewed as a location where a variety of activities might happen – almost as if it were a blank canvas. In contrast, places can be defined as spaces that have been imbued with human feelings and beliefs, of a sense of attachment or belonging – what the humanistic geographers of the 1970s, such as Edward Relph (1976) would refer to as a ‘sense of place’ (see also Tuan, 1977).

Relph’s (1976) work suggested that places are produced through bodily and perceptual experience, and that people may come to strongly identity with a place – to develop of a sense of what he termed ‘insideness’ with that place, which is characterised by feelings of familiarity, safety, and welcome. He contrasted this with a sense of ‘outsideness’, such as feelings of homesickness when you are somewhere unfamiliar. He also linked this to the standardised and commercialised spaces of airports, shopping malls and so on, which he characterised as inauthentic or placeless because, in his view, they do not engender feelings of belonging and insideness.

Relph’s focus on bodily perception and experience is important for my own thinking, but I feel that to understand music festivals as places, we need to look at other factors and theories too. Expanding on the notion of bodily perception, I’ve drawn on the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991) whose tripartite notion of the production of space is useful in delineating lines of enquiry for examining festival places. Lefebvre describes three interrelated moments: spatial practices, spaces of representation, and representations of space.

Spatial practices refer to the everyday activities, routines and perceptions of people in relation to the world around them. At festivals, particular forms of behaviour are deemed appropriate by participants during festival times, and the repetition of those behaviours over a number of years serves to reaffirm those behaviours – whether related to alcohol and drug consumption, dressing up or stripping off, an acceptance of muddy and perhaps unhygienic condition, or simply with respect to the social interactions of, and between, festivalgoers, festival staff and festival performers. In other words, spatial practices are performatively produced, and different sets of expectations will develop at different events, based on demographics, psychographics, ideological positioning, musical genre and various other factors. These expectations may also shift over time, as these various factors alter from year to year.

Spaces of representation refers to the symbolism and meaning that is ascribed to places, including both the human and the physical features of the landscape and built environment. For instance, the Free Festivals of the 1970s and 1980s in the UK were often sited at or near prehistoric monuments which were invested with symbolic meaning by the New Age Travellers responsible for setting up the events, even though those same monuments could simultaneously be invested with different meanings by other groups of people. A good example is the Stonehenge Free Festival, held from 1974 to 1984. This prehistoric monument had, as Andy Worthington (2004) has discussed, great social and mystic significance for the New Age Travellers, yet it could also be seen as a tourist resource, an archaeological riddle, or a place of Druidic worship. A contrasting example would be the Reading Festival in the UK which has become synonymous with celebrating graduation from secondary school, a rite of passage where teenagers attend the festival for the first time with a group of friends rather than with their parents.

Finally from Lefebvre, representations of space refers to maps, plans, rural and urban planning, entertainment license conditions regarding security checks, noise and health & safety issues, and so on. These representations of space are regarded by Lefebvre as ideological in nature, since they are used to develop a conception of space and place that meets the needs of those who create them. These ‘conceived spaces’ (as Lefebvre also refers to them) are powerful because they can have a direct impact on site layout, flow, organisation, aesthetics and symbolism – all of which affect how a festival is experienced by festivalgoers. In addition, the official mediations and marketing activities of festival organisers are important, as they can help to set the agenda for, or to direct, the social and behavioural expectations of their events.

This brief discussion of Lefebvre’s (1991) ideas draws attention to everyday social practices, the interaction and work of both festival producers and festivalgoers, and to the importance of representations and mediations to perceptions of an event, hence to the sense of place and insideness (Relph, 1976) that an event might engender. It also points to the active creation of that sense of place and insideness by multiple actors, and implies that the same place can be viewed in very different ways by different people. This latter point reminds me of Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia which he describes as ‘capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several places, several sites that are in themselves incompatible’ (1986: 25).

Foucault (1986) describes heterotopia in terms of deviance from social norms, yet I found in my research that even relatively mainstream commercial festivals can demonstrate such juxtapositions, and it is less about deviance than it is about difference (Anderton, 2019). Furthermore, while festivals may be experienced differently by different groups of people, there is often a broadly-based social image of the festival (which defines the parameters of expected or acceptable meanings and behaviour) that can be identified by those various groups. I refer to this overarching image as an event’s meta-sociality, which might also be described in terms of an event’s particular social ‘atmosphere’ or ‘feel’. For instance, at Burning Man the Ten Principles (Harvey, 2004) which guide the event have an important role to play in fostering and maintaining the event’s meta-sociality, as they act as an important point of reference for both organisers and participants.

A final theory to acknowledge here is drawn from the work of the cultural geographer Doreen Massey. She describes spaces as ‘constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations’, rather than fixed and bounded areas with singular identities (Massey, 1994: 4). Furthermore, she has characterized places as ‘spatio-temporal events’ formed of multiple narratives (stories, memories, beliefs, mediations) that become centred on particular geographic locations (Massey, 2005: 130). This relational and process based understanding of space and place acknowledges that narratives about place can change and develop from year to year, and that informal understandings of place are as important as formal mediations and marketing. At festivals, the place image will vary according to the particular mix of attractions, performers, attendees, sponsors, security staff and so on that come together in any particular year. Nevertheless, longer-lived events in particular may develop a recognizable sense of place and festivalgoers themselves may continue to feel a sense of belonging and familiarity in relation to that place. To return to the festival is, in a sense, a kind of homecoming or, for some, a form of pilgrimage, or a place of renewal (whether on a personal level or within a social or familial group). In this way, a temporary event can gain a sense of rootedness within a landscape or location – one that can increase over time as a festival develops a recognisable character and identity that is both place- and event-based.

**Cyclic places**

The above discussions lead to my own conception of festival sites and events as ‘cyclic places’ or as ‘cyclic festival places’ – a term that conflates a sense of place, a recognisable meta-sociality, and a cyclical if temporary existence (Anderton, 2019). This conception acknowledges that festivals may be regarded as sites of transgression and of deviance: something that I have characterised in the British context as a countercultural version of the Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) carnivalesque (Anderton, 2008, 2011, 2019), but that there is no necessity for this to be the case. Festivals can take on many forms and many meanings, and individual festivals can themselves be understood in differing ways by the variety of individuals and groups who attend them. For me, a ‘cyclic festival place’ is characterized by four interrelated aspects.

First, cyclic festival places are often intimately connected to the pre-existing meanings of the locations that play host to them – they are not necessarily liminal, nor do they necessarily represent the use of space as a blank canvas. Instead, the relationship may be more akin to symbiosis, with the pre-existing meanings of a place (and its broader landscape) framing festivalgoers’ understanding of the festival. I see this as operating at a variety of levels. For instance, in the UK the rural landscape of England is encoded with narratives, meanings, mythologies and behavioural expectations, as are its prehistoric sites, farms, country house estates and other locations that are popularly used for festivals. At a more local level, the specific location or site of a festival may itself be encoded with meanings that are shared by festivalgoers or mobilised in festival mediations. For instance, the Cambridge Folk Festival is held in a small suburban park called Cherry Hinton. It has been held there since the event’s inception in the mid-1960s, and is strongly associated with the folk enthusiast Ken Woollard, who ran the event from 1965 to 1993 (Laing & Newman, 1994). His socialist roots and principles guided the event and ensured that it maintained non-hierarchical advertising, opportunities for amateurs to perform, a family-friendly approach with minimal policing, and a broad rather than traditional understanding of folk music. Cherry Hinton has become synonymous with the festival and with the guiding principles of its original founder, such that plans to capitalise on the festival’s popularity by moving to a larger site have consistently been opposed by festivalgoers and workers. For instance in 2004, Nigel Cutting (of Cambridge City Council) quashed rumours of a change of site by stating that the ‘site is very special and part of what makes the festival the success that it is. We would be taking a very big risk if we were to move it somewhere else’ (cited in Anderton, 2019: 117).

The second aspect relates to the sense of place, belonging and familiarity that may be constructed by regularly occurring events. The festival may exist only temporarily in a physical form, but the provision of entertainments, accommodation and other on-site facilities and services in a familiar layout fosters a sense of continuity. Festivals develop their own histories, landmarks, rules and behaviours that are formed through the interactions of organizers and festivalgoers and are re-constructed or re-performed on an annual basis, forming a meta-sociality that is also re-created on an annual basis. Within this, individuals and groups may develop their own personalised sense of place and belonging with the event and its site, which is linked to their own lived experience and memories of the event from year to year. Thus, multiple narratives (Massey, 2005) or heterotopic understandings (Foucault, 1986) may be recognized within a festival site. For instance, at many events that I studied groups of friends or families would make a festival a central meeting point of their year – one of the few times when they might guarantee that everyone (or most) would be together at the same time. The festival becomes part of their personal narratives and life stories – a part of their own identities, including stories of making friends, meeting partners, experiencing one-off performances, remembering those who have passed away, and so on. Moreover, some groups will seek out the same part of an event’s camping grounds each year, or stake out zones within the main festival arena. These base camps allow them to domesticate the site for their own particular social or familial group, which promotes a sense of belonging, ownership and insideness, and thus reinforces a sense of place despite the event’s temporary annual existence.

The third aspect of a cyclic festival place is that it is necessarily mediated in either formal and informal ways or both. Such mediation not only includes official documents such as licensing terms and festival marketing, programmes and media, but also the activities of festivalgoers themselves in discussing, anticipating and remembering festivals through a variety of social and online media, or in face to face communication (Morey et al. 2014; Anderton, 2019). Together these mediations form a virtual version of the festival that continues to construct behavioural expectations and place-images throughout the year. This is especially important for the contemporary music festival market due to the increased competition brought about by the rapidly growing number of events seen throughout the 2000s (Anderton, 2008, 2019). Mediation helps such events to define themselves within the market, to attract new festivalgoers and to reinforce a sense of place and meta-sociality (which then further strengthens expectations regarding social norms and behaviours during the festival itself). The latter is shown in websites and internet discussion groups that offer advice and tips to ‘festival virgins’ or ‘newbies’ about what to expect and what to bring and so on. Such mediations help to reinforce the performativity of festivalgoers onsite, and help recreate the atmosphere and feel of the event each year.

The final aspect of cyclic place is the combination of continuity and change. This is constructed through the intersection of a festival’s relatively stable sense of place (its place-image and meta-sociality) with the ever-changing performances, mediations and social interactions that are to be found at an event each year. The mix of music, people, preferences and activities changes over time, and while a festival’s sense of place may remain familiar to regular attendees, each year’s event will feel different. This allows festivalgoers to avoid feelings of stagnation, and festival organizers to react to changes both in regulation and legislation, and in developments in the tastes and demographics of their audiences – to create new stages and other attractions or to extend the styles of music on offer. Hence, a sense of novelty and difference is added to the sense of familiarity and belonging, and this helps the event experience to remain fresh and exciting, while maintaining and developing its overall identity.

In conclusion, the four aspects outlined in this presentation help to characterize music festivals as cyclic places (Anderton, 2019; forthcoming). This concept acknowledges how festivals may come to be constructed as places that hold significant social and cultural meanings for their attendees, even though they may be commercially managed and marketed. It also recognizes the role of festivalgoers and festival organizers in fostering cyclic places and perhaps helps to explain why, at least in part, some festivals manage to endure and thrive from year to year, while others, which fail to develop the sense of place, belonging and attachment engendered by a cyclic place, do not.

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**Biography**

Dr Chris Anderton is a music and music industry researcher and practitioner. He is the author of the book *Music Festivals in the UK*, co-author of the book *Understanding the Music Industries*, and has published and presented internationally on music festivals, the music industry and music history. He manages the Music Promotion and Music Management degrees at Solent University where he established the in-house music organisation Solent Music (solentmusic.com). He is also co-executive producer of the long-running music industry conference and live event SMILEfest (smilefest.co.uk), which is transforming into SO:MusicCity in 2019.