

Inside Festival Cultures: Fields, Bodies, Ecologies

A Conference organised by the University of Birmingham, 16th and 17th May 2019

Preliminary online workshop scheduled for the 18th of February 2019 (4.00 pm to 6.00 pm), which will consider a proposal for an edited collection and contribute towards the design of the conference.

Convened by: Dr Jeremy Kidwell and Dr Maria Nita

Confirmed speakers:

Dr Marion Bowman (The Open University), Prof. François Gauthier (University of Fribourg), Prof Sharif Gemie (The University of Chichester), Prof Graham Harvey (The Open University), Prof Jacqui Mulville (Cardiff University).

The key concern of the proposed conference is to investigate important developments in a growing transatlantic modern festival culture. We will ask how have festivals made use of traditional cultural practices? Are festivals acculturative hubs, thus assisting society to make sense of change? Are festivals laboratories for cultural change and innovation? Might festivals present us with opportunities for 'an ecological reconciliation'?

The conference will investigate the forces shaping festivals, such as tradition, commemoration, commercialisation, globalisation and innovation. In particular, this event will focus on the role festivals have in processes of cultural transmission in the contemporary world. Modern festivals emerged in the context of significant social and cultural change in the 1960s. Over the past five decades, festival networks have developed a model based on oral traditions, drawn from the memorialisation of the free festivals of the 1960s. Woodstock's and Glastonbury's iconic naked festival bodies signalled a profound societal change, whilst displaying a nostalgic re-enactment of and yearning for a simpler past and community. In recent years, trans-national festival networks, like the Burning Man festival, have consciously promoted community-oriented spiritual practices. Our proposed conference wishes to illuminate the facets of these varied dynamics inside festival cultures.

Modern festivals represent a new and exciting area of study reflected by both the rising scholarly interest and the continuous growth of this phenomenon in the West during the past five decades. This era of late modernity or postmodernity was marked by important cultural, social and environmental changes, such

as increased globalisation, and the environmental and societal effects of anthropogenic climate change. Modern festivals have to be considered in conjunction with these developments. Hence the Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert is seen by some scholars as an experiment in community resilience in response to climate change, whereby the arid climate of the desert represents a projection of the future of mankind. Perhaps following the earlier transatlantic route of the 1960s, that of Woodstock and Glastonbury, Burning Man is currently extending in Europe. Such developments should be investigated against the backdrop of other significant global trends, such as the decline of institutionalised religious traditions as well as political, economic and socio-cultural changes. The conference will develop a scholarly conversation around the wider implications of festival culture in Britain and abroad.

More specifically the conference will explore the interplay between two areas of investigation, namely the development and transmission of tradition/s on one hand and, and on the other, the roles festivals have in showcasing innovation and experimentation with cultural change. Many scholars have argued that increased mobility and globalisation in our contemporary world is impacting on the established channels for cultural transmission, thus leading to increased secularisation and a loss in traditional cultural values. Others have shown that festivals can represent important commemorative spaces, and that the transmission of religious and other cultural elements may continue despite decline or disruptions in such institutions as the church, communities of place, the traditional family and so on. At the same time we increasingly live in a world dominated by change, uncertainty and risk, and scholars recognised that the implications of living with unprecedented global risk in a detraditionalised society involve the development of new types of subversive social movements. Festivals appear to have developed in this context and against such global trends, yet during the past five decades they have themselves changed significantly, with some public and academic voices deploring their decline into an increasingly corporate ethos.

We expect the conference will attract broad interdisciplinary participation, which will help us explore broader themes in this field of research and begin a dialogue on the role festivals have in shaping an emerging global culture, as well as their role in mediating change and promoting cultural innovation.

We welcome 20-minute papers that could include but are not limited to the following topics:

- (1) 'Festival fields as sites of commemoration';
- (2) 'Music, orality and tradition in global encounters';
- (3) 'Festival bodies: change and cultural transmission'
- (4) 'Greening and consumerism at festivals.'

Proposals of about 200 words together with a short biographical note (50 words) in Word or PDF format should be sent to M.Nita@Bham.ac.uk by February 7th, 2019.