Culture of Events: Is There a Place for Critical Theory in Event Pedagogy?

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By and large, the study of events at the post-secondary level has been focused on their planning and management. (Getz, 2008) While this operational perspective obviously has value and continues to be generative in creating ever more spectacular and well organized special events and conventions, an examination of events as sites of cultural, political, and ideological contest are less common. Events are constructed phenomena and are therefore open to analysis, critique and theorizing, and while some event scholars have begun to take up this challenge, it is less common to find courses that introduce students to the hermeneutic analysis of events as texts in and of themselves. We set out to combine various critical theories and cultural studies approaches with current and historical event cases to show students that while events are exciting and lucrative, that they are also ideological and political constructs and have profound social impacts beyond the level of entertainment. This paper outlines the background and justification for our decision to create the course, offers the precedents for event analysis set by cultural and literary critics and then sets out the structure of the course as well as sample modules.

Festivals and events, planned or otherwise, have long been used by societies and their ruling powers for festive celebration or political hegemony (Getz, 2005). From ancient Greek and Roman times, special events like the Olympics and "circus" have served a higher – although much more veiled - purpose than simple sport or games. The Ancient Olympics were more about civic pride amongst warring Greek city-states than they were about the modern Olympics ideals of peace and friendship, and hope and understanding. In those times, the games served as a permanent focal point of unity for a nation that was divided into many highly independent city-states, or *polis*. The games provided the annual forum for the sharing of ideas, art, poetry, and athletic bragging rights. It is argued for instance that the Greek Empire would have crumbled much sooner if the games had not been there to unify the metropolises "whose ideal of absolute independence was its greatness and weakness" (Gomez-Lobo, 1997, p. 20) in celebration.

So too are the modern Olympics used as a tool by host cities and nations to achieve political goals. The 'spectacle' of the opening ceremonies is staged to showcase a nation's grand achievements, such as the Chinese did in Beijing in 2008, or the stalwart nature of a once great empire, as the British did in London in 2012. Indeed, the elaborate staging and ritual of the Olympic torch relay was in fact a manufactured symbol of Nazi Party power rather than some representation of the human side, and uncorrupted virtues, of global sport. "The torch relay is a total fabrication. The Germans invented it for the 1936 Olympics."(Nadel, I.B. in Allemang,

2009.) The torch relay was one of the many ingenious and innovative methods – a planned ceremony within a larger event- of propaganda used by the Nazis to link their cause to that of the ancient values and aesthetic of ancient Greece.

The Romans on the other hand, used the elaborate spectacle of their *Circus Maximus* not to draw attention to themselves and the might of their empire, but rather to do exactly the opposite and provide a distraction for their citizens away from the socio-political problems of the day. "Bread and circuses", from the latin *panem et circenses*, is the metaphor for what was a superficial means of appeasement through the use of elaborate staging of circus games and other forms of entertainment as a means of increasing political power through populism. As Bergmann contends, "Societies and people define themselves through spectacle" (In Gold, 1999, p. 23), and that spectacle is more often than not a highly staged and constructed event that carries much more significance than simple entertainment.

Festivals and events, when at their best, also function as instruments of social change and cultural celebration. Indeed, Getz (personal communication, July 2010) contends that the phenomenon of festivals and events is best explained through the lens of sociology and anthropology. This is because when people come together to participate, share and experience something communally, certain socially advantageous 'forms' are created through the development of 'soft infrastructure' such as knowledge, social capital, or even public policy. The gathering of people who share common values and interests helps to foster a sense of belonging, sense of place and 'communitas' (Derrett, 2002). These acts of festive sociability can be very powerful. For instance, the annual Hajj at Mecca is not only the world's largest pilgrimage, but also the biggest single gathering on the global calendar. Such events, whether they are liminal (that is, overtly sacred) or liminoid (in a secular context) – allow individuals to probe, test and cultivate their identities with reference to their social context. In the case of pilgrimage, one of the prerequisites is consecrate space that sets the journey apart in both space and time, a sacred site where one has access to their god. In many cases such sites are 'contested', where there is contest over access and usage and therefore it is necessary to negotiate over space, ownership and symbolism (Dignace, 2003).

While not conventionally a part of event management discourse, the cultural analysis of events is a well-established feature of many structural and post-structural hermeneutic approaches. As the definition of "text" was successively broadened over the course of the twentieth century, events became sites of direct interest, with their effects becoming common parlance among cultural critics. While some of these cultural critics directly address events themselves (particularly those of the historicist tradition), others offer tools easy adapted to the examination of events as "text." The example perhaps most appropriate in the context of event planning is also one of the most representative of the conversation around Austen's (1975) speech-act theory. The wedding is a carefully orchestrated event that brings people together to witness a series of vows. It is simultaneously an organizational endeavor, a profoundly symbolic system, and an ideological construct. As Eve

Sedgwick points out, a "subject gets constituted in marriage through a confident appeal to state authority, through the calm interpellation of others present as 'witnesses,' and through the logic of the (heterosexual) supplement whereby individual subjective agency is guaranteed by the welding into a cross-gender dyad" (71). Thus, all aspects of the planning of the event, so everyday in its occurrence, become profoundly rich moments for analysis. All the choices that go into the event, from the most direct aspect of the vows (do they write their own versus a more "traditional" approach? what are the nature of the vows they write?), to the location of the event, to the payment of costs, all become meaningful and are therefore part of a larger "text" to be read.

Perhaps the best example of the analysis of "event as cultural text" is the Russian Formalist Makhail Bakhtin's discussion of the cultural impact of carnival in *Rabelais and his World* (1984). In it, Bakhtin uses the event of the renaissance carnival to show how social strategies of inversion were used to place those aspects of low cultural status in primacy over conventionally higher-order modes of thought, speech, behavior, and rank. The effect of these inversions, he notes, is a highlighting of the everyday, the body, the imperfect, as well as allowing all to participate in a larger, social satire where hypocrisy is laid bare; but rather than an objective mockery (as with neo-classical satirical forms), the carnivalesque provides no opportunity for "outside," no safe vantage. All are equally implicated.

New Historical criticism also provides an opportunity to see how events can reveal the cultural and discursive assumptions of a society. In his essay "Strange Things, Gross Terms, Curious Customs: The Rehearsal of Cultures in the Late Renaissance" (1983), Steven Mullaney shows the affects of "wonder-cabinets" and "spectacles of strangeness" in shaping renaissance subjects' understanding of self, other, and the very definition of culture. He examines, at length, a single event in 1550 where the city of Rouen played host to a "recreation" of a Brazilian village. Visitors could observe the villagers (a host of indigenous people imported specifically for the event) or engage with them directly. In the wider context of cultural tourism studies, this staged event and resulting essay brings new and complex meaning to the discussion of "authenticity" and the tourist experience. Authenticity (MacCannell, 1973) of course, like the 'experience economy' (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) after it, has long since become a cliché in tourism studies nomenclature and is in need of interrogation and deconstruction. Such a turn to the reservoir of critical theory can give us the terms to begin unpacking such terms and identifying their ideological implications.

It was with these instances in mind that we developed our course "Culture of Events" (September 2009) to begin to reveal to students trained in the development and organization of events that their productions have significant cultural affect. We found that our millennial student population was having a difficult time grasping the importance of some of our chosen event case studies simply because they were struggling with the socio-cultural context of these historic happenings. We felt that the best way to teach critical theory to event students was by means of example, so

we set out to provide a loosely diachronic movement through significant philosophies that allow us to view events as social, aesthetic, and political forces and then set them next to representative anecdotes, or cases. We would then have the opportunity to look at historically and currently successful events, from the ancient Olympics to Burning Man, from a full-fleshed perspective. Students would be first introduced to the theory, then walked through the history and logistics of the representative event and then, through discussion and exercises, would work through the process of analyzing any event using the course theories and terminology. Throughout the term, students would be given the tools to measure and predict the effects of the events that they plan so that they would be able to accurately predict as well as strategically craft and design events for particular audiences, towards particular purposes, in myriad contexts.

We begin with an overarching, rhetorical approach, one that sees events as created and designed meaning-making systems that are inherently persuasive. As such, the creation of events becomes one where audiences arrive at the event in one state, and as a result of that event, are moved to a different perspective. We note that in every event-planning situation, the Aristotelian, rhetorical triangle is at work; planners must give participants a reason to care (pathos), be organized and have a clear purpose (logos), and be ultimately credible and trustworthy (ethos). We also note that, drawing from Kenneth Burke (1989), the purpose of events is to create moments of identification, where participants are joined together towards a common goal or recognition and begin to think "in terms of" each other. This identification is often facilitated by the countervailing force of division, whereby the group is distinguished from those outside of itself. In other words, events create a sense of community by means of mutual recognition against a symbolic Other. This rhetorical approach is both descriptive and prescriptive insofar as it gives the language to describe what is happening when events occur, as well as guides the planning of events in order to make them successful. Further, and more importantly, such a descriptive/prescriptive approach demands of students that they be always self-reflexive in their choices. The knowledge that their choice differences make a difference in meaning gives a profound power and ownership to event planners and managers. But it also forces students to ask themselves the big "why?" Why are they doing this event? What is its purpose? What do they hope audiences take away? Of what do they hope to persuade their audiences and what change, both individually and socially, do they hope to affect?

In one module, we addressed the theories of Hakim Bey (1991) and the ontological anarchist movements who call for the creation of "temporary autonomous zones" (TAZ), or spaces that exist outside the control of the state. These zones have no sense of permanence of continuity, but rather represent an explosion of expressive freedom outside the logic of the civilized. Taking his cue from the early twentieth century Free State of Fiume as well as the philosophy and work of Gabrielle D'Annunzio, Bey notes that such moments of freedom should never seek to be permanent because the teleological finality promised by revolutionary thinkers such as Marx lead only to senseless deaths and ultimately a return to the oppressive force

of civilization. Instead, Bey embraces the path of the return "to Croatan," whereby subjects eschew the logic of individualism and "go native," disappearing into the anonymity of the crowd, "unplugging from the grid," as it were. Toward these ends, the TAZ uses the technologies of state control to create spaces outside state control. Once we walk students through the TAZ, we then took these ideas and set them against the so-called "twitter-revolutions." From the Green Revolution to the Arab Spring, the technologically assisted "flashmob" has become a powerful tool of political expression. Carefully and meticulously planned and orchestrated, the flashmob is an event that personifies the TAZ in that it has no intention of permanence, but uses the tools and power of oppression (technologies of communication and surveillance) against the oppressive power of the state. Jessica Ketcham Weber (2010) assists us in understanding the persuasive power of such flashmobs, a we examine her essay "Techno-mob movements: Public Performance and the Collective Voices of Outsiders." She places the phenomena of the flashmob into an event perspective by defining them as the "creative use of technology to mobilize citizens in public performances" (262).

Other modules in the course include an analysis of Gay Pride (parades in this case) as a sight of not just sexual expression and freedom, but as a construction of "drag," "feminism", and gender identity. We also explore a number of iconic pop culture movements in the UK such as the Mod vs. Rocker clashes on the beaches South England in the early-1960s, the drug culture of Acid House or Rave parties of the late-1980s, as well of the origins (from Jamaican dub to subterranean London) and meanings of Dubstep in contemporary music. To all of these we bring various socio-cultural theories and historical nuance to provide the students with context to better understand how these events came to be, what they meant to the participants, and the resulting societal interpretation. Soccer hooliganism is analyzed using some ideas in Franklin Foer's *How Soccer Explains the World* as a way of exploring working class unemployment, the crushing of trade unions, and the beginnings of globalization in Thatcherian England. By pairing historical moments like these (Hillsborough Disaster, 1989) with wider societal change (the rise of corporate hegemony) and event specific phenomenology (such as ritualized male violence as a result of structural social disenfranchisement) we can take almost any staged event and begin to see how it works. As such, we also tackle the civil rights movement in America during the 1950s and 1960s as a way to understand civil disobedience as a socio-political force for change as demonstrated by Rosa Parks or Mahatma Ghandi, and in this case culminating with Martin Luther King's *I Have Dream* speech on the Mall in Washington, 1963.

Our overall purpose then, is to highlight for students that events, whether staged, planned, constructed, organic, or otherwise, have the power to affect great change for good or bad. Their impacts stretch far beyond the economic. Indeed, it is the political and socio-cultural impacts that can be most significant (Allen et al., 2011). Thus, we contend, analysis is the first step towards design. In other words, the same tools that can be invoked to critique and deconstruct events can also be used to construct sophisticated and innovative experiences that are both entertaining and

culturally rich. We see a sea change coming – one where students are not only trained in the strategies of event production but also in their analysis and critique. And we are not alone; other scholars are pursuing similar ideas, such as Andrews and Leopold in their book *Events and the Social Sciences* (2013). From our perspective the instrumental approach to event pedagogy is merely one step down the path of educating successful event designers. It is not enough to know the practical tools for how to stage an event; without the interpretive and theoretical tools by which event managers can recognize the cultural, social, political and aesthetic impacts and implications of these practical design choices, they will be building events wearing blinders. The Culture of Events class assumes that students who understand the ideological implications of events are better equipped to design the right event for the right audience, given the right context.

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