

Tomasz Lesicki

Medical University of Gdansk

Ritual process and the imaginary world at music festivals

Introduction

Przystanek Woodstock and Heineken Open'er Festival are currently the most popular music events in Poland, attracting thousands of participants. For a few days, festival camping towns are put up in the separated suburban areas of the cities, which host the events, presenting a field for sociological analysis. The festivals, due to their length, specific ambience and number of participants, are not "ordinary" weekend events organized in city centres. The purpose of the presented study is to explain their nature in the perspective of selected theories.

Theory

The rite of passage concept

During a ritual process an individual passes from the sphere of the profane (*profanum*) to the sphere of the sacred (*sacrum*). The changes that participants undergo make them gain new cultural competence. This process was the subject of an in-depth analysis by Arnold van Gennep (2004), an anthropologist who advocated the theory that societies can be divided into secular and religious ones, and that the reality of these societies will be respectively domains of the profane and the sacred. According to the researcher, the transformation of a neophyte – participant of the rite, the moment of granting him a new status – is best manifested in the rite of initiation.

The rite of passage – as it is also referred to – can be divided into three phases: preliminal, liminal, and post-liminal (from the word *limen* – threshold). Van Gennep claimed that each ritual is characterized by such a tripartite division. The first phase consists in exclusion. During this time it is crucial to separate the initiate physically from the social reality, and norms and conventions which are familiar to him. The liminal phase is the moment of suspension of these cultural and societal laws (it is a stage of functioning at the threshold of two worlds: the sacred and the profane), during which the ritual passage, the contact with the divine sphere,

takes place. The ensuing re-inclusion of the ritual participant into the world of the profane, with its conventions and established order, is the last stage of the ritual process. The individual, who was marginalized at the time of separation, returns to the defined social structure with new cultural competences obtained through the ritual influence.

The social group that consolidates during the transition rituals (unless the ritual is essentially individual), was described by Victor Turner (1969) as *communitas*. Within this construct, institutionalized forms are suspended, and the goal is to move away from the structural framework. Elżbieta Hałas (2007) notices that a rite induces an almost ecstatic sense of community in the group of initiates. Stripping the rite participants of the rights, duties and conventions which they followed before the rite, makes the *communitas* appear as a homogenous body, deprived of the past and the future, as a “pure nothingness” (Turner 1974). The initiates are in fact an anti-structure reality, i. e. a specific social field in which norms, status, rank or position are loosened, if not disintegrated, and established social structures are contrasted with their negations. Instead of the constant, we are dealing with the transient; in opposition to social inequalities – an equality of all is being put in place; the naming system disappears in favour of anonymity, and the secular is replaced by the sacred. In the case of a ritual, achieving the sphere of the sacred means a deep integration: it enables the entire community to unite firmly and redefine the social structure.

In this paper, it has been assumed that the discussed theories could be transferred onto the ground of participation in a music festival, understood here as a very specific rite of passage, where the place of separation is the area of the event, the initiates – its participants (forming the *communitas*), and all the acts taking place in its course – elements of the initiation process.

The social exchange theory

Functioning within the same structure requires the participants of the ritual to establish specific relations between each other, which are characteristic of *communitas*. One of them is exchange and related duties: giving, accepting and reciprocating the gift (Mauss 2001). In Marcel Mauss's theory of social exchange, the symmetry of particular aspects of exchange plays an essential role. Mauss's theory holds that there is a system of comprehensive benefits consisting in the fact that the objects of exchange may not only be material, but also intangible assets, services, behaviours, pleasantries and fun activities.

Imaginary world

Complementing the anthropological analysis with a phenomenological paradigm, it is worth paying attention to the original typifications made by an individual while organizing the surrounding reality. A member of a community recognizes individual experience (his or other members') as a common experience,

lived through by the entire community. This interpretation is supported by using the knowledge of “ancestors”, significant Others who are part of the community. An individual refers to this knowledge freely when interacting with other group members, assuming that they are using the same resource. When making the typification, an individual puts other members of the interaction into the category of the “generalized Other” (a representative of the community), who performs functions closely related to his/her assigned role. At the same time, for the sake of alignment, the role given by an individual to the companions of the interaction, becomes internalized by him/herself (Lejzerowicz-Zajączkowska 2003). During a music festival, a participant perceives him/herself and others as part of the festival attendee community, which shares the unique collective experience.

In a phenomenological analysis, music festivals can be perceived as specific microcosms, whose idea was explored in sociology by Alfred Schütz (Schütz in: Manterys 1997). This idea has two components: the objective one, which contains the whole of the culturally formulated reality, and the subjective one, covering the personal experiences and imaginations of individuals associated with the surrounding reality. These components constitute the distinctive intersubjectivity of the experienced world, where the vision of a given construct is shared by participants of the interaction, although it is still relevant for every individual separately.

Both elements complement each other and form an analytical framework which serves as a reference for the studies on the world of mass events. On the one hand, the established social construct, being a general characteristic of a given festival, is already visible, and on the other hand it has been created on the basis of the subjective approach of individuals. In this case, intersubjectivity may be an option to consider – intersubjectivity understood here as a vision shared by the general public, but still very specific to each individual. This vision takes the form of a common spirit or collective consciousness characteristic of the festival, established in the communication processes and interactions between festival participants. In this approach, the particular experiences of an individual and their subjective interpretations are translated into the experiences of other participants in the social reality. The suprapersonal consciousness will be an individual creation; however, shared by all, and considered identical. The awareness of this intersubjectivity is shaped by the given lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) experienced by every member of the interaction (Schütz 1989). Festival participants can therefore share a common stream of consciousness.

Objective and method

The aim of the research is to analyse the personal views of festival participants about this particular type of entertainment. The point was to transcend the individual experience of the partiers and to try to capture the general tendencies related to experiencing the events included in the sociological analysis. This method allowed for precise control of incoming information and enabled creating an accurate picture of the social reality. What caught specific interest were the intentions

for participation in the events, but also noticing both the festivals' distinguishing features and common aspects.

While designing the course of the research, the following questions were posed:

1. Which ritual processes are revealed at particular festivals?
2. How does the imaginary world appear from the point of view of festival participants?
3. What are the common features of given festivals?
4. Does participation in a festival transform an individual in some way? What is the durability of the occurring changes? Does the festival participant become a liminal entity?
5. How does the structure (anti-structure) manifest itself during the festival?
6. How does the sense of community manifest itself during the festival?

The study used qualitative in-depth interviews, and participant observation. Eight participants of the music festivals were interviewed, including three regulars of Przystanek Woodstock, three of Open'er, and two people participating in both festivals. The researcher attended Przystanek Woodstock three times (in 2008, 2009 and 2011), and participated in Open'er twice (in 2010 and 2015). The structured interview with direct participants of these events allowed to capture the essential nature of these phenomena. Qualitative analysis of the collected material made it possible to present an accurate image of this social reality section, i. e. music festivals.

Results

The motive for attending

The motives of the first arrivals at Przystanek Woodstock usually involve curiosity. Respondents hinted that they wanted to experience something new. Both festivals take place during the summer, so high school and university students (as they constitute the majority of participants at music festivals) can easily manage a few days off, as well as take spontaneous decisions about going. "I met my friend on the beach and K. in Sopot, and it was so completely spontaneous; he mentioned that he was going to Woodstock in two days, and asked if I was going with him. The next day, me and K, we checked out what Woodstock was, on the second day we found out about the prices, and there, we were already coming along."

Apart from wanting to satisfy curiosity, an important impulse to go is trying to verify the legend of the festival. This legend refers to a musical event with a relatively long history and the fact that it has been organized by Jurek Owsiak. "I'd always wanted to go, because I always admired Owsiak for what he does, and I wanted to see it, because I've heard a lot about this festival; and I was talked into it by a friend who had been there with another friend a year earlier, and they said it was fun; there were people, concerts; and that's why I went on this journey."

Finally, the purpose of arrival is the desire to spend a few days in a not particularly sophisticated, ludic atmosphere of freedom. Interestingly, the wish for ulti-

mate rest and to “chill out” seems to be a more important motive than the music itself. “If someone is interested in it, then they go; if someone can’t be bothered, they may not get to any concert, like K., who never even reached the stage; he only went on [...] Steczkowska, I guess, that’s where we landed, just for laughs”. Obviously, music is important, it builds the background and to a certain degree it determines the kind of people arriving at the festival, but the primary motive for participating in the event is the opportunity to cut off oneself from reality and to unwind. [People – T. L.] go there to relax, they don’t have to worry about getting up, getting dressed in the morning [...]. I am free, no one makes me do anything, I do what I want; I rest, I have fun, it’s different than just going to town to party, to a club.”

The *communitas* that forms spontaneously during these few days feels the need to get away from everyday life. “Because Przystanek is not about stars. It’s about having fun to music that is not necessarily good, but joyful, upbeat and ludic” (Owsiak, Skaradziński 2010: 37). Another distinct element is the need to make spontaneous friendships with casually encountered participants. “Everyone is a buddy at Woodstock, people embrace each other, and behave like a big family.”

Among the motivations of attending Open’er, the desire to experience a concert of a star comes first. When deciding to take part in this music festival, participants inspect the line-up: a list of performing artists.

First of all, we had an Open’er folder, which everybody gets from the organizers, and we could look through a table where it said exactly who was performing, when and where, and we could choose and combine what we liked. Since the list of performers is announced much earlier, you can learn a bit about them, listen to something you didn’t know before, and find out whether it suits or not. In general, obviously, we followed the well-known and popular bands.

A festival is evaluated on the basis of who comes to perform at it. “A festival is measured by the grade of musicians who come. It’s not that the festival is a great value just in itself [...]. I went to Selector once, maybe twice, now I’m not going because it’s just lame [...]”. Notably, the wish to attend the maximum possible number of concerts stands out.

You know, I went to Heineken, because the Sex Pistols played there, and I just couldn’t pass a concert of such a legend. Same with Prince, though I’m not a big fan. Then it turned out that Gentleman and Erica Badu were to perform, so it was a very nice combo on that day. I go to Heineken if there’s someone cool playing, Wood[stock] is not for concerts, just for the atmosphere, friends and fun.

Getting to the festival

The above mentioned freedom in the case of Przystanek is for the first time experienced during the journey to the festival, which most participants choose to make by special festival trains. This is the first opportunity for the initiate to

enter the festival's anti-structure. "Sodom and Gomorrah on the train [...] you let everyone off the leash and put them on that train and you feel that freedom. You start a hardcore party."

The journey to the place of seclusion appears here as a pre-liminal stage in the rite of passage, when participants cut themselves off from the reality in which they live every day. Social relations between the participants are formed at this stage already. This is how one of the respondents describes it in his column:

At ten o'clock I was standing on the platform waiting for the Woodstock train to arrive. When the train came, I immediately got on. I must say that I felt a bit awkward going alone, without my friend (I didn't quite feel the Woodstock climate yet). What was my surprise when right upon my arrival a group of young people asked me if I was going alone. I answered, truthfully, I indeed was. – Then you're going with us! – I heard. We spent the whole trip, over eight hours (as we had several unannounced stops on the handbrake, because the toilets had too little capacity), singing, dancing, if possible, and – as a matter of fact – drinking alcohol (Szkarlát 2010: 14).

Participants with a longer experience play an important role here – they are guides of a kind who help the newly arrived initiates to blend into the *communitas*. Despite the kindness of other participants, the journey to the festival is long and cumbersome. After arriving in Kostrzyn upon Oder, participants must reach the festival campsite, located several kilometres afar from the city centre. In other words, they need to get to the actual place of separation, where the next stages of the ritual will take place. Most of the Open'er attendees arrive in the vicinity of the festival on special buses, and in order to get to the festival campsite, they also have to march for an hour or so.

The festival campsite

The sense of community between the festival participants is present throughout the whole event, which with reference to the rite of passage constitutes the level of "macro". But it is most easily observable while travelling to the festival and during concerts.

After reaching the place, the *sacrum* affects participants by means of a camping site. "The look of the campsite is impressive, you're disgusted by this dirt, the nudity, the drinking; the first two hours are shocking, then you start to take in the atmosphere, enter the mode, it starts feeling like the usual. "In order to fully experience the music festival, feel its atmosphere, you need to use the campsite. Without it, the reception of the event will be incomplete; it will lose some of its value.

That's why people started going to the tents, so they wouldn't have to come back home. It seems to me that this is what people are looking for. They're seeking music, but going to a concert of a star you like is one thing, and seeing them at the festival, another. With the campsite, it feels like I'm on vacation, without it it's like coming back from a party every day.

The camping site is a space of social relations, established or maintained during the event.

I rent a camping space, but only for social reasons. I usually do it this way that I sleep and shower at my grandmother's, who lives in the centre of Gdynia, and I buy a ticket for the campsite so that I can enter the campsite; this is where most of the friends who have come from all over Poland are camping, otherwise I would not get a chance to hang out with them and talk.

The concert – the liminal phase

Concerts are the core of every music festival. While respondents – especially participants of Przystanek Woodstock – emphasized that the atmosphere of the festival is often more important than the music itself, the highlight of each day of the festival is the performances of the stars. It is during the concerts when you can clearly see the ritual process with its liminal phase. This is when the audience feels the communion with the sphere of the sacred the most. Participants who stay near the stage at the time of the performance are in a threshold situation (limen), when certain social conventions are suspended (anti-structure). The ecstatic vibe affects the majority of the listeners. After the concert, when they return to the structure for a moment, it is time to comment on the performance. "During the concert, I experience it deep down in my heart, and after the concert I comment on what I liked and what I didn't. "Experiencing the *sacrum* during the concert may occur individually, but respondents also remark on the collectiveness of this act. "At the concert, everyone behaves like one big family."

Indeed, establishing the collective spirit which results from the presence of masses of people similar to each other at the concert marks the climax. A common stream of consciousness manifests itself during the act of acquiring the same experience, while disregarding the structural framework. What an individual sees, appears to him/her as a vision shared by all. Individual consciousness is temporarily pushed away to the benefit of something that can be called trans-personal consciousness. Even if the concert is experienced individually, its reception among the mass of other participants or discussion about it is an act of an objectivization of this experience, constituting a specific *Lebenswelt*, which the intersubjectivity of the festival world is based on.

During the concert a specific act of exchange occurs, especially between the artist and the audience, where – considering the system of comprehensive benefits – the performers receive the approval of the audience in the form of applauding, cheering and a partying crowd. A ritualized exchange does not have to resemble an economic transaction. Musicians, as a matter of fact, give their performance as a gift, and the audience reciprocates this act with an enthusiastic response. An exceptionally great performance usually ends with the crowd's ovation and the demand for an encore. In this arrangement, cheers and applause are a gift that artists have to accept and then reciprocate. Mauss's theory works well here – when the

musicians give something remarkable and unique during the encore, they more than give back the kindness.

[...] and then they clapped so much that Pollard went out again alone with the guitar, and he played one more song, and it was great, it was so magical.

There even have been some fantastic improvisations; they displayed the lyrics of the piece *Knights of Cydonia* on the jumbotrons, and some lines are chanted there, and it was really cool, because the vocalist made contact with the audience and asked them to sing along with him. [...] Everyone was acting crazy; I was quite near the stage with my friend and even the mud that splashed up to our knees did not matter at all.

A peculiar form of suspending of social norms in the situation of a concert is pogo – observable especially at rock and metal concerts. This is an aggressive quasi-dance, sham fight, between the concert participants to the rhythm of the music being played. Aggression and violence are common during transition rituals, when initiates are beaten or even mutilated (Gennep 2004, Eliade 1997).

There's no profound ideology in it, I just enjoy that. Actually, I feel controlled aggression; I don't know, I like it, for example, entering this pogo with such aggression. Not with hatred towards these people, but with some kind of internal aggression, you move your body in a way that doesn't surprise anyone and, in fact, you're independent of other people's judgments and opinions.

In spite of the brutality of this act, its participant condones violation of his personal space, so that he can blow off his deposits of energy and tension. Interestingly, the respondents often talked about a certain fraternity, some sense of community between pogo participants. "I would be more likely to help someone during pogo than someone I meet in the street. Somehow he seems closer. I think we agree on this one particular aspect of life. "The behaviour of individuals during pogo is a practical application of the knowledge developed by significant Others. The phenomenological wisdom of ancestors is common to all the initiates who, nevertheless, remain anonymous to each other. The idea of pogo, created by a certain Other, prevails over other models of behaviour and such a system was accepted by the general public. "I'm entering pogo to let off steam. I feel identity with the crowd then."

The domain of many festivals – including Woodstock – is ubiquitous dirt. Przystanek is often called "Dirtstock" – especially by its opponents. The necessity to give up some of the normal hygiene habits is another argument supporting the anti-structure nature of a music festival. Admittedly, music festivals offer the opportunity to follow the necessary hygienic procedures, but often in a limited form. Besides, dust clouds and high temperatures make the efforts put into hygiene rather transient. Nevertheless, the company of other participants, who are in the same situation, effectively mutes the cultural imperative of cleanliness, enhancing the feeling of freedom. The care for appearance, for the perception by others, will return only after the event.

I don't mind it, because I brace myself for the dirt when I'm going there. [...] Not washing is simply convenient. You don't have to bother with towels, wash your hair; you just wake up, go to bed as you like it; nobody remarks on what you look like, or that you are dirty. I don't mind it, but I don't want to look like that when I come back from Woodstock.

In the case of Przystanek Woodstock you can talk about some kind of affirmation of dirt – one of the attractions there is mud baths. There is a high pillar near the main stage, the so-called mushroom, which sprinkles water, turning the area around it into a muddy puddle. It is a place for having fun, playing simple games and enjoying euphoric baths. Within the mud sector, social norms also become loosened.

Everyone seems to know these mud sectors. If somebody walks into it, you can legally make him dirty, he will not hold a grudge against you, because that's why you go there: to get muddy; and even if you don't know this person, you can easily push him in and he'll not take offence, he'll smile and throw you in, too.

This kind of fun resembles African and Australian rites of passage, where the bodies of the initiates are often smeared with mud. Dirt is not an element that excludes the contact with the sacred sphere, on the contrary – when considering the tradition of contact with mud and the ecstatic nature of this act – it may be the key to it. All in all, mud, just like the initiate in the liminal phase, is also a form in a specific state of suspension between dense liquid and thinned solid (Douglas 1966).

Conclusions

When the music festival is over, its participants return to playing various social roles, and again enter the structural framework. The *Communitas* dissolves just as quickly as it commenced, and the rite of passage comes to an end. A mass event of this type turns out to be a real comma, a threshold between the laws of the usual structure.

The uniqueness of festival music lies in the fact that it is strongly linked to the vibe that the festival offers, ingrained in the social reality created during its time. The reception of music is mediated by the imaginary world created at the festival, one which one can identify with (Frith 1998). "Rain doesn't bother us, because there is music. This is the bonding agent. "Music festivals, like Open'er or Woodstock, provide a subjective sense of belonging. They allow the participants to express themselves in a fixed framework, and the music enables them to define themselves and also to experience a collective identity in a ritual way.

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Summary

Ritual process and the imaginary world at music festivals

The article concerns the music festivals Przystanek Woodstock and Heineken Open'er Festival and analyses them in an anthropological and phenomenological paradigm. Through participant observation and structured interviews the author gathered manifestations of the ritual process and investigated the unique Lebenswelt, the world experienced by the attendees. The purpose of the scientific analysis was acquiring an in-depth insight into personal visions of the festivals, the way they are perceived by their participants and identifying the functions of this kind of entertainment. It was important to investigate the motives to take part in such mass events, but also to study the perception of other participants. The author analysed individual experiences and the way they translated into a collective experience. The analysis made use of the perspectives of the ritual process theory of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, the exchange theory of Marcel

Mauss and the experience of collective identity based on the phenomenological theories of William James and Alfred Schütz. The results confirm the presence of mechanisms identical with those in the rites of passage and antistructure, which manifest themselves in the suspension of certain social norms. The exchange refers primarily to the immaterial sphere between artist and audience, and is observable in the case of both events. The idea of Lebenswelt is based primarily on the joint experience of concerts which contributes to creating a collective experience.

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rituals, imaginary world, antistructure

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