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Festivals for Europe

Analysing the meaning and function of Europe in contemporary cultural festivals – between prestige seekers & political activists

[work in progress – not for citation]

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This paper asks for the meaning and function of Europe in two very different cultural festivals that explicitly brand themselves as European. The first is ÉCU – The European Independent Film Festival. It is a 'filmmakers' festival dedicated to the 'indie' movies. In ÉCU, Europe is meant to gather the filmmakers, as well as endow them with prestige and recognition. The second festival, or rather a series of festival events, is Transeuropa, which has been taking place in 10-14 cities across Europe with the pursuit of deliberating on Europe and its problems 'above the nation state'. It is platform of political advocacy through aesthetic culture, where Europe is very much a unifying symbol for different local activists to come together and articulate their goals. In Transeuropa, Europe is not only a means to an end, but an end in itself – a cosmopolitan ideal. Rather than a direct comparison, the coupling of the two festivals illuminates that seemingly analogous European cultural endeavours can have a similar social function while having very different discursive pursuits. The methodological premise of the analysis is the significance of festivals in society – their communicative and community-building capacity (especially in regards to the nation), their function as space for sociability, and their contemporary post-traditionaland cosmopolitan character. The example of ÉCU shows how the 'European' signifier is used to voice critique of mainstream film industry and create a space for independent filmmakers to gain visibility. Transeuropa, on the other hand, is a space for deliberation on important political and social issues of the day beyond strictly national perspectives. At the same time, it is a venue of for local actors to articulate very particularconcernsthat are inherently political in nature.

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Introduction

This paper investigates cultural festivals for the meanings and function of Europe in them. It identifies and compares festivals that call themselves European. It analyses how they frame their European character – what they really mean when invoke Europe? At the same time the study is concerned with how immediate audiences of these festivals perceive that explicit European character. The former is aimed at revealing what meanings of Europe cultural festivals construct, and the latter at what understandings come about through them. Specifically, the paper analyses examples of cultural festivals that induce engaged audience participation. These festivals serve as micro examples of how meanings and social understandings of Europe are constructed and communicated through cultural production.

The first example of such festival is ÉCU - the European Independent Film Festival that has been taking place in Paris since 2006. Every year, it brings to the French capital the most cutting-edge 'indie' moviemakers from Europe and elsewhere. In between its main event that takes place every spring, the ÉCU travels across Europe and beyond to both show and collect what it considers to be 'best' independent cinema. It is a curious example of a transnational 'alternative' festival/network that takes the terms "European" and "Independent" as common denominators for the films it gathers. The second festival is Transeuropa, a transnational cultural advocacy network and series of events scattered across Europe. Every year it takes place in around a dozen cities in different countries, not always in the capitals or popular tourist destinations, but in places where there is a social base for cultural activity outside what is perceived as the 'mainstream', but that have the aspiration of a European scale. In each location the Transeuropa Festival gathers artists and activists in pursuit of elaborating on "Democracy, Equality and Culture beyond the Nation State" and links them in a European network. This seemingly odd pair of festivals is not compared directly. However, they are presented side by side, as both are very atypical festivals that claim to provide alternative and critical takes on aesthetic culture and/or social issues, and do so deliberately and explicitly from a European perspective.

Theoretical Framework

A festival is a space (a particular place and time) where people come together driven by interest in some form of aesthetic culture. In other words, it is a space of social participation through culture. I refer here to contemporary cultural festivals located in urban centres, gathering an informed public, communicating what is widely socially perceived as relevant cultural texts. These festivals grow out of the tradition of modernity - its specific congruence of state, society and culture - which manifested itself in the meaning-making dimension of cultural production (Swingewood 1998). It is since then that cultural texts, objects, institutions, and spaces such as festivals became carriers of meaning that profoundly shaped modern society. In sociology, it has been claimed that festival sites are socially relevant because they are spaces that can facilitate participation and interaction through culture[i]. More specifically, from the perspective of cultural sociology, cultural practices and interactions such as festivals are seen as informative of the social world they inhabit (Spillman 2002). Firstly, it is so because the participation they enable is a form of public sphere. Secondly, the interactions that take place between people at festival sites happen around cultural forms that represent certain ideals and values – they can serve as forms of community building.

Festival and the modern nation

Festivals are among the forms of aesthetic cultural expression that have been known to signify ideas and values that lay at the foundation of one of the most important collective identities of modernity - the nation (Hutchinson and Smith 2000). Together with museums, galleries, and libraries, festival belong to the family of cultural spaces that have served as tools of promoting the national idea (Leerssen 2006a, Leerssen 2006b). The participatory and interactional quality of festivals – how they communicated what is a nation to society – can be compared to the role newspapers and books played in the facilitation of 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983). Similarly to other public cultural institutions such as the library and museum, festivals were the signifiers of cultural particularity of a nation by showcasing what was categorised as 'it's part cultural heritage' (Bennett 1995). As the nation state and its structures solidified, festivals focused on their collectivising function increasing started to reproduce the triumphalist discourse of the nation, in most extreme cases in service of imperialism and fascism (Berezin in Spillman 2002).Most commonly, they were 'performed' in order to achieve and solidify national allegiance through mass participation.

Within the realm of the nation, a festival is one of the tools coming from the aesthetic cultural register that has been successfully used for symbolic dominance. World fairs, the Olympics and other such festival-like events and competitions serve as representations of the nation to the outer world and signify its particularity through aesthetic culture. When it comes to cultural festivals, this has been especially visible in film festivals, and other events that involve national competition. Today, only very few of the grand traditional festivals that celebrated a nation (for its own sake) are still relevant, however ones that involve multinational participation remain spaces where prestige is wagered by those who compete and those who organise the event. Most of them are large-scale and widely broadcasted mega events that still

reproduce the formula of affirming national particularity in one way or another. However, as of recently social research identified a new breed of festivals, one that no longer uncritically celebrates the nation(Giorgi, Sassatelli, and Delanty 2011). What has been coined as 'post-traditional' festivals is argued to be a form of cultural production with a more socially grounded meaning-making capacity in contemporary society than the often ideologised, politicised, and homogenous top-down traditional festivals.

The festival and its social function

In order to study the social dimension of cultural festivals one has to take into account their general features which are interaction and communication, that have been identified as noteworthy by scholars in the field in the study of festivals (Bondebjerg 2000, Giorgi, Sassatelli, and Delanty 2011, Simmel 1991). It is indeed equally important to identify what kind of gatherings actually are these (interaction), and what do they what to convey to the outside world (communication)? Outlined below are the theoretical approaches to studying public and interactive forms of cultural production such as festivals that are to guide the analysis in explaining, as follows: what kind of publics are gathered by 'European cultural festivals', what happens within these festivals, and what is their message to society at large (both anticipated and actual). In other words, the 'who' and 'how' of the festivals can help explain the 'what', which in this case are different understandings of Europe communicated by these festivals – what kind of social meanings do they create in regards to Europe?

The first major theoretical backdrop of how to conceive of festivals, in terms of their social dimension, is Habermas' idea of a cultural public sphere (as seen in Giorgi, Sassatelli, and Delanty (2011)). This idea derives from his work on the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere in the nineteenth century European coffee houses, literary salons and other cultural spaces (1989). In these spaces, aesthetic culture evolved into a product, a topic of discussion, and a plain for communication, what occurred in result was a rational-critical debate among individuals previously without access to the public sphere (Habermas 1989, 29). Habermas argues, that "the same process that converted culture into a commodity" – the transformation of social interaction through discussion on things cultural – "established the public as in principle inclusive" (1989, 37). However, according to Habermas, the public sphere in the west underwent a transformation from these fairly indigenous and local cultural encounters that formed conscious citizens, to mass production of information and leisure content aimed at shaping individuals according to the wants and needs of the economic and political elites. This constituted the change from "culture debating" to "culture consuming" (Habermas 1989, 159).

Festival can be investigated as potential sites of the cultural public sphere.If so then their latent social function apart from enabling participation and interaction is very much concerned with their communicative capacity[ii]. Critics of Habermas have found it highly debatable to what extent one can assume an intrinsic rationality of language and hence discourse, as well as, whether such thing as a shared goal of consensus between social actors actually exists. Even in the case of a small scale cultural festival, relations between cultural producers and between members of the audience can be shaped by their social standing, as well as, outside forces and interests. These limits of the communicative action theory for the study of festivals are best illuminated by Bourdieu's theory of fields, which presupposes that reproduction of social distinctions[iii] happens precisely through cultural production(Bourdieu 1984, English 2011).

In terms of the community building capacity of a festival, it is, Simmel who shows that the very need for social participation and face-to-face interaction are manifestations of the quest people undertake in search for meaning (1997). He argues that "only through society is human life endowed with reality", and that there exist "innumerable forms of social life" that endow our existence with meaning (1997, 120). Festivals and other public and collective "associations are accompanied by a feeling for, by a satisfaction in, the very fact that one is associated with others and that the solitariness of the individual is resolved into togetherness, a union with others" (121). More specifically, the symbolic significance of such togetherness is that it is pure, without a clear objective – it is an essence of society. Whereas where clear goals for coming together exist, it is no longer 'sociability', it is an instrumental principle that drives participation in such instances. Hence, Simmel differentiates between organisations and associations that have clear political and/or economic objectives from a cultural public sphere that originates from the human 'artistic impulse' and need for pure togetherness. Also in that sense, 'sociability' is democratic, because it entails mutual enjoyment of interaction in a group regardless of social status – it is inclusive and reciprocal in the rules of the game – unlike modern life.

The two most important social features of cultural festivals are interaction and communication – their analysiscan inform the researcher on the social world they inhabit. As background for analysis the paper takes classic sociological approaches to studying the social significance of aesthetic culture that previously have been applied to the study of arts festivals. Namely these are perspectives that seek to know how pre-modern traditional religious and folk festivals induced the sensation of community (Durkheim and Swain 1976), how modern festivals retained some of that power through providing a space for sociability in an otherwise socially compartmentalised world (Simmel, Frisby, and Featherstone 1997, Simmel 1991), how cultural forms such as festivals are able to contribute to public deliberation on vital social issues (Habermas, Crossley, and Roberts 2004, Habermas 1989, 1984), and how aesthetic cultural tastes shaped by festivals reproduce social distinction (Bourdieu 1984, Bourdieu and Johnson 1993). Further analytical context is the existing

literature of the social impact of arts festivals (Dayan in Bondebjerg 2000), their modern alliance to the nation (MacAloon 2008, Leerssen 2014), their changing discursive focus into post-traditional, critical and cosmopolitan variations (Delanty 2010, Giorgi, Sassatelli, and Delanty 2011).

 I this paper all of these approaches to study festivals are mapped onto the cultural diamond, which outlines the set of actors and their mutual relationships that have to be analysed to decipher the connection between culture and the social world(Griswold 1994). Consequently, the analysis takes into account not only arts festivals as such, but also their creators, their immediate audiences, and their wider social contexts. Furthermore, I employ two main methods of investigation in order to analyse what kind of participation, interaction and communication that takes place in these festivals. Firstly, I carry out a content reading of the festivals - what they have to say about themselves and what cultural products are showcased there. The second method is audience reception analysis – what do people that take part in these festivals think of their European character, which is supplemented by participant observation. I have taken part in both the ÉCU and Transeuropa in order to investigate their European character and their social resonance. Below, I present the data gathered on contemporary arts festivals that claim to be European.

ÉCU - The European Independent Film Festival

The European Independent Film Festival has been taking place in Paris annually since 2006. It has grown from a quite minuscule and niche project to a fairly significant event of the 'indie' cinema scene with constantly growing aspirations. ÉCU is fairly recognisable amongst a multitude of film festivals mainly to its very specific focus, namely the discovery and promotion of independent filmmakers predominantly from Europe. Apart from collecting and showcasing the "best and brightest" talents of the independent film scene every spring in Paris, throughout the year the ÉCU travels across Europe and beyond in cooperation with local cultural and film festivals - from Barcelona, Spain and Kielce, Poland to Beirut, Lebanon and Beijing, China (Hiller 2013).

 The primary quality of the ÉCU, which has to be considered when embarking on the analysis of the meaning of Europe it conveys, is its name. In French 'écu' means a 'shield', a 'coat of arms', or a 'Crown' and historically has been equated with various pre-modern French coins(Dunin-Wąsowicz 2009). The name ECU re-emerges in 1978 as the day-to-day reference to the acronym signifying the European Currency Unit – electronic unit of account of the European Communities, and later the EU. It was the virtual European currency until 1999 when it was replaced by the *euro*. ÉCU might not be a household name but it is a vivid historical reference to the European construction. Put together with the second part of the festival's name – "European Independent Film Festival" – the choice of the former part becomes clearer. Here the terms "European" and "Independent" are equally important signifiers that are deliberately put together following the historical 'nickname' that also bears a European reference. However, the "European" and the "Independent" qualities of ÉCU are mutually intertwined and mean more than just a geographic scope and a genre of contemporary cinema.

 It can be claimed that ÉCU endeavours to symbolically capitalise on a very specific cultural discourse of the properties and value of European film, as well as on the established role of European film festivals as cultural producers of prestigious and niche European cinema. Since mid-twentieth century European cinema evolved from signifying solely national particularity to representing more universally relatable subjects, yet still in relation to specifically very national contexts. Today, most European films are aimed at reaching wide audiences throughout the continent and especially in contrast to Hollywood productions they are characterised by a common aesthetic of *Eurochic*[iv]. Elsaesser associates this shared European character to an increasing post-national quality of some European films - no longer putting hermetic national qualifiers as most important components of a cinematic narrative(2005). European movies still present mostly nation-specific stories, albeit often simplified for a wider international audience, but the *Eurochic*aesthetic (seeming sophistication, refinement, artistry) of these cultural objects defines what is symbolically perceived as European film nowadays. It is this very much popularly recognised appeal of European cinema that ÉCU is subscribing to by emphasizing its European character. European film is not just any film, it is seen as *chic*, as inherently artistically valuable, and hence possesses high symbolic capital in the eyes of the informed public, as well as well-regarded on a more popular level.

 Historically, the specificity of European film as a cultural object developed in a reflexive relationship with the special and almost formative role of a European film festival as a cultural creator[v]. Just as European film, European film festivals intrinsically national if not nationalist, it has not been until the 1960s that the European festival circuit became a venue of increasingly 'post-national' cinema. Since then festivals remained powerful culture-creating spaces, where aesthetic tastes become validated and promoted. Their resonance as cultural creators has only solidified, due to their proliferation and competition, resulting in maintaining the special character of European cinema, especially against Hollywood. In that sense "[f]ilm festivals are on the one hand typically postmodern phenomena, in their auto-reflexive and self-referential dimensions, but also quite rich in mythic resonance with their performative tautologies" (Elsaesser 103). Festivals are very much markers of existing cultural distinction, as well as aspire to continuously set these standards. The

historical particularity of European film was partially made by the European festival network, a successful supporter and promoter of European cinematography. Today too these are very much European film festivals that shape European film and stimulate public acclaim for such cultural products. Conscious of the rhetorical force of festivals as cultural creators, ÉCU openly strives to achieve such potency in regards to independent cinema, and explicitly follows notable examples from elsewhere.

Following Sundance - ÉCU vs traditional film festivals

ÉCU's aspiration to set the tone in the world of independent movie making is manifested in the type of films it admits to its competitions and how it categories them. The festival wants to be a space for the "best and brightest" independent European filmmakers that otherwise do not have suitable outlets to show their work, especially due to the commercialised nature of the film industry. In that sense the ÉCU is very much a filmmakers festival, following the example set by Sundance in Salt Lake City, Utah in the USA. Sundance is a very particular festival in how, according to Dayan, it exemplifies what is a dual event: first it is an embodied happening, displaying a collection of films and providing interaction for the participants; second is the exchange of cultural texts and before and after the event that matters most for the meaning-making power of a film festival as a cultural creator (Dayan in Bondebjerg 2000). Sundance is intrinsically performative, claims Dayan, in so much as there exists a multiplicity of participants that actively make the festival happen outside of its main event. Just as Sundance does in the USA, ÉCU wants to "open" the difficult cinematographic industry for niche independent films, in order to "share people's stories via Europe" (Hiller 2013).

In this particular regard, the category of independence, which is put in the spotlight in the festival, can be problematic. As pointed by Elsaesser, in general it "says little about how such film are produced and financed, but acts as the ante-chamber of reclassification and exchange, as well as the place holder for filmmakers not yet confirmed as auteurs" (2005, 92). This both isn't and is the case of ÉCU. Firstly, it isn't because indeed all of the movies in the selection are independent in much as they are not produced by any major film production companies, are not significantly financed by public film institutions (plentiful of which exist in EU member states), nor are they overwhelmingly sponsored by corporate donors. It is difficult to preclude that any degree of such support had at all been involved in the production of these films, however it is certain that they neither enjoyed the public or private support that would have given them wide industry exposure and allowed the possibility of public acclaim through established channels. Hence, neither of these movies had been given access to the major European 'festival network' (Valck 2007). Secondly, the way in which ÉCU emphasizes its 'indie' character has a lot to do with the aspirational quality of that term, as it has been used in the cinematic industry before. The supposition seems to be that the allure of 'independence' amongst film spectators mutually reinforces the *Eurochic* quality of the festival.

By the looks of the recent entries to the festival, it is indeed a project mostly devoted to fairly young filmmakers outside of the industry circuit. Consequently, the majority of films at ÉCU are either short études or documentaries. There is an especially unprecedented concentration of productions that touch upon relevant and contentious social and political issues that feature remarkably in-depth critical elaboration. The content of the films ranges greatly, from classic 'stories' to complete 'abstraction', and none of these movies has a strictly 'European focus' - these are not films 'about Europe'. For these mostly junior filmmakers what matters is the meaning of the selection they are chosen into and that the prize they are given is claimed to matter in a European scale of cultural creators. People are interested in participating in the ÉCU because they want to be recognised in what is perceived as a European scale, by what is perceived as the European scene of independent filmmaking. At the same time ÉCU is space where 'sociability' takes place. Independent filmmakers come there a form a community not only due to shared interest but through immediate interaction.

This wish is also expressed by the organisers, the dozens of volunteers, and the associate festivals – to both create a network and single out the best 'indie' moviemakers in Europe every year. Hence, the ÉCU positions itself both in opposition to major film festivals, and expresses an aspiration of being recognised as Sundance did in the USA. The vehicle for that is to award prizes for best European independent films. By establishing such classifications and giving awards for "best European 'indie' movies" the ÉCU makes a discursive connection between Europe as platform of recognition and the success of the awarded films. The meaning of Europe in the ÉCU has two pronounced variations. Firstly, the festival is a space of opposition to the commercialised industry, which in Europe celebrates 'itself' in Cannes, Venice, and Karlovy Vary. ÉCU also consistently disassociates itself from what it sees as the mainstream industry and from national and European agencies that fund culture. Secondly, the fact that the ÉCU gives an award for "best European" independent film is perceived as a powerful symbol that gives credibility to these filmmakers. Therefore, on one hand, the European aspect of the ÉCU is a sign of protest of the 'indie' filmmaking community, on the other it expresses their aspiration for recognition as artists and/or producers of culture. The former is visible in the discourse of the ÉCU as such, its name, the categories it establishes, and its transnational aspirations. The latter is evidenced by the multitude of cooperating niche partners (predominantly) in Europe and most importantly by the beginning filmmakers that flock to Paris to show their work at the ÉCU.

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As a festival the ÉCU facilitates participation of independent filmmakers, and that it enables interaction between them and specific cinematic audiences. Most importantly however, ÉCU communicates the terms 'European' and 'independent' as its pivotal characteristics. Conscious of the historical significance of the established European festival network, and the fairly recent success of niche Sundance, ÉCU aspires to being a cultural creator in its own filed. The role of every film festival is building its own importance that is largely self-referential (Elsaesser 2005, 96, 97). Hence if one analyses ÉCU as a form of cultural public sphere, it is most definitely an agent of distinction setting. ÉCU is also a counter festival - to its established predecessors, national film industries and even European cinematic schemes - and in that sense it builds its significance through opposition. Following Dayan's idea of monstration, which is a spectacle that demands attention, it is clear that ÉCU is striving to be recognised (2009, 25). The festival is a site of symbolic struggle in how ÉCU promotes its own understandings of what is European and independent cinema.

As a cultural creator, what ÉCU wants to achieve is very much in line with what Dayan writes on the relationship between media and audiences, spectators, or publics – it is a quest for visibility (2013). He distinguishes a narrative of deprivation that has been echoing in relation to the media, in which those without access to mass communication were marginalised. Dayan claims that this "paradigm of visibility" treats anonymity as stigma, with visibility until recently enjoyed only by a privileged few, today minorities and other interest groups increasingly strive for it and see it as a gateway to acquiring different forms of capital, both material and symbolic (139). Accordingly, those who seek to be recognised are "visibility seekers" and this is very much true of artists, including filmmakers. However, "those who try to gain access to the right of conferring visibility (…) [are] visibility entrepreneurs" (149). ÉCU then is a visibility entrepreneur of sorts when it comes to European independent cinema. What ÉCU strives for – recognition of independent filmmakers – highlights the performative dimension of mediaexposure. Namely, that what is enacted, dominates. Hence the quest for visibility is a quest for inclusion into a performance. In the case of ÉCU, as a cultural producer, it is also the making of one's own performance – the festival – that is envisioned to bestow visibility in a European scale onto the filmmakers that claim to beindependent.

Transeuropa

The Transeuropa Festival (TEF) is in all possible ways an atypical example of a cultural event that claims to be European. Transeuropa has been taking place every year across Europe since 2011, every time simultaneously in over a dozen cities, brought about by hundreds of volunteers. TEF claims to provide a space to "IMAGINE, DEMAND and ENACT an alternative Europe". It is hence very different from the ÉCU not only in form (a multi-city cultural festival vs a film festival) but also in how it constructs its own meanings of Europe. However, the function of Europe bares similarity in how its banner brings people together for a common purpose and signifies more than just geography. Transeuropa is a siteof political activism. The cultural festival is a space for voicing and discussing burning social of European scale and significance, but informed by local contexts. The European quality of this festival is a tool of aggregation of local political activists; it is a slogan to which people are thought to be likely to respond. At the same time,it is a cultural event where critical outlooks on Europe are made. During the festival period, spanning in each location usually about 2 weeks, the activists behindTranseuropa organize a series of exhibitions, screenings, performances, as well as debates and lectures that gather mostly local publics of medium and large metropolises where it takes place. As of 2013, Transeuropa happened, as the organizers like to point out, concurrently in Amsterdam, Barcelona, Belgrade, Berlin, Bologna, Bratislava, Cluj-Napoca, London, Lublin, Paris, Prague, Sofia, and Warsaw.

The research has identifies that the enduring focus of the festival on aesthetic culture is a vehicle of social communication that is directly linked to its political activist dimension. The insistence on the transnational and European symbolic aspect of the festival is aimed at facilitating deliberation on Europe's problems, from a European perspective, but taking into account local contexts. The meaning of the explicit reference to Europe is, as in the previous case, a vehicle of attracting attention, of subsuming cultural consumers under a common denominator, but the open and deliberative format of the festival allows its participants to shape and express their own ways of how they understand Europe.In what follows, I outlies the conclusions of the analysis the available textual materials produced by Transeuropa (from 2011 onwards),as well as secondary resources about its discourse and its activities (mainly from the media). I juxtapose this with the results of my participant observation in the making of the 2012 London edition of the festival and my participation in the 2013 UK event, as well as with the interviews I carried out with the organizers from circa dozen locations. The analysis is carried out along the lines of the cultural diamond diagram, inasmuch as it delineates the actors involved in the making of Transeuropa and the communicative and sociable function of the festival.

Transeuropaand its producers: European Alternatives & local activists

The proper Transeuropa Festival in its current form, encompassing circa dozen cities around Europe, began in 2011 when it received its transnational character (in 2010 it was the London festival for Europe). From the very beginning the combination of a 'transnationalism' and 'culture' were the pivotal characteristics of the festival, in terms of form and content alike. The unity of the two has been the main goal since culture is seen here as the tool of communication between different social actors involved, and is envisioned to happen in a transnational scale. The festival's transnational character, in terms of form, is evidenced in how its events happening in multiple cities at once are connected thematically, and hence approach a similar array of topics from different regional and local perspectives. These happenings are also spread out across two given festival weeks - on different days in different cities - to allow maximum cross-fertilisation of ideas between the events via either the travelling publics and/or social media. When it comes to form, the festival commences at once in all cities simultaneously, and the grand finale of each edition takes place in one designated location with a grand forum. On the other hand, the transnational character of the festival's content rests on its many, sometimes quite robust, discursive suppositions. TEF claims that solving Europe's problems cannot happen by acting in one country only, that deliberation on Europe's problems must happen not only in the centre but also in the periphery. TEF also questions the legitimacy and the contemporary adequacy of the nation as the social unit through which social change can happen. Furthermore, its idea of Europe is one built on an intercultural dialogue, within its borders, but also with the outside world/

   The main agent behind TEF is the European Alternatives network. It is an organisation that is a bottom-up democratically governed network of volunteers located in over a dozen cities across Europe, predominantly in the locations where the festival takes place. The European Alternatives present themselves as "unique in being at once a breeding ground for new ideas and proposals for politics and culture at a European level, and in being a political and cultural actor with a truly transeuropean activity, staff and support base" (Transeuropa Network 2011, 11). The format of the organisation is collaborative and participatory, what they want to communicate, their goals, is a result of negotiated priorities of each local part of the network. This process reflects the main philosophy of EA, which is to conceive of 'transnational' solutions for 'transnational' problems in a spirit of solidarity across Europe.

   As evidenced by the format of festival described above, the means of achieving that transnational dialogue are intrinsically cultural. This is also visible in the general standpoint of the festival that goes against an ethnic and narrowly national understanding of culture. In this spirit, the European Alternatives pledge to uphold the cause of celebrating cultural diversity as a mean of executing their agenda for a transnational democracy in Europe. In regards to the festival, they claim that the local and regional contexts and understandings of social life can be best accessed and understood by the wider public through cultural forms delivered by a festival. It is this cultural exchange of local and particular perspectives, their equal access to a public sphere, which permits a productive, and very much needed inclusion of previously marginalised groups. It does seem that apart from their rather robust visions for European democracy, this is precisely what the European Alternatives are achieving by organising the Transeuropa Festival. They are giving visibility to the underprivileged and the discriminated of Europe. Their cultural events provide a space for free and uninhibited expression of often-obscure groups in society who have frequently been consciously denied their self-expression elsewhere in the public sphere.

   Apart from the significance of the European Alternatives activists who are the driving force behind the festival over the years these are their local collaborators that matter equally. The EA, however, are responsible for building that transnational community (network) of local activists in the first place. Together with the EA the local organisers take part in consultations about the programme of the whole festival, propose themes and bring up issues to be taken up. Most importantly, however, they are responsible for the execution of this programme on the local level, by inviting artists, scholars, and community activists to take part in the festival. They, so to speak, are in charge of 'infusing' the transnational themes with local relevance by relating them to what's important for the immediate audiences of the festival. Thus, they are also pivotal in facilitating the ground for sociability at their specific locations – the extent to which a community of producers and spectators is a result of the festival event.

The politically conscious and engaged audience of the festival

The main features of Transeuropa are its transnational architecture, the concurrence of culture and politics in its program, and the extent to which it is a space for informed deliberation. Hence the 'symbolic rituals' taking place in each festival are aimed at physically involving the audience of each festival location and 'virtually' connecting it to all other sites(Duncan 1995). The real and imagined sociability takes place in each festival space and between all the spaces during the 'ritual events' taking place in the beginning of each festival. In the years 2011 and 2012 the festival happened in the spring and commenced around Europe Day (9 May). It opened concurrently in all cities with the *Transnational Walk*, an event of primarily symbolic value - it metaphorically underlined the European character of the whole event. The goal of this exercise was to make clear to the festival audiences that it was a single festival happening all over Europe and not 12-

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14 different ones. Apart from being a symbolically transnational happening, of quasi-ritual quality, it was also very much a truly festival-like event. The *Transnational Walk* was an urban carnival in which audience participation was key to its success. This common opening moment was no ordinary walk. In all participating cities it was focused on the multicultural character of each city. It was carefully planned out by the festival organisers in order to encompass the highest diversity of spaces visited, which in various ways corresponded to the other cities were the walk also happened. The walk was 'interrupted' with frequent stops during which reference was made to the links that exist to another city. It was also 'infused' with stories and anecdotes about that other city that was told by an actor, playing a person supposedly native to that location.

This ritual was enacted in various locations of each walk. The event in each city 'made' as may links as possible to the other cities where the walk was happening. This carnivalesque cultural aspect of the festival reinforced its discursive aim. Telling the stories from other cities was aimed at emphasising the transnational character of the festival by engaging the audience in reflecting on the historical links between the festival locations – on showing their intertwined pasts and current connections. What the interviewees have described, and what I deciphered from the event, is that the walk was indeed a sociable event that facilitated personal interaction between the members of the audience. This was a truly cultural festival-like prelude to the more politically charged content that came later, though underpinned with the discourse of European commonality and transnationalism. Nevertheless, what mattered most in the walk was the immediate sociability that laid ground for latter more informed interaction in regards to the political themes of the festival.

Similar was the function of the AIRTIME event, which replaced the *Transnational Walk* as the symbolic ritual commencing each edition of the festival. The AIRTIME event was a public performance piece simultaneously staged in central urban spaces of the 2013 festival locations and broadcasted online. In October 2013 it happened exactly at the same time in 10 festival sites and showcased different perforce pieces by artists individually commissioned by Transeuropa in each city. Each site had a different choreography, but the narrative was the same even though it was spoken in different languages. The recording of this narrative was available to be downloaded prior to the event, so that everyone present at the site of the performance could listen to it from their own personal device in the language of their choosing. It also a participatory event in which anyone could take part, even passers-by that have not 'prepared' for the event. Visually the performances could be classified as something between contemporary dance, a pantomime, and conceptual theatre. Both the actors and the regular participants in each city were enacting the same motions whilst listening to the same track. The story told during the event, consequently, reflected this transnational architecture of the performance. At first, the narrator in the recording signalled that other people were doing the exact same thing and listening to the exact words in various European cities. Subsequent narrators emphasized the symbolic importance of "movement" in which the participants were taking place, and the existence of a "temporary autonomous zone" among the participants (Hakim Bey, 2003). They quite explicitly invoked the temporality of national borders, called for voices and acts of protest against inequality and injustice, and advocated the need for more solidarity in Europe.

Transnational and local political activism

The festival is space of deliberation on political issues through the intermediary of culture. It is so thanks to this specific sociability among its organisers, the artists, and activists involved, as well as the audiences. The results of this intellectual cross-fertilisation between the various festival locations and the subsequent exchanges facilitated by the network is a formation of a transnational micro civil society organisation that sees Europe as both as a means to an end and a goal on its own merit. The Transeuropa festival is indeed a vital part of a certain type of political and civic advocacy pursued by the European Alternatives. The festival serves as a space where somewhat robust ideas of Europe are equally elaborated, reconceptualised, and critiqued.

However, on the part of the local activists and the audiences the meanings of Europe identifiable in the festival are even further decentred. Europe is understood as a platform to articulate the immediate points of concern of specific communities, be that localities or minority groups, which are voiced from local perspectives. These are not expressions of any nationalistic claims, but rather provincializing perspectives that underline the need for customs solutions fit to specificcontexts. For most of activists and participants, Europe is associated with a set of standards to be replicated universally (democracy, pluralism, and minority rights). It is an imagined community of values (of sorts) – meaningful in all contexts. That is perhaps the biggest difference of Transeuropa, which apart from an assumption of prior European commonality and the aggregating power of the slogan, sees a European perspective on social and political issues of the day as part of the solution. This notion is not universally shared by all it participants to the same degree, most of whom see their local and particular issues as most dear to them. However, as identified by the research, all of them agree that due to the nature of contemporary politics and society Europe is the right perspective from which their problems should be addressed.

Traneuropa festival is a cultural event that uses different aesthetic forms as means of facilitating public discussions of Europe. It is an emanation of the European Alternatives - a network of activists convinced about the need for pan European solutions to burning social problems prevalent throughout the continent. The festival serves also as an aggregate for its members to exchange ideas, to engage new collaborators, and to further the agenda of the network to pockets of public opinion in Europe. However, the reflexive nature of the festival makes it a very local-specific event, where particular issues take centre stage in each location. At the same time, through festival these local issues travel to other locations and also oftentimes become appropriated into the agenda of the larger European Alternatives network. The festival is space of deliberation on political issues largely through the intermediary of culture and thanks to the specific sociability it allows to happen among its organisers, the artists, and activists involved,as well as the audiences. The results of this intellectual cross-fertilisation between the various festival locations and the subsequent exchanges facilitated by the network is a formation of a transnational micro civil society organisation that sees Europe as both as a means to an end and a goal on its own merit. This is also why the postulates voiced throughout the festival are directed directly at the European Union, which is seen as the only body remotely capable of executing the ideas that surface in the festival. Even though the EU is seen as the only big ally of the network and one of its main supporters, the ideal of Europe conceptualised thought the festival and advocated by the EA go way beyond any plausible political developments of the near future. The Transeuropa festival is indeed a social space where a certain type of political and civic advocacy takes place. The festival serves as a site where somewhat robust ideas for the future of Europe keep taking form.

Conclusion

This paper investigated contemporary European cultural festivals for the meaning and function of Europe in them. It established the methodological framework on how to study the significance of cultural festivals in society – their communicative and community-building capacity. In a more empirical vein the paper brought together theorisations on the importance of modern festivals in regards to the nationtoexamine contemporary Europe-focused festivals. The example of ÉCU - The European Independent Film Festival shows how festival can use Europe as a label in pursuit of wider recognisability that is seemingly superficial. However, upon closer examination it is evidenced that the European signifier is used to reinforce the critique of the perceived status quo of the mainstream film industry. Being both a European and an independent film festival, ÉCU expresses its aspiration for recognition and at the same time creates space for independent filmmakers to gain visibility. In regards toTranseuropathe research demonstrates how this cultural festival becomes a space for deliberation on important political and social issues thanks to its European allegiance. This festival is a space for addressing questions of European scale as well aslocal significance. Europe here, however, is not just an aggregative tool but a cosmopolitan idea that is the driving for political activism taking place in the festival.

[7452 words]

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[i] A useful conceptual frame on how to study festivals, their relevance for the social world as part of an aesthetic public sphere, originates from the supposition that cultural production cannot be seen as a mere depiction of social reality, and that culture and the arts should be seen as autonomous social fields filled with their own discourses that impact the social world. Accordingly, "arts festivals negotiate and communicate collective identities" as well as are "instances of the cultural public sphere", the "latter concept is here used to refer to the articulation of politics and societal issues as contested domains through aesthetic modes of communication" (Giorgi and Sassatelli in Giorgi et al. 2011: 1).

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ii Communicative action supposes that transmission and renewal of cultural knowledge creates common understandings is society, embodied in identity formation, forms of solidarity, and all kinds of social belonging. The main theoretical supposition is that social communication is aimed at consensus – derived from individual and social rationality ingrained in language. The rational quality of communication is seen as striving at reaching mutual understanding in society, at least in principle (Habermas 1989).

iii Festivals can be seen as part of the cultural field in society where reproduction inequality takes place. The field of cultural production, including festivals, is a space of symbolic struggle that extends to the political and economic field (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993).

iv "Style and subject matter ensure that the films travel more easily across national boundaries, and by appealing to universalized Eurochic values of erotic sophistication, adult emotion and sexual passion, they even have a chance to enter the American market." (Elsaesser 2005, 83)

v Elsaesser writes that "[f]estivals have always been recognised as integral to European cinema" and that particularly "[t]he annual international film festival is a very European institution" (2005, 83, 84). Today the network of European films festivals is perceived to be a "key force and power grid in the film business, with wide-reaching consequences for the respective functioning of the other elements (authorship, production, exhibition, cultural prestige and recognition) pertaining to the cinema and to film culture" (Elsaesser 2005, 83).