

Temporary Illusions – Transformations of Urban Space During the Transylvania International Film Festival of Cluj

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Abstract

Cluj is the largest university city in Transylvania, it is one of the most dynamically developing cities in the region, and it is the venue for a variety of local and international festivals. Among these the Transylvania International Film Festival (TIFF) is distinguished because of its ability to integrate local and global culture into the context of the city. The festival temporarily transforms the everyday urban landscape by reorganizing the pre-existing structure of public space and placing media and ephemeral objects in the public spaces of the city. The paper investigates from the perspective of sociology and media philosophy the way the festival integrates the diverse apparatuses of contemporary audio-visual media and the relation of these media to the use of urban space. It explores critically the different cultural aspects of the festival in relation to public space and its role in society. Building upon the theory of publicity of Habermas and Debord's [1] notion of the spectacle the paper argues that although in many regards the TIFF creates a sense of public space, these aspects create a mere illusion and are in service of consumerism. It explores media both as dispositifs for the contextualization of urban space and as parts of the complex apparatus of the festival itself.

Rezumat

Cluj este cel mai mare oraș universitar din Transilvania, este unul dintre cele mai dinamice orașe din regiune și locația pentru o varietate de festivaluri locale și internaționale. Printre acestea se remarcă Festivalul Internațional de Film Transilvania (TIFF), datorită capacității sale de a integra cultura locală și globală în contextul orașului. Festivalul transformă temporar peisajul urban zilnic prin reorganizarea structurii preexistente a spațiului public și plasarea mijloacelor media și a obiectelor efemere în spațiile publice ale orașului. Lucrarea investighează din perspectiva sociologiei și a studiului media felul în care festivalul integrează diversele aparate audiovizuale contemporane și relația acestor elemente media cu utilizarea spațiului urban. Lucrarea explorează într-un mod critic diferitele aspecte culturale ale festivalului în legătură cu spațiul public și rolul său în societate. Bazându-se pe teoria publicității lui Habermas și a noțiunii de spectacol a lui Debord [1], lucrarea susține că, deși în multe privințe TIFF creează un sentiment de spațiu public, de includere socială, aceste aspecte sunt o simplă iluzie și sunt în slujba consumismului. Lucrarea

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prezentă explorează media atât ca dispoziție pentru contextualizarea spațiului urban și ca parte ale complexului aparatului festivalului în sine.

Keywords: festivals, media, public space, augmented reality, spectacle, dispositive

1. Introduction

The main question of my investigation is the way festivals use the public spaces of the city and the type of permanent and temporary impacts they have upon the built environment by the use of audiovisual media. Based on the theory of urban studies and the principles of contemporary postphenomenology [2,3], I focus on and analyze the example of the Transylvania International Film Festival (TIFF) and discuss the relationship between architecture and audiovisual media in the context of the festival.

The subject of postphenomenology is the study of the way perception is influenced by and mediated by technology. In this context it provides a useful framework for both architecture and audiovisual media can be interpreted as modern technologies that mediate human perception, both corporeal, haptic perception (called microperception) and symbolic, cultural perception (called macroperception) [2,3]. In the framework of the example of TIFF, the paper examines the relationship between subjective human perception and these contemporary technologies. The TIFF provides a fertile field of investigation for the mutual influences of these technologies upon each other.

2. Events' characteristics

One of the characteristics of the TIFF is the varied and experimental use of public space and culture-related public and semi-public spaces. The venues of the festival can be divided into four large groups according to their public character and spatial scope: 1. Public spaces (e.g. Main Square, Football Stadium at Mănăstur), 2. Semipublic spaces of institutions (e.g. French Cultural Center, German Cultural Center, Lutheran Church, Piarist Church etc.) 3. Public spaces of consumer establishments (e.g. TIFF House), 4. Spaces designed specifically for film screenings (Art Cinema, Florin Piersic, Victoria Cinema and Mărăști Square cinema, Cercul Militar Cinema, etc.).

The public spaces (the various squares of the city, the street network) attract the TIFF's largest audience, they are the most extensive in size and the most representative on the scale of the city. They are the most socially inclusive of the venues of the festival, and are easy to reach and accessible to the general public. The aim of the festival at these venues is to attract the general public and to promote the festival. The socially inclusive character of the venues and the concept of the festival are also reflected in the nature of the films chosen for these places, as the films shown here are mainly classical films that have gained a cult status (such as Stanley Kubrick's *2001 Space Odyssey*, 1968; David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with me*, 1992) or recent feature films that have a more mass appeal (e.g. Richard Linklater's *Boyhood*, 2014; Radu Mihăileanu's *The History of Love*, 2017).



Figure 1 The Main Square of Cluj during the 2017 TIFF – author's photographs

In everyday situations the main square of the city has the following functions: a meeting place, provides terraces for the cafés around the square, transit area, sitting place, waiting place, a tourist site, playground for children etc. The most used areas therefore are the sides of the square and those around the antique ruins where there are benches provided for people. The use of the square is determined in these situations by the possibilities of sitting down and the urban trajectories of transit. The everyday life and use of the square is determined by different patterns: patterns of pedestrian traffic trajectories, time schedules of the cafes, of schools and office hours etc.

In the context of the public space film screenings, social and historical backgrounds play an important role in studying the relationship between architecture and the media. The effects and associations of these are determinative of the spatial perception created at the conjuncture of urban space and media. From a sociological point of view, urban public spaces are the places of the public civil sphere, whose contemporary image and spatial use, function is determined on one hand, by the current capitalist system and, on the other hand, by the legacies of the socialist system before 1989. Under the Communist regime, the public space was the venue for the expression and exercise of totalitarian political power, which resulted in general mistrust and alienation between public space and the individual [5-6]. After the change of regime, a large-scale privatization of the public space began that did not focus primarily on the civil sphere but it was dominated by the large international corporations. Thus, the primary functional and aesthetic determinants of public space were commercial activities and consumption. The contemporary public space in Cluj is defined by the remainder of the public mistrust, the lack of civic initiative, and the overwhelming effects of large corporations over the public square [5-6].

In this context the temporary public space created by the TIFF is the dream image of an idealized civil sphere. Jürgen Habermas defined the following five attributes of the civil sphere: easily accessible, allows civil autonomy, rejects hierarchy, but it is subjected to law and it is participatory in character [11]. The public spaces that host the events of the festival only symbolically reflect these values, and in fact the Habermasian public sphere has never been realized in practice. Nonetheless, the TIFF creates the illusion of this idealized public space, the feeling of belonging, of participation and social inclusion. During the festival, the city's public spaces are reorganized, social behavior changes, civic roles are rearranged, and these changes have imprints in the architectural configuration of urban spaces. These events attract more people than usual, the whole space of the square is used by pedestrians; they give the illusion of social inclusiveness and the illusion of manifestation of democratic power.

The generic audience member is a middle-class person age fifteen to fifty with artistic, intellectual interests. That is the norm. The rest is the specific, the exception, the unusual: children, old people, people from different cultures, district regions of the city etc. These groups are not excluded but there are special screenings provided for them in order to attract a wider interest group. E.g. workshops for children or the Hungarian film section of the festival. There are three categories of social inclusion: 1. The norm, the generic rule. 2. The Other that is relatable, reachable, acceptable

(ex. minority population) – the social inclusion is a desirable effect 3. The Other that is unknown, unrelatable, maybe even criminal (gypsies, skinheads, beggars) – these groups are almost always excluded. The coming together of these different categories is brought about by cinema in this case. Cinema is one of the most relatable and most easily understood, easily taken in mediums (music being even more so) that has the capacity of bringing together different layers of society.

The open-air screenings at the Mănăştur football field are a good example for the way the festival has the capacity of uniting the artistically inclined cosmopolitan audience with the population of Mănăştur that historically has a rural origin. Screenings at the Mănăştur football field are free, so they are more participatory and result in greater sense of civil freedom, sense of belonging and social inclusion. One of the aims of these projections is to engage the local community that is sociologically quite different from the city centre. A general characteristic of TIFF is that it selects locations for the screenings that highlight the city's current urban planning and social problems. Likewise, the urban potential and the current disorder of Somes riverbank was brought to attention by the film screenings on the riverbank as part of the 2016-2017 TIFF (Someş Open Air). Another example for the responsiveness of the festival to the new developments within the city is the car cinema near the newly built motorway in 2009.



Figure 2 Mănăştur Open Air in 2013 and Someş Open Air in 2016 (source of the images: <http://tiff.ro/tiff/foto/proiectie-manastur-open-air>, <http://tiff.ro/foto/focus-liban-lovitura-ca-n-filme-somes-open-air>)

Social inclusion in the case of the public space venues of the festival (with the exception of the Somes river bank and the Mănăştur football fields) is dependent on public safety and on whether or not one has purchased a ticket, the area for the audience in a public space being walled off by panels. The disharmony and tension thus created results from the fact that public spaces are in the property and use of the public that is commercialized and consequently sold back to the participants. The TIFF creates a closed off enclave that is not freely accessible for the public, as for example the park is in the case of the Jazz in the Park festival. In this enclosed heterotopic space [4] one has the illusion of freedom, of participation, of belonging to the local culture, to a democratic society, to a cosmopolitan society. However precisely this feeling is marketed and commercialized by the festival. This illusory feeling gives one of the charms of public space screenings.

Guy Debord argues that in the contemporary society real life experiences become secondary to their visual representation. “Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation.” [1, p.8], This alternate reality of the virtual world of mass media he calls the spectacle. The spectacle is a means of mediation of human relations and relations of power within society. “The spectacle is (...) a social relation among people mediated by images.” [1, p. 9] “The spectacle is the affirmation of appearance and the affirmation of all human, namely social life, as mere appearance.” [1, p.10]. The TIFF and the other festivals held at Cluj contribute to the phenomenon of the Spectacle in that

they are a collection of representations of the ideals of society, they are a visual culmination of the spectacle. The spectacle is maintained by the capitalist, consumerist system as a means to create capital. Debord argues that the spectacle is the main production of present-day society [1, p. 12]. It negates the real experiences of life and perpetuates a suspended dream state like existence: “the spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of sleep. [1, p.14]”

From this perspective the environment created by the TIFF (and other festivals similar to it) is part of the Debord's spectacle. The sense of belonging and the idealized view of public space is part of the temporary illusion of the spectacle. It is a false image, a distorted view of reality it was created as a marketing tool serving both the festival, the spectacle itself and the cities commercial interests. It presents a misleading, idealized image of public space that has never been truly realized, only in the virtual temporary realm of the spectacle. In this context the atmosphere created at the festival ultimately serves the contemporary consumerist system.

Tonnelat argues that in the case of squares “the main communicative tool is the spectacle, either in the form of a formal actor/audience format, such as when a concert or a cultural event takes place, or in the form of a political demonstration for all to see in the city and sometimes in the nation.” [9] The fact that the feelings of belonging, of at homeness, public democratic control and citizen freedom are underlined in this collage of images of the spectacle is a testament to the new romanticism of today's post-postmodern, metamodern world. The metamodern public space image created by the TIFF presents many romantic characteristics: such as the nostalgic feeling for an idealized past glory age of public space (that has never existed) or the sensibility for the authenticity of past and present values (see: local cultural elements incorporated into the festival). Also, the TIFF and many contemporary festivals that encompass both local and global cultural influences depict the metaxis aspect of Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's metamodernism [10]. The TIFF oscillates between the elements of the traditional culture of the city and the contemporary global tendencies. The festival “negotiates between these opposite poles of culture” [10]: the aggressive dominating spectacular, popular international and the unique, nostalgic, mysterious and idyllic traditional. The metaxis comparison is fully fulfilled, for the convergence of the two is never truly complete.

“The metamodern should be understood as a spacetime that is both neither ordered and disordered” [10], the metamodern metaxis creates a space and time that “of our place with those of a surreal place that is placeless. For indeed, that is the “destiny” of the metamodern wo/man: to pursue a horizon that is forever receding” [10]. Both the spectacle of Debord and the metamodern of Vermeulen and van den Akker present the temporary, illusory and illusive aspect of today's world that is presented in a spectacular collection of images during festivals like the TIFF.

The festival provides a framework for a liberated behavior that is not possible in everyday life. From the point of view of symbolic use and symbolic interpretation of space, the contemporary festivals reproduce the traditional features of carnivals and their social roles within society and urban space [7-8]. One of the features of the traditional carnival worldview is the disintegration of the social hierarchies, the interchangeability of social roles, the institutionalized turmoil, chaos and the suspension of laws regulating social order [8]. Contemporary festivals, from a social point of view, break away from the city's every day, customary rules: the public spaces function differently, streets are closed, the main square is gated for public screenings, cultural institutions like the French and German Cultural Centers, the Student Cultural House etc. adjust their programs according to the events of the festival etc. While in an everyday context the main square of the city is used individually by the people, during the festival the main square is used collectively. The events enhance the cultural awareness and the sense of belonging of the participants. The social role

of carnivals in a traditional context is to strengthen the existing social value system by providing a formal spatial, temporal framework for the disruption of the everyday value system [7].z



Figure 3 Show Transe Express in cadrul TIFFF 2016. Sursă: <http://tiff.ro/eveniment/transe-express>, Programe pentru copii la Bontida, TIFFF 2016, Sursă: <http://tiff.ro/stiri/weekend-la-castel-programul-distractiei-de-la-bontida>

From this perspective, the event of the TIFFF creates a heterotopic space [4]. They are events that are situated outside of the ordinary social life in space and time, they are in conflict with everyday life, and are places of crisis and deviance. They abandon the patterns of everyday life where ordinary time is suspended. From a postphenomenological perspective [2,3] this heterotopic space has the power to evoke hermeneutically different cultures: the local culture with all its symbolical connotations, a global culture through the medium of the film. It can evoke different time periods, locations on the globe or in the universe. This is made possible by the presence of media within architectural space that creates a new hermeneutic perception of urban space.

Despite the fact that the urban space of the city is not perceived consciously by audiences during a movie screening, urban space is still an important background to the TIFFF and the determinant of human behavior. The main square and its historical, social, political connotations are juxtaposed with the experience of watching movies during the main screening. This duality can be observed at the level of behavior, use of space and the overall cultural experience.

Comparing the social behavior of participants at an open-air screenings and behavior of viewers at a movie theatre, the specificities of the functions of public spaces can be observed. While in a movie the participants are just passive viewers of the movie, the social roles of pedestrian and viewer/festival participant are merged in a public screening.

At open air screenings movement in space is much freer, more flexible (you can watch the movie from public benches, surrounding buildings, etc.), smoking is permitted, there is more talking, and so on. On the other hand, in a movie theater, both the movement possibilities and the conversation options are restrictive. Although public space open air screenings are not characterized by the experience of augmented reality between media and architecture, the exception has to be made in the case of the instances when the venue of the screening itself is evoked within the film. Such as in the case of the promotional video for the 2017 TIFFF depicting Madalina Ghenea (last year's guest at the TIFFF) and King Kong (referring to the recently released new movie). The promotional video was shown during the opening event of the 2017 TIFFF held at the main square of the city, and at the moment of appearance of King Kong on the tower of Saint Michael's Church many heads turned towards the tower, as if expecting the animal to be there in real life as well. This exemplifies the mutual influence upon the perception of reality of architectural context and audio-visual media. Reality became augmented for a split second, but the contextual juxtaposition of the same architectural object in media and in real space created the brief sensation of ambiguity. From a post-

phenomenological point of view this momentary experience of augmented reality corresponds to what Ihde described as “background relations” and “hermeneutic relations” [2,3]. The urban space is the background in which media is placed, though it is not consciously perceived. The experience of augmented reality becomes self-reflective when this background becomes the subject of media, when the media makes a reference to the venue, to the real world and thus, the previously unconsciously perceived space becomes the focus of consciousness.



Figure 4 Still image from the 2017 TIFF promotional video (source: <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/oubYVTjpZQw/maxresdefault.jpg>)

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the TIFF presents a sensitive attitude toward the city's historical and social context, both in its use of the spaces of the city and in the use of city's built and cultural environment. These incorporated local contexts constitute an integral part of the festival's experience.

Despite the fact that the festival is a temporary event, its ability to attract large number of local and international attendants, the organizational concept, the creative, experimental use of public space and its cultural aspects contribute to the transformation of the city's cultural, symbolical image and to the city's branding that goes beyond the duration of the festival. These types of festivals are the contemporary versions of traditional carnivals, and have the same function to provide a formal spatial, temporal framework for the disruption of the everyday value system. They create heterotopic spaces situated outside of the everyday space and time structure. The feeling of belonging, social inclusion, the democratization of public space, the illusion of public space is commercialized and ultimately contribute to the spectacle described by Debord in the context of these festivals.

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