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Symbols, practices and myth-making: cultural perspectives on the Wexford Festival Opera

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Abstract

In recent decades geographers have paid increasing attention to festivals. They have construed festivals as important practices through which people connect with their place and as authored landscapes designed to promote particular sets of values and attach specific meanings to place. Tourism influences the processes and dynamics ongoing in festival settings and this paper seeks to unravel some of the complex ways in which it influences the reproduction of cultural meanings there. It draws on research conducted on the Wexford Festival Opera in the Republic of Ireland and analyses the symbolism, practices and meanings found to be associated with the festival. It discusses how 'official' festival meanings sought to balance élitism with inclusivity, and international appeal with local support but identifies a contrasting set of 'unofficial' meanings being communicated through the attitudes and practices evident in the local population. Tourism's role was found to be critical in reproducing 'official' meanings and in sustaining myths encasing the festival.

Keywords: tourism, festivals, contested spaces, cultural meanings

Introduction

Few topics have excited as much recent research attention among tourism academics, including tourism geographers, as festivals and events. The literature on the area has quite liberally burgeoned from being a minor speciality to one that appears to interest a substantial number of those who research tourism issues. This is not surprising, given the profound social and cultural importance of festivals and the many diverse and complex relationships that bind them to tourism. While a sizeable literature has now accumulated, many research questions remain unexplored. In particular, this

paper argues that there is a need to deepen our understanding of the interconnections between festival-tourism activity and the social and cultural contexts within which it takes place.

Festivals are known to exist in virtually all human cultures (Falassi 1987) and many have a history that spans centuries. Their immense cultural and social significance has attracted the interest of scholars from several of the social sciences and humanities for decades. Human geographers have been interested in festivals since at least the 1970s, construing them as one of the many practices that humans develop in the process of connecting with their places, making homes for themselves and carving out landscapes in their own likeness. Over time, geographical approaches to studying festivals have changed considerably. Traditionally, a predominant interest was elaborating the cultural geography concepts of culture region, cultural diffusion and cultural ecology. The emphasis was usually on rural places and rural societies and a key preoccupation was defining culture hearth areas and exploring diffusion patterns. A classic example of this approach is Carney's (1978) analysis of Bluegrass music and Bluegrass festivals in the USA.

In recent decades, the geographical literature on festivals has increased. Since the late 1980s, the emphasis has shifted markedly to interrogating the interplay of social, economic, political and spatial forces that shape festival practices and places. The focus now tends to be on modern, predominantly urban-based societies and settings, and key tasks involve theorizing human agency, the reproduction of place and place identity and the role played by space in the reproduction of culture (e.g. Smith 1993; Willems-Braun 1994; Lewis and Pile 1996; Waterman 1998). In particular, analysing how groups of people use festival settings to assert particular notions of identity, promote alternative cultural views and practices, and produce their own forms of knowledge has been a preoccupation (Jackson 1988; Marston 1984). These developments in the literature can be said to be both reflective and constitutive of the more general *rapprochement* between human geography and the social sciences.

As festivals have become key elements in the place-selling/place boosterism process in recent decades, the links between festivals and tourism have strengthened immeasurably. Geographers' interest in these linkages has increased accordingly and festival settings are being used to explore how place boosterism, cultural commodification and local–global processes are implicated in the repositioning of local economies and in the reproduction of place (e.g. Getz 1991; Hall 1992; Jarvis 1994; Hughes 1999). However, the research avenues explored in the general cultural geography literature on festivals are rarely developed fully in tourism contexts. While researchers have been alert to the manner in which tourism is increasingly implicated in branding places as 'festival places' and boosting the tourism appeal of both events and places, they have shown less interest in exploring tourism's potential to influence the cultural contexts and practices that festivals represent and to affect the reproduction of cultural meanings in festival settings.

While there are some exceptions (e.g. Getz 1991; Waitt 2001), few researchers have been interested in exploring how the status, practices and lifestyles of local actors are affected as festivals are marketed as tourism attractions and begin to draw tourist flows. In the context of festivals and place identities, while studies like those of Hughes (1999) and De Bres and Davis (2001) emphasize the importance of festivals as vehicles for recon-structing place identity, few questions are asked about who determines the identity constructs, how does the symbolism promoted relate to the reality of the place and the extent to which local communities cooperate with the process. Equally, little attention has been paid to exploring how the arrival of tourists influences local people's sense of identity or engagement with those festivals held in their places.

   This paper thus argues that there is a need to investigate how tourism complicates the deeply embedded set of socio-cultural processes that underpin festivals, as it does all cultural practices and activities. In doing so it draws on the theoretically grounded enquiries into festivals that have emerged in human geography and social science literature in recent decades. The empirical part of the paper draws on a case study of the Wexford Festival Opera founded in the Republic of Ireland in 1951. Specifically, this research sought to identify the key actors and the dominant hegemonic interests shaping the festival and to explore the extent to which 'official' festival meanings were representative of views held more widely within the locale. It further sought to identify how the festival management promoted local acquiescence to the meanings being promulgated through the festival and to explore the attitudes and practices adopted by local people. Finally, it endeavoured to unravel the influential role played by tourists and tourism in shaping the meanings and practices associated with the festival. The paper begins with a brief review of some relevant research questions.

Unravelling the complex and contested meanings produced in festival settings

A key starting point is acknowledging that there is nothing natural about festivals (Farber 1983). Hall (1989, 1992) has written extensively about the explicit and implicit politics of events. 'Politics is paramount in hallmark events, it is either naïve or duplistic to pretend otherwise' (Hall 1989: 236). While much of his focus has been at the macro political level, he has noted that at the micro-level 'hallmark events may be used for personal political ambitions or to realize institutional goals' (Hall 1992: 84). This argument can be applied to smaller-scale events, as well as to those that are, or that have been in the past, community based. Bonnemaison (1990: 25, quoted in Hall 1992) suggests that community events employ a collection of symbols that define the community and represent it to the outside world. The political dimension of community events manifests itself when researchers

begin asking which symbols are selected to represent the community? Who (individuals/institutions) chooses the symbols and what interests/values are being promoted? In a study of a community-based festival in Ontario, Canada, Farber (1983: 40) identified a public mythology that was designed and structured by leading members of the community as a 'symbolic representation of the asserted, believed and controlled community identity'. She concluded that this public mythology was constructed in order to influence outsiders', including tourists', interpretation of the place. More importantly, she found that it was designed to perpetuate a sense of commitment to both the community and to its 'officially' held values, among community members themselves.

Recognizing the political nature of festivals goes hand in hand with the awareness that human populations are socially and materially constructed in a way that makes access to power a constant source of struggle. Several geographical studies (Jackson 1988; Marston 1989; Smith 1993) have repeatedly shown festivals to constitute 'authored landscapes', where dominant groups promote particular sets of values, attach specific meanings to place and attempt to reproduce hegemonic meanings. Festivals and events thus constitute an example of settings within which people struggle to assert their ownership of a place and to claim their right to produce particular sets of cultural values and practices. The understanding of public rituals as contested spaces has been furthered through analyses of events such as the Notting Hill Carnival (Cohen 1982; Jackson 1988), the St Patrick's Day festival (Marston 1988), Orange Parades in Northern Ireland (Stokes 1994) and the Rio Carnival (Lewis and Pile 1996). Several of these studies demonstrated the extent to which the symbols of public celebration are inherently politicized. Cohen (1982), for example, described how the Notting Hill, Carnival in London became subsumed into the various historically rooted local struggles that characterized the place. While Stokes' (1994: 9) analysis of Orange Parades in Northern Ireland shows that the symbolic and political dimensions of certain settings can be so dominant as to transcend the cultural.

Most festival settings are not marked by such powerful and easily recognizable symbols as those inspired by the racial or religious tensions just cited, and so appear to be much less obviously politicized. However, as several sociological and anthropological studies have demonstrated, the development of tourism can introduce exactly these sorts of tensions, turning festival settings into obviously contested terrains. Greenwood's (1989: 179) much cited study of the Alarde in Fuenterrabia, for example, was a devastating critique of how the commodification of a village's public ritual 'robs people of the very meanings by which they organize their lives'. Similarly, Crain (1996) concluded that tourism development promoted 'massification', commercialization and privatization processes at a Spanish place of pilgrimage, alienating villagers from their traditional Pentecostal rituals. Sampath (1998), too, writing in respect of the Trinidad Carnival,

argued that tourism development may be deleterious to artistic freedom and to the local distinctiveness that underpins the carnival's tourism appeal in the first instance.

There is much scope for exploring issues such as these from a geographical perspective. Issues of identity and connection with place, for example, become central when the focus turns to understanding how the presence of tourists is implicated in the reproduction of festival space, affects local residents' engagement in festival practices and influences how they identify with the festival. Sack (1997) argues that possessing control over a given space is critical to thinking about a particular space as home. In a tourism context, might this imply that the arrival of tourists into established festival places alters residents' engagement with festival activities and influences practices and attitudes? Might it encourage behaviours that assert dominance over space and seek to retain ownership over the festival production process or alternatively promote disinterest in the practices and meanings associated with the festival? These are key questions, especially given that the proliferation of public festivities in Western Europe in recent decades is associated with the increasing desire of Western societies to re-assert and commemorate links with time, place and community, in an effort to combat the sense of dislocation allied with globalization (Manning 1983; Boissevain 1996).

Equally, the broader geographical interest in theorizing human agency can be pursued in the festival – tourism context by eschewing the tendency to accept festivals as 'given', as uncomplicated entities that simply 'happen' and by problematizing instead their authorship. While there has been increasing acknowledgement that there is nothing inevitable about festivals (Waterman 1998), there has been a general reluctance to look beneath the 'stage-managed' veneer of festivals to analyse the layers of meanings reproduced, the hierarchies of actors and interest groups involved and the tensions hidden beneath the surface. This reluctance has the effect of undermining the significance of festivals as contested cultural practices that are socially and materially constructed. The remainder of this paper reports empirical findings that help illuminate how tourism helps to shape the multi-layered cultural meanings produced in festival settings.

Introduction to the case study and methodology

Wexford is a medium-sized coastal town located some 100 km south of Dublin on the southeast coast. In 1951, the town had a population of 12,000 (the current population is 15,000). Each year since then, during three weeks in October/November, the festival has staged what it describes as three 'rare and unjustly neglected' operative works and, over time, has earned critical acclaim for its endeavours. In recent years it has been attracting audiences of about 20,000 annually.

The research methodology employed a combination of approaches to collect primary data within a framework that was predominantly qualitative in design. The findings reported here draw mainly on: an analysis of archival material held by the Arts Council of Ireland; semi-structured interviews with 'key informants' involved in the festival organization and in the arts scene in Wexford; and a questionnaire survey administered to the resident ($n = 166$) and visitor ($n = 94$) populations. The structured questionnaire survey administered to locals was comprised largely of open-ended questions and took 10–15 minutes to complete. An indication of the issues addressed in the survey, with examples of the questions posed, is given in Table 1. It was administered to a systematic quota sample of local residents, targeted irrespective of their engagement or interest in the festival. The survey administered to the visitor sample was much shorter, taking 3–5 minutes to complete and was comprised mainly of close-ended questions. Three researchers administered the questionnaires simultaneously on four days (two week days and two weekend days) towards the end of the 1996 festival. Sampling points for both surveys were a variety of public sites in the central commercial district of Wexford.

Table 1 Residents survey: issues addressed and sample questions

Issues addressed	Questions asked
Historical and current levels of participation in festival	*Have you (had) any involvement in the festival as an organizer, performer, volunteer, sponsor (in the past)?*
Explaining levels of participation in festival	*Do any of the following (list of reasons offered) explain your decision to attend?*
Interaction between locals and tourists during the festival	*Which events did you attend and where were they held?*
Views on how the festival transforms the town in the short term	*Do you think Wexford seems like a different place at festival time? If yes, in what way is it different?*
Views on how it transforms the town in the long term and ideas about future developments	*Is there anything about the festival that you would like to see changed?*

Uncovering 'official' meanings – symbols of elitism

The Wexford Festival Opera originated as a local initiative, in response to a perceived lack of opera in the region. It was the culmination of a series of activities that began with local opera devotees gathering in each other's houses and developed into the formation of the Wexford Opera Study Circle in 1950. Dr Tom Walsh, a local medical doctor, led this initiative and, with the support of others drawn from the ranks of the local élite, he went on to found the festival in 1951. While the stated objective at the time was 'to

bring the best operas to the Irish people' (*The Wexford People* 1951), the Wexford festival conformed to the social norms prevailing in the Europe of its day by subscribing unquestioningly to the view that the arts were the preserve of the social élite. This stance was communicated through all aspects of the festival's operation. At the organizational level, for instance, concerted efforts were made to associate the venture with the local élite and invitations to join the Festival Council were confined to leading politicians, business people, clerics and professionals of social standing. Artistically, the vision propelling the festival forward clearly construed the arts as being separate from ordinary life and this was communicated through the festival's artistic policies, symbols and practices. It gradually established itself as a festival dedicated, initially almost exclusively, to Italian, albeit to 'rare and unjustly neglected' Italian opera, thus reinforcing the former's undisputed hegemonic status. In eschewing operas that carried the 'popular' tag and in duplicating social etiquette conventional in the operatic world, Wexford unashamedly directed itself not simply towards opera enthusiasts but towards élite audience groups.

A number of developments sought to alter this direction over time in ways that would have reflected changing European artistic policies, but with only moderate effect. In the early 1960s, for example, some members of the festival's governing council sought to popularize the repertoire in an attempt to broaden audience appeal. However, this move provoked the resignation of the founder, divided local opinion and ultimately failed to instigate change. The matter was resolved with a return to the *status quo* and a firm commitment to privileging established opera enthusiasts and, as Isar (1976: 128) put it more generally, the inevitable covey of 'society hangers-on'. Later, Brian Dickie, who succeeded Walsh to become the festival's second, and first salaried, artistic director in 1967, renewed attempts to reposition Wexford as a festival that sought to introduce and convert new audiences to opera. He argued that Wexford 'must solicit those serious play-goers and music lovers to whom opera is, as an art form, still a closed book' (Wexford Festival Office 1971). However, he was forced to conclude that 'artistic institutions, particularly those that build themselves positions of national influence, [like Wexford was doing] tend to assume an outward conservatism which . . . tends to maintain a status quo' (Wexford Festival Office 1971). Unable to persuade the festival council to open up the festival to new audiences, he resigned, having been five years in post.

Sustaining the *status quo* involved, *inter alia*, developing symbols through which the festival's ideals and identity could be easy read. Central in this respect was the small group of venues used to house the festival. These included a number of the town's churches, but the most prominent venue was, and still is, the Theatre Royal. This has been the main home of the festival since its inception and is where all the main opera productions are staged. The Theatre Royal had been linked with the high arts in Wexford since its foundation in 1832. While the theatre is in no sense an

architecturally splendid building, it is very distinctive precisely because of its unexpectedly modest proportions (it seats just 550) and location (on a street that is largely residential) and because of the intimacy and quaintness that these traits impart. Over time, it has become one of the most potent symbols of the festival both in the minds of local residents and visiting festival audiences, and in both popular and critical, national and international commentaries on the festival. Opera critics regularly comment on the 'quaint' and 'intimate' appeal of the theatre while descriptors such as these are well used in the festival's own publicity. In the early days, the theatre had a central role to play in symbolizing the separation of the opera world from ordinary life. For Wexford townspeople, it signified a different world, one commanded by foreigners (singers, conductors, designers, directors) performing and producing music of continental European origin, sung mainly in Italian. Initially, the Theatre Royal had no dressing rooms and the principals arrived for evening performance already attired for the stage. Photographs of the festival dating from the early 1950s tellingly capture how the Theatre Royal and its environs created a spectacle which local people came to gaze upon and marvel at (Wexford Festival Archives). More contemporaneously, it remains the place which local people are most likely to associate with the festival. Some 49 percent of survey respondents in 1996 cited the Theatre Royal when asked what place within the town did they most associate with the festival.

Symbols of inclusivity

Yet, the festival's official promotion of itself as an elitist affair is only partial, because it promotes itself simultaneously as a festival that is firmly embedded in the local community and unequivocally supported by that community. A key explanation for this important dimension of the festival's identity relates to its particular historic origins. As already mentioned, these lay within the relatively narrow confines of the town's local élite and an early priority was persuading a much broader section of the local population that the festival constituted a venture which the townspeople as a community should pursue. This was necessary if only because the Wexford community at large was the source of what Walsh had said were the two things that the festival needed to survive: money and the enthusiasm and good will of the Wexford people. Great efforts were made to garner these. Through the mechanism of the local media, Festival Council members were quoted urging local residents to support the venture, to welcome festival artistes and audiences to the town and to take ownership of the festival as a 'Wexford Festival'.

> Unless there is the utmost cooperation from people in the town, the loss will be so great that there can never be another Wexford Festival. Everybody

connected with the organisation of the festival would feel very badly if the Wexford people did not look upon it as their festival. (Festival Council member quoted in *The Wexford People* 1952)

However, the Festival Council envisaged a particular role through which local people could develop a sense of ownership. The most striking feature of this process was the extent to which festival management looked to the rank and file of townspeople to provide a range of production supports in largely 'behind-the-scenes' roles. Hundreds of local people volunteered to work for the festival in guises as varied as choral singing, administration, wardrobe, make-up, lighting, making and painting sets and stage management. Most noteworthy, a local postman is reputed to have had a major influence on the selection of operas for many years, while a local electrician has for decades managed the backstage technical crew. However, neither of these individuals were members of the Festival Council, the public face of the festival. Yet, crucially, every voluntary effort, including that of choristers, was publicly recognized with the publication of names in the local press. Cultivating this 'local embeddedness' was crucial for the financial survival of the festival, especially in its early decades. Opera production is a costly undertaking and voluntary 'in-kind' support was vital in a context where state grant aid was always inadequate and where the concept of arts sponsorship was still only in its infancy. The contemporary Wexford Festival still relies significantly on voluntary support. In the late 1990s the services of some 300 volunteers were engaged annually (J. Hynes, Chief Executive of Wexford Festival Opera, interview with the author, 1996).

These voluntary underpinnings have an important symbolic significance. They create a mechanism through which the Wexford Festival can promote itself as a festival inclusive of local concerns and warmly embraced by the host community while simultaneously asserting itself as an international élite arts festival. Furthermore, the 'local embeddedness' discussed above creates a distinguishing element which the festival management determinedly emphasizes in the image it cultivates for the festival. Its publicity machine repeatedly signals the friendliness and hospitality of the townspeople who provide visiting audiences with a 'warm and vivacious welcome' (*www.wexfordopera.com*). Popular conceptions of the Wexford Festival Opera have long accepted this dimension unquestioningly. As early as 1953, the national press had singled out Wexford on this basis: 'the 1953 festival is above all, a product of voluntary effort on the part of the Wexford man in the street, his wife and family and his fellow-workers' (*Irish Press*, 26 October 1953). Indeed, the extent to which this dimension has come to influence general understandings of what the Wexford festival represents is reflected in the fact that 'official' entries in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Sadie 1992) and *The Oxford Dictionary of Music* (Warrack and West 1992) supplement their artistic comments with

references to the town's 'convivial atmosphere' and 'the conviviality of its welcome', respectively.

Practice versus symbolism – revealing myths

When attention turns to analysing local people's feelings about the festival and to examining their participation in festival events, however, this official identity balancing élitism with inclusivity and international appeal with local support begins to disintegrate. The symbols and practices identified in the festival landscape were a study in contrasts, with the dichotomies clearly illustrating how the Wexford festival actively engages in the social construction of culture. The key symbolic role played by the Theatre Royal in the townspeoples' imaginations, for example, was found to contrast sharply with the reality of their attendance at festival venues: it is a place to which few local people go during the festival. Only 9 percent of local residents entered the theatre during the 1996 festival, and just 7 percent attended a scheduled opera performance there (2 percent attended an opera dress rehearsal).

The tendency for local people to absent themselves from the opera events was not confined to any particular sector of local society. Certainly, people from professional backgrounds were found to be more likely to go to an opera, but all local respondents, irrespective of occupational background, were more likely to attend one of the fringe events that have been run concurrently with the opera festival since the 1960s. In particular, the survey identified a small number of respondents who, given their socio-economic characteristics and their year-found patterns of engagements in the arts (e.g. purchasing opera CDs, attending classical music concerts, etc.) might have been expected to attend an opera but did not. Tellingly, reasons given in explanation included a fear of 'feeling out of place' and of 'not knowing anybody there'.

This sense of 'feeling out of place' while at home relates to finding that, for 75 percent of Wexford respondents, their home town feels like a different place at festival time. It becomes, in effect, a festival town, which in 1996 looked, sounded and felt different to most of the local people surveyed. The single most important transformative factor – and that mentioned by 25 percent of respondents – was the presence of visitors. Numerically, the volume of visitors attracted by the festival substantially increases the town's population for the period in question, thus the everyday spaces of the town are much more crowded than usual. However, the weight of the visitor presence varies both spatially and temporally. By day, in ordinary dress and amongst the busy movements of the local population, the visitors' presence is not very marked. In the surges of people making their way to daytime festival events (recitals, concerts and operatic scenes) the distinction between visitors and local people is difficult to detect, partly because of the informal dress code and partly because sizeable numbers of

local people attend daytime events. This notwithstanding, the presence of visitors, and particularly of foreigners acting in the capacity of festival employees (singers, choristers, conductors, designers, etc.) can often be detected in the foreign languages and dialects spoken on the town's streets. However, in the evening time as the regular rhythms of the ordinary Wexford day wind down and local people make their way into their homes, the visitor presence becomes centre-stage. This is when the opera-goers make their way on foot through the streets of the town to the theatre. Distinctly labelled by their evening dress attire and with their presence emphasized amidst the narrow streets of the ancient town, their appropriation of public space in the centre of the town is dramatic. The transformative and highly symbolic effect on the place is unmistakable. This is where and when Wexford becomes the 'festival town'. It is the time and place when visiting opera-goers were found to have a strong possibility of meeting friends and acquaintances, either by accident or design, from their home place, be it Dublin, London, or elsewhere. Equally, if local people sense themselves 'out of place' this is the time/place they feel it most keenly. In the early years of the festival, the arrival of opera-goers at the theatre created for local townspeople, a sight to be gazed upon. This is no longer the case, the novelty of the spectacle having diminished with familiarity over time. However, some local people can still marvel at the sight and comment on how the festival 'transforms Wexford, (bringing in) well-known people as well as artists' and at how 'an amount of cosmopolitan people come in' during festival time.

This unravelling of the symbols, spaces and practices that epitomize the Wexford Festival Opera appears at odds with the officially designated festival traits of local ownership and local embeddedness. The latter concept further deteriorates when the views and participation levels of survey respondents are analysed. As already mentioned, local attendance levels were low, with just 7 percent found to have attended an opera. Attendance at other opera festival events (e.g. dress rehearsals, recitals and concerts) increased this figure to 17 percent. These participation levels showed great continuity. Some 76.6 per cent of local respondents said that they 'rarely' or 'never' attend an event on the opera festival programme, while 83.1 percent reported no change in their rate of attendance in the last five years. However, 32 percent did state that they had attended an opera in the past, referring in most cases, to the distant past.

Additionally, as Table 2 illustrates, involvement in the crucial, ownership-building 'behind-the-scenes' roles was found to have declined substantially over time. Just over 13 percent of respondents claimed to have had involvement as a performer (mainly in the chorus) and 14.5 percent as a volunteer, at some point in the past, but only 1.8 percent and 3 percent could claim a current involvement in these respective roles. Symbolically, the festival chorus, historically the bastion of local involvement in performance roles, was completely devoid of Wexford singers for the first time in 1996, having

been replaced by a choir from Eastern Europe. This fact was clearly well known in the public domain and a sense of dissatisfaction with this development was frequently volunteered in survey responses.

Table 2 Present and past involvement in the Wexford Festival Opera

Type of involvement	% of sample (n = 166)	
	Past	*Present*
Performer	13.3	1.8
Volunteer	14.5	3.0
Performer in fringe festival	6.0	1.2
'Friend of the Festival'	0.6	1.8

These statistics about local involvement were illustrated by comments from respondents who frequently highlighted how the festival has changed over time: 'local involvement has gone, it's out of our hands'; 'local involvement has dropped'; 'they should involve the ordinary people again . . . attending, taking part, locals are excluded'; 'it used to be a different place, not now, not as much local involvement in chorus'. Equally, observations made by many local respondents prompt the suggestion that the festival is not really seen as being theirs at all. They felt that: 'it's a successful festival for outsiders . . . not geared to people of the town'; 'it's more of a festival for coming to the opera, not for locals'; 'ordinary people don't get much involved'; 'it gets great write-ups . . . ads on the radio . . . business for the town . . . doesn't do anything for the working class'. Several respondents were critical of what they regarded as their exclusion from the festival: 'there's too much hoity-toity, it should be open to everyone'; 'it's catering for a tone deaf elite'; 'it's not a people's event, just to keep people happy they throw in a few fringe events'. Comments such as these demonstrated an awareness that inclusion in the festival was not left to chance but was in fact controlled on the basis of social standing and place of residence. Repeatedly, respondents' comments and practices (in terms of participation) contradicted the official image of Wexford as a festival warmly embraced by the local community at large and as a festival firmly rooted in place.

When asked to explain their non-attendance, the vast majority of local respondents could not produce a reason, even when prompted with possibilities. Of the 15.7 per cent of non-attenders who did give a reason, 14.5 percent cited 'a lack of interest'. It might have been expected that ticket prices or ticket availability would emerge as an issue, especially given that the Wexford Festival has consistently achieved very high levels of seat occupancy since 1992. However, the latter issue did not feature at all, just 1.2 percent spoke of ticket prices as being prohibitive and only one respondent commented on the high price of tickets. This appears to be a surprising finding, given that ticket prices at the time of surveying were £IR36 and £IR48 and implies a substantial disinclination to attend the opera events on offer.

Superficially, this evidence might be read to infer a simple disinterest among local people in opera, in the high arts in general and thus in the festival. Certainly, the general tendency to inadequately appreciate the extent to which the arts are socially constructed might prompt such an interpretation. However, an exploration of respondents' attitudes towards the festival revealed both a sense that they felt themselves excluded and a wish for greater involvement in the festival. The sense of exclusion did not appear to be a recent phenomenon. The survey findings earlier noted a consistency in the high level of non-attendance at the festival, while archival research undertaken before the survey work identified a number of periods during the festival's life time when local peoples' engagement with the festival seemed to be in a pattern of decline. Yet it was clear that a sizeable proportion of local people would like to be more involved. One third of those surveyed expressed a desire to participate more fully, and the comments freely offered by several displayed strong feelings on the matter: 'the opera is only for "big people" . . . always been that way. I'd like to go but that's the way it is'; 'the festival is directed at higher class people, local people should be more involved'; 'There's a public demand the festival isn't meeting, prices are too high. Why doesn't Wexford get bigger?' 'It's not accessible enough, there's a need to bring the arts to the public rather than vice versa'. All of these comments echo criticisms made by Irish music critics, scholars and singers at various points since the 1970s about the failure of the festival to implant roots in its place of origin and to develop the opera scene in Ireland. They also lend support to the Wexford Arts Officer's view that 'the festival may have existed here for 40 years without having any impact' (L. Comer, Arts Officer, Wexford County Council, personal interview, 1996).

Explaining local acquiescence

The discussion of local people's attitudes to, and practical engagement in, the festival revealed an air of contentiousness. The possibilities for engaging in the festival, which differed sharply on the basis of geographical origin, filtered by social class and material means, were found to disadvantage local people. Yet, despite the divisive nature of the landscape produced in Wexford, the cultural meanings and social ordering being reproduced have remained largely unchallenged. Instead, local people have slowly withdrawn their support as volunteers, funders, audiences and enthusiastic onlookers and have steadily resigned themselves to the realization that their interest in the 'high' arts has to be satisfied elsewhere.

The question as to why this is the case arises. In seeking answers, inspiration was sought in the geographical literature that clearly reveals the political and symbolic significance of public festivities. Here, there is much evidence that social groups which perceive themselves to be marginalized

within society have engaged in festival practices to assert identity and lay claim to space (e.g. Jackson 1988; Marston 1989). More specifically, in an arts context, Willems-Braun (1994) argued that individuals and sub-groups can fashion their engagement in festivities in ways that challenge and disrupt the social ordering that more generally limits involvement in the arts. However, it seems that little attention has been paid to exploring how elements of society that have been overlooked or marginalized in the course of the festival production process actively seek means of redress.

In the Wexford case, the driving ambition of the festival organization was to produce a highly specialized repertoire, of little known opera, to international standards. Pursuing this objective necessitated generating substantial amounts of audience revenue. A local audience could never have risen to the challenge of paying such high prices, of supporting such a specialized repertoire, or of furthering the festival's ambitions for international recognition. Yet, at the same time, the festival organization needed the support of the local population and had to establish means of securing this. Its initial approach was to construct very specific roles through which local people could engage with the festival. The dominant role constructed was not that of audience member, even though local people proved themselves to be eager opera-goers in the festival's early years. Rather, local people were encouraged to become 'hosts', welcoming the visiting audiences, 'supporters', contributing financially to the festival and 'producers', providing in-kind support through voluntary activities. These roles, conducted largely in 'behind-the-scenes' capacities since the early 1950s were critical in promoting a sense of ownership of the festival and, by extension, a sense of pride in its achievements. They thus worked as a means of connecting the local population with the festival and, while the reality of this type of participation may not be as pervasive as it was in the past, it still remains in evidence.

A second approach, introduced in the early 1960s when local interest in the festival was waning noticeably, was to develop a series of arts events to be run concurrently with the opera programme. These encompassed *inter alia* film, drama, window dressing competitions, art exhibitions and music concerts, and were known as the 'fringe' festival. These fringe events continue to accompany the staging of the opera festival. Today, however, they are entirely different in terms of content, organization, audiences, funding, marketing and branding (D. Collins, Director of Wexford Arts Centre, interview with the author, 1996). Fringe events are loosely organized by the Chamber of Commerce and have no artistic direction. Analyses of patterns of engagement in the 1996 festival found that, in general, visitors were preoccupied with the main opera festival, while locals were preoccupied with the fringe. Of the locals surveyed in Wexford during the 1996 festival 16.9 percent had attended an opera festival even while 59.7 percent had participated in the fringe. Corresponding figures for the visitors surveyed were 55.3 percent and 36.2 percent. In providing a series of possibilities for socializing and engaging in cultural activities, the fringe

festival serves as an entertainment option for the local population at large during the festival period. As such, it offers an alternative to participating in the opera festival. However, only 18.6 percent of the locals surveyed had actually attended a fee-paying fringe event and several expressed dissatisfaction with its profile, organization and artistic content.

Both of these mechanisms, the establishment of 'behind-the-scenes' supporting roles and the creation of the fringe events, have been very important in enabling the opera festival to maintain a convincing semblance of widespread acceptance and inclusivity at the local level. Yet, neither are sufficient to explain why local people have remained largely disinterested in attempting to disrupt or alter the cultural meanings and the social ordering reproduced through the festival.

Tourism's intervening role

Tourism's role has been vital in this respect. While tourism was never, and to this day is not, a stated aim of the festival, exploiting it as a means to an end has been critical in allowing those controlling the production of the festival to reproduce hegemonic meanings with very little opposition. Crucially, its tourism function consolidated its position in the eyes of such critical gatekeepers as the state, the national tourism agency and major sponsors. This has been the case particularly since the late 1980s when cultural policies across the Western world have tended to relinquish the social democratic models of the late 1960s in favour of a more pragmatic approach that views the arts through economic lenses. The dominance of overnight visitors in the Wexford festival landscape is long-standing, dating back to at least 1959 when Walsh estimated that 60 percent of audiences came from outside of Wexford, with 25–7 percent of these coming from abroad (*Irish Independent*, October 24, 1962). Over time this dominance has strengthened. By 1989, the equivalent figures were 85 percent and 35 percent (O'Hagan *et al.* 1989) and these remained largely unchanged into the 1990s (J. Hynes, interview with the author). English visitors predominate amongst international visitors.

In a local context, the manner in which the festival functions as a tourist attraction is critical. The timing of the festival coincides with the low tourist season and its proven ability to draw 20,000 tourists, both domestic and international, is particularly important for the regional economy. Local people's reactions to visitors were very positive. Their presence was never associated with overcrowding or traffic congestion, or construed as being in any sense undesirable. Critically, in line with existing profiles of cultural tourists (e.g. Richards 1994), festival visitors were found to have high per capita levels of expenditure. Not surprisingly, therefore, when asked what they considered to be the festival's main achievement, almost 61 percent of local respondents replied 'the business it generates'. Indeed, 9 percent of the

sample themselves benefited financially from the festival. However, the festival generates much more than economic benefits, it also bestows a certain social and cultural status on the town that local people, irrespective of their relationship with the festival, are free and willing to revel in. For 13.9 percent of local respondents, the festival's main achievement was that it puts 'Wexford on the map'. It generates external affirmation for Wexford by generating flows of visitors and income into the town, by creating for Wexford a place in the operatic world and by strengthening its place identity in the world at large. In the words of townspeople: 'it's marvellous, people go because it's the thing to do'; 'it puts Wexford on the world stage'. The society event that the festival represents exudes a sense of social status that extends to the town as a whole. Local people, irrespective of their relationship with the festival itself, are free to bask in the reflection of the glory that 'Wexford the festival town' bestows on the place.

   Local respondents' understanding and approval of the use of the festival as an effective means of marketing their place is one instance where there was widespread agreement within the local arena about the meaning and functioning of the festival. It may not have satisfied certain artistic needs, or met the interests of many sectors or individuals within the town, but it was perceived to be in the best interests of the town as a whole. This reflects the widespread belief in the symbolic value which opera, as a form of 'high' culture, bestows on their place. It perfectly illustrates Blau's (1989: 438) argument that 'considerations of commerce and symbolic worth carry economic and political decision-makers into the activities of culture-building . . . whatever the traditions or the tastes of the local community'. This local pride, stemming from an allegiance to place, was pervasive throughout the local population surveyed. Just over 90 percent of local respondents said that the festival increased their sense of pride in Wexford. It thus crossed social divisions and can only be interpreted in terms of cultural references and to the sense of belonging to an identifiable culture group. It is not a unique finding. Hall (1992) and, more recently, De Bres and Davis (2001) have written about the ability of events to reinforce regional identity and social cohesion and promote a sense of pride in place. As Rooney (1988: 97) argued, 'perhaps the psychic benefits, the bonding of people to their place for a job well done, are the real and lasting justification for hosting such activities (events)'.

Conclusions

Thus, while it would be perfectly valid to analyse and interpret the Wexford Festival Opera as an event that functions as a model tourist attraction, extends the tourism season and generates significant economic benefits for a regional economy, to do so would be to merely scrape the surface. To accept this as an élite arts festival that has the unqualified support of the

townspeople who, in the words of the festival's publicity material, offer opera-goers a warm and vivacious welcome, would be a gross simplification of what is a complex and multi-faceted reality. As this paper has tried to show, festivals represent complex cultural practices with many layers of meanings. In the case discussed above, it has been argued that there is very little that is natural or inevitable about the way in which festivals evolve. Underneath the layer of mythology that envelopes the Wexford Festival Opera, its shape and symbolism can be seen to embody the intentions and meanings of key architects. It has been constructed in a way that furthers specific interests and, in the process, marginalizes others.

Willems-Braun (1994) and Waterman (1998) have argued that festivals have the ability to transform places into spaces of cultural discourse and, to an extent, this was found to be the case in Wexford. However, it is important to elaborate this argument with the recognition that there can be several strands of quite different sorts of discourse ongoing simultaneously at different times and in different places in the festival landscape. It was evident from listening to the people encountered during the surveying process in Wexford that the festival and the festival place are experienced with varying degrees of involvement and intensity. For many of the people who live in Wexford town, the festival, while omnipresent, does little to draw them into a deeper engagement with their place, or with the arts going on there at the personal level. Yet, in a wider sense, it acts to strengthen pride in local achievement, in Wexford as a home place and it heightens, by extension, the sense of place identity. These strong place connections engendered by the festival depend, almost ironically, on the festival's relationship with other places. The history of the festival has been characterized by a desire to 'shake off the local' and become encased in a network of inbound flows of tourists, income, media attention, critical approval and sponsorship. The connections and flows that the festival has successfully developed are responsible for generating the external approval and affirmation that is so formative in strengthening the general sense of pride in place identified.

Meanwhile, within the festival space itself, visitors predominate in shaping, experiencing and revelling in the opportunities for social interaction and cultural engagement afforded by the festival. Their presence is critical in transforming ordinary time/space into festival time/space and in creating something of a spectacle for the local population, who now seem to have yielded up parts of their town to the festival and to the visiting opera-goers. It is tourists who can seem most at home here while, in ways that belie the official messages produced by the festival management, local people can feel excluded from or simply disinterested in the workings of the festival. Yet, while the manipulation of culture can give rise to tensions and potential conflict (Kearns and Philo 1993) – an assertion that this study supports – both remain well hidden beneath the surface of the highly stage-managed Wexford festival. Many of the multitude of ways in which the

local survey respondents know and experience the festival are unheeded and unreflected in official festival meanings.

All of these findings, of course, have implications for the reproduction of place. The Wexford case epitomizes how a festival's very existence is premised on movement, interaction and the exchange of multiple flows in the form of people, ideas, money, etc., both within the festival space and between it and other places. It is a clear example of how Massey (1991), adopting what she terms a global sense of place, thinks of places as permeable spaces, partially influenced by the interchanges and relationships that connect them to other places. Interrelations were hugely influential in shaping the meanings and practices associated with the festival. Their contribution was such that they overshadowed those made by any particular, place-specific traits and this realization begs the question as to whether place matters any more. In response, it has to be pointed out that, on the surface, place can be seen to play a vital role in creating an identity for the Wexford Festival Opera. This festival is undoubtedly as much about the place (e.g. its theatre, its friendly people, its historic town) as it is about the opera produced there. However, it is evident from the foregoing discussion that 'Wexford the festival place' is a quite different entity to the Wexford within which people live year-round. The components of the 'festival place' genuinely belong to the 'ordinary place'. What is different is the manner in which the former's components are constructed without reference to the diverse, lived reality of the ordinary town. Thus, what has emerged in Wexford is a festival place that is carefully packaged, mythologized and commodified.

In all of the above, the presence of tourists and the influence of tourism interests were strongly felt and closely interwoven into the workings of the festival. This case study found tourism to be hugely influential in shaping both the experience that is the Wexford Opera Festival and the place that is the Wexford festival town. As festivals increasingly either emerge as, or evolve into, tourist attractions, the importance of being alert to how tourism complicates the social and cultural dynamics of festival settings becomes more evident. It is a task that has the potential to yield new insights into the profound social and cultural significance of festivals.

Acknowledgements

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Résumé: Symboles, pratiques et création de mythes: perspectives culturelles au sujet du Festival de l'Opéra de Wexford

Au cours des dernières décennies, les géographes se sont de plus en plus intéressés aux festivals. Ils en ont déduit que les festivals sont des pratiques importantes qui permettent aux gens de renouer leurs liens avec leurs lieux de residence. La création de tels paysages est conçue pour promouvoir certains ensembles de valeurs et attribue donc une signification particulière au lieu. Le tourisme influence les processus et les dynamiques en cours dans le cadre de festivals. Cet article cherche à démêler les formes complexes de leur influence sur la reproduction de significations culturelles et se fonde sur un travail effectué au Festival de l'Opéra de Wexford en République d'Irlande. Il analyse le symbolisme, les pratiques et les significations associées au festival. L'article indique comment les significations officielles du festival cherchaient à contrebalancer l'élitisme avec l'inclusion ainsi que l'attrait international avec le soutien local mais il identifie également un lot de significations indépendants communiquées par les attitudes et pratiques mises en evidence par la population locale. L'auteur conclut que le tourisme a un rôle fondamental dans la reproduction de significations officielles et dans le maintien des mythes qui encadrent le festival.

Mots-clés: tourisme, festivals, espaces contestés, significations culturelles

Zusammenfassung: Symbole, Praktiken und Mythenbildung: Kulturelle Aspekte der Opernfestspiele in Wexford

In den letzten Jahrzehnten hat sich ein zunehmendes Interesse der Geographen der Untersuchung von Festspielen zugewandt. Dabei sind Festspiele als wichtige Praktiken erkannt worden, durch welche sich Personen mit ihren Orten verbinden. Zugleich fügen Festspiele ihren Orten besondere Bedeutungen hinzu und schaffen Landschaften mit bestimmte vermarktbaren Wertsätzen. Dieser Beitrag sucht einige der komplexen Webmuster zu entwirren, in denen der Tourismus den Betrieb und die Dynamik von Festspielen und die Herstellung von Kulturverständnis an deren Orten beeinflusst. Er stützt sich dabei auf Forschungen über das Wexford Opera Festival in der Republik Irland und untersucht die mit diesen verbundenen Symbolismen, Praktiken und das Kulturverständnis. Dabei wird diskutiert, wie das 'offizielle' Festspielverständnis zwischen Elitengedanke und populärer Offenheit sowie internationaler Ausrichtung und lokaler Unterstützung zu balancieren sucht. Zugleich wird ein 'inoffizielles' Festspielverständnis identifiziert, welches sich durch Haltungn und Praktiken der lokalen Bevölkerung ausdrückt. Dabei wird die Rolle des Tourismus als kritisch befunden bei der Herstellung des 'offiziellen' Verständnisses wie dem Erhalt das Festival tragenden Mythen.

Stichwörter: Tourismus, Festspiele, umstrittene Räume, Kulturverständnisse