

# Analysing Events as Cultural Objects. Application of the Cultural Diamond Model to the Imaginary of the Contemporary Celebrations

**Authors** Francesca Ieracitano  
ieracitanof@gmail.com

**Abstract** *Analysing Events as Cultural Object. Application of the Cultural Diamond Model to the imaginary of Contemporary Celebrations.* The paper focuses on the event as a cultural object to analyse its social significance and features. The analysis of the characteristics of the event, its receivers and its creators, has been carried out applying the euristic model of the cultural diamond on three big international events. The aim is to offer an interpretation of the event as a genre of contemporary celebrations and as a cultural object that reflects both the imaginary of contemporary societies based on a relational dimension. The result showed how events are characterised by a temporal continuity disconnected which allows them to colonize the present time. Moreover events give meaning to spaces where the failure of some social institutions, like politics or economy, is visible, creating an utopia. Finally, the social significance and imaginary the event acquires resides in its ability to relate to the social world, celebrating its contradictions and its culture.

**Keywords** Events | Celebration | Cultural object | Imaginary | Space



## 1. Introduction

In the last years, events became a successful genre used to redefine the imaginary of contemporary celebrations (Etzioni et al., 2004) that involve institutions; companies and the general public (Johnston, 1991).

However, sociology, contrary to other disciplines, have only rarely examined and better defined this phenomenon in a holistic perspective (Frost, 2016) exploring its multidimensionality (Delanty et al., 2011; Page et al., 2012; Andrews, Leopold, 2013) and most of all its imaginary dimension.

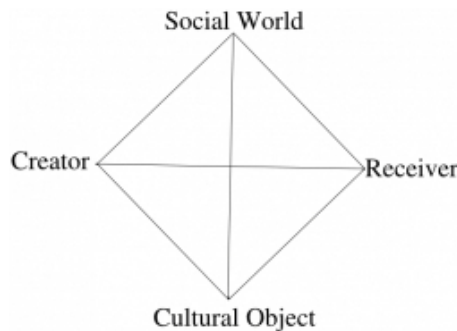
A socio-cultural interpretation of events becomes relevant for several reasons. First of all, events give us a description of the processes that nowadays affect the dynamics of social participation related to the celebrations (Picard, 2016). As a consequence, they feed symbolic images through which a social group or a community builds a horizon of meaning where emotions have an important role in constructing and reinforcing both individual and social imaginary (Grassi, 2015). Lastly, events are a way of framing different cultural contents that would normally be experienced in different contexts (Derrett, 2003): shows, music and the Holy Mass; gastronomy, traditions and High Tech; theater and shopping.

With regard to these various aspects, events are an important indicator of cultural changes in the imaginary of Western societies; therefore, they can be considered a meaningful cultural object.

According to Griswold (1994:11) a “cultural object” is a “shared significance embodied in form” and it represents a part of the wider cultural system. The status of “cultural object” is not built in the object itself; that is how the observer defines it in order to analyse the “cultural phenomena and their relation to social life” (*Ibidem*). In other words, event, as cultural object, sheds light on the trajectories towards which the imaginary of a community is oriented in a precise social, cultural and historical age.

The “cultural diamond model” clarifies how each cultural object has one or more “creators” who define its nature through their intentions and values. Moreover a cultural object can only be regarded as such when it becomes public and when it is used by the cultural receivers: an active audience Griswold (1994: 14) calls “active meaning makers”. Therefore, in order to analyse cultural objects, they need to be put in relation to the cultural system they belong to: a “social world” characterized by specific “economic, political, social and cultural patterns and exigences” (Griswold, 1998: 14).

The cultural object; the receivers; the creators and the social world as if put in a diamond-shaped structure (Figure 1) appear to be linked.



**Figure 1-** *Cultural Diamond* (Griswold, 1994)

As Griswold (1994:16) argues:

"cultural diamond is an accounting device intended to encourage a fuller understanding of any cultural object's relationship to the social world. It does not say what the relationship between any of the points should be, only that there is a relationship".

Although this model can seem a simplification of the analysis of cultural phenomena, it is useful to suggest a holistic perspective to the study of the events, by focusing on the relational dimension among the creators, the events, the receivers and society. In our perspective, by giving the right importance to the connection between these points it is possible to understand the social and anthropological meaning of contemporary events as the moment in which collective representations take place and meet emotions.

Therefore, we applied the cultural diamond model to the study of the events as a genre of contemporary celebrations. The aim is to investigate if events can be considered cultural objects in contemporary society and to define the relation among the events, their creators (like institutions/communication agencies/companies), their receivers (the audiences) and the social world (contemporary society) in a socio-culturological perspective.

In order to explore these elements the cultural diamond model was applied to three events selected as cases study: EXPO2015<sup>1</sup>, The White Night<sup>2</sup> (WN); The World Youth

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<sup>1</sup> Expo2015 is the Universal Exposition hosted by Milan, in Italy, since 1th of May to the 31th of October 2015. The event was held under the theme *Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life*: <http://www.expo2015.org/>

<sup>2</sup> The WN (known as *Nuit Blanche* in Paris) is a cultural event born in Paris on 2002 and extended to other European Capitals and other cities in the world (Montreal, Toronto, Bruxelles, Madrid, Rome, Lima and Leeds). The format of this event was developed in different way in other cities, i.e. the Parisian event is dedicated to the contemporary art, the Roman one, now suspended, was inspired to the Berliner concept of white night, where Musuem are open all night long and different cultural events happen all around there. See more at <http://uk.france.fr/en/events/nuit-blanche-paris-and-ile-france>



Day3 (WYD). They have been chosen because of their international reach, the degree of public participation and the diversified typology of imaginary they are related to (economic, cultural and religious), which make them significant examples (Eisenhardt, 1989).

These events were analysed through an ethnographic observation carried out during EXPO2015 in Milan; tree editions of the WN of Rome (from 2005 to 2007); and the XV edition of WYD2000 of Rome. The observation mainly focused on how the spaces were used during the events and the forms of participation of the public (Atkinson, Hammersley, 1994).

Because of the local dimension of our observation and the timing of the events, the data collected on the field were compared with other sources and secondary data emerged by external documentary materials (e.g., official websites, official reports.). Then, they were integrated with other recent results reported in academic studies (Rymarz, 2007; Butt, 2015), for a further update and international comparison.

## 2. Are events a genre of celebrations?

In order to analyze event as cultural object it is firstly important to define it. In our analysis, the event is not seen as the result of the celebration process, but as a genre with its own features that also includes some typologies of celebrations, such as festivals.

This genre, unlike other, can undoubtedly seem blurry. In fact, the word "event" is sometimes used as a synonym for "festival" (Falassi, 1987:1) or "exhibitions" (Forst, 2016). The reason behind this overlap can be explained through Getz's (2007:10-11) words: "Many specific expressions of art include events, such as the theatre, music concerts, art exhibits. But the event is usually a vehicle for performance and exhibition, not the core phenomenon".

Therefore, the event, in its being a vector for something else, acquires multiplicity. As Badiou (2007: 179) claims: "the event is a one-multiple made up of, on the one hand, all the multiples which belong to its site, and on the other hand, the event itself".

It is no coincidence that the word "event" is also used to frame specific kinds of celebration: sporting events (that are more than just a match); cultural events (more than a simple exhibition or concert); religious events (not only limited to the celebration of the Holy Mass). Such celebrations are referred to as "events" since they include performances, rituals and ceremonies of different nature.

The idea of events as a genre is also demonstrated by the spreading of subgenres that could be related to it. For instance, Mega Events (Roche, 2000) "by way of their size of

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<sup>3</sup> The WYD is a spiritual and cultural International meeting among Catholic young people, promoted by the Catholic Church on the Pope's initiative. It was established in 1985, during John Paul II's pontificate <http://worldyouthday.com/> and <http://www.krakow2016.com/en/>



significance are those that yield extraordinarily high levels of tourism, media coverage, prestige, or economic impact for the host community" (Getz, 2007: 25). It is also common to talk about Special Events: "a one-time or infrequently occurring event outside the normal program" (Getz, 2007:27; Goldblatt, 1997). Media Events are a special case because they "are not televised events. They are television events" (Dyan, Kats 1994: 211) "...created primarily for broadcast audiences" (Getz, 2007: 27).

Considering the events a genre implies a paradox, as the genre itself indicates a typology that aims to give steadiness to a cultural content and to define its boundaries. The idea of steadiness collides with the events' temporary nature.

The etymology of the term event, indeed, derives from the Latin *eventus, evenire*, which indicates, according to the Italian Dictionary Treccani, what has happened or what will happen; the occurring; the unexpected; a happening on fact of some importance. Starting from the etymology of the term, sociology, anthropology and philosophy developed some definitions of the concept of event, referring directly to the unforeseen and unpredictable nature of the phenomenon, such as the definition proposed by Morin (1972) which defines the event as what is unlikely, accidental, random, singular, concrete, historical. On the contrary Augé (2010) talks about "a dictatorship of (contemporary) events that are presented as extraordinary, even though they eventually trivialize it all". The dynamic nature of the event is confirmed by Badiou's (2007: 38) analysis, according which the event is "the becoming of becoming: the becoming (One) of unlimited becoming".

To overcome this paradox, for the purpose of our analysis, the genre is intended as a relation that makes the cultural object recognisable by both producers and receivers (Rosmarin,1985). So, the genre acquires a collective identity defined by its form, its purposes and its meaning (McQuail, 2006).

The form of event as a genre, and its collective identity, is defined by event's contents, space and timing. Such elements are strongly intertwined. Specifically, the contents of the events are various and different; as already mentioned, they are one-multiple made up of all the multiples which belong to the event (Badiou, 2007: 179). Unlike festivals, the events' cultural offer appears to be not only quantitatively abundant, but also very diversified, so to connect elements that are often in contrast, like the sacred and the secular, culture and shopping, economy and gastronomy, creating, as a result, proper crossreadings or forms of syncretism.

The dimension of space is what contributes to the steadiness of the event, even after it ends. According to Badiou (2007: 178-179) actually, the event "can always be localized...The event is attached, in its very definition, to the place...The site is only ever a condition of being for the event".

The connection the event and its contents have with the space, but also with the time dimension, as we will investigate later on, is a bond of relation and negotiation. In order to analyse the event genre as a cultural object, it is useful to look for its social meaning in the dialectic relationship the event builds with time and space. Its significance can be



also identified in the purposes and the social-functions fulfilled by events in contemporary society.

### **3. Defining the event as cultural object: the importance of timing dimension**

The Timing dimension is analysed starting from the events role in the organisation of social times and their relationship with the past and the future of a community.

According to Durkheim (1912), celebrations contribute to the organisation of social times defining an alternation between sacred and profane times. They are ways of acting that develop within certain groups, by raising, maintaining or reproducing the mental states of those groups, so to represent moments of "collective effervescence". They outline the relation both between the present and the past and even between individuals and the community.

On the contrary, the extra-ordinary nature of contemporary events links this celebratory genre to the temporal dimension of the present. According to Augè (2010) the connection of events flattens contemporary societies on an eternal-present dimension, "a static time in which the past is blocked and the future is denied". The author defines the event as a "temporal non-place" giving the illusion of a new start.

The three events analysed give a higher value to the present dimension instead of other kinds of celebration that are strongly linked to history and time steadiness and, in being so, find their meaning and justify their cyclicity.

In particular: EXPO2015 in line with the Universal Exposition format, has a prolonged duration (185 days for the 2015 edition). Such a prolonged time tends to normalise an event that, recurring cyclically, is perceived as exceptional. However, each new edition of the event takes place in a different country and not necessarily in the same period of the year. This makes it difficult to create a sense of continuity and feelings of expectation and affection. In addition, this disengages the imaginary from the continuity of the symbolic dimension of a specific place or community and anchors it to the emotional dimension of the event itself and its contents.

The same temporal organisation can be found in the WYD, which lasts a week and recurs every two or three years in different countries. The WN recurs every year, in the same period and has a duration circumscribed to a night, but its cyclical nature is not granted, as it was proved by the sudden cancellation of the event in Rome (in 2011) after eight editions, unlike other countries.

The events are characterised by a disconnected time continuity that strengthens the connection with the present, enhances the feeling of uncommonness of the events and encourages the public participation, as each event becomes unique.

In fact, the timeframe between two events edition, as in the case of EXPO or WYD, is quite long and dislocated in space. Instead, when the event takes place every year (i.e. WN) the new contents it offers each time make it an unrepeatable event.



The dimension of the present acquires importance also because the time of year when the events take place has no social significance. We can assume that they can coexist with sacred and secular times, working times and holidays, without necessarily determining them and/or interrupting them, since temporality is not defined or necessarily characterised by continuity and/or repetitiveness. Therefore, events have no function in the organisation of the social time, like Easter, Christmas or Carnival, as they do not interfere with the schedule of the community that hosts them, regardless of their duration. Finally, events do not give continuity in time to the collective imaginary, so it is not useful to keep it alive in time, but only to witness its immanent strength.

For example, the temporality of the WN has an impact on the normal sleep-wake rhythm, interrupted during the event; it delves into the regime of nightly imagery and brings to light mystical structures that make the participants dialogue with a collective intimacy through images of the night (Durand, 1996). In this case, the rational organisation of everyday life is only subverted for one night during the weekend. The same happens during EXPO2015 and the WDY in which it is possible to take part either for the whole duration of the event, only over the weekend or during the most topical days, like the opening and closing.

With regard to the relationship with the past and the future, events do not aim to create any link of continuity with it, nor a projection of a community towards the future, but they just represent a celebration of the present. In fact, unlike Carnivals or Anniversaries, they display repetitiveness in their format, but not in the contents and values they suggest and in the ways of development. Their specificity, especially in the case of the cyclic ones, stands in the always innovative elements they introduce: e.g. the main theme of the EXPO2015; the cultural-artistic offer of the WN; the agenda of the WYD, in order to preserve their aura of extraordinariness to the participants' eyes.

In the latter case, the format of the event always keeps the same structure, although the themes they develop upon change and do not preserve any kind of memory continuity. The cross icon is the only constant symbolic element. The logo of the event, instead, changes each time.

In line with the tendency to the "eternal present" (Maffesoli, 2000), contemporary events do not aim to create a memory effect, even in those cases when they have some kind of cyclic nature.

So, how is it possible to state that the relation between the events and their temporality is relational and based on negotiation? Considering their complexity and the richness of their contents, they need to fit in a timeframe that allows their realisation, yet not interfering with other celebrations that are strongly linked to a specific time. We could mention Bank Holidays, Commemorations, Carnivals, etc. that stand by a liturgical calendar or historical recurrences. Therefore, choosing the right time for events to take place and the opportunity to make them happen again depends on the nature of the event genre itself.



#### 4. The spacial dimension of events

If contemporary events do not mean to become relevant, either on the calendar, or in history or in the future projections of a community, they make their mark on the space where they take place. Events, unlike other kinds of celebrations, do not have an already decided site. Instead, they create new areas for themselves that normally are “non-places” (Augé, 1992).

The space, together with the contents, could be one of the aspects that mostly contribute to the creation of the event as a cultural object, since the transformation of the space is the only memory contemporary events leave behind. Once the event ends, the site, at times unused, goes back to the collectivity for it to use and host new contents, or to welcome new experiences, to the point it becomes a space of relation and socialisation itself.

To analyze the spacial dimension of events, the following indicators are relevant: the typology of the site and the redefinition of the site they take place in.

Firstly, events' location can change from time to time, often being characterised by a vast territorial extension: Universal EXPO and the WYD take place in different countries each time and, according to their organisation and their contents, need different sites with specific features.

The WN normally takes place in the city centre, although it can also include neighbourhoods that are far from it (the WN2006 of Rome absorbed suburb of the capital, like Centocelle and Laurentina). It is not coincidental that for large-scale events, like the three examined, participants are given maps to help them orient themselves among the scheduled activities and in the organisation of the spaces.

The location where events take place does not need to have a historical or symbolic value, such as anniversaries and commemorations, since the event itself gives this kind of value through the reconstruction of scenic designs and the models of public participation. Nor does it have to be a sacred place of worship, even in the case of religious events. For instance, during the WYD, vast urban areas, sometimes peripheral and lacking of any social meaning, are turned into sacred areas, like the area where the General Hospital of Torvergata is now situated in Rome and where the Holy Mass was celebrated during WYD20004.

Unlike festivals and other kinds of ceremonies, the rearrangement and redefinition of the urban space, even after the events, is a specific feature they have, since events are characterised by a great public participation that requires the identification of specific areas.

The EXPO2015 determined the requalification of the peripheral area of Milan, which hosted the event, but mostly the restyling of the Darsena and the redefinition of the adjacent neighbourhood. This is the case of a permanent effect produced by a massive event on the city. In the case of the WN, everyday sceneries, such as urban areas, also

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<sup>4</sup> See photographs of the events at [http://www.ptvonline.it/nascita\\_sviluppo.asp](http://www.ptvonline.it/nascita_sviluppo.asp)



undergo a redefinition and a deconstruction, creating an "eventful city" (Palmer, Richards, 2010).

Spaces are redefined in their symbolic meanings depending on the events. The non-places are transformed into anthropological places (Augè, 1992) and assume a symbolic value as a function of the celebration that they host. In some cases, the entire city is taken over by the event, altering its own spaces and borders. In doing so, the viewer-citizen takes possession over the urban environment by reusing structures and contexts in which access is sometimes denied (i.e. The WN); congested spaces turn into art galleries or theatres.

When the event ends, the non-place goes back to being so in some cases, like the streets of the WN in Rome. In other cases, like EXPO2015 and the WYD, cities inherit new structures or acquire new sites that will be destined to new uses.

## 5. The social functions of events

Different genres of celebration have their own specific purposes and social functions (Turner, 1982). Festivals, for instance, are "recommitment rituals" (Etzioni, 2000), as they mean to strengthen social integration among its participants. Along with this point of view, Falassi (1987: 2) defines festivals as: "...a periodically recurrent, social occasion" referred to:

"all members of a whole community, united by ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical bonds, and sharing a worldview. Both the social function and the symbolic meaning of the festival are closely related to a series of overt values that the community recognizes as essential to its ideology and worldview, to its social identity, its historical continuity, and to its physical survival, which is ultimately what festivals celebrate".

If festivals' social function is to strengthen a community's values with continuity, Carnivals' social function is, on the contrary, to subvert the established order of our society, through jokes, disguise and the juxtaposition of sacred and profane (Harris, 2003). "The carnivalization process entails the creation of a countersociety, an opposite mirror of the everyday social order, in which the normative codes regulating behavior are not only suspended but entirely overthrown" (Rusu, Kantola, 2016: 13). According to Lachmann (1988: 130): "in the carnival, dogma, hegemony, and authority are dispersed through ridicule and laughter".

Commemoration and Anniversaries are genres of celebration that aim to "honour the memory of someone or something" (Getz, 2007: 34). Their purpose is to improve the relationship societies have with their past to keep the memory alive in the present. These celebrations include ceremonies based on symbolic rituals, as it happens with Coronations, National Days; wars or battles where the community celebrates its main values together with their violations, like with natural disasters, Holocaust Remembrance Days etc. (Rusu, Kantola, 2016).



The event, unlike these genres, does not serve a purpose of integration, neither subversive, nor commemorative. Firstly, because it transcends social, cultural or generational feelings of belonging. We could mention the WN or EXPO, as they address a heterogeneous mass public, often made up of people of different geographic origin that intentionally go to where events take place.

Considering the nature of the contents offered by the WN and EXPO2015, the receivers do not identify fundamental values of their own ideology or *Weltanschauung*. The contents of such events do not necessarily connect with their social identity. Even when the contents of the event include a city's cultural heritage (as it happens with the WN in Rome), such heritage acquires a new role to address a wider public (concert within Museums).

The case of the WYD could seem an exception to the rule as it addresses young Catholics. However, it intends to be an event that tries to go beneath appearances. An example of this tendency is the "About WYD" section of the official website where is a content dedicated to the "Perspective" (about the event).

"...The happenstance observer would witness not angst and malice, but smiles and joy, singing and dancing young people, culture upon culture and nation upon nation, proudly holding their flags high (or wearing them), greeting one another in peace, trading their tokens, humbly realizing how small they are in a world of people, and strengthened to witness so many who share their convictions"<sup>5</sup>.

Both the name of the event (World Youth Day) and the "perspective" used to frame it do not refer to religious identities in any way. This highlights a potential override of appearances and boundaries to address contemporary youth in a broader meaning. Since the event is made up of numerous elements, the *social functions* of this cultural object are various:

- *the leisure function*: events satisfy the need of culture, spirituality, recreation and sociability through leisure activities (Morin, 1962; Best, 2010). These celebrations maintain the particularity of games, involving everyone (Huizinga, 1955) how it emerges from their programs. Even in the most official celebratory occasions, like the WYD, the expected kind of participation, as the words used on the official website are festive and joyful, which leads to an atmosphere of exuberance, to a state of free and spontaneous relaxation and leisure, sometimes taking on a character of improvisation (Callois, 1958; Debord, 1994).

- *The function of channeling social fragmentation*. Events channel individualistic impulses and tendencies towards massification in contemporary societies (Wolton, 1997). Due to the abundance and variety of the cultural offer, people can participate in these events in a way that is suitable for their interests having the illusion to do not feel part of the mass. The event genre, as a "relational package" prevents it from addressing a specific public-community. Instead, it tries to gather more and more people of different belongings.

<sup>5</sup> <http://worldyouthday.com/about-wyd/wyd-history>



- *Participation*: events are an opportunity of aggregation and socialization. The emotional component (Knottnerus, 2010) is a specific feature of this participation, it favours an emotional sharing that allows aggregation and collective imaginary to emerge. The emotional component, in fact, filters any form of privacy and encourages the search for occasions of contact, beyond the belongings. The ties established here do not necessarily need continuity, but they are meant to last for as long as individuals remain subject to the stimulus, then they dissolve and are rebuilt in other spaces. This means, events pursue a function that once belonged to the main social institutions.

## 6. The relation between the events and their receivers and creators

For the purpose of our analysis, we decided to focus only on the creators and receivers' features that are exclusively useful to enhance the relation between them and the event as a cultural object.

To examine this relation it is important to question who the people who take part in the events are; what they do at the events (Griswold, 1987), but also what the creators' purposes and intentions are with regard to the cultural object.

### 6.1 *The receivers*

In order to investigate the relation between the receivers and the events, the following variables were considered; typology of receivers, their needs, modes of participation and reception. The reception is strictly connected to the modes of participation. It can be intended both as an interpretation, therefore as a significance, and as market success (Griswold, 1987).

About the typology of receivers, as we said, the public of the events does not need to be a homogeneous group of individuals who share identity and values (Falassi, 1987). Although we can find some of these elements, in the WYD, in the case of EXPO2015 and the WN the public is composed by people of different social, cultural, economic and national origin. They share a common interest towards the contents of the event; coexist in the same space for a limited amount of time and get together upon the same emotional incitement.

In the case of the WYD a significant part of the participants, which is the catholic youth, joins the event together with their reference community, defined within dioceses or religious orders. However, these groups of participants come up beside individuals who share a common religious feeling, despite not being identified or belonging to any religious community<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The official websites of WYD has a whole page of instructions, specific for groups, small groups and individuals <http://worldyouthday.com/pilgrimimages/united>



The number of participants to events is too wide and they are too heterogeneous to last in time:

20 million participants took part in EXPO 2015; 1 million people attend the Nuit Blanche in Paris each year<sup>7</sup>; around 2 million 500 thousand attended the WYD2000 in Rome and up to 3 million-3 million and a half in Rio De Janeiro in 2013<sup>8</sup> (Jackowski et al., 2017).

The heterogeneity of the public has a direct influence on the second variable: the modalities of participation. It needs to be divided into active participation and passive forms of participation. The active participation refers to the process of recruitment that great events effect, getting volunteers involved in the managing and organisation of the event from the pre-play to the post-play phase (Goffman, 1981). In the case of the WYD and Expo 2015 specific sessions of both websites were dedicated to volunteers hiring<sup>9</sup>, whose role is fundamental to manage and set up the event before and after. They simplify activities that might be more complex due to the massive participation and they represent a key in the connection between the creators and the receivers. This model of participation establishes a stimulus towards the active commitment of the community who hosts the event, encouraged not only to take part in the initiative, but also to be part of it.

Regarding the passive participation: events present similar participation models of festivals. One of these is the participation model of "having to be there". Studies on the reasons behind the decision of the public to take part in the events have shown how receivers "give more weight and greater visibility to events per se as a distinctive phenomenon" (Nicholson, Pearce, 2001:458).

In many cases, adhering to an event does not show a real interest in the content that will be proposed (Nicholson, Pearce, 2001), but it is a reflection of the fascination for an opportunity that presents itself as unique (Rymarz, 2007) and modifies the perception of ordinary life contexts (Evans, 2012). In a quantitative and comparative part of the analysis we carried out on the WN in Rome and Paris in 2007, among the reasons of the participations, the opportunity to see a transformed city stood out (Ieracitano, 2009: 143).

Another model is the interactive participation: it refers to the important role that the interactive participation of the public plays in the events. This is a prerequisite that confirms the difference between the spectators of a show, and the public of events. Event participants, in their constant interaction with the space, the contents, and the other participants, give life and personality to these ceremonies. Interactive participation allows each individual to be able to take part in these events independently, responding to their tastes, their interests and their needs.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.paris.fr/nuitblanche15ans>

<sup>8</sup> There currently are no clear statistics on the number of participants in Krakow.

<sup>9</sup> <http://worldyouthday.com/about-wyd/internships> and <http://volunteer.expo2015.org/it/diventa-volontario>



The participatory dimension that characterises events assumes very specific traits sanctioning the transition from fruition to a form of participation that becomes cultural experience, although temporary.

This is a kind of experience that, according to Gadamer (1975), we could define as *Erlebnis* more than *Erfahrung*. While *Erfahrung* is based on a process of accumulation that leads to gather experience in the long run, the *Erlebnis* refers to “make the experience”. It is a present experience that does not necessarily need to be linked to our biography. The cultural experience of the events is, however, *Erlebnis* due to its timing and, especially, its episodic nature.

Like in festivals, the public of events is ready to support endurance tests that lead them to withstand stresses that would not commonly be accepted, such as long lines to attend the event, physical fatigue (Falassi, 1987), etc. A clear example would be the 8-hour-line at EXPO2015 for the Japanese pavilion, plus the long lines to access the expository area and other pavilions. The tolerance of long lines is also a fundamental element of the WN that grant free entry to museums, in many cases. This is added to the effort to stay awake the whole night. The WYD, as well, requires the strain to attend long celebrations in particularly crowded areas. The official website includes a section dedicated to the “preparation for WYD”, divided into physical and spiritual preparation.

About the physical preparation, contents of the website for the next WYD2019 in Panama inform that;

- " One of the great things about WYD is the suffering...:
- Walking; Be prepared to walk an average of 15K (10 miles) every day. From early in the morning until possibly after midnight...
- Sleeping; Don't expect to sleep much at the vigil. Many cultures love to stay up late, singing and dancing (all night). They will probably calm down just before sunrise, giving you a couple hours to sleep before Mass begins...
- Food: WYD food is hit or miss...mostly miss, though it is food no matter what it looks like. Eat it and smile. Lack of food is another common experience at WYD. Lines are usually very, very long (90 minutes is not unusual)..."

Different levels of effort and different modes of participation highlight the dialectic and negotiating relation that the receivers have with event as cultural object. A relation that ranges from forms of social effervescence to individualistic enjoyment. In this huge effort lies the symbolic dimension of participation in the event based on a "feeling with" which is foundational to the logic of the imaginary (Maffesoli,1990).

## 6.2 The Creators

Analysing the role of the creators means wondering “who” made the cultural object what it is, who defined the images that characterised it, since the social significance of the event lies upon the creators’ intentions.



To analyse this aspects three variables were considered: the nature; the structure of the event creators and the intentions and values they promote.

It is not possible to identify only one creator for each event due to the abundance and variety of the cultural offer and for the same reason, from the organisational point of view, they have a double nature: institutional and commercial along with the public and private. The structure of event creators is reticulate: communication agencies; sponsors; institutions and other stakeholders contribute to the organisation of the events. This means that the images of the events draw on both the imaginary of the market and that of cultural values.

In line with the cultural diamond model, creators have to be examined not only considering their organisational functions, but mostly the values and the intentions they promote.

In each examined event, various actors acquire the role of creators. In the case of the WN institutions like Ministries of culture, local and national Governments along with agencies, foundations, artists, Museums, Galleries promote values oriented to the spreading and promotion of culture to a bigger and bigger public and not necessarily passionate or expert. Commercial partners promote culture as consumption and entertainment or aimed to the promotion of the territory.

An event like EXPO2015, considering its global reach, saw a great organisational effort, which involved international institutions, so not only Italy, but also those countries exhibiting the products of their culture. On the institutional level, but also on a private one, entities were established for management of the realisation of the event, with the contribution of other corporations and partner companies. In that case, the reference values come under the sustainability and the respect of the environment in the production, which was culturally interpreted by each country involved in the event. The attention to environmental sustainability is one of the values upon which contemporary society are investing consistently.

In the case of the WYD of Krakow this range of actors and their interaction is even clearer. The website of the event clarifies how, behind the organisation of the event, it is possible to distinguish international partners and generic ones. The first typology includes official partners (for example, cultural centres), generic partners (religious or secular foundations) and strategic partners (local governments). The second typology consists of commercial partners, among which official partners (banks) and technical partners (i.g. Pepsi). In this case, the values the event promotes take roots in the catholic culture even if the partners of the events do not need to represent it.

How do these complex organisational structures affect the nature of the event as a cultural object? Firstly, their heterogeneous nature makes it difficult to identify a specific system of values the events express. Secondly, it is easy, consequently, to experience within events a contamination of values that make the culture to be presented to the public as consumption (The WN) and the economic development as culture (EXPO2015). This, also, leads to mix up religious values and the tendency to spiritualism.



Finally, to better understand the relation between events and creators, it is fundamental to consider the importance of the creators' intentions in defining the events' significance. It is not only about investigating the creators' individual intentions, but also to understand "the degrees to which the intentionality has been shaped by social elements" (Griswold, 1987:6) and how such intentions affect the cultural object. Such purposes lead the creators to the creation of that specific cultural object.

The WYD event, for example, was originated from a single creator's intention, Pope John Paul II, who in 1984 encouraged young people from all over the world to take part in the International Jubilee of Youth on Palm Sunday in St. Peter's. Acknowledging the positive feedback, he promoted the WYD for two consecutive years. The historical and social reasons that move his intentions, as the Pope himself explains in his book, "Alzatevi, Andiamo!" (Giovanni Paolo II, 2004), originate from the Pope's participation in the "Light-Life movement" (known as the Oasis Movement)<sup>10</sup>. It is a movement born in Poland against the oppression, on behalf of Communism, of young Catholic associations. Being part of the movement during summer brought the Pope over the idea of a gathering based on Christian values, which he tried to create with the WYD.

Over time, the cultural object created by such intention, although keeping its values steady, acquired a wider significance to the point its ultimate religious purpose becomes just as important as the participative dimension beyond a religious sense of belongings. This is confirmed by a significant statement on the WYD 2019 website:

"While these events are organized by the clergy and laity of the Catholic Church, youth of all faiths are invited to attend and encounter Christ, making this gathering truly universal"<sup>11</sup>.

Behind the WYD, it is possible to identify historical-political motives that do not strictly relate to the event, although they have influenced its creation and form.

The characteristics of the WN are strongly affected by the creators' intentions. Therefore, they change according to the country, as it is an international event shared by various European and Northern American capitals.

For example, the WN in Paris, born in 2002, offers contents of contemporary art, while the one in Rome includes theatre plays, concerts and free museums, performances and shopping. The creators' intentions in the various WN share the willingness to make citizens enjoy a whole new experience of the city. It is clear in the "event's history" section on the Paris WN website, in reference to the first edition in 2002.

"cette première édition de Nuit Blanche est conçue comme une grande fête nocturne de l'art, gratuite et ouverte à tous. Un parcours collectif à la dimension spirituelle propose aux Parisiens une redécouverte de leur propre ville à travers des lieux prestigieux, d'autres abandonnés, insolites, parfois présents sous un angle inhabituel, ou un éclairage particulier"<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.light-life.oaza.pl/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://worldyouthday.com/about-wyd/wyd-history>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.paris.fr/nuitblanche15ans>



The fact the WN in Rome was cancelled to become “The Museums Night” confirms how the creators’ original idea to make the culture “useable” outside the Museums by merging it with the life of the city and its inhabitants, collided with organisational, economic and logistic matters.

Therefore, the new event brought new intentions: instead of taking the culture outside the museums, bringing people inside them with new suggestions and contents. The change was determined by some economic reasons as well, like the economic crisis, which made it necessary to give the event a new dimension, because of its incredible costs.

With EXPO2015, the social leverage on the creators’ intentions is even clearer and it finds its greatest expression in the purposes behind the creation of the Universal Expo and the choice of its themes.

We could mention the first Universal Exposition in 1851, created by the British Commonwealth to prove its industrial power (Cristante, Barile, 2004), while the main theme of the last EXPO2015 in Milan was “Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life”.

It reflects the concern of the society about the effects of unbridled progress all over the planet. Therefore, it tries to send a message of sustainability in food production for an even distribution of resources worldwide.

Comparing the two themes of the first and last edition, it is possible to identify a juxtaposition between the Global and the local of the various Nation-States the new Europe tries to leave behind. In other words, the opposition between two completely different social worlds, on a political, cultural and economic level, becomes evident behind the creators’ intentions.

## **7. Final Remarks: What is the collective imaginary and significance of the event and where is it?**

The application of Wendy Griswold’s cultural diamond model allowed us to analyse events as a cultural object in a holistic perspective. Through this perspective we explored the characteristics of the event as a specific genre of celebration, different from others like festivals, carnivals and commemorations, focusing on its collective imaginary; so on the factors that determine its relation nature, making it recognisable to the creators and receivers. This meant, studying the event as a cultural object in relation. The analysis showed that the relation between the event and its time and space is one of the most distinctive features.

In particular, the cases study outlined how difficult it is for events to relate to time. This is due to their extent, variety in their contents and the great participation that forces them to negotiate on their temporal collocation to avoid any obstacle to the regular schedule of other genres of celebration.



Therefore, the results of the analysis showed how events are characterised by a temporal continuity disconnected which allows them to colonize the present time, giving dynamism to a society that is strongly tied to the present and that denies its relation to the past or the future.

On the contrary, events seem to be way more effective in their connection to the space they are able to reframe and transform creating utopia, an “imaginary place”. A happy place, as it represents an ideal space born from contemporary societies’ dystopias: suburbs and abandoned countryside, disused factories etc. The events give meaning to spaces where the failure of some social institutions, like politics or economy, is visible.

Therefore, the event becomes a cultural object even thanks to this ability to transform, which affects the space dimension more than the receivers’ participative dimension or their values.

With regard to the participative dimension, the imaginary and the significance of the event as a cultural object goes behind the interpretation of its contents and use, but, once again, it recalls its relational nature. In fact, it is an experience that can be negotiated according to the effort and intensity with which it can be lived (active, passive, interactive participation; individual or collective). This kind of experience is affected by the relation the event creates with its temporality, since it is an experience connected to the present (*Erlebnis*) and, therefore, does not aim to make memories.

The relation between the cultural object and its receivers and creators, it was interpreted through the needs it meets and the intentions behind it. The event genre is the answer to the contemporary individual’s needs of culture, consumption; entertainment and sociality. Such needs become participative models built upon an emotional sense of sharing and belonging. This is demonstrated by the fact they do not fulfil a function of integration or conflict towards society, unlike other genres of celebration. They aim to go beyond belongings to gather as many people as possible.

Such features, however, are likely to be misunderstood if the needs are interpreted disregard of the relation between the event and its creators’ intentions (affected by historical, cultural and economic factors). Therefore, by changing the cultural, historical and economic conditions, the creators’ intentions are renegotiated to the point some events are cancelled (WN in Rome); some new are created (the intentions behind WYD) or to the celebration of opposing values and cultures (the first EXPO in London vs the last EXPO2015 in Milan).

The fact that it is not easy to identify the relation between the event and the social world in a direct way confirms the idea that the social significance of the event as a cultural object and its imaginary lie in its relational power. However, this becomes more and more evident as the analysis on the cultural object keeps focusing on the various levels of relations the event builds with the public, its creators and the contexts.

Finally, the social significance the event genre acquires resides in its ability to relate to the social world, celebrating its contradictions and its culture. This is a capitalistic culture (corporate events) that gives a new meaning to the spiritual dimension (religious events), a culture of leisure and entertainment, a culture of ethics and aesthetics



(fashion/consumption events); a culture of presentification, a cultural celebration of togetherness without commitment.

The limits of this analysis are certainly linked to the circumscribed number of examined cases and the lack of a specific analysis focused on the public's opinions. However, the outcomes could be useful to develop future sociological and cultural studies on events or other genres of celebrations in a holistic perspective.

In fact, to understand the significance and the imaginary of events, they suggest not to focus exclusively on the cultural object itself, but on where significance and imaginary of events reside, which means in its relational structure and its ability to create relation outside its structure, among participants.

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