

Betwixt and Between Work and Play: Liminality at the Festival OFF d'Avignon

Hanna Huber

Department of Theatre, Film and Media Studies, University of Vienna

Abstract

Previous festival research based on Victor Turner's concept of liminality essentially shows two tendencies: either festivals are interpreted as initiation rites of artists and artworks (Teissl, 2013; Valck, 2007), or they are described as carnivalesque inversions of the everyday in which participants temporarily engage in deviant behaviours and renegotiate social identities (Luckman, 2014; Pielichaty, 2015; Ravenscroft & Gilchrist, 2009). Yet, certain social divisions and behavioural patterns remain powerful even within liminal festival spaces (Van Heerden, 2011; Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2010).

This paper examines to what extent the Festival OFF d'Avignon in France unites carnivalesque exuberance with its status as a performing arts market and is thus situated 'betwixt and between' work and play. Today, the non-juried fringe festival constitutes a marketplace for the purchase and sale of theatre productions, mirrors neoliberal structures of modern-day society, and represents an initiation rite for artists and their creations. Amidst the market bustle, the festival's revolutionary story of origin still resonates in the memory of its participants, when the provincial town is transformed into an in-between space every summer.

Conceptualised as a mixed methods research, this article draws on a combination of qualitative interviews, quantitative data evaluation, and secondary literature.

In his study on the Festival OFF d'Avignon published in 2005, Alain Brunsvick observes that the papal city offers every visitor and theatre-lover an exceptional parenthesis outside the ordinary to mingle and merge and willingly overthrow social codes and hierarchies. At the same time, theatre professionals showcase their artistic propositions on the fairground of Avignon, while curators and *programmeurs* gather in a carnivalesque rush to make a good bargain (Brunsvick, 2005, pp. 20–21). Building on Brunsvick's analysis, this article explores the OFF d'Avignon today as situated 'betwixt and between' work and play. While the festival serves as a marketplace for the purchase and sale of theatre productions and represents an initiation rite for artists and their creations, its counter-culture heritage of social protest and political activism resonates in the memory of its participants. At the example of the Festival OFF d'Avignon, this paper discusses the applicability of Victor Turner's concept of liminality as a method for festival research and in particular for the investigation of fringe festivals.¹

¹ The term fringe festival originally comes from Edinburgh, when back in 1947 eight acting companies performed uninvited on the "fringe" of the Edinburgh International Festival.

From Counter-Culture Festival to Performing Arts Market

On the fringe of the renowned Festival d'Avignon founded by Jean Vilar in 1947, the actor and playwright André Benedetto staged his play *Statues* at the Théâtre des Carmes in July 1966 without having been officially included in the festival program. This rebellious act marked the initial impulse for the genesis of an alternative festival on the fringe. Two years later, the happenings of July 1968 intensified the thirst for free artistic expression and encouraged creations by independent artist collectives outside institutional structures. According to the actor Philippe Caubère, the political activism of 1968 finally gave birth to the OFF d'Avignon (Rumello, 2016, p. 34). By contrast, André Benedetto claims that such an adventure of mankind does not originate at a specific date but gradually develops. In his view, the revolutionary movements of 1968 had derived from the human need to speak up, perform, and create, which then became manifest in the fringe festival (Léonard and Vantaggioli, 1989, p. 12).

The local population of Avignon experienced the political activism of May 1968 with a two-month delay (Loyer and Baecque, 2016, p. 255), while it had already begun to subside in Paris. Like the occupation of the Théâtre Odéon in May (Huber, 2022a, p. 39), the central Place de l'Horloge in Avignon was changed into a forum for public debates every evening. Amidst the agitated atmosphere, the French police arrested the twenty-one-year-old Gérard Gelas on 18 July 1968 for having written the controversial play *La Paillasse aux Seins Nus* (Bredeson, 2006, p. 79). All performances by his amateur theatre company Le Chêne Noir were banned even before the play's premiere. This manifestation of public censorship provoked a general mobilisation fighting for freedom of expression and creation (Rasse, 2003, p. 42).

Parallel to these events, the Living Theatre, who had been invited at the Festival d'Avignon in 1968, explored the stage as an instrument to enact a renewed model of society (Jouve, 2018). In their new creation *Paradise Now*, Avignon itself should become mankind's paradise, a fundamental counter-space to the dominant social class (Brauneck, 2007, p. 25). Theatre was thus conceived as "a Utopian forum for revolutionary praxis: a social laboratory that could alter human nature and enact various radical forms of political and social change" (Penner, 2009, p. 17). The context of the political activism in 1968 offered the ideal testing ground for their experimental performance *Paradise Now*. "[W]ith its reliance upon spontaneous improvisation, Artaudian physicality, and anarchist principles," their new creation "was meant to bring about revolutionary change" (Pellerin, 2018, E-1).

The events of July 1968 illustrate how the limitations of conventional theatre were contested and performances conquered the streets. In close proximity to the official Festival d'Avignon, public space was converted into a forum for political debates and a laboratory to

explore alternative models of society. While Jean Vilar initially referred to alternative performances on the fringe, e.g. by André Benedetto or Gérard Gelas, as “hors festival” (Midol, 2003, p. 65), the name Avignon OFF was then used by the journalist Jacqueline Cartier in 1971, who compared the non-juried fringe festival to the OFF Broadway.

More than fifty years later, the OFF d’Avignon has become a central networking platform for acting companies in France. The festival’s open-access policy has led to a rapid influx of not only artists and festival visitors, but also curators, producers, and talent scouts looking for new artistic talents and future hit productions. The acting companies self-organise and self-finance their participation hoping to attract attention and to sign promising contracts for the upcoming season.

At a certain point, the unregulated growth of a non-juried festival necessitates organising structures, which let the artist Alain Léonard found the association Avignon Public OFF (APO) “for my colleagues and friends” in 1982 (Léonard and Vantaggioli, 1989, p. 63). Succeeded by Avignon Festival & Compagnies (AF&C) in 2006, the intention remains to act as neutral custodian by compiling a festival program and organising membership cards without intervening in artistic decisions. Pierre Beffeyte, president of AF&C from 2016 to 2020, named professionalisation as their primary goal saying,

Ce que je souhaiterais [...] c’est de montrer que le festival du Off, ce n’est pas juste une troupe de barbares qui viennent s’installer dans une ville à un moment donné, qui la recouvrent d’affiches et qui s’en vont à la fin du mois, en laissant tout derrière eux, avec indifférence. (Beffeyte cited in Monastier, 2019)²

Thereby, he clearly distances the present-day festival from its origins in the late 1960s, where provocative performances in the streets had caused public disorder. In another interview two months later, Beffeyte stated that the OFF hid behind its legacy of 1968, but liberty also comes with responsibility (Van Egmond, 2019). Consequently, AF&C promotes professionalisation of this once chaotic event as the optimal solution and advances measures like the instalment of a *Fond de Soutien à la Professionnalisation* to financially support selected acting companies and the separation of the open-access *Village du OFF* from a newly created meeting spot for professionals only called *Village des Professionnels*. Thus, the fringe festival leaves behind its revolutionary heritage and is heading towards a new image as a professional theatre market. François Ribac unmasks the liberal rhetoric and management of cultural organisations that are

² [translation: “What I would like [...] to show is that the OFF festival is not just a group of barbarians who conquer a city at some point, cover it with posters and depart at the end of the month, leaving everything behind with indifference”]

“literally obsessed with professionalisation”, which actually results from the “growing commercialisation of human activities” (Ribac, 2003, p. 18).³

This development meets contradictory reactions among the participating artists: the actress Anna Cottis, who knows the OFF d’Avignon since the 1980s, warns that progressing professionalisation might also exclude acting companies who do not fit into the image of the “artrepreneur”, caught between the idealism of creating art and the necessity of running a business. Some might be excellent artists but lack entrepreneurial skills to economically balance their festival participation and obtain funding (Cottis, 2021).⁴ The actor Laurent Chouteau remembers the OFF in the 1990s as wild, unbridled, without control, and much more fun compared to the increasingly professional, regulated, and serious festival editions in recent years (Chouteau, 2021).⁵ By contrast, Sophie-Anne Lecesne, co-president of the actors’ association AAFA, is convinced that artistic freedom and professionalisation should not be perceived as opposites. Instead, it is an absolute necessity to guarantee fair work conditions for freelance artists, which allows them to fully focus on the act of creation (Lecesne, 2021).⁶

To which extent does the Festival OFF d’Avignon unite its counter-culture heritage with its status as a competitive sales fair, and is thus situated “betwixt and between” work and play? In how far does the concept of liminality represent a methodological approach that permits further insights in the festival’s position today?

Liminality and Performance Studies

In 1909, the French ethnologist Arnold van Gennep described the universal structure of *Rites de Passage* performed by individuals or social groups. He, thereby, distinguished three phases: (1) During the separation phase (pre-liminal) the participant is detached from everyday life. (2) In the transformation phase (liminal) the participant is placed in a state “between” all possible

³ The French original reads: “La rhétorique libérale et le management sont littéralement obsédés par le professionnalisme et ce mouvement résulte du mouvement de marchandisation croissante des activités humaines auxquelles les arts du spectacle n’échappent pas.” (Ribac, 2003, p. 18)

⁴ “C’est le péril de la professionnalisation [...] Si les gens qui ne savent pas faire tous les dossiers n’ont pas accès à la création artistique. Là on rate quelque chose, parce qu’être administrateur n’est pas la même chose que d’être artiste.” (Cottis, interviewed on 6 August 2021) [translation: “That is the danger of professionalization [...] If people who do not know how to do all the files do not have access to artistic creation, then we are missing out on something, because being an administrator is not the same as being an artist.”]

⁵ “Dans les années 90, ce qui était génial, c’est qu’il y avait des spectacles dans la rue et de la musique, beaucoup de spectacles de rue. C’était un peu fou, plus sauvage, un petit peu plus débridé, et beaucoup plus intéressant. Là, tout est tenu, sous contrôle, c’est moins drôle.” (Chouteau, interviewed on 21 July 2021) [translation: “In the 90s, what was great was that there were street performances and music, lots of street performances. It was a little crazy, wilder, without restraint, and much more interesting. Today, everything is held under control, it’s less fun.”]

⁶ “Je ne vois pas forcément l’opposition. [...] On peut avoir une liberté artistique et une régulation des conditions d’accueil et de la rémunération.” (Lecesne, interviewed on 22 July 2021) [translation: “I don’t necessarily see an opposition. [...] We can have artistic freedom and a regulation of the working conditions and payment.”]

areas, which allows new experiences. (3) The incorporation phase (post-liminal) signifies the participant's return into society with a transformed identity. In pre-industrial societies rites of passage represent an essential component of social life and mark the transition from one stage to another, e.g. in birth, puberty, marriage, and death (Van Gennep, 1909).

Van Gennep's publication was not translated into English until the 1960s, whereupon it was read and highly appreciated by the British social anthropologist Victor Turner, who took up this concept and elaborated on the phase of liminality, i.e. a time of inherent possibility representing a temporary inversion of social structures. Thereby, Turner focused on "the creative potential of ritual" and connected "rites with notions of performance" (Andrews and Roberts, 2015, p. 132). To allow a broader application of this concept, it seemed necessary to gradually divorce the "theory of liminality from a concept of the sacred", which "facilitates a move from thinking about tribal cultures to thinking about industrial cultures" (Crosby, 2008, p. 7). Turner's framework had a considerable impact on the study of liminal experiences in various scientific fields, ranging from geography to tourism studies, psychotherapy to performance studies.

At a conference entitled "Cultural Frames and Reflections: Ritual, Drama and Spectacle" in 1977, Victor Turner and Richard Schechner met and exchanged ideas, which contributed to the formation of "Performance Studies" as an independent academic discipline and "entailed the epistemological shift from object-oriented art to processual creative performances" (Abeliovich, 2018, p. 286). In *Theatre and Anthropology*, Schechner analyses patterns of performance sequences analogous to initiation rites:

[L]ike initiations, performances 'make' one person into another. Unlike initiations, performances usually see to it that the performer gets his own self back. (Schechner, 1985, p. 20)

In theatre studies, Erika Fischer-Lichte draws a similar comparison between rituals and theatrical performances, saying: "[I]n theatre the transformation brought about by the liminal state is reversible and does not ask for public acclaim" (Fischer-Lichte, 2005, p. 38). Patrice Pavis uses the notion of liminality in his description of the spectators' experience who enter and exit an imaginary world by anticipating the happenings on stage (Pavis, 2016, p. 127). To what extent is this concept a useful lens for festival research situated at the crossing point between anthropology and performance studies?

Festivals create a space and time outside the everyday, which permits participants to temporarily abandon working life routines, experience a different reality, and engage in festive sociability. This article examines whether the Festival OFF d'Avignon still represents an

inversion of the everyday. The following three sections discuss power struggles within liminal festival spaces, the function of fringe festivals as initiation rites for artists and artworks, and the progressing professionalisation of former counter-culture events.

Power Struggles Within Liminal Festival Spaces

While festivals do invite participants to escape existing boundaries, to renegotiate dominant discourse, and to redefine social identities, a close analysis shows that, first, suspended hierarchies are reinforced immediately after the festivities are over and, second, some social divisions and patterns of interaction remain powerful even during the time of transgression.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin (1965), the carnival is a time when all rules and regulations are suspended, in particular all forms of social hierarchy, and the world is turned upside down. Yet, the carnival is confined in time and suspended hierarchies are reinforced as soon as these exuberant celebrations have come to an end. Neil Ravenscroft and Paul Gilchrist point out that “contemporary festivals, as carnivalesque inversions of the everyday” are “deployed to maintain and reinforce social order and, thus, the discipline of bodies and behaviours” (Ravenscroft and Gilchrist, 2009, p. 36). They argue that festivals

offer a liminality in which people can engage in ‘deviant’ practices [...] safe in the knowledge that they are not transgressing the wider social structure they encounter in everyday life and that is infused in the moral codes of the festivals themselves. (Ravenscroft and Gilchrist, 2009, p. 36)

Dewi Jaimangal-Jones *et al.* analyse how social norms and established structures are transcended at electronic dance music festivals. Travelling to these events represents both “a rite of passage” and “a pilgrimage or source of spiritual fulfilment” (Jaimangal-Jones *et al.*, 2010, p. 254). The temporarily staged festivals allow participants to abandon existing social structures, enter a “world of beingness and nothingness” (*ibid.*, p. 255), challenge norms of everyday life, and discover new ways of “constructing their self-identity” (*ibid.*, p. 259). Likewise, Susan Luckman (2014) describes outdoor music festivals as an alternative social space which allows participants to transcend the structures of urban life by exploring new forms of social identity. The end of the festival signifies a return to familiar social structures and behaviour patterns. Examining the rock and popular music tribute festival Glastonbudget, Hanya Pielichaty argues that festivals act as “social vehicle[s] employed to maintain order and discipline,” while providing individuals with “liminal space to momentarily lose themselves and behave in a care-free manner” (Pielichaty, 2015, p. 239). According to these observations, festivals offer a controlled space, which temporarily permits a celebratory chaos, artistic freedom, and deviant behaviour, in order to reinforce the pre-festival status-quo afterwards.

Comparably, the annual Festival OFF d'Avignon creates a space and time outside the everyday. When I arrived in Avignon in September 2017, a French student introduced me to his hometown with the following words, “En juillet, Avignon, c'est la folie! Le reste de l'année, c'est mort,”⁷ which illustrates that the local population experiences the festival as a period of radical transformation. Similarly, Annika Wehrle claims that due to this seasonal division the rest of the year is characterized by a withdrawal of theatrical activities to the private sphere (Wehrle, 2011, p. 146). Georges Banu even refers to Avignon as two cities (Banu, 1996, p. 20). In order to counteract the ambiance of a “ville morte” after the lively festival, the municipality in cooperation with local theatres has put increasing effort in organising cultural events such as the annual Fest'Hiver in the winter season.

Yet, the carnivalesque atmosphere at the OFF d'Avignon is perceived and appreciated primarily by festival visitors, who admire the papal city with medieval flair, colourful posters, and artists in extravagant costumes. The artists themselves experience their festival participation as hard work. In order to advertise their plays, they hand out flyers while singing songs or reciting extracts in the street. Since the 1980s, the non-juried fringe festival has become a highly relevant platform for freelance artists to showcase and sell their new creations. In order to finance their festival participation, acting companies oftentimes take out a loan, which they hope to pay off after having signed contracts with *programmeurs* for the following season(s).

Turner's description of liminal space “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial” (Turner, 1969, p. 81) might lead to the naïve conclusion that festivals operate as utopian sites that transgress *all* social boundaries and break open *all* culturally defined categories. By contrast, Esther van Heerden argues in her analysis of South African arts festivals that inversions of established social norms are only partly executed, as “only certain behavioural transgressions were permitted and the control of social interaction was such that some behavior was prohibited or highly constrained” (Van Heerden, 2011, p. 66). Also Jaimangal-Jones *et al.* emphasise that “in even the most oppositional cultural formations, some social divisions and patterns of interaction, particularly with regard to gender and class, remain powerful” (Jaimangal-Jones *et al.*, 2010, p. 255).

Graham St. John (2001) claims that the ConFest, Australia's biggest alternative lifestyle festival, allows participants to temporarily abandon the social structures of their everyday life and assume a new identity. He contends that Turner's concept of the “liminal ritual” would not

⁷ [translation: “In July, Avignon is madness! The rest of the year it's dead.”]

entirely capture the complexity of contemporary festivals, as this “pure, ideal category” tends to when applied inflexibly “disregard ‘complicated’ performative spaces and intra-event strife” (St. John, 2001, p. 48). In contrast to that, St. John argues that public events like festivals represent “contested cultural arenas” and he views ConFest as a “realm of competing discourses and practices” (*ibid.*, p. 53).

At the OFF d’Avignon, the festival’s open-access policy suggests that every participant has the same chance. In fact, the opposite is true. Only acting companies with sufficient financial resources have the possibility to rent expensive timeslots at private theatres with an excellent reputation: Performance venues like La Manufacture, Le Train Bleu, and 11 Avignon (formerly 11 Gilgamesh), also referred to as “IN du OFF,” have become focal points of *programmateurs* and, thus, significantly increase the visibility of artists. By contrast, unknown acting companies without regional or national subsidies can only afford renting provisional *garages à spectacle*⁸ with little space and poor infrastructure instead, whereupon their plays are barely visible among the nearly 1600 competitors.⁹

Under the heading “Les compagnies à l’assaut des remparts: Liberté, Inégalités, Fraternité”,¹⁰ Catherine Benzoni-Grosset examines the social inequality at the neoliberal theatre market: “Il est impossible de nier l’aspect budgétaire et le fait qu’il soit en Avignon comme ailleurs source d’inégalités” (Benzoni-Grosset, 2003, p. 138).¹¹ The overabundance of plays increases the importance of costly marketing campaigns in order to attract attention. She writes: “[L]e principe de liberté achoppe sur une réalité dictée par cet univers marchand. Une première sélection s’opère par l’argent” (*ibid.*, p. 155).¹² Despite the festival’s founding philosophy to represent an open-access space of artistic liberty, money dictates artistic decisions and economic success.

Nikson Pitaqaj, *metteur-en-scène* of the acting company Libre d’Esprit and vice-president of AF&C from 2019 to 2021, stages text-based plays such as those by Václav Havel that transmit socio-political criticism and address an intellectual audience. He notices that small artistic projects have steadily been losing ground at the OFF d’Avignon over the past decades,

⁸ The local expression “garages à spectacle” designates poorly-equipped performance venues whose proprietors profit from high rental charges distributing time slots on a first-come, first-served basis.

⁹ The theatre landscape at the OFF d’Avignon is much more complex than outlined in this paragraph, as it unites around 140 performance venues that differ with regard to their artistic orientations, business models, and mission statements. For a more detailed analysis, see: Huber, 2022b, pp. 116-120.

¹⁰ [translation: “The acting companies attacking the city walls: Liberty, Inequalities, Fraternity”]

¹¹ [translation: “It is impossible to deny the financial aspect and the fact that this is in Avignon like elsewhere the source of inequalities.”]

¹² [translation: “[T]he principle of freedom stumbles against a reality dictated by this commercial universe. A first selection is made by money.”]

while the commercial entertainment industry producing stand-up comedies progressively conquers the festival (Pitaqaj, 2021).¹³ Furthermore, the amateur actress Cécile Canal who invented the fictional character Alice L'accen, a politically interested clown, does not recognise herself in the one-man-shows advertised at the Rue de la République, but instead locates her political monologues in the sector of public education (Canal, 2020).¹⁴

It therefore appears that large production companies with sufficient financial resources and entrepreneurial strategies gain more visibility on the open-access theatre festival than individual artists staging political plays for an intellectual audience. In this regard, the OFF no longer offers an egalitarian in-between space in which social hierarchies and patterns of interaction are inverted, as it was aspired to by OFF artists of the 1960s, but in fact reproduces them. Thus, the OFF mirrors the mechanisms of today's neoliberal, capitalist society.

Festivals as Initiation Rites for Artists and Artworks

Marijke de Valck (2007) argues in her analysis of European film festivals in Cannes, Venice, Berlin, and Rotterdam that individual participants do not necessarily undergo a rite of passage in the course of these festivals, but films do. Therefore, she coins the term “Sites of Passage”, i.e. a combination of “obligatory points of passage” according to the Actor-Network Theory by Bruno Latour and the ethnological concept of “rites of passage” by Van Gennep. With this term De Valck combines the spatial (“site”) with the temporal component (“passage”). Accordingly, film festivals represent a central node within the cinema industry and an obligatory passage for filmmakers to access a global network. Similarly, Verena Teissl emphasises that festivals take over the function as “gatekeeper” and represent a turning point of individual artworks, resulting in their approval or rejection among artists, critics, and the audience. Thus, the world premiere, for instance, of films in Cannes constitutes their ritual entry into a commercial and alternative market (Teissl, 2013, p. 77).

¹³ “J’ai l’impression que les compagnies comme la mienne qui sont des compagnies avec un engagement de théâtre politique, un engagement de texte intime, personnel, on perd du terrain tous les jours. A place de ça il y a de grosses structures de production, de grosses machines qui gagnent du terrain. En fait, il y un déséquilibre.” (Pitaqaj, interviewed on 15 July 2021) [translation: “I have the impression that acting companies like mine, which are acting companies with a commitment to political theatre, to intimate and personal texts, we are losing ground every day. Instead, there are big production companies, big machines that are gaining ground. In fact, there is an imbalance.”]

¹⁴ “Je ne me reconnais pas dans tous ces one-man-shows qu’on voit dans la Rue de la République. Même si je joue seule en scène, je me trouve plutôt à côté de l’éducation populaire.” (Canal, interviewed on 20 July 2020) [translation: “I do not recognize myself in all these one-man-shows that you encounter in the Rue de la République. Even if I act alone on stage, I see myself rather in the domain of popular education.”]

Today, the OFF d'Avignon has become a highly relevant platform for independent artists to present and sell their new creations. The actress Isabelle Kancel from Guadeloupe confirms that gaining visibility for her *seul-en-scène* represents the primary motivation to travel to Avignon, as the OFF remains the biggest international showcase to build up a reputation and to sell the show to *programmeurs* from French-speaking countries (Kancel, 2021).¹⁵ Correspondingly, the actor Emmanuel van Cappel emphasises that the OFF signifies an obligatory passage for acting companies in search of touring opportunities, as theatre professionals from all over France are present (Van Cappel, 2020).¹⁶ William Mesguich, known as the “Marathon Théâtral Man” performing in up to four plays per day during the three festival weeks, also confirms that Avignon offers the opportunity to sell one’s plays and to earn enough money, which then permits working on new creations (Mesguich, 2021).¹⁷

The Parade d'Ouverture organised by AF&C at the beginning of the festival marks the artists' first encounter with the public. Hereby, they move along the Rue de la République from Avignon Gare Centre, symbolising their connection to the outside world, to the Place de l'Horloge, one of the biggest public squares in the heart of the inner city. In his description of initiation rites, Turner points out:

The passage from one social status to another is often accompanied by a parallel passage in space, a geographical movement from one place to another. (Turner, 1982, p. 58)

Similarly, the artists enter the arena of Avignon *intramuros* like gladiators. Mesguich emphasises that today the parades are very framed, very formatted, completely different to the frenetic, excessive performance of the Living Theatre in 1968. In this regard, the OFF d'Avignon mirrors the evolution of the Western world society (Mesguich, 2021).¹⁸

¹⁵ “[Le OFF] reste la plus grande vitrine internationale pour se faire connaître et éventuellement pour vendre le spectacle. On souhaite qu’il y ait des programmeurs du monde entier qui puissent être intéressés – en tout cas, des pays francophones.” (Kancel, interviewed on 10 July 2021) [translation: “[The OFF] remains the biggest international showcase to become known and to potentially sell the show. We hope that there are programmers from all over the world who are interested – in any case, from French-speaking countries.”]

¹⁶ “[Avignon], c’est vraiment là où on peut rencontrer tous les professionnels, les acheteurs, les journalistes, les producteurs, les directeurs de salle etc. Donc, je crois que si on a envie de tourner, c’est vraiment un passage obligé et puis si on veut aussi être visible sur tout le territoire.” (Van Cappel, interviewed on 27 July 2020) [translation: “[Avignon] is really the place where you can meet all the professionals, buyers, journalists, producers, theatre managers, etc. So, I think that if you want to go on tour, it’s really a must and if you also want to be visible throughout the territory.”]

¹⁷ “Le but du jeu Avignon c’est quoi ? De vendre le spectacle. Je n’échappe pas à la règle. Je vais vendre une trentaine de fois. Je vais mettre 40.000 euros à gauche pour ma compagnie, ce qui me permettrait de faire un autre projet. Je gagne ma vie [...] en multipliant les projets.” (Mesguich, interviewed on 23 July 2021) [translation: “What is the goal of the Avignon game? To sell the show. I am not an exception to this rule. I will sell around thirty times. I will put 40,000 euros aside for my company, which would allow me to do another project. I earn my living [...] by multiplying the projects.”]

¹⁸ “Il y a encore de fameuses parades, mais c’est aussi très encadré, très formaté. Il n’y a peut-être plus cet engagement frénétique qu’avait à l’époque le Living Theatre. [...] On est quand même bien plus sage, c’est

The OFF represents a rite of passage not only for artists, but also for their creations. Alexis Armengol, playwright and *metteur-en-scène*, points out that staging a play repeatedly in front of an audience is a chance to better know, develop, and let evolve an artistic creation (Armengol, 2021).¹⁹ The actress Pierrette Dupoyet, participating at the OFF since 1984, describes the festival as a laboratory to experiment and test new creations (Dupoyet, 2020).²⁰ When she encounters her audience after the performances and receives feedback, she adapts and modifies her plays accordingly. At the end of the festival, Dupoyet knows whether her new creations are understood and appreciated by the audience or whether they need to be reworked (*ibid.*).²¹

Few but oft-cited plays enter the world of fame by passing through the ‘magic door’ of Avignon. *Adieu Monsieur Haffmann* by Jean-Philippe Daguerre had its premiere at the OFF in 2017, was celebrated by the audience, praised by critics, and received four Molières. One year later, *La Machine de Turing* by Benoît Solès created enthusiasm among the festival audience, was awarded four Molières in 2019, and still tours in France and internationally. These successful productions stand as a pillar of hope for all aspiring artists who take out a loan to finance their festival participation. Yet, with a total of 1592 theatre productions presented in 2019, one should not forget that a considerable number of acting companies remain unseen and leave the OFF indebted, exhausted, and frustrated.

Professionalisation of Supposed Liminal Spaces

terrible. [...] On n’est plus dans cet excès des années 60, ce qui est dommage. Comme la société j’ai l’impression qu’on est devenu très formaté, très cadré.” (Mesguich, interviewed on 23 July 2021) [translation: “There are still famous parades, but they are very framed, very formatted. There is no longer this enthusiastic commitment that the Living Theatre had at the time. [...] We are much more reasonable today, it’s terrible. [...] We are no longer in this excess of the 60s, which is a shame. Like society, I have the impression that we have become very formatted, very framed.”]

¹⁹ “Le fait de jouer 17 fois quasiment de suite avec des gens devant c’est une chance, parce que ça permet de mieux connaître son spectacle [...] de pouvoir évoluer au cours d’un mois. En fait, je dirais que jouer en général c’est un laboratoire et là le fait de multiplier les représentations, coller les unes aux autres, six fois par semaine, évidemment c’est génial.” (Armengol, interviewed on 26 July 2021) [translation: “The fact of playing 17 times in a row with people in front of you is a chance, because it allows you to better know your show [...], to develop it over the course of a month. In fact, I would say that acting in general is a laboratory and the fact of multiplying the performances, placing one after the other, six times a week, obviously that’s great.”]

²⁰ “Le Festival OFF d’Avignon est un laboratoire où on expérimente, on essaie sa mise en scène, les éclairages. Et puis, le public vous parle.” (Dupoyet, interviewed on 7 September 2020) [translation: “The Festival OFF d’Avignon is a laboratory where we experiment, we try out the mise-en-scène, the lighting. And then, the public responds.”]

²¹ “Il y a un vrai dialogue et quand vous quittez Avignon, vous savez si votre spectacle va tenir jusqu’au bout, s’il va dépasser la centième représentation, ou si malheureusement il n’est pas assez abouti et qu’il faut le retravailler.” (Dupoyet, interviewed on 7 September 2020) [translation: “There is a real dialogue and when you leave Avignon, you know if your show will last until the end, if it will go beyond the hundredth performance, or if unfortunately it is not successful yet and must be reworked.”]

While festivals were oftentimes associated with social protest and political activism in the past, their increasing commodification has changed their function in society (Sharpe, 2008). In particular, the agitated summer of 1968 transformed Avignon into a liminal space to renegotiate social identities and political power structures. Students danced and sang of the revolution in front of the Palais des Papes. On the central Place de l’Horloge, artists of the École des Beaux-Arts repurposed streets and walls as their canvas for critical and subversive messages such as “L’art n’existe pas. L’art c’est vous” (“Art doesn’t exist. Art is you”) and “La poésie est dans la rue” (“Poetry is in the street”) (Williams, 2011, p. 286). Short performances in public negotiated controversial issues, such as the role of the French government in the Algerian War of Independence.²² The French philosopher Maurice Blanchot remarked about the atmosphere in France at the time:

Depuis mai, la rue s’est éveillée: elle parle. C’est là l’un des changements décisifs. Elle est redevenue vivante, puissante, souveraine: le lieu de toute liberté possible. (Blanchot, 2003, p. 180)²³

The street awakening of 1968 radically opened the accessibility of public space that became a canvas for revolutionary poetry, a forum for political debates and a stage for social criticism. Festival visitors entered the liminal space at their arrival, where they witnessed or actively participated in performative projects that challenged hierarchical social structures and attacked the rigid bourgeois value system. Their experiences within the liminal space altered their perception of their everyday life to which they returned at the end of the festival.

Today, visitors observe and partake in the ludic atmosphere at the OFF d’Avignon, while artists experience their participation as a serious endeavour with the objective to sell their play and gain recognition. According to Hanya Pielichaty, the “commercialisation of contemporary festivals demonstrates the societal and political control present in supposed liminal spaces” (Pielichaty, 2015, p. 239). This development is clearly noticeable in Avignon: Professional artists view their participation at the OFF as an obligatory milestone in their career. Thus, the fringe festival is clearly attributed to the working world and mirrors the dynamics, mechanisms, and values of neoliberal societies.

In the 20th century, the cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1938) remarks a disappearance of the playful in modern societies, as leisure time is increasingly structured and

²² The documentary film *Être libre* (1968) focuses on the festival participation of the Living Theatre in July 1968 and their performance *Paradise Now*, but also permits insights in the revolutionary atmosphere on the streets of Avignon.

²³ [translation: “Since May, the street has awakened: it speaks. This is one of the decisive changes. The street has become alive again, powerful, sovereign: the place of all possible freedom.”]

functionalised. This may be true even more so today as leisure is no longer able to maintain its ludic character, being over-organised in a technical sense and taken too seriously. The playful and subversive nature of the fringe festival has slowly been transformed into the serious endeavour of acting companies striving for success. Jennifer Elfert notes that since the 1980s and 1990s many theatre festivals define themselves not only as entertaining events but as work meetings among professionals, and thus include workshops as well as round tables, colloquia, and live debates (Elfert, 2009, p. 79). Similarly, Bianca Ludewig observes an elimination of the work/leisure dichotomy, establishing festivals as important networking meetings in the professional arts community (Ludewig, 2018, p. 8).

The progressing transformation from counter-culture event to performing arts market has accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic. After the festival cancellation in 2020,²⁴ the OFF d'Avignon of 2021 took place in a reduced form, marked by safety and hygiene measures. First and foremost, the opening parade had been cancelled, whereupon only few acting companies kept up the tradition to wear costumes in public during the three festival weeks. The majority were just dressed in everyday clothes while addressing pedestrians and handing out flyers to advertise their plays. As a result, the festive atmosphere was less visible in public. Theatre halls had to be aerated and disinfected between performances, which reduced the number of timeslots available per venue. Consequently, only 1,070 productions were staged in 2021 compared to the record high of 1,592 in 2019 (Avignon Festival & Compagnies, 2021, p. 2). Face masks had to be kept on during the performance; hand disinfectant was available at each venue; and from 21st July onwards, festival visitors had to show their *pass sanitaire*²⁵ before entering a theatre hall for more than 50 spectators. These measures led to a noticeable decrease in attendance figures, whereupon several acting companies were repeatedly confronted with a nearly empty auditorium. Moreover, many *programmeurs* had postponed their theatre season by one year, as cultural venues and other institutions had remained closed due to multiple periods of Covid-19 lockdown in 2020/2021. Consequently, 2,087 accredited professionals attended the festival in 2021 compared to 3,250 in 2019, which marks a decline by 36 percent (*ibid.*, p. 4).

²⁴ When AF&C announced the first cancellation of the OFF d'Avignon on 15 April 2020, the loose organisational structure of the non-juried fringe festival risked breaking apart and every theatre director acted autonomously by either cancelling the scheduled programme, creating online alternatives, or organising independent micro-festivals. For a more detailed analysis, see: Huber, 2023.

²⁵ The so-called *pass sanitaire* meant that festival visitors either had a valid PCR-test or their second Covid-19 vaccination dated back at least 14 days.

These circumstances increased the competition among acting companies and let professional objectives overshadow the carnivalesque atmosphere. Even more noticeably than in previous years, the Festival OFF d'Avignon was perceived not just as an entertaining event but a serious work meeting and important networking platform among theatre professionals. Having been confronted with the uncertainty whether and under which conditions the OFF 2021 could take place, it was even discussed in one of the *wébinaires* held by AF&C at the beginning of the year to organise a “festival pro” instead. That would have permitted acting companies to showcase their new creations and to sign contracts with *programmeurs* but excluded ‘ordinary’ festival visitors who come to Avignon just for the joy of going to the theatre. The thought behind this suggestion was to drastically reduce the audience numbers, in case Covid-19 infection rates would not have permitted large gatherings in July. This measure, which in the end was not necessary, would have repressed the carnivalesque atmosphere even further by transforming the festival into an exclusive work meeting among theatre professionals only.

The festival cancellation of 2020 and the reduced edition of 2021 also stirred up participants to rethink the organisational structure and work practices at the OFF d'Avignon that have caused unhealthy competition, collateral social damages, a survival-of-the-fittest mentality, and a standardisation of aesthetic forms. To tackle this issue, work groups were launched, panel discussions were organised, and objectives were written down. Lecesne, co-president of the actors' association AAFA (Actrices et Acteurs de France Associés) and co-founder of EGOFF (États Généraux du Festival OFF d'Avignon), is convinced that the microcosm of OFF d'Avignon does not only mirror problems of a neoliberal economic system, but by revealing them, it potentially serves as a laboratory to discover, explore, and test alternative models of cultural politics (Lecesne, 2021).²⁶ The association EGOFF, founded in 2020 with the intention to reinvent the OFF d'Avignon, considers the non-juried festival as a testing ground for a social and ecological economy in the cultural sector. In other words, the clearly framed microcosm of the festival still inspires participants to review and renegotiate socio-political structures of everyday life. While it was the streets in July 1968 that were converted into a public stage to share and explore utopian visions of society, the OFF today

²⁶ “On peut faire civilisation, on peut faire modèle de société [...] La base n'est pas suffisamment pourrie pour qu'on y renonce. Effectivement, l'objectif c'est d'en faire un phare culturel. [...] Le OFF pourrait être un modèle de société.” (Lecesne, interviewed on 22 July 2021) [translation: “We can make civilization, we can make a prototype of society [...] The base is not rotten enough for us to give it up. Indeed, the objective is to make it a cultural beacon. [...] The OFF could be a prototype of society.”]

provides a site for discursive and analytical formats, which encourage thought experiments on how to guarantee free artistic creation as well as sustainable work practices.

Conclusion

According to Victor Turner, the liminal space “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial” (Turner, 1969, p. 81) represents a “realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (Turner, 1967, p. 97). Festivals, i.e. carnivalesque inversions of the everyday, permit participants to experience a different reality. On the fringe of the Festival d’Avignon, July 1968 did indeed provoke a release from hierarchical structures and the creation of a temporary utopia. The streets were transformed into a public forum for political debates and free thinking, a canvas for provocative slogans and mural paintings and an open space for communal life and self-discovery. More than fifty years later, the streets of Avignon serve as advertising space for acting companies who distribute flyers and address potential theatregoers, curators, talent scouts, and journalists.

While festival visitors today might still experience the carnivalesque atmosphere as a joyful inversion of the everyday, the artists view their participation as a serious endeavour that involves considerable financial risks. The supposed liminal space has become an important networking meeting in the professional arts community. Economic constraints and social hierarchies dominate and impact the autonomy of acting companies. Thus, the OFF d’Avignon represents a clearly framed microcosm that mirrors social and economic injustices of neoliberal policies in a condensed form, which in return permits one to recognise, identify, discuss, and reform these structures and mechanisms. Today, the OFF d’Avignon operates as a liminal space, not necessarily by suspending the everyday, but by mirroring, reinforcing, and thus revealing the impact of neoliberal economic structures on the cultural sector. In further consequence, the OFF is again taken as a laboratory to experiment with alternative models of society, not by acting them out on the streets, but by engaging in thought experiments and panel discussions.

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