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Tension, trust and transformation: sociological insights, Europe and ESA's 30th Anniversary

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Light Festivals, between culture and tourism: An ethnography in two Portuguese light festivals

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Introduction

Light festivals have become prominent cultural and touristic phenomena globally, blending artistic innovation with urban revitalization. This thesis explores two major Portuguese light festivals: Lumina in Cascais and Luza in Loulé. Through a multi-sited critical ethnographic approach, the study investigates these festivals' roles in cultural democratization and municipal economic development, exploring processes of 'artification', financial precariousness, and visitor behaviors.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical foundation for understanding light festivals is rooted in their evolution from traditional to post-traditional forms. Traditional festivals, deeply embedded in local customs and often tied to religious or seasonal events, have evolved into post-traditional festivals that serve specific cultural and economic purposes (Bennett et al., 2014; Cudny, 2016). This transformation is crucial for comprehending how light festivals function as controlled products with distinct objectives, merging artistic innovation with economic imperatives.

The concept of the experience economy, introduced by Pine and Gilmore (2011), is pivotal. Light festivals epitomize this by offering immersive sensory experiences that combine cultural engagement with entertainment. They transform urban spaces into interactive art installations, inviting visitors to experience cities in new and dynamic ways. This experiential aspect is central to their appeal and success, drawing both residents and tourists.

Light festivals are strategic tools for urban revitalization and tourism development (Alves, 2007; Garcia-Ruiz, 2019). Cities hosting these festivals enhance their cultural appeal, attract tourists, and stimulate local economies (Edensor, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). Municipal governments and festival organizers employ various strategies to leverage these events for economic gain, highlighting the interplay between cultural production and tourism promotion (Giordano, 2017; Giordano & Ong, 2017). Visitor experiences, drawing on Urry and Larsen's concept of the "tourist gaze" (2011), are crucial. Visitors actively engage with light festivals, contributing to their meaning and value (Camprubí & Coromina, 2019a, 2019b). Understanding these subjective experiences is essential to fully grasp the cultural and economic significance of light festivals .

Methodological Framework

The research employs a comprehensive and flexible ethnographic methodology, essential for capturing the multifaceted nature of light festivals. Ethnography allows for an in-depth exploration of the experiences, motivations, and interactions of various stakeholders, including artists, organizers, visitors, and local authorities. The importance of comprehensive ethnography which involves using multiple tools and valuing interdisciplinarity and epistemological flexibility, is emphasized.

Ethnography is particularly suited to the participatory and experiential nature of light festivals, especially due to its ephemeral *mise en place* in public space. This approach enables the researcher to experience the festivals firsthand, providing rich, detailed insights into their operation and impact. A critical ethnographic perspective (Carspecken, 1996), which considers power dynamics and the broader socio-political context, guided the process of data collection, analysis, reporting and retribution to informants.

The Lumina and Luza festivals were selected as case studies for their prominence and differing approaches to organizing light festivals. Lumina's international orientation contrasts with Luza's strong local and community focus, offering a broad spectrum of insights into the functioning of light festivals in Portugal.

Data collection techniques included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis. Participant observation involved actively engaging with the festivals, attending events, and interacting with participants. Semi-structured interviews

with artists, organizers, visitors, and local authorities provide diverse perspectives, enriching the ethnographic data. Documentary analysis of promotional materials, media coverage, and festival reports supplements these methods, providing additional context and background information.

Ethical considerations and reflexivity are key components of this research. Being a non-native Portuguese citizen, my outsider status enabled me to identify underlying tensions and conflicts that local participants might overlook. This reflexive stance ensured a more nuanced and critical understanding of the festivals.

Lumina and Luza: A Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis of Lumina and Luza reveals how these festivals shape and are shaped by their local contexts, highlighting their significance in Portugal's cultural and tourism landscapes. The Lumina Festival, initiated in 2013 in Cascais, quickly established itself as a major cultural event. Cascais, a coastal town with a rich cultural heritage and significant tourist influx, provided an ideal backdrop for the festival. Lumina transformed the town into an open-air gallery, with light installations strategically placed to interact with the town's architecture and natural surroundings. This festival aimed to blend art and urban space, enhancing the aesthetic appeal of Cascais and offering visitors a unique sensory experience.

Lumina's success can be attributed to its diverse programming, featuring works by both local and international artists, strategic partnerships with local businesses and the municipality, and effective marketing strategies. These factors ensured the festival's sustainability, attracted large crowds, boosted the local (nocturnal) economy, and enhanced Cascais's cultural reputation.

In contrast, the Luza Festival, held in Loulé, followed a different trajectory. Launched in 2017, Luza aimed to create a cultural event that would counterbalance the region's strong tourism seasonality, primarily centered on sun and beach tourism. Luza sought to position Loulé as a hub for cultural and creative activities, thereby diversifying the region's tourist offerings and extending the tourist season beyond the summer months.

Luza's approach was more community-oriented compared to Lumina. It emphasized local participation and collaboration, involving local artists, schools, and community groups in creating and executing light installations. This grassroots approach fostered a sense of ownership and pride among the local population, strengthening community bonds and enhancing the festival's sustainability. Furthermore, Luza focused on educational activities, such as workshops and seminars, aimed at raising awareness about light art and its applications.

The comparative analysis of Lumina and Luza reveals several key themes. The geographical and socio-economic contexts of Cascais and Loulé significantly influenced the festivals' development and impact. Cascais's established cultural infrastructure and proximity to Lisbon made it easier for Lumina to attract a large and diverse audience. In contrast, Loulé's relatively isolated location and heavy reliance on seasonal tourism posed challenges for Luza in terms of audience reach and engagement.

While both festivals showcased light art, their artistic visions and programming strategies differed. Lumina emphasized international collaborations and high-profile installations, positioning itself as a global player in the light festival circuit. Luza focused on local engagement and community-driven projects, reflecting a more localized and inclusive approach.

The economic and social impacts of the festivals also varied. Lumina contributed significantly to the local economy by attracting many tourists and generating media coverage, which enhanced Cascais's cultural profile. Luza's impact was more community-centered, fostering local talent and promoting cultural education. Although it attracted fewer tourists compared to Lumina, its emphasis on community engagement and cultural enrichment had a lasting positive effect on Loulé's social fabric.

Both festivals faced challenges related to funding, logistics, and maintaining artistic integrity. Lumina's reliance on commercial sponsorships sometimes led to compromises in artistic quality, as installations had to appeal to a broad audience. Luza, with its limited budget, struggled to maintain high production standards while ensuring community participation. However, both festivals demonstrated resilience and adaptability, finding innovative solutions to sustain their operations and achieve their goals.

Municipal Policies, Sociocultural Experiences, and Economic Dimensions

Chapter 4 presents the intricate interplay between public policies, cultural practices, and economic dynamics within the context of Portuguese light festivals. This analysis is crucial for understanding how local governance and tourism efforts influence the organization and impact of these events, which serve as both cultural and economic instruments.

I begin by examining the dual motivations behind organizing light festivals: cultural democratization and economic development. Culturally, these festivals aim to extend cultural access beyond densely populated urban centers in Portugal, promoting engagement in various locales. Economically, they are leveraged as marketing tools for municipal development, using (nocturnal) creative tourism to attract both human and financial capital. The festivals help combat the seasonality of tourism and align with a

neoliberal perspective that emphasizes the narrative of creative cities and the attraction of entrepreneurial and human capital.

I employ Mendelow's (1981) analytical matrix to scrutinize the power dynamics and influence among different stakeholders involved in the festivals. This approach reveals how these festivals are strategically instrumentalized for urban branding and economic gain (Zukin, 2010). I discuss the concept of *Disneyfication* (Bryman, 1999), *commodification of the arts* (Dewey, 2010a, 2010b), and the *McDonaldization* of the contents (Ritzer, 1993), illustrating how festivals often cater to broad and recurrent artworks, linked to mainstream tastes (Bourdieu, 2014; Peterson, 1992, 2005) to maximize appeal and economic return. This phenomenon can sometimes dilute the unique artistic and cultural value of the festivals, leading to a loss of experience authenticity.

A significant focus of the chapter is on the tensions between artistic vision and commercial viability. Artists frequently face pressure to tailor their creations to meet public expectations and investor demands, which can compromise their creative integrity. This balancing act between maintaining artistic quality and ensuring economic sustainability is a recurring theme. I point out that the financial austerity within which Portuguese light festivals operate further exacerbates this tension, fostering an environment of uncertainty and precariousness for artists and organizers alike.

Visitor motivations and behaviors are another key aspect analyzed in this chapter. By understanding the audience as critical stakeholders, I provide insights into their consumption patterns and the motivations behind their participation. This analysis is rooted in both statistical and ethnographic methods, offering a comprehensive profile of festival-goers. The findings suggest that visitors are drawn to these festivals not only for the cultural experience but also for the broader leisure opportunities they present, thereby contributing significantly to the local (nocturnal) economy.

The Artification of Practices, Artists, and Festivals

Chapter 5 introduces the concept of artification, particularly within the context of light festivals. Artification refers to the process by which non-artistic practices, people, objects, or events are transformed and recognized as art(ist). This chapter explores the historical background of light art, the practices of legitimization and valorization in the arts, and the specific processes through which light festivals achieve cultural significance.

I begin with a brief history of light art, tracing its origins and evolution. Light art has a rich and varied history, with roots in both the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century and the technological advancements of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Artists such as László Moholy-Nagy and James Turrell have been pioneers in using light as a medium, creating works that challenge traditional perceptions of art and space.

In the context of light festivals, the process of artification involves several key practices. Firstly, there is the need for legitimization, where festival organizers and curators strive to have light installations recognized as legitimate forms of art. This often involves collaborations with established artists and institutions, as well as the incorporation of critical discourses that frame light art within broader artistic movements. By positioning light festivals within the art world, organizers can attract a more diverse and discerning audience, as well as secure funding and support from cultural institutions.

The concept of artification is further explored through the lenses of Heinich and Shapiro (2012), who discuss how practices, works, and professionals traditionally not identified as artistic are integrated into the cultural sphere. I highlight how financial constraints and the constant pursuit of innovation compel festival organizers to include works by peripheral authors and artists who might reject the label of "light artists." This inclusivity helps to broaden the scope of light art and fosters the development of a more formalized "field of light art," moving beyond a simple "art world."

The chapter also examines the role of ritual in the context of light festivals. Rituals play a crucial part in integrating newly artified practices and artists into the existing networks of light art. These rituals include the ceremonies, events, and social interactions that occur during the festivals, which help to establish a sense of community and belonging among participants. Through these rituals, light festivals create a space where emerging artists can gain recognition and where established artists can experiment and innovate.

I discuss the challenges faced by artists in light festivals, particularly regarding the tension between artistic integrity and commercial viability. Artists often need to adapt their work to meet public expectations and the demands of investors, which can compromise their creative vision. This tension is exacerbated by the precarious financial environment of Portuguese light festivals, which relies heavily on municipal funding and sponsorships. Despite these challenges, many artists continue to push the boundaries of light art, using festivals as a platform to explore new ideas and techniques.

The chapter also addresses the homogenization of festival content, a consequence of the commercial pressures faced by organizers and artists. To appeal to broad audiences, festivals often feature similar types of installations and performances, leading to a certain uniformity in the programming. However, I argue that this does not necessarily diminish the artistic value of the festivals, as the repeated exposure to light art helps to solidify its place within the cultural landscape.

Summary and Policy Recommendations

Chapter 6 provides a comprehensive summary of my research findings and offers policy recommendations based on the analysis conducted throughout the study. This chapter

synthesizes the insights gained from examining the Lumina and Luza light festivals and provides guidelines for evaluating and enhancing the cultural and economic impacts of such events.

One significant contribution of this chapter is the development of evaluation criteria for light festivals. I critique the existing reliance on tangible, data-based indicators, arguing that they do not adequately capture the full spectrum of festival impacts. Instead, I propose a set of guidelines that considers both *tangible* and *intangible* outcomes, offering a more holistic approach to festival evaluation. These guidelines aim to balance the economic benefits with the cultural and social impacts, providing a more comprehensive framework for assessing the success and value of light festivals.

The chapter concludes with several policy recommendations. I suggest that local governments and festival organizers adopt a more integrated approach to planning and executing light festivals, ensuring that cultural, economic, and social objectives are aligned. I advocate for the establishment of stable funding mechanisms to support the sustainability and artistic integrity of the festivals. Additionally, I call for greater community involvement in the planning process to foster a sense of ownership and ensure that the festivals reflect the local culture and values.

This final chapter synthesizes the insights gained from the Lumina and Luza festivals and contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of cultural festivals and their potential to drive social, cultural and economic growth. The guidelines and recommendations presented aim to support the sustainable development of light festivals, balancing the need for economic viability with the preservation of artistic and cultural integrity and adopting new practices more respectful with the environment.

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