

A FESTIVAL OF HUMAN CRISIS

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This essay draws comparisons between music festivals and refugee Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) on the islands of Lesbos, Chios and Samos, with the aim of demonstrating initial similarities that may exist between the two environments and uncovering striking differences between them. It is intended as a first step in assessing how, and if, the provisions provided for one can offer lessons for the other (Bernet, 2017), and whether the knowledge of the festival sector could be adapted and put to use in improvising the conditions for refugee provisions. While we understand music festivals and how they look intuitively, RICs require a definition. Reception Centres are intended as a temporary space, one that provides immediate shelter and basic needs whilst initial asylum processing takes place (Avramopoulos, 2015). As such, these structures, spaces and provisions rely on temporary development and maintenance. They need to be reactive and able to adapt to growing populations and, as they have become less temporary solutions to crisis, they have to be adaptable. The temporary nature of both structures and systems (festivals and RICs), as well as the ways in which people flow around these spaces suggest an important point for comparison.

The relative success of festivals in responding to complex needs suggest that RICs can learn from the governance of a multi-million pound industry. Past experiences on the island of Lesbos suggest a reality in which this is actually the case (Bernet, 2017). In 2015 a grassroots movement built an informal refugee camp on Lesbos to house around 800 people. The Better Days camp was a response to the overcrowding of the official Moria Reception Centre on Lesbos. In building this camp they were supported by a group of Dutch volunteers from the festival industry who were able to draw on their networks to bring festival infrastructure to the camp, in particular high quality tents that could withstand the conditions. Importantly though, these volunteers not only brought equipment but also knowledge of sanitation, waste disposal and lighting to improve safety and security (author interview with Glocal Roots, 2019) and it is the success of this project that further emphasises the wider applicability of knowledge from the festival sector for improving official, as well as unofficial, housing solutions for refugees. It is through recognising the capacity of festivals to provide food, washing facilities and quality shelters that we can come to understand the capacity to achieve this and as such the failings of different state, and international bodies, to do the same when it comes to refugee provision in South East Europe.

We use photographs to question the initial visual similarities (pairing photographs from festivals and RICs) before re-focusing attention on the details that exist within the mosaic of images we present. To achieve this we also draw on interview and ‘serial ethnographic’ (Mannergren Selimovic, 2018) data from multiple visits to both UK festivals and the islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos and Kos between 2017 and 2019, we make suggestions of lessons that can be learnt from the experience of festival sites for rethinking refugee housing and support inside RICs. In so doing, we remain ever mindful of the inherent privilege interwoven alongside the institutional tapestry of the festival experience, from those who organise them and those who enjoy them. Based on interviews with activists, however, we recognise the importance of drawing on other experiences, even those that stand in stark contrast with refugee lived experience (Anonymous author interview, 2018; author interview with Liska Bernet, 2019).

As such, we recall that the festival-goer, imbued with wages and disposable income is situated to fully enjoy the perks of global capitalism. Moreover, as a paying participant, they expect, and even demand, appropriate service provision. The refugee, on the other hand, lives within extreme conditions of depravity and lacks mobility rights, within and beyond, the state. In that understanding, the festival goer is viewed as human and citizen in his/her full rights. Refugees, in contrast, are defined as non-humans or 'missing people' (Braidotti, 2018), as 'ungrievable' bodies (Butler, 2012), or non-citizens (Azoulay, 2008). The ability of the refugee to demand service provision is limited to protest, itself curtailed by state officials. It is in this vein, and with this understanding, that we draw these comparisons and make suggestions for how the lessons of the festival industry can begin to provide more humane conditions, that in fact recognise the humanity of refugees, challenging the narratives of non- human and ungrievable bodies.

This photo essay is based on visual material collected during research visits to music festivals in the UK in 2017, 2018 and 2019 and during primary research (#IR_Aesthetics Project) in RICs in Lesvos, Chios and Samos in 2018 and 2019, as well as a series of prolonged visits in the area engaging with activist and NGO support networks. It was, during this fieldwork, that we were alerted to conversations within activist communities, which imagined the comparative value of festivals and RICs (anonymous author interview, 2018). A conscious decision has been made in the production of this essay to avoid photographing human beings living in and around RICs. There are a number of reasons for this. The first being the inability to guarantee the safety and anonymity of people photographed. We wanted to avoid negative consequences for subjects of our study. Like Butler (2011), we conceptualise a body as never devoid of its context (Butler, 2009) and vulnerable to injury and suffering (Murphy, 2011). A body is always impinged upon from outside: by others, by social norms, by historical specific conditions of embodiment (or lack of it), by social and political organization, and by environmental factors (Lloyd, 2015).



Refugees are often unintelligible in those terms and thus are unrecognisable, they do not appear in public as legible subjects in their own rights, their life is 'ungrievable' or dispensable (Butler, 2012: 11). An empty photograph intends to challenge the exploitation and silencing that occurs through the endless photography of people's lives without their permission. The exclusion of human beings from our images not only challenges the unethical practices of taking photographs without permission, it also allows to highlight not only what can be seen, but also what is missing. These photographs are not works of artistic endeavour, rather they are a testimony of the events and human experiences that have been taking place in the RICs and their vicinity, an attempt to raise awareness of conditions and to challenge their continuation. Second, we wanted to avoid sensationalising and exploiting the stories of individuals who are propelled into the public domain and thus taking away those individual's sovereignty and power in deciding what happens with their image. To this day, weak populations remain more exposed to photography, especially journalistic photography, which coerces and confines them to passive, unprotected position (Azoulay, 2008). Thirdly, there is an imaginary value of presenting empty spaces into which people can imagine the effects on their own lives (Greene, 1995) provoking, hopefully, self-reflexivity. Following Azoulay (2008) we recognise the co-ownership of photography, by photographer, photographed, and witness. Each element of this triumvirate is a necessary condition under which photography is truly effective. Thus, we encourage a reader/viewer of this essay to imagine crafting a life for multiple years in a temporary space capable of providing a standard of living akin to that of a festival and to draw on this imagination to better understand the images and discussions we present.

We situate our key comparisons within this stark contrast of beneficiary populations. The first approaches the geography of these spaces from a distance, focusing on size, location and borders. The second considers accommodation types and how they are spaced and located. From there we engage with questions of security, fences and their materiality (Sundberg, 2008; Squire 2013; and Soto, 2018).

Fourthly, we engage with medical provision, doctors and trained medical staff available at these sights, their role and the expectations placed on them. Finally, the last section focuses on waste disposal and sanitary provisions, each of which are fundamental aspects of both RICs and festivals, and as experiences on Lesbos demonstrate, are the starting point for conversations between the two (Bernet, 2017).

1. View from a distance

The ten largest festivals in the UK in 2017 had a combined capacity of 700,000 participants, with Glastonbury alone hosting 120,000 guest and Latitude and Bestival (ranking ninth and tenth) selling 35,000 and 30,000 tickets respectively (Consultancy.uk). Smaller festivals such as Truck Festival in Oxfordshire sold 5,000 tickets in 2018 (Truck Festival, 2019) and, Moseley Folk Festival in Birmingham had a reported daily capacity of 6,000 visitors (eFestivals.co.uk, 2018).



Photo 1: Panoramic view of the Truck Festival, Oxfordshire, UK, Summer 2018

In contrast, whilst the number of refugees arriving into the countries of South East Europe has decreased overall since 2015, the flow of people nevertheless continues, with 79,500 refugees and asylum seekers residing in Greece as of May 2019 (UNHCR 2019) and an increase in arrivals on to the islands between July and August 2019. Those arriving are in the first instance accommodated in RICs either on the mainland or on the islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Kos and Leros, most commonly known as the Hotspots (Dimitriadi, 2017) (the focus of this piece). These spaces in structure, and often location, resemble festival sights in their reliance on temporary accommodation and impermanent administration structures, yet in keen contrast to festival sites, they are dealing with humanitarian crises and have additional problems such as difficulties with mental health and asylum procedures to contend with (anonymous author interview, 2018). Whilst we recognise these vast differences in problems faced, we suggest that drawing on festivals to support improved conditions in housing structures, waste disposal, sanitation and food, would provide a safer and more secure environment for overcoming the deeper issues associated with crisis, as, as one interviewee told us, on Samos at least ‘everything comes back to food and water’ (Author interview with Project Armonia, 2019).



Photo 2: Panoramic view of the Vathy RIC (lower left corner), Samos Island, South Greece, January 2019

2. 'Sea' of tents

While not all festivals look the same, they have a commonly acknowledged aesthetic. The stage is always present at the centre of attention. We also have camping sights, on occasion, romantically compared to the 'sea' of tents (Mair and Laing, 2011).



Photo 3: Tent field with view of the stage in the background, Truck Festival, Oxfordshire, UK, Summer 2018

The reliance on tents to house refugees is also becoming a common occurrence in RIC's. The RIC on Samos has an official capacity of 650 people, yet between December 2018 and January 2019 an estimated 5,000 people were waiting on the island for an asylum decision (Beattie et al, 2019).

The numbers are continuously fluctuating. When the number of people rapidly increases, the majority of people live outside the RIC's fence. This area is referred to as the 'jungle' (Bird and Beattie, 2019) and relies on tents and makeshift shelters that are unable to withstand the rain and cold in winter, or provide protection from the heat, snakes and rats in summer (anonymous author interview, 2019).



Photo 4: The 'Jungle' outside Vathy Reception Centre, Samos Island, South Greece, January 2019

3. Security provisions

The security at festivals relies on check-points, fenced off areas, as well as wristbands indicating area-access. There are occasional flare ups: This is Tomorrow festival in Newcastle in May 2019 was cut short due to security concerns (NME, 25th May 2019), organizers of the We Are FSTVL in Upminster, also in May 2019, faced festival-goers storming the festival entrance when they ran out of wristbands (Independent, 27th May 2019). Yet, in general, the use of fences and wristbands lead to smooth running events.



Photo 5: Security check point, Truck Festival, Oxfordshire, Summer 2018



Photo 6: Beach stage, the Great Escape Festival, Brighton, UK, Spring 2019

Security in RICs relies on a combination of organisations including local police and, similarly to festival environments, private security firms. Particularly poignant to a comparison with the UK is the presence of G4S, at both festivals (Guardian, July 2019) and in RICs. RICs also make use of barbed wire fencing, often multi layered, and, whilst they are presented as being open, the layers of security present an aesthetic of ‘enclosure and control’ (Barder, 2016: 32; Tazzioli, 2018). Like a festival site there are zones of exclusions within an RIC separated by fences, zones where only administrators can enter, zones that are often associated of a higher standard including containers with working air conditioning and heating.



Photo 7: Moria Reception Centre, Lesvos, South Greece, Summer 2017



Photo 8: A fence surrounding the Vathy Reception Centre, Samos Island, South Greece, Summer 2018

4. Medical provisions

While medical provisions at festivals have not always been perfect (Chapman et al. 1982), there has been growing improvements in this area. More data is available on successful application of emergency medicine at music festivals (McQueen and Davies, 2012) and medical provisions now focus exclusively on the needs of festival emergencies. A notable example is Festival Medical Service created in 1979 and is now a recognised provider of high-quality professional event medical services at large and small events (FMA ‘About’). Festivals not only provide more information on emergency first aid, but also install functional medical emergency points (with Glastonbury going as far as having main medical centre and number of smaller walk-in emergency points; Glastonbury ‘Medical and First Aid’).



Photo 9: Welfare tent, Truck Festival, Oxfordshire, UK, Summer 2018



Photo 10: First Aid point, Truck Festival, Oxfordshire, UK, Summer 2018

With growing numbers of medical provisions at festivals, the situation is very different in RICs. The proportion of medical professionals on duty is striking, with one protest sign reading ‘one doctor per 6,000 people’ and interviewees telling us of lengthy queues to see a doctor, with only one doctor present in an RIC for some months. This is against a backdrop of attempts to hire more staff, with doctors then failing to arrive for their first day of work (anonymous author interview, 2019). The support offered by the third sector differs between RICs, as does the relationships between camp or reception centre officials, local and national government, and third sector providers. In particular, Médecins Sans Frontières (the largest and most active medical provider after UNHCR) tries to maintain a strong presence on Lesbos and Chios. However, their involvement on Samos is limited as they are unable to carry out vaccination programmes nor medical services inside the RIC, they have however provided psycho-social support, advice for how to stay safe medically when travelling and children’s vaccination programmes outside of the borders of the RIC (author interview with MSF, 2019).



Photo 11: Taken during January 2019 protests around Vathy RIC, Samos Island, South Greece

5. Sanitary Provisions

There is a social rhythm expressed in daily routines of the festival-goers and a sense of community between participants (Tjora, 2016). And while every participant accepts certain levels of inconvenience, almost written into the 'to-do' list of any festival experience, we have grown more accustomed to the presence of sufficient amenities, like showers and toilets (Saleh & Ryan, 1993) and waste disposal, meaning that the festival industry have the ideal knowledge base for supporting the setup of camps and temporary accommodation (Bernet, 2017).



Photo 12: Fresh water access, Truck Festival, Oxfordshire, UK, Summer 2018



Photo 13: Toilets facilities, Truck Festival, Oxfordshire, UK, Summer 2018



Photo 14: Rubbish bins, Truck Festival, Oxfordshire, UK, summer 2018

Life in the island RICs is one of continuous queues (Bird and Beattie, 2019). Everyone has access to showers but they must queue to make use of them and most people do not have time to do this daily whilst also queuing for food. There are also often issues with water supply, in particular for the provision of sanitation, a major problem that occurred in the summer of 2019 on Chios (Action for Education, 2019). A problem the solving of which would benefit from the knowledge of an industry that is used to establishing water provision in temporary locations. As well as issues with water provision there is a lot of untouched food littering the 'jungle' outside the Vathy camp, leading to further risks of vermin and disease and a limited number of toilets, many of which are broken and unclean. Following gender-based violence, a number of RIC residents in fact rely on plastic bottles as an alternative to the toilets, especially after dark. In the outside area of Vathy Reception Centre additional toilets were brought in by an NGO, but they have since been removed as they were placed on adjacent private land (Author interview with NGO, 2019). In addition, while festival-goers have wellies to navigate sanitation, RIC populations often do not. Many members of the community in fact take their socks off when it rains to stay dry and warm when they arrive at their tents and rarely have seasonally appropriate shoes.



Photo 15: Littering outside of Vathy RIC,
Samos Island, South Greece, January
2019

Conclusions

A parallel narrative between music festivals and RICs opens our eyes to alternative solutions to the management of refugee provision. Knowledge that drawing on the experience of the festival industry has had some success in providing grassroots support also suggests that a more sustained collaboration, also working with RICs, could be of value. There are similarities between festivals and RICs and lessons to be learned. For example, there is evidence that festivals located in urban spaces have better facilities at their disposal, are a social space where people may pursue their interests, meet with family and friends (Cudny, 2018), or encourage cultural engagement and social cohesion (see for example research by McGillivray); all those elements which are lacking in the peripheral locations of RICs (Bird et al. forthcoming). The recycling practices introduced at the festivals in recent years (eg. banning plastic bottles at Glastonbury, Guardian, February 2019; or, tents recycling by an NGO, Julie's Bike), are practices aimed at cutting waste, which could also be transferred to the RICs which are dealing with waste disposal issues (WHO2019).



Photo 16: Plastic bottles with urine outside of Vathy RIC, Samos Island, South Greece, January 2019

Some of these practices are already happening on the Greek islands but they are carried out by NGOs rather than the RICs. The organisation Dirty Girls on Lesbos, for example, wash used blankets so that they can be reused rather than being destroyed which was previously happening inside of Moria (author interview, 2018). Similarly, the organization of medical provisions at the festivals, could be a model for voluntary organizations engagement with the needs of RIC populations. As mentioned above, the same security company, G4S, is already contracted in both cases, at festivals and in RICs. Yet, there seems to be a lack of reflection on how experience from one could be implemented in the other. Further research is necessary to draw on the suggestions above in an impactful way. The proposed research agenda concerns itself with the inhuman(e) aspects of our historical conditions, including for example: human rights studies, humanitarian management, trauma, memory and recognition studies (Braidotti, 2018); and advocates for the necessity of interdisciplinary work. Through engaging with two different examples the point of this photo essay was to draw attention to the horror of one (RIC), placed against the idyll of the other (festival) and the lessons that can be learnt.

If then, the devil resides in the detail, what does this tell us? It is true that we can organise large numbers of people at a music festival yet, cannot replicate the same flexibility for refugees in Reception Centres. We question the initial superficial visual similarities apparent in 'matching' photos from festivals and RICs and instead refocus the lens on the differences discernible in the detailed tapestry of the photos.

The temporary nature of music festivals reminds us that RICs too were meant to be temporary. They are not. They permanently reside in the landscape. The voluntary nature of attendance at a music festival versus the confines of the reality of life in an RIC is a further stark contrast. Life at a music festival is- and always will be- a luxurious experience. Life in an RIC is the complete opposite. Whilst both environments represent a departure from normality, a suspension of the real, of time, and of perception, the comparison between the two demands further reflection.



It is to acknowledge the conceptual shift towards the surreal. Consequently, it asks the reader to grapple with a seemingly superficial similarity between festivals and RICs and embrace a filtered lens. A lens which when seen through a glass darkly, reveals a nightmarish parody mirroring of the fiesta. Yet it also reveals an opportunity to learn, an opportunity often embraced by grassroots organisations, that suggest that the lessons of festival management can indeed be drawn upon to provide for refugees in a way that provides solidarity and dignity (Author interview with Glocal Roots, 2019), an approach sorely missing from the RICs themselves.



The **#IR_Aesthetics**, funded by the Aston Centre for Europe (Aston University) and Europe and the World Centre (University of Liverpool), is a field research project investigating the stories of migration and the refugee crisis in Serbia, Macedonia, and Greece from inter-disciplinary perspective. It focuses on (1) political expression in marginalised communities through use of graffiti and music, (2) use of technology and social networks, (3) investigates everyday geographies of the refugee crisis, and (4) migration and trauma, and children in IR.

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