Transformational festivals: changing development and sustainability through culture

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Transformational festivals (TFs) are gatherings that occur all over the globe, with particular incidence in the Western world, and seek a "transformational experience" beyond the musical experience. Although most TFs are based on Electronic Dance Music, they offer a much larger range of experiences spanning from personal development, to discussions on political economy, spirituality, ecology, including active participation and even co-creation of participants in the festival. The emergence of these festivals since the mid-1990s is partly rooted in the 1960s and 1970s counter-culture but is essentially an outcome of contemporary global dynamics. Their missions, visions and manifestos reflect the criticism of existing development models and concepts of sustainability.

This paper explores the specific forms of identification of TFs and the claim that they constitute a global social movement. Taking literature on social movements and on cultural sustainability, the paper questions the ambitions of these festivals regarding social, political, economic and in particular cultural change. Through the comparative analysis of three major festivals, the paper addresses their range of priorities, their decisional processes, implementation strategies and their ambitions in terms of impacts. It argues that TFs propose new ways of changing mentalities and of implementing alternative development models through "immersive strategies", some of them with explicit political objectives. Such experiences are time and place bound, but they have a multiplier potential that can be carried into urban settings and across the globe.

The paper concludes with a discussion about the usefulness of transdisciplinary approaches to cultural events that bring together different dimensions of social, economic, political and cultural aspects in a living utopian setting, at the same time merging and differentiating the time and space dimensions. From an academic perspective this immersive approach to culture in sustainable development allows a fresh insight into the possibilities of discussing the topic.

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