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Daniel Urrutiaguer

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Theatre and environmental footprint: which political ambivalences?

Daniel Urrutiaguer

Abstract

The usual definition of sustainable development is based on the Brundtland Report with economic, social and environmental involvements for reducing the negative effects of market regulation. The industrial standards for the corporate environmental responsibility are following this framework without giving a priority to culture. The paper questions the political ambivalences of focusing the attention on the ways to decrease the environmental footprint for the theatres and festivals. This economical concept is coming from pragmatic environmentalism and can meet different societal expectations from market-oriented views to more radical critics against the increasing inequalities and environmental degradations. Two sensitive sources of pollution are examined: the organization of transport and the management of waste. Both are calling to individual environmental responsibilities for the choices in touring shows, the displacement of audience, communication and the attendant's behaviour, especially in the festival sites. Nevertheless, the systemic pressures for creating new shows, to get some gains in the corporative and the mediatic reputations, and attracting attendants at a national and international scale offset the expected benefits for the environment. This synthetic indicator is based on a metaphor about the natural capital as a provider of services. Therefore, both environmental economists in favour of a substitution between economic capital and natural capital for stimulating growth, and ecological economists, reluctant to this view, can refer to the environmental footprint for their recommendations. The question cannot be examined without analysing the chain value in the sector of performing arts and its desired and/or possible transformations to more cooperation.

Keywords

Theatre, environmental footprint, inequalities, inclusion, reputation

The usual international definition of sustainable development is based on the Brundtland Report (1987: 16) on the ways to satisfy the needs of the actual and the future generations. Three pillars are distinguished: biologic through preserving biodiversity, economic through reducing poverty, and social through inclusion. This vision inspired the emerging industrial standards for sustainable management. In 2007, the British Standard BS8901 *Specification for a sustainable event management system with its guide of use* defined a system of sustainability as “an enduring and balanced approach to economic activity, environmental responsibility and social progress”. The enterprises should operate in a way that is balanced for minimizing their negative social, environmental and economic impact (Case 2013: 146).

The Brundtland Report did not take into consideration the culture as a significant topic. The international view on the role of culture for development changed in the 2000's with the Unesco Declaration on Cultural Diversity in 2001 and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Cultural Diversity in 2005. The culture is claimed as a fourth pillar by the UCLG in the Agenda 21 for culture while other topics consider culture as a transversal component which crosses the three pillars or more radically as the central factor of sustainable development (Hawkes 2001; Auclair 2014: 20; Soini & Birkeland 2014; Dessein *et al.* 2015)

The ecological challenges can concern biological, economic, social and cultural matters if we take into consideration the ideal view on the development models. Particularly, the ecological considerations diverge according to the acceptable degree of substitution of economic capital and natural capital (Pearce 1993; Pearce and Atkinson 1993; Zaccai 2016: 526). If economic growth can be accepted even though environmental resources are destroyed for increasing the purchasing power, the model is close to “green growth” without modifying production relationships. Particularly, environmental economics use hedonic methods to valorise the implicit prices of natural resources and reveal agents' preferences. The communication on this process is exposed to “green washing” critics. If the natural capital is mostly viewed as not substitutable, the ideal societal model is turned to soft growth or negative growth for preserving biodiversity and requires the reconfiguration of social relationships to solidarity. Ecological economics developed on this basis and shifted from a monetary to an energetic and interdisciplinary approach to evaluate the natural resources (Costanza & Daly 1987).

As the ecological crisis has deepened without an international consensus on the political countermeasures in the 1990's, a pragmatic environmentalism developed with synthetic indicators for awaking ecological consciousness (Spash 2009; Boisvert 2017). Following this new framework, the concept of ecological footprint was introduced by Rees and Wackernagel

(1994) for measuring human carrying capacity as a description of how many planets it would take to support human demand of resources each year. The notion refers to a flow of services that the stock of natural capital can provide, and implicitly calls on the responsibility of economic and social players from organised civil. In 2010, the ISO 26000 norm has listed and explained seven principles of social responsibility for enterprises (accountability, transparency, ethical behaviour, recognition of stakeholders' interests, legality, respect of human rights, considering international norms of behaviour). Therefore, the reference to the environmental footprint is ambivalent as it can support a market-oriented view on enhancing less polluting activities or the more radical critics against the increasing inequalities and environmental degradations.

The institutional and professional discussions on the ecological matters for the performing arts organisations are focusing on their environmental responsibilities first (Auclair 2014: 22; Hamidi-Kim 2015, Henry 2015) while the question of the reconfiguration of the chain value to more cooperation and respect of the cultural diversity is still sidelined (Lucas 2012, Urrutiaguer 2014, Urrutiaguer 2015).

The aim of the paper is to question the viability of the recommendations for reducing the environmental footprint as inter-organisational competition for improving their reputation is a powerful counterforce. To what extent stressing the modes to decrease the negative effects on the nature is supporting a political view which does not take into consideration the inequalities in the performing arts chain value? First, the most significant guides for the environmental responsibility will be examined with the ISO 20121 standard and the Green Theatre Plan for London. Two sensitive sources of pollution will be then the subject of the main paradoxical question: the organization of transport and the management of waste.

The significant guides for the environmental responsibility

Since June 2012, the ISO 20121 standard¹ is concerning the enterprises that define their principles of sustainable development in a “declaration of missions and values” with at least four key types of engagement:

- the inclusion of parties that take part in the engagements

¹ This standard is entitled “Responsible Management Systems Applied to Event Activity - Requirements and Recommendations for Implementation”. The approach of the Organizing Committee for the London Olympic and Paralympic Games inspired the development of the document by delegations of experts from standardization bodies from 25 countries and 10 observer countries.

- an attention to regulations, an evaluation of environmental and societal risks
- employee training, interactions with suppliers, the integrity of running of the association
- transparency (AFNOR 2013)

The ISO 20121 framework is based on a process of pursuing continual improvement of the economic, social and environmental performances following the Plan Do Check Act cycle. Les Rencontres TransMusicales de Rennes, which specializes in contemporary music, was the first festival certified for this standard in France in December 2013 (Herry 2014: 11).

In a French guidebook, Jean-Claude Herry details the different involvements in environmental and social matters. Social domain concerns a more inclusive cultural policy through facilitating access to disabled attendants, considering the plurality of cultural rights in programming and the devices for cultural action; improving the working conditions, reducing the professional risks and training staff; and taking care to audience security. Environmental eco-responsible measures are concerning several topics: reducing consumption of energy and water though bettering the control of their sources; the use of recycling materials, finished products and alimentation which have a weaker environmental footprint; the organisation of selective sorting (for waste); the reduction of neighbour bothering noise; the measure and reduction of carbon emissions for transportation; the preservation of greenhouse gasses emitted; the preservation of biodiversity around the festival site.

In 2008, The Green Theatre Plan for London was started, with the objective of reducing the carbon emissions of London theatres by 60% by 2025, compared to what they were in 1990. This plan, first carried out by the Arcola theatre and then by the Julie's Bicycle Green network, constitutes a reference to approaches taken to reduce environmental impacts in the performing arts sector. The document states that the principal sources of energy conservation are a more judicious use of the heating and cooling systems in the building and stage space. The improvement of the isolation or use of more economic lighting requires investments but are susceptible to articulate the positive ecological effects with a decrease of maintenance prices and use. This also assumes staff's involvement in a position of energetic vigilance to limit waste.

Another important adjustment variable identified by the London 2008 plan is the development of subcontracting relationships or purchases from suppliers that are more respectful of their

natural environment (Greater London Authority 2008: 17). Eco-conditionality in the choice of suppliers is even more necessary as the sophistication of the effects of lights and sounds to satisfy expectations in spectacular or disturbing scenic images tends to increase energy expenditure.

Organisation of Transportation

According to an estimate of the effects of the major English festivals on the environment in 2014, 65% of the carbon dioxide emissions on the site result from energy consumption and 35% from waste (Powerful Thinking 2015: 13). If public travel is considered, the share of carbon dioxide emissions attributable to them is 80%, compared with 13% for energy consumed and 7% for waste disposal at the site (*Ibid.*: 25).

Systemic pressures on travel development

The economic viability of the production of shows implies a high paying audience and the organization of tours to amortize the assembly costs. The number of attendants is determined by their willingness to travel and pay because of anticipating more sensitive satisfaction gains than monetary and time expenditures. Consequently, the success of a show is accompanied by a greater displacement of audience residing in more remote municipalities, which generates potentially energy-consuming and degrading transport for the natural environment.

The corporate reputation gains of performing arts companies depend to a large extent on the ability to gain national and international recognition. The survey of the territories and resources of companies in France showed a positive correlation between the degree of dissemination of representations outside the headquarters area, the probability of obtaining a three-year state subsidy in the framework of a convention and the importance of access to the network of state-run, most remunerative and prestigious cultural institutions (Urrutiaguer, Henry, Duchêne 2012). Therefore, the systemic pressure to produce new shows is strong, and likely to attract the attention of programmers, experts of public authorities, cultural journalists, peers of the profession, as well as opinion leaders in digital networks, and to try to broaden the temporal and geographical scope of the tours. In France, the number of contract workers in show business tripled while the volume of discontinuous work doubled between 1990 and 2012 (Guyon, Patureau 2014). This demographic growth did not result in decreasing average wage but in greater inequalities. Between 2000 and 2012, the average

individual wage increased by 14% while the interquartile range increased from 19 to 21 (D'Agostino, Théry 2015: 56)

The reputation of a theatre or a festival also depends on its ability to attract paying audiences from other regions or countries, as well as national and international programmers and artists to play an intermediary role in the distribution of shows and thus contribute to a densification of the scheduled teams' tours. Consequently, the functioning of the value chain in the performing arts stimulates an intensification of the displacement of companies and attendants, potentially degrading to the natural environment.

The movement of companies

A limitation of the environmental footprint results from the choice of the journey having the shortest distance a priori and from the privileged use of public transport by rail or bus as compared to traveling by car or plane when possible. Scenery transport should be carried out by vehicles with dimensions that are proportional to their volume and more energy efficient.

One way to achieve substantial energy savings is to build tours grouped in time in the same region. This presupposes a coordination upstream of the programmers to agree on the choice of a common show and its circulation from room to room. This virtuous behaviour for its ecological benefits offers an opportunity to reduce the costs of transport of the guest company, which leaves a budget margin to reduce the price of unit sales of performances. Moreover, the temporal continuity of a tour reduces the cost of resuming the show when actors in the initial distribution, engaged on other projects, are no longer available. This element may justify the consent to a reduction in the supplementary transfer price for the company which benefits from an extension of its series of performances. Nevertheless, the anticipation of a local restricted audience for a show can incite some programmers to negotiate a territorial exclusivity with the company for minimizing their box office risks. This prudent approach to programming increases energy costs and reduces the capacity of circulation of the show.

The accommodations of the artistic and technical teams invited can limit the negative environmental impacts by privileging their reception in shared apartments or, failing that, in hotels concerned to respect their environment. Nevertheless, the prices charged by downtown hotels make the option of a walking distance between the place of accommodation and the performing arts places often difficult for the organizers. A shuttle system is then to be

installed if public transport does not allow to properly serve this place of residence far from the centre of the festival.

The displacement of attendants

Spectator travel is a source of carbon dioxide emissions that is even more important as the theatre or the festival has an attractive reputation.

The team can only carry out an awareness and incentive work so that the attendants adopt an eco-responsible attitude. An information policy can be carried out to publicize the modes of public transport enabling access to the site by facilitating the dissemination of information on their traffic schedules. The configuration of a festival site is also decisive if it allows traveling on foot to travel from one place of performance to another.

Carpooling is an option to be encouraged because of its positive ecological benefits, the reduction of risks on the road, but also the experiences of shared sociability between people attracted by the organisation's artistic and cultural project, which is likely to strengthen their satisfaction. In 2012, the English group Festival Republic², recently distinguished for its environmental actions, opened a reserved car park (Priority Car Park) and financial incentives for cars carrying several people. Nevertheless, their partnership with the BlaBlaCar digital network from 2014 has been more decisive for increasing the number of people transported by carpooling³.

The team can also sign partnership agreements with eco-responsible hotels by advising audience. The European eco-label is awarded to establishments that optimize their management of heating, air-conditioning and water, use ecological products for maintenance and breakfasts.

The management of waste

Materials recycling was highlighted in the London action plan of 2008 as a marginal source of savings for carbon dioxide emissions. The most recent English manifesto Festival Vision: 2025 puts forward another vision by attributing to waste the cause of 35% of the carbon emissions in the festivals of the United Kingdom welcoming more than 20 000 spectators. Organic wastes, estimated at 2.8 kg per festival, are reported. This can go as far as the

² During the creation of Creative Green Rewards in the creative industries area in 2017, Festival Republic was awarded the Best Creative Group award. <http://www.festivalrepublic.com/news/festival-republic-wins-first-creative-green-awards>, accessed page on 2017.06.24.

³ <http://www.juliesbicycle.com/latest/case-studies/8661-festival-republic-reading-leeds-and-latitude-festivals/>, accessed page on 2017.06.24.

abandonment of tents by campers who have come to attend these festivals (Powerful Thinking 2015: 13, 19-21).

Communication

Communication needs have grown considerably with the intensification of competition resulting from the strong demographic growth of companies and the creation of shows. Attracting the attention of public funders, cultural institutions, cultural journalists, different types of public requires the dissemination of communication materials with clear and attractive content without distorting the artistic approach in its presentation. There is therefore systemic pressure to significantly increase communication spending to better the valuation of artistic production, which can have negative environmental effects if editions of flyers, brochures, posters are too large and generate of waste streams.

The development of digital networks opens a perspective of reducing paper supports in the framework of more interactive communication strategies by involving Internet users in the discussions on the proposed aesthetic and life experiences. However, the effectiveness of messages to arouse interest in their content requires diversification of channels and distribution formats. A disappearance of the paper supports in favour of an exclusive digital communication is thus likely to be counterproductive, especially since the Internet users undergo a strong multiplication of electronic messages which makes difficult the attraction of the attention for proposals of shows or unknown artists. Furthermore, the micro decrease of the negative effects of paper consumption is counterbalanced by an invisible macro effect of developing computer expenses on the environment. The hardware materials require specific minerals as cobalt which use the child manoeuvre in African countries and cooling the data servers is using huge electrical energy.

The attendants' behaviours

A reduction in the sources of pollution caused by the attendants requires a proactive attitude of a festival team to organize systems of selective sorting and to make people aware of the effects of their behaviours on the environment of the site. The incentive to recycle the products consumed requires a written and oral communication by the organizers and the setting up of collection facilities.

The English group Festival Republic says it has succeeded in reducing the waste from the three festivals under its direction by developing selective sorting devices, distinguishing between recyclable waste, materials that can constitute compost and non-recoverable waste.

The distribution of gifts such as free drinks or discounted tickets stimulated festival-goers to engage in recycling activities. The Reading Festival is cited as an example for the construction of a sculpture with used cans and the organization of a contest to guess the number of cans used⁴.

In the campsites on a festival site, the minimization of the waste left by the festival-goers after their departure presupposes a pedagogical effort which can be based on the distribution of recyclable bags to throw there its garbage. A deposit proposal can be made for tents that festival goers do not want to resume in order to reduce the wild abandonment of materials.

Conclusion

Looking at ways of reducing the environmental footprint for the performing arts organisations is therefore raising more general questions on the regulation of the performing arts chain value. The concept was constructed by environmental pragmatist economists, and can be used through different political frameworks. Close to the recommendations of ecological economics, a strong version of “green theatre” requires changing the logic of action and valuation of production and distribution networks by enhancing local participative creations, regional-scaled performing artists’ networks or more ecological devices for touring. Following the environmental economics framework, a market-oriented version of “green theatre” can focus on individual environmental responsibilities without calling to change the systemic pressures for increasing the number of creations and attracting larger audience.

Focusing on the ecological effects on and of theatrical networks of production and distribution is therefore politically ambivalent. Even though each artist should propose his/her aesthetic specificities and then preserve his/her autonomy, the mechanism of the conversion of the aesthetic value into monetary value is based on competition for which the levels of corporative and mediatic reputations are resulting into the concentration of the funding opportunities and demand of performances. Ecological consciousness requires then to question the ways of changing the institutional and market pressures for competition in the performing arts sector.

⁴ <http://www.juliesbicycle.com/latest/case-studies/8661-festival-republic-reading-leeds-and-latitude-festivals/>, accessed page on 2017.06.24.

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