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Lesser narratives writ large: attention-seeking and the event economy

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My name is Richard Voase. I joined what is now the University of Lincoln twenty-five years ago when our tourism degrees were established.

Prior to that, I worked in two seaside resorts, and for seven years I was in charge of performing arts for Kirklees Council – that's Huddersfield to you – along the road.

But in my academic career I have sought to introduce students to conversations they're unlikely to encounter in the workplace. What is the innate nature of enjoyment? How does our culture coerce us into enjoying ourselves in prescribed ways?

For example, you may think that Martin Heidegger had nothing to say about smartphones, but you need to think again. My latest article for Leisure Studies looks at how portable communications devices can ruin your holiday. But enough of that.

So regarding what I am going to address you today?

Colleagues, this is a conference, and I want to confer. I want to hear your views, if not at the end, then over dinner or via e-mail. The nub is this: I am troubled by the thought that our field of study may be over-specific, to the extent of being narrow.

A conversation with a student set off this line of thinking. Her dissertation was on the audience experience of live events streamed into cinemas. Was it the same audience, did the streamed experience complement or replace the live event, and so on.

One day she came in looking preoccupied. I said, what's the matter?

She said, my friends tell me my dissertation is not about events. I said, well of course it's about events. A show at the National Theatre, you can't get a much bigger event than that. She replied, you're talking about events. But they are talking about 'events'.

The inverted commas in her voice were almost palpable.

The word 'event', like many loose terms, assumes an implied meaning. I was *supposed to know* what that implied meaning was. And clearly, I didn't. And the dissertation wasn't, so she'd been told. Of course I reassured her, but the question remained in my mind.

So what is an 'event' in inverted commas? Shows happen in the National Theatre, in the Playhouse in this city, and in fixed venues up and down this country generating little specific public attention. These are not, in terms of the implied meaning, 'events'.

So what is? When Glastonbury is on, you know about it. When somebody is getting married, you know about it. Fuss and palaver are integral to it. So is an 'event', in terms of its implied meaning, identifiable by the fact that it sets out to generate a particular kind of attention?

That is what I want to explore with you in the coming minutes.

Let's look at a theoretical context. The French thinker Jean-François Lyotard produced an influential book in the late 1970s, *The Postmodern Condition*.

He saw western culture fragmenting under the influence of electronically-mediated information. What he called the 'grand narratives' of society – major religions, science, collective identities – were breaking apart. The fragments he called 'lesser narratives'.

Thus, major religions have seen the emergence of fundamentalisms; science is no longer accepted as the vehicle for undiluted human progress; and major industries and the communities surrounding them have broken up as a new economy takes hold.

In 1970 there were three television channels; there are now more like three hundred. Cheap television that screams at you, in the form of 'reality' programming, is one response to this over-capacity. Welcome to *Love Island*.

So then: how does the explosion of events, and interest in events, find a place in this? Guy Debord, noted French leftie, noticed in the late 60s that society was becoming like a gigantic cinematic film of itself. He gave us a term: the 'society of spectacle'.

In a society defined by the prolific mediation of information, what things look like matters: *Love Island* again. Donald Trump, a product of reality TV, knows how to make a spectacle of himself. He is also a master of the lesser narrative. He and Twitter deserve each other.

So there, in brief, is a theoretical context. We live in a cultural landscape in which spectacle is dominant – lesser narratives screaming at us - and the fuel for all of this is *attention*. Name it, and if you have heard of it, it exists. If you haven't, it doesn't.

I'll give you an example. I took a call from BBC Internet News earlier this year. I was asked if Hull's City of Culture celebration had been successful.

I said I did not have access to the tracking studies, but I had no doubt that it would have been successful because it attracted attention; and attention converts into economic benefit. That is why 'City of Culture' is a coveted moniker. The caller did not quite understand.

So I said, take the Ferens Art Gallery in Hull. That gallery had collections of national importance *before* the City of Culture event. The only difference, now, is that more people

know about it. The caller said, so the Ferens Art Gallery now has collections that are of national importance as a result of City of Culture?

I replied, *no*, the Gallery had collections of national importance *before* City of Culture. The difference, now, is that you know about it. The very fact that we are having this conversation, I said to her, is evidence of its success. This was not what she wanted to hear.

Returning to event education, I have been looking at the content of the degree we offer at Lincoln. I have also been looking at the text books. They follow the same pattern. An 'event' is project managed, it is sponsored, it is sustainable, it has a legacy.

Colleagues, this is a very specific kind of event. It is about what we used to call 'special events' when I worked in resorts: events put on in the early and late season for the purpose of attracting attention and boosting shoulder month business.

Do any of you offer students a module on Crisis and Disaster Management? We do. It is very popular with students. I once asked an undergraduate what tsunamis, terrorist attacks and the like had to do with event management.

Curiously the student was hard-pressed to see the connection; yet she had no doubt that there was one. And I think there is one. Why? Because disasters attract attention.

Guy Debord said in respect of spectacle: 'Whatever appears is good, and whatever is good appears'. What he meant, I think, is that if it has come to your attention, it's important. So calamities are objects worthy of study. Less so if you are caught up in one.

There is an uncomfortable truth, that our industries enjoy closeness with calamity. There have been two benefit concerts already for last year's Manchester bombing that I can think of, maybe three. The site of the Twin Towers attack is now a tourist attraction.

So I am setting out a case that 'events', in inverted commas, are about generating attention. One could say that attention is the lubricant by which lesser narratives seek to be noticed.

And lubricant it is. You cannot have a lesser narrative than an individual Facebook page: two thousand million little voices, worldwide. Here I am. Look at me.

I was present at an event recently where a speaker suggested to a group of young children that Facebook lets you keep in touch with your friends. Does it heck, I thought to myself.

Alright, that is what Facebook appears to do, and does do. But as a business, it converts the attention of two thousand million people into revenue. The extent and the consequences of this have been blown wide open in the news in recent weeks.

But if attention is the lubricant, is there a *vehicle*? And here, I refer to a term used by our keynote speaker, Chris Rojek, in his book, *Event Power*. He speaks of a 'gestural economy'. I find this term very useful. I wish I'd thought it up myself.

His book is about global events, and how they position audiences to endorse worthy concepts. There is a kind of symbolic economy surrounding 'events' in which what I shall term 'worthinesses' are traded. We are back to sustainability and legacy again, aren't we?

Anyone who has seen the sea of abandoned tents and litter after a music festival may question the commitment of audiences to these agendas, but whether the intentions be real or fake, to sign up is to acquire – and here I adapt a term from Pierre Bourdieu – ‘gestural capital’.

And we *are* talking about ‘gesture’. A gesture is facile, ephemeral, easily deployed.

The Labour Party got their fingers burned in Tottenham a few weeks ago. They organised a mini-Glastonbury for the purpose, as far as I can see, of the worship of Jeremy Corbin. It was called Labour Live, also known as JezFest. Jez was on the bill.

But people who were happy to roar approval for him at Glastonbury last summer did not show up. Half the tickets were given away free. People will cheer anything when they’re in the right mood. Gesture is easy; commitment requires intent.

Clearly, these themes are grander than a fifteen-minute envelope. I am in fact planning an article on this topic, in which I hope to offer it detailed treatment.

So let’s conclude. I said at the beginning that I was a tad troubled by what I see as a narrowness in our field of study.

So my questions to you are thus: do we complement our academic offer with a study of the workings of attention in society?

Or, do we extend our curriculum beyond ‘special events’ to include broader aspects of arts and entertainment management?

Or do we do both?

Or, there is another option: we stick with a formula that works. We continue with our specific focus and continue to give the customers what they think they want.

You’ll have gathered from my tone just then that I favour a broader perspective. It has a lot to do with my personal outlook.

It seems to me that times of celebration – whether that be a holiday, a night at a concert or in the theatre, whatever – can be occasions when humans cultivate and cherish their full humanity. And that, for me, has been the privilege of working in these fields.

Did Descartes say, ‘To be human is to put up a stage extension’? No, he did not. He said, ‘I think, therefore I am’.

Colleagues, we need to ensure that thinking is at the centre of our endeavours.

Thank you for listening.

Richard Voase
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