Woodstock: A Social Drama

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Introduction

I'm going on down to Yasgur's Farm,
I'm gonna join in a rock and roll band.
I'm gonna camp out on the land.
I'm gonna get my soul free.

These are some of Joni Mitchell’s lyrics in her song, “Woodstock,” written about the 1969 Music and Art Festival. Started by the collaborative ideas of four young men, Woodstock Music Festival in August of 1969 changed the world, as they knew it. An event to raise money for a new studio and to attract an expected 50,000 people turned into a sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll event for more than 500,000 people. The event, scorned by many upstate New Yorkers as ‘hippie freak show,’ changed locations three times. Eventually, they settled on a farm in Bethel, New York. The three-day peace and music event was filled with extreme amounts of mud, lack of water and food, and jam-packed with memorable musical performances. The culture developed of peace and love even after the concert was over spread through the entire nation.

In this paper, I will examine Woodstock as a social drama and the effect it had upon future American Culture. Specifically, I argue that Woodstock was a turning point in American history that changed its culture for the better. The importance of this research is to understand how a single event can change a nation’s mindset and how to apply this knowledge to future events. Additionally, the information can be applied to marketing
strategies to reach the young people and/or concert goers that Woodstock reached. To make this argument, I will provide you with a brief description and history of Woodstock and social dramas, summarize previous research done on the subjects, and finally analyze how Woodstock could be considered a social drama and how this affected the outcome of the event.

**Literature Review**

Through Victor Turner’s concept of social drama, I will establish the expansive impact Woodstock had on the American culture and why it was so needed at the time. To understand the importance of Woodstock, we first need to understand the lens of which the event is going to be viewed- Social Drama.

From two articles written by Deflem and Vosu, they give an accurate description of what social drama really means and how it can be applied to Woodstock. In Deflem’s “Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion: A Discussion of Victor Turner’s Processual Symbolic Analysis,” he describes in depth the idea of symbols and their effect upon people and society, which in the end, Woodstock was a symbol of what the late 1960s culture needed. More specifically, social dramas are processional with four phases: a breaking of the social norm by persons or a group, a crisis due to the breaking of the rules, new morals or rules brought into focus by leaders of the group, and lastly, the social group that was previously isolated being released back into society (Deflem 3). Along with the many connections that can be made with Turner’s phases of a social drama, his idea of *Communitas*, where a lack of structure forms new bonds between the attendees, gives a well-researched idea about hippie culture from the late 1960s.

Furthermore, in Vosu’s “Metaphorical Analogies in Approaches of Victor Turner and Erving Goffman: Dramaturgy in Social Interaction and Dramas of Social Life,” she goes into
further detail of how “Turner social drama for understanding experiences that deviate from routine everyday situations” (Vosu 140). This was a great way to put it, “A deviation from the normal”, which is what Woodstock was. Then the theory goes further in taking those rituals and the conflicts created and analyzing how they are resolved. The resolution of these conflicts directly change the people involved and the society they are released into.

The first resource about the festival, Woodstock: Three Days that Rocked the World, is a book that gives a day-by-day of the three-day festival and explains every part of the festival. It even includes interviews and photos from organizer, volunteers, and attendees of the festival. Both these resources take different views of the event. The movie was more about the music and how the music moved people and created the event, while the book, focuses more on the drama of the crowd. Both sources give a great overall idea of how it felt and sounded to be at the 1969 festival.

After getting a strong grasp of Victor Turner’s social drama and of Woodstock, six other resources highlighted the cultural impact Woodstock had on society. First, “Documenting, Creating, and Interpreting Moments of Definition: Monterey Pop, Woodstock, and Gimme Shelter” explains how the 1970 documentary of Woodstock portrayed the festival to the people who did not attend. Though it gives off slightly and chaotic or almost aggressive feel to the concert, “in the chaos a ‘founding of something new, something our world must now fin a way to deal with” (Kitts 721). Through examining all the mediums, Sheeny takes what Kitts did a step further by explaining Woodstock’s view of outside society. Specifically, Sheeny explains how badly the media missed the enormity and ground breaking angle they could have taken when covering Woodstock. Instead of emphasizing the changing culture and a generation in revolt,
they focused on the chaos and disorganization that occurred due to the underestimation of festival attendance.

“Woodstock: A Moment of Muddy Grace” celebrates the festival for its “muddy, disheveled, incredulous grace” (Pareles). He comments on the ‘love, not war’ ways of the hippies gave the concert, an almost utopian aura and full dives in to how the hippie culture spread through the nation. Very similarly, “Twenty-Five Years Later, We’re Still Living in Woodstock Nation” gives the update view on how the hippie culture created at Woodstock still is prevalent in today’s culture. The strongest resource is 1969: The Year Everything Changed, because its thesis is to prove that each event in 1969 changed everything. This is the longest and most detailed depiction of the culture before and after Woodstock, all major events that happened in the specified year.

From these sources, this article will now elaborate on how Woodstock fits in the four stages of social dramas defined by Turner and providing enough evidence to prove its dynamic nature.

Methodology

Certain events throughout history deviate from the normal and in turn influence future events and society. Victor Turner called these events, social dramas, or “an eruption from the level surface of ongoing social life, with its interactions, transactions, reciprocities, its customs making for regular, orderly sequences of behavior” (Vosu 142). Victor Turner wrote about his experiences studying the Ndembu tribe in Zambia. He developed the idea of social drama “to look beneath the surface of social regularities into the hidden contradictions and eruptions of conflict in the Ndembu social structure” (Deflem 3). In the end, his new theory could simplify how society worked and expand on its strengths and weaknesses.
In order to regulate what is a social drama, four phases must transpire: a breech, a crisis, a redressive mechanism, and a reintegration. More specifically, at first there needs to be a breaking of the social norm by persons or a group, then a crisis due to the breaking of the rules. After, new morals or rules need to be brought into effect by the leaders of the group. Next, the social group that was previously isolated needs to be released back into society (Deflem 3). The liberation of the group will allow them to spread the new rules to the rest of society that was previously unaffected.

During these four phases, the group develops a tottering value system and in turn is referred to by Turner as a “Communita.” Communitas are dominant during the third phase of a social drama. More specifically, Turner describes the Communita subjects as “neither here nor there,” they are exposed to the rest of the community and treated as equals to one another, creating a generic bond and sentiment of ‘humankindness’ between them” (Deflem 15). This middle step of social limbo eventually resolves itself as the Communita forms a new organization all together.

Victor Turner’s social drama theory originally was applied to religious rituals of the Ndembu tribe, but now, those same phases can be applied to major historical events to understand their importance.

Analysis

Woodstock in many aspects can fit into the definition of a social drama, its phases, and other aspects, but even in the end, Woodstock took social dramas one step further and changed American culture. Part of the social drama’s definition is an eruption from everyday life, which definitely matches the 1969 festival. This festival with its almost half a million people was something the world had never seen and the attendees would never forget. The last part of the
definition refers to how the event’s customs become a regular part of society. As many media outlets spread the happenings of Woodstock to the nation, the festival would soon be regarded “as the birth of a new nation,” where its peace and love mentality were infused in everyday life (Kitts 260).

More specifically to truly be regarded as a social drama, Woodstock needs to correlate with Turner’s four phases. The first is the breaking of the social norm, which was lightly touched on earlier in this paper. Furthermore, the festival rebelled from the everyday life of the late 1960s, which was infused with a war in their own country for Civil Rights and a war abroad in Vietnam. Woodstock created an escape for young people to step out of an overly dramatic political world and be at peace with the music. As this upheaval from the rules continued, the unstructured chaos of the community developed as well.

Crisis is a necessary step in social dramas and there was no shortage of crises. One such crisis at Woodstock was the food and water shortages due to the enormous amount of people. The original expectation of 50,000 people daily was greatly underestimated and the near half a million people in attendance spent almost three days without sufficient food or water. Moreover, a large rainstorm came through upstate New York to which the unexpecting concert promoters could only pray that the crowd did not get electrocuted. The mass amount of water created a large mudslide in the field, which was an injury and lawsuit waiting to happen. Another problem from the rain was the electrical work created for the crew and the festival schedule was set back many hours because the audio equipment had to be fixed and dried. The schedule was so far behind the closing act of Sunday night, Jimi Hendrix, who was supposed to begin at midnight, did not start his set until almost 8am Monday morning.
The next phase of social dramas is the establishment of new morals under the leadership of the group. The groups leaders, the men and women who put on the event, announced many of the new morals on the loud speakers, as public service announcements. For example, continuously through the three days, they would advise not to take the brown acid because it was manufactured poorly and would result in a bad trip (Evans and Kingsbury 146). The leaders are not promoting the use of drugs, but they are advising that if you are going to use drugs at least be smart. The *Rolling Stone*’s writer, Greil Marcus wrote about his experience at Woodstock: “in the chaos, [there was] a founding of something new, something our world must now find a way to deal with” (Kitts 721). These new rules did not have to be written down, they were created through the environment of the festival. Peace and love were all around them. People gave food to people who had none. Even the Bethel towns’ people, who were against the festival, donated food to help the young men and women. The locals said they had never heard so many ‘please’ and ‘thank you’s.’ The ‘flower child’ way of living was spreading through the festival and soon across the United States.

After the three days, the attendees had to return home to their jobs and families as part of the fourth phase in Turner’s social drama. Most people leaving did not realize what the affect of their new mindset and culture would do to America, but they would soon find out. In *Time Magazine*’s “The Message of History’s Biggest Happening,” the author described the influx of ‘Hippie’ culture after Woodstock, as “thousands of young people, who had previously thought of themselves as part of an isolated minority, experienced the euphoric sense of discovering that they are, as the saying goes, what’s happening” (Sheeny 244). The event that started as a simple fundraise had now turned into a culture changing social drama.
Another aspect of being a social drama is the development of the Communitas, “the generic bond and sentiment of ‘humankindness’ between them” (Deflem 5). The sense of community between the people of Woodstock expanded not only to the attendees of the festival, but to the crew and even the policemen. Outside of the festival fences, the policemen were seen as the enemy, but inside, they were another community member of peace and love. Mike Vitiello, an attendee of Woodstock, remembers “a cop car getting stick in the mud and we all went over and helped push it out. There was no feeling that this was our enemy” (DeNitto 2). In the end, the 1969 music and art event of Woodstock truly was a social drama, but in particular after this social drama had concluded, its attendees changed one of the most influential countries in the nation, America.

Woodstock with its half a million young people and new cultural ideas had to make an impact. Prior to the 1969 festival, unjust laws, the war, and Civil Right movement restricted the culture this youth grew up. They were allowed to die for their country and drink alcohol, but were not allowed to make political decisions because of their denial to vote until age twenty-one. Even more, the draft, which they had no political power to fight, enveloped these youth with hostility towards the government and structure. Lastly, the still split ideology of whites and blacks in the eyes of the government gave the American culture unwariness of the unusual and different. “Upheaval was inevitable. Talk made music, and music made talk” (Evans and Kingsbury 14). The music and environment of Woodstock gave the youth the chance to change their future. In an event that could have gone from bad to worse by way of a half a million-person political riot, the concertgoers bonded together in peace and love to celebrate life, music, and community.
Woodstock did not just affect the social aspect of society, but the marketing and arts part of society. The event was the first ever nationally advertised music concert and future concert promoter’s learned from the ‘mistakes’ of Woodstock. There was no huge advertising in the venue, no sponsored products, there was barely tickets sold. Woodstock’s goal was to create a community and feeling. On the other hand, future promoters saw the money-making ability that these large music festivals had and exasperated them for whatever they could. Today, music festivals of this magnitude cost around $250 a ticket with every stage sponsored by a different Fortune 500 company. Woodstock and other early music festivals will never again be able to happen because of the money driven concert industry Woodstock unearthed. The event even changed how people attend rock concerts. More specifically, regulations on number of tickets sold, electrical setup, and now more concerts have assigned seats to control the crowd.

The festival, despite negative views from the media and older generations, proved how the next generation, could be stronger the generations past. Even without true political structure or regulation, they could function violence-free and community focused. Michael Lang told NBC’s Gabe Pressmen that during the three-day festival: “It’s been working since we got here, and it’s going to continue working. No matter what happens when they go back to the cities, this thing is happening and it proves it can happen” (Kirkpatrick 193). People at the festival learned how to interact with one another peacefully, have mutual respect, and embrace ‘free love.’ When the Woodstock generation grew up and became today’s leaders, most of them exemplified the traits they learned from that farm in New York.

**Future Research**

Woodstock is a very interesting topic that many scholars explain from all sorts of angles. This research on the topic creates modernized approach to Victor Turner’s theory of social
dramas. Furthermore, future research can then analyze historical or future events to classify them as social dramas could be applied to a much wider spectrum of events such as important assassinations or even major sporting events. Additionally, the marketing and promotional ideas learned by the ‘mistakes’ of Woodstock can now be applied to modern events to create more successful campaigns. Acknowledging Woodstock as a history-changing event, not just for music and rock’n’roll, but also for the American society as a whole, allow scholars to understand the event better.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is easy to see how the 1969 Music and Art Festival, Woodstock can be referred to not only as a social drama, but a culture-changing social drama. Previously in this paper, I examined Victor Turner’s theory of social dramas and applied it to Woodstock then summarized previous research on the topics. After, I argued that even though it was a single event, it still had the power to change a culture and the importance it had on the generation and concluded with the future effects of Woodstock and this research. In the end, the 1969 Music and Arts Festival, Woodstock’s influence can be summarized by the final lyrics of Joni Mitchell’s song:

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We are stardust.
Billion year old carbon.
We are golden.
Caught in the devil's bargain
And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden.
To some semblance of a garden.
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Works Cited:


