Linguistic, Cultural and Artistic Identity in Colonial Malta

A proposal to give a paper at the
“‘Postcolonial’ Conflicts in the European Context”
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The paper I would like to present at the “‘Postcolonial’ Conflicts in the European Context” conference has two objectives: 1) To introduce the Post Doctoral research project I am establishing called “Cultural Identity and the Interpretation and Management of Precolonial and Colonial Heritage and Artistic Sites in Postcolonial Malta”, and 2) To identify and indicate some of the arguments that underpin this project.

1) Introducing the Project
“Cultural Identity and the Interpretation and Management of Precolonial and Colonial Heritage and Artistic Sites in Postcolonial Malta” is an investigation into the production of Maltese identity and the role cultural sites and art play in forming people’s subjectivity. It is a study of the UNESCO listed Mnajdra Neolithic temples to understand conflicts between competing interests of local, national, and international communities in these globally significant sites. The project’s objective is to research the changing perception, representation, and meaning of these temples between 1600 and the present. It seeks to better understand the discourses, practices, and modes of expression (including the vandalism of the sites in recent years) used by the various communities with significant investment in sites.

2) Presenting some of the evidence: British colonisation (1800 – 1964)
The second half of my paper presents a case of how the British established, consolidated, and managed the local population by distabilising identifications between the Maltese and their own cultural heritage. This was essentially aimed at containing and countering any possibility of Maltese identifications and desire for autonomy and self rule concurrent with the aspirations of their nearest neighbour Sicily. These efforts by the colonial rulers became particularly punctuated after the establishment of the Italian state in 1868. Specifically I shall consider
i) Origins and Constructions of Maltese Identity during the 19th Century
ii) From Dialect to Language: The use of Maltese as Colonising Tool.
iii) Origins and influences of Maltese artistic and cultural expression during British colonialism.
1) Scholarly and Academic Research to Date

i) **Ph D Thesis: The Work of Art (Cinema) in the Age of Global Culture** (University of Amsterdam in association with the University of Technology, Sydney, 1998-)
My Ph D examines two art films (Wim Wenders’ *Wings of Desire* (1987) and *Faraway So Close!* (1993)) and one mainstream Hollywood film (Brad Silberling’s *City of Angels* (1998)) in terms of the continuing function of art in contemporary (global) culture. Framed by Walter Benjamin’s influential essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, my objective is to examine whether art continues to play a role in authenticating and renewing social bonds by representing cultural relations between individuals. The reference point for the idea of the function of art is derived from the traditional role it had in human societies where the aura of art as a cult object enabled individuals to authenticate and renew bonds and relations both within themselves as well as with other members of their tribe. The main theme of my Ph D thus focuses on the relations fostered by the work of art in the contemporary city and the impact and mutations reproductive technologies such as cinema plays in realising the modern subject/citizen. Outcomes thus far include a website (www.jgrech.dds.nl) and a refereed publication.

ii) **Master of Art by Thesis topic: Images From The Underworld** (University of Technology, Sydney, 1989-1995)
My MA Thesis comprised of 13 chapters each developing an independent story based on 13 photographic art works representing different parts of Sydney. Each chapter is situated in a geographical location around the city that are or have been associated with different socio-cultural groups and identities. Some chapters concentrated on questions of personal identity while others dealt with modern notions of psychological personhood and citizenship, postmodern fragmented identities and so on. Specific cultural/identity sites explored include working class suburbs, migrant suburbs, inner city artistic bohemia, and sectors of the city in which alternative cultural and subcultural groups gathered such as punk and grunge. In addition, two chapters deal with historical notions of identity including one based on an imaginary visit to the Mnajdra temples, their archaeology, and the imaginary spaces they configure. The main outcome from this research was a multi-media performance and a gallery installation.

iii) **Graduate Diploma in Visual Arts; The Holtermann Rephotographs** (Sydney College of the Arts, Sydney University, 1987-1988)
My Graduate Diploma project was a time-space study based on the Holtermann Collection’s photographic representations of the Australian bush during the 19th Century. This collection is named after Bernard Otto Holtermann, a German-Australian who came to Australia in the 1860s and, with the aid of money he earned as a successful gold-miner, sponsored the production of this unique archive. A significant outcome of this research was a thesis about the project (15000 words) that explored: mid 19th Century Australian colonial history; the significance of migration in the development of the mining industry; the rise of the myths surrounding the bush and its working class culture; and migrants’ contributions to Australian culture and society. The major outcome, however, was an exhibition called *The Holtermann Rephotographs: Two Views of the Central West 1872 – 1988*, which toured nationally through regional galleries for more than two years. Copies of my work in this exhibition are now held at the Mitchell Pictures Library, State Library of NSW, Australia.
2) Related Research conducted in realising cultural and artistic projects

i) **Mil Irvina (From The Ruins)** Photo & text installation, National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, Malta, & fotogram Gallery, Amsterdam, Netherlands, (1996/7)

This installation was a meditation on Maltese identity which assumes a postcolonial (post 1964) context while reflecting on Malta’s colonial and pre-colonial history. **Mil Irvina** built on ideas I had engaged in an audio-visual installation **angels and the city** (see below) which dealt with the 20th Century human diaspora in New World working class industrial cities. **Mil Irvina** dealt with the conflicts created in the European ‘homelands’ from where those migrants came, in this case Malta, where colonised populations within Europe were subordinated and had to relate with fellow countrymen and other Europeans as superiors. The hierarchies of power and dominance between people sharing a common cultural heritage was thus the main theme of this installation in which memories transmitted through images in art, sculpture, and culture reveal underlying tensions and contradictions in relations between coloniser and colonised, ruler and ruled. The installation attracted much attention from the press in Malta, being reviewed in every major newspaper and was spotlighted in radio and television cultural programmes. Examples of this work are in the collection of the National Museum of Fine Arts, Malta.

ii) **angels and the city** multimedia installation, Wollongong City Gallery (1996).

This photographic, video, and sound installation explored aspects of life in the contemporary city. Here I worked with family archival photographs which traced the diasporic movements of people from Europe to other parts of the world over the 20th Century. Although specifically drawn from my family archive and experiences from the Maltese diaspora, the family snaps in the installation were not displayed as an autobiographical history but rather anonymous images presented as if they were found objects or bought randomly at a street market stall. Thus the installation gave an impression that the images and the stories they told could belong to anyone. Seen through the snapshots made by the travellers themselves, this work conjured up an imaginary history of the city populated by a migrating human family during the 20th Century. The project’s main themes centred on notions of displacement in cities such as the NSW town of Wollongong, one of Australia’s most heavily industrialised cities that attracted many migrants to work in the steelworks and other allied industries.

iii) **Sharkfeed** ABC On-Line (www.abc.net.au/sharkfeed) (2000)

Produced in collaboration with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the Australian Film Commission, this web installation provides an archeaological slice of life in the city of post war Sydney. It is an on-line documentary exploring the impact of the death of Sydney schoolboy Graeme Thorne in 1960. Kidnapped by Jewish-Hungarian refugee-migrant Stephen Bradley (formerly known as Istvan Baranjoy) after Thorne’s father won the Opera House Lottery, Bradley is reported to have said “I’ll feed him to the sharks if I don’t get the ransom money” when he telephoned the Thorne home later on the day of the abduction. There was an understandable outcry when the boy was found dead and wrapped in an old blanket six weeks later. The project explores a range of topics across a range of aspects of social and communal life including death; the role of the family in the contemporary society; myths of childhood and adventure; questions of race and migration; the impact of transport and mobility on common life; the role of forensic evidence in the legal system, justice, and the establishment of truth; representations of minorities in the media; gambling
and other forms of social and moral (mis)behaviour.
3) Publications

a) Refereed Journal Articles

2002 "Empty Space and the City: The re-occupation of Berlin" in Ian C. Fletcher and Van Gosse (eds), Radical History Review: Citizenship, National Identity, Race, and Diaspora in Contemporary Europe, Duke University Press, no 83, Spring 2002, pp 114-142. See also http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/radical_history_review/v083/83.1grech.html

"Living with the Dead: Sharkfeed and the extending ontologies of New Media" in Rob Shields, Joost van Lon, and Greg Elmer (eds) Space and Culture, Sage, vol 5, issue 3, August 2002.

b) Other Publications (Selected)


"Redeeming Cunnamulla or Avoiding Reality", a review of the documentary film Cunnamulla (2000) by Dennis O’Rourke in Peter Tapp, Kate, Raynor, Naji Dellal (eds), Metro, 126, Summer 2001, pp 21-24.

1996 "Unwanted Shadow Man" (narrative & photographs) Artlink-Masculinities Reflected vol 16 #1, Aut, pp 56-57

editor (catalogue) & "introduction" (essay), angels and the city, Wollongong City Gallery Press, p 2

1994 Images From The Underworld script short-listed at the annual National Playwrights Conference, Australia National University, Canberra, Aust.

1991 editor (catalogue) & "Introduction" (essay) Myth and Identity, Orange Regional Gallery Press

1989 "Reading The Holtermann Rephotographs" (essay) The Holtermann Rephotographs Catalogue, Orange Regional Gallery Press