

REVIEWS

Books and other publications

Carmel Borg and Raphael Vella (Eds.), *Shooting Society: Documenting Contemporary Life in Malta* (pbk.), Malta: Midsea Books, ISBN: 978-99932-7-419-3, 2012, 328 pages.

Carmel Borg and Raphael Vella's publication sets out to 'document contemporary life in Malta' by offering a photographic and textual compendium of contributions from a selection of 80 authors and photographers currently active in Maltese academia, journalism and literature. The short texts range from the purely academic to the overtly creative and each one is anchored onto a visual image - a 'moment' in the colourful kaleidoscope of social life in contemporary Malta. The 150 images act as focal points in a sequence of themes: Portraits, Spaces, Rituals, Spectacle, Desire, Identities, Contestations, Generations. Each contribution is a double interpretation – a textual reverberation on a visual image - photographer and wordsmith in synergy.

The editors state in their introduction that they would be happier if their readers were less confident about how to define 'Maltese society' after their encounter with the book, than before. They set out to resist stereotypical reductionist statements and 'disorientate' by offering multi-perspectival interpretations of life in contemporary Malta.

This, they achieve almost playfully – shifting genre, focus and scope with each dual contribution. Is this an academic publication? a creative project? Or a realistic documentary of social life in Malta? It is each of these masquerading as the other – and you are left

unsure of where the ‘document’ ends , the creativity begins and where we should look to learn about what is ‘really out there’.

You are not a ‘reader’ but a spectator – a voyeur sifting through the complex fabric of social life in Malta. Some of you may choose to loiter in the unexpected vantage points of public rituals, consider the idiosyncrasies of individual portraits, engage in the conflicts and resistance of contested social issues or tread with care through dark and unfamiliar social spaces. The colour and beauty is there too – but don’t expect the sunsets, blue seas and fireworks. They are there in their effects – but we happily forget them as we focus on what else goes on when we ‘do’ Maltese culture.

The Editor’s attempt at ‘disorientation’ works on every level – visual, intellectual and sentimental. Clear definitions and familiar preconceptions are blurred in the kaleidoscope of visual and textual reverberations. Each adds another facet to this multi-perspectival whole and leads to more questions than answers.

Is this a book about ‘being Maltese’? or about not being ‘really Maltese’? ...or are we looking at what has happened to ‘The Maltese’?

This is the strength of the publication – the way that the multi-faceted representations call into question the very concept of Maltese cultural identity and highlight the paradox of fluidity, and core constants - with hints of cultural anchors laying solidly below the surface of evolving extenuations.

One of these ‘cultural anchors’ that the images transmit, yet is overtly excluded in the texts is the Maltese language. All the writings are presented in English. This, in itself, is a firm statement of one aspect of ‘being Maltese’ – the ease with which language switches are performed according to situation and context. Malta’s postcolonial linguistic

legacy has English firmly placed in a position of power in academia and leads to this paradoxical use of English to describe and explore contemporary culture and social life in Malta. The fact that this choice seems coherent and apt shouts ‘being Maltese’ from the glossy pages of this publication. It is clearly an understandable choice for this anthology of texts from local and international contributors and one the authors made because they could – and that realistic choice is essentially part of post colonial contemporary Maltese life.

Our Maltese language, however, is not totally absent in this publication – it is scribbled as graffiti on the walls, in large print on billboards, neatly presented on street signs and scrawled across protest placards. There is, in fact, more evidence of written Maltese in the photographs than English, and yet the photographs suggest much more than this. It is the voices that draw the reader in - mute in the portraits, strident in the street scenes and whispering in the crowds. These clearly carry Maltese harsh ‘h’s, guttural consonants and broad vowels, though one may imagine a spattering of English spoken in some of the crowd scenes. Some of the placards in the street protests are, indeed, neatly printed in English.

It is interesting to note the contrast between the scrawling hand-written Maltese placards, and the computer generated English messages in the photographs of organised public protests – an apt representation of the passion and spontaneity of the native language, as opposed to the pre-meditated, groomed version in English. Though this linguistic aspect of contemporary life in Malta is implicit in the visual content of Borg and Vella’s publication, the inclusion of Maltese versions of some of the creative texts would have added another facet to the project by highlighting this fundamental ‘cultural anchor’ in

contemporary Maltese society– the Maltese language and the ‘Maltese’ ability to switch to the English language according to social context and purpose.

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