

## Towards a Practice-Led Research and Teaching & Learning Environment: A Case for Maltese Cultural Studies

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**Abstract:** This paper makes a case for the introduction of cultural studies at the University of Malta as part of a concerted effort towards the foundation of a specialised creative cultural pedagogical programme aimed at producing a rigorous range of taught and research objectives including a sharp focus on practice-led critical cultural research. The argument is based on a dual impulse embedded in cultural studies which produces intellectual work that is both a research practice in itself as well as an imperative to situate that work in practical everyday culture. Alongside creative and artistic practice, cultural studies, it is shown, has legitimate dealings in both the academy where it participates in scholarly discourses concerning the production of culture as well as dealing in the world beyond the University where, in everyday life, cultural studies researchers participate directly in the production and transformation of culture. Thus as a practice, cultural studies participates in both the spheres of everyday life through the production of culture as well as in the academy through the production of knowledge. It is this dual imperative which gives cultural studies its peculiarly critical edge, for this demands that knowledge engages directly with daily cultural practice to reveal the interconnection between politics, culture and knowledge production. Thus cultural studies may be regarded as both a form of production in the formation of daily life, albeit with a heightened sense of intellectual rigour, as much as it is a discursive scholarly activity conducted in the academy. It is this combinative and yet practical approach to research and teaching outputs and outcomes that gives cultural studies a crucial and potentially pivotal role in the formation of a creative contemporary practice-led research curriculum at the University.

**Keywords:** Maltese cultural studies, practice-led research, transforming culture, Maltese culture and society

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## Introduction

The Call for Papers this essay responds to focuses on notions of visual arts practices, creative practices, and practice-led hybrid research and researcher identity. Over and above that “Call”, I have been asked to focus on the potential contributions a cultural studies approach might give in support of such teaching and learning as well as research objectives.

I would like to start by making the following observations. The first is that generally speaking, research and knowledge production, and teaching and learning at the University of Malta remain generally bound to mono-disciplinary intellectual approaches founded in what might be described as “book” oriented studies. Secondly, intellectual work is not always considered a practice, but rather a mental, abstract and theoretical activity, often relying on anachronistic “language games” and highly formalised methods and approaches as to what constitutes research. The idea that practical work can be a form of rigorous and inventive intellectual research, or that intellectual work is a practice in itself and that either/and/or both can drive innovation and creativity is still largely regarded as a foreign idea associated (often condescendingly) with the applied sciences.

This paper delineates cultural studies from conventional approaches to research and the production of knowledge with a view of showing how, even at its most theoretical, cultural studies is a “discourse of engagement” (Grossberg, private correspondence, 2014) that can (and should) be regarded as a mode of critical and analytical intellectual practice.

## Practice-led Research and Cultural Studies

Although the main purpose of this paper is to outline the role cultural studies can play in forming and supporting practice-led research and allied pedagogical approaches at the University of Malta, I want to commence by recalling my own entry into cultural studies through my research and production needs as a practicing artist. For some time now, contemporary art and practice-led research have often been considered synonymously. So much so that there is a growing body of literature dealing with practice-led research as contemporary art. This includes Hazel Smith and Roger Dean's *Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice in the Creative Arts*, arguably the most comprehensive compendium dealing with practice-led research in the academy to date. This collection of essays sets out not only to “document, conceptualise, analyse and debate the proliferating relationships between creative work and research”, it also shows that practice-led research brings into question ideas about “what is knowledge, what is research and how can we understand the creative process?” (Smith and Dean, 2009, p. 1). Smith and

Dean see symbiotic relationships between academic knowledge and practice-led research which they highlight in titling their book as well as indicating early that they fully intend to consider how “academic research can lead to creative practice” (Smith and Dean, 2009, p. 2). It is not my intention to argue that either scholarly intellectual work or creative artistic productions are or should be regarded as the 'proper' or 'superior' way to produce practice-led research. Rather I assert both are valid forms of *practice*.

I intend to complement, complicate, diversify and expand the understanding of practice-led research (and research-led practice), as well as what cultural studies oriented/influenced practice might look like. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge from the start that this discussion is situated in a technical context where through digital technology, creative, cultural and artistic practices are today converging. Yet even with this expanded sense of the field, it would be mistaken to think that this paper divorces creative practices (some of which may be associated with artistic production) from the work of practice-led intellectual research or from research-led practical application.

My formal education as an artist predates my education in cultural studies and began at Sydney College of the Arts, Sydney University, an institution regarded as one of the most conceptualist oriented professional contemporary arts education institutions in Australia. Yet even at such an institution, I soon became aware that the level of theoretical and analytical grounding in culture that I was getting had its limits. For while Sydney College gave students a critical, historical and theoretical overview of art and culture, what was lacking was a systematic programme that enabled students to conduct both in-depth and rigorous cultural analyses of contemporary society and how such analyses might be incorporated in their artistic production. For this reason I finally decided to pursue an MA and finally a PhD in cultural studies even though my Bachelors and the first of my Graduate degrees are in Visual Arts.

A question now arises: As I had already received an excellent grounding as a practising artist in one of the premier educational institutions in Australia, an institution that, in spite of having been established less than a decade before I graduated, could even then already boast amongst its graduates some of the most innovative Australian contemporary artists including internationally renowned designer Marc Newson and the film-maker Jane Campion, why did I decide to pursue a further formal education in cultural studies? The answer to that question has to do with the role I saw for myself as an artist.

I believe there is an intimate connection between the work of art and the production of culture, and that this connection exists beyond the refined elitist sites and practices found within the art world. I wanted to produce not

just artistically refined and highly aestheticised objects ready for consumption in art galleries and museums! I wanted to develop artifacts that would situate themselves critically in wider society and engage with contemporary culture and a myriad of its many discourses. For even before attending art school, I had defined my creative artistic practice in broader terms than that associated with conventional art institutions.<sup>[1]</sup> I wanted a different kind of audience to the audience one gets in placing work in high art settings.<sup>[2]</sup> While not ignoring conventional art galleries and museums, I wanted to talk to people in other, often ordinary, everyday settings, sometimes only accidentally realised, in which contact with creative and artistic work may not have even been intentional or recognised. I wanted a form of contact with people in a myriad of settings beyond the inner city enclave from which I came.<sup>[3][4]</sup>

What I was looking for in my education, in addition to developing the analytical, historical, and technical skills needed to produce highly refined contemporary artistic objects, was an equally rigorous ability to identify and

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[1] My work included sound and musical composition and performance as well as the more static visual and sculptural forms which I had begun exploring as a teenager. Some of these efforts resulted in outputs such as an improvised theatrical production staged at Sydney's Nimrod Theatre and at the Adelaide Arts Festival (Adelaide Fringe) in 1976, a punk rock/rock-fusion band, community based musical theatre productions, youth improvisational theatre productions, and improvisational theatre-in-education troupes from 1973 on..

[2] I devised a number of strategies to find an audience including touring exhibitions through regional and rural public galleries, performances in pubs, community centres and alternative art spaces, scripted radiophonic features produced and broadcast to national and international audiences (including Malta), performances at academic conferences as well as more conventional exhibitions in State run, or private, or artist run, or commercial art galleries. I also wrote a number of critical and fictocritical essays, reviews, commentaries and catalogue essays as well as editing a number of publications. In each their own way, these engaged different kinds of audiences through different means and in different contexts.

[3] I was lucky to grow up in the increasingly vibrant, multicultural, inner city (of Sydney) where by the 1990s there existed a fully developed art infrastructure comprising of some excellent art schools, an extensive network of public and private galleries and artist run spaces and studios, a generous number of quality television and radio arts and cultural programmes, art columns and reviews in newspapers, specialist art journals and magazines, a network of art focused NGOs, and financial supporting organisations such as the Australia Council, the Australian Film Commission, and a variety of other Federal, State, and local Government instrumentalities. These served a highly educated and sophisticated art community comprising of many thousands of artists and writers, students, teachers and educators, critics, academics and scholars, as well as a very well informed, inquisitive, and critically challenging general public. So much so that one could say that the practice I constructed for myself as an artist was only possible in what was already by the 1980s a sophisticated, complex and intricate context.

[4] Although many of my teachers were overtly non-committal in terms of politics, I did nevertheless encounter many inspiring individuals during my art education including Nigel Lendon, Helen Grace, David Ahern, John Williams, Steven Lojewski and Bonita Ely, all of whose attitudes and approaches made me feel that perhaps there could be some correspondence between my vision for my own practice as an artist and the idea of art that was being promoted by the institution I was in.

diagnose contemporary currents and trends in society as well as to become proficient in critical analytical languages about culture. So I enrolled into the MA programme at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney, a Faculty with an international reputation as a centre of excellence in cultural studies.

Initially, I thought cultural studies would merely complement my artistic practice by providing tools to develop an intellectually rigorous and yet critical engagement with contemporary society. Yet unlike more tradition bound academic disciplines, cultural studies encourages students to undertake and produce work as cultural artifacts, then known as Non-Traditional Theses at UTS, rather than limiting students work only to scholarly scientific studies. Yes, I did want to find ways of better prizing apart the socio-cultural and historical conjunctions within which I operated! And yes, I also wanted to articulate my work theoretically rather than remain dependant on what others wrote about it. But I wanted to do so on my creative and artistic terms rather than purely through the languages of the academy and the social sciences.

In fact, what I was seeking was precisely what makes creative artistic work a practical form of intellectual research; the ability to better understand the world and to explain that understanding through different means of representations.<sup>[5]</sup> Whether the research objects produced by this are considered works of art or works of scholarship is irrelevant when the point of the exercise is arriving at a better understanding of contemporary life.

In the canonical thinking of Western epistemology, it is deceptively easy to overlook and dismiss practice-led research derived from experience when comparing or opposing it to conventional logic-based scientific knowledge. Conventional academic thought would have it that true scientific knowledge can only be expressed through rational linguistic discourses. This contrasts with the many languages of the senses through which art usually speaks. For unlike the dispassionate tone adopted by scholarly discourse, art speaks through and to the body's sensory organs and this often imbues art with empathy and human feeling. Rather than analytically describing what happens in a war, art expresses what it is like to be subjected to one. Despite the differences in the way in which art speaks, it, like science, is, when it is at its most vital and critically engaged, a way of trying to better understand the world. People do learn through art and the sensations art generates just as much as people learn through the languages of logic, reason and rational argumentation.

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[5] For an overview of my creative and artistic work, see *Untitled and Undocumented: Fragments of Life in the Global City* (Grech 2006b). For examples of my attempts at combining cultural studies with creative practice-led research, see Grech 1996, Grech 2002a, Grech 2002b, Grech 2005, Grech 2007, and Grech 2013.

And yet, neither should one dismiss the importance of being able to logically and coherently represent one's concerns through intellectual work associated with the academy. Nevertheless, when I set out on my journey into cultural studies, I considered cultural studies work as an aid and adjunct to my artistic practice, a closely allied set of organising analytical tools and intellectual skills that would complement and articulate my creative research and production. It is only later that I realised that cultural studies also made it possible to think about scholarly intellectual work as a form of creative practice even when it restricts itself to empirical investigations and analytical understanding of the world. As my relationship with cultural studies grew, I began to realise that what drew me originally to the field was increasingly expanding and that cultural studies could itself provide creative modes and strategies that extended the array of approaches I could use in my creative practice.

I began this account of how and why, as an artist, I was drawn to cultural studies by asserting that practice-led research is closely related to, if not synonymous with, the work of artists who span both theory and practice. I now conclude this section with the suggestion that some intellectual workers in the academy today equally regard their work as a form of creative practice even if their mode of actualising their research takes shape in abstract forms of knowledge, such as scientific writing, not usually associated with art.

### **What is cultural studies?**

One of the commonest mistakes surrounding the practice of cultural studies is, as John Storey writes, to think of it as a disciplined “monolithic body of theories and methods” (Storey, 2003, p. 1). According to Stuart Hall, “cultural studies has multiple discourses” (Hall in During, 2007, p. 33-44) and it “accretes various tendencies that are splintering the human sciences” (Miller, 2001, p. 1). It would be more correct to think of cultural studies as a general field of intellectual endeavour which cannot be reduced to any singular, individual or ideal form. One feature of cultural studies is its 'tendencies' towards 'multiple discourses'. Rather than providing a series of methods and approaches, dictums, laws and dogmas, in principle positions and/or predispositions or propositions, cultural studies remains nebulous and ready to take shape in different contexts. This depends partly on the individual who is drawing upon it, partly on the subject matter under investigation, and partly on the peculiarities of the research object. Cultural studies instead demands that the researcher is situated in terms of topic, approach, and context.

Cultural studies does not apply particular methods or ways of doing things that are normally associated with convention bound disciplines. It does not cohere itself to a range of research subjects and nor is it about standardising approaches someone doing cultural studies might follow. It demands a positionally situated development of approaches, methods and applications that may come to be regarded as suitable to just one particular study.

Depending on whose ideas of cultural studies you look at, cultural studies might involve a legacy of thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Lawrence Grossberg, Meaghan Morris, Ien Ang and so on. Or it might involve an overt “commitment to progressive social change” (Miller, 2001, p. 1). Sometimes cultural studies is distinguished by a rejection of hand-me-down notions of culture as 'excellence' or 'taste' or 'style'. Cultural studies might overtly focus on resistance to power and hegemony, just as it might involve a synthetic combination of all the foregoing as well as other ideas or concerns. It can be about the study of “canonical” (Miller, 2001, p. 1) art but often it is about the formation of culture in everyday ordinary situations.

Sometimes cultural studies is about something that no-one would have ever thought valid or interesting enough to study. Other times it can be about an unusual or an unexpected treatment of a subject found in other academic fields. In fact, cultural studies can be so malleable that a student who first arrives at it may find it surrounded in mystery that no-one seems willing or capable of speaking about, but rather, something alluded to, often poetically.

Cultural studies can appear to be allusive because it emulates the forms and contours not of a rigid universally applied homogenous body of knowledge which shapes and conditions whatever terrain that knowledge happens to be travelling over. Rather, cultural studies follows the shapes, outlines, and specific actualisations of culture in a living relation with the researcher's practice at the time it is applied. Yes, there are methods that are regarded as 'cultural studies' in orientation, but one may or may not choose to apply them. So too, a researcher who applied one particular approach or theoretical paradigm in one situation may choose, at another point in time or place, to apply an entirely different set of research parameters in conducting a similar kind of study. This can confuse someone not used to adaptive modes of intellectual practice.

There is nothing inherently wrong or inadequate or inappropriate with all the different methods, approaches, theoretical premises, and interpretations any one practitioner of cultural studies chooses. Just as there is no one way of universally assessing a work or body of research and decrying it as 'good' or 'bad' cultural studies. This apparent lack of 'rigour' is enough for some to dismiss cultural studies altogether as an intellectual practice.

When trying to describe cultural studies to students, I sometimes talk about it as a multi-tentacled theory machine that uses whatever methods and approaches it has at its disposal to conduct the work the researcher needs to do. I encourage students of cultural studies to think of this not as a discipline but rather as an intellectual toolbox large enough to accommodate many different approaches and methods, whether they are regarded as belonging to already understood terrains of cultural studies or they are borrowed from Arts disciplines or found in the Humanities or Social Sciences or derived from Physical or Applied or even theoretical Science. Cultural studies, as an intellectual approach, morphs according to the needs of its user as well as the nature of the matter under investigation.

One can also talk of cultural studies in terms of geography. Now it is possible to talk about a British cultural studies, American cultural studies, Australian cultural studies, Swedish cultural studies, Spanish cultural studies, Asian cultural studies, Turkish cultural studies, African cultural studies, and so on. And one day it might be possible to talk about Maltese cultural studies. Each of these regions of cultural studies can be seen to express themselves in ways that others do not, as if each has their own take and cultural studies discourse. This does not disqualify any of the approaches, but rather recognises that different spatio-temporal locations demand different means and methods in the study of culture. These are expressed in the formation of cultural studies practices themselves as much as in the discourses and the research that actually take place in particular places and situations.

The nomadic nature of cultural studies coupled with the amorphous qualities sometimes upsets adherents of other disciplines, particularly disciplines where boundaries are patrolled more jealously, where standards are measured and upheld against universal principles, and laws applied uniformly (or as uniformly as possible). In other words, cultural studies can appear disruptive to adherents of some disciplines in which the forms and structures of the discipline are regarded as sacrosanct. To practitioners of more formalised bodies of knowledge, cultural studies can appear to be “antidisciplinary” (Grossberg, 2010, p. 14-16) and devoid of standards.

What critics of cultural studies really mean is that they cannot see value in what cultural studies approaches yield, or perhaps that such yields fly in the face of orthodoxies that underpin their discipline. Sometimes this is cited as an excuse to have cultural studies removed or excluded from the academy, but this can be a disguised play of power within such institutions where cultural studies contests the hegemony of ideas about what constitutes knowledge. It is important to recognise too that underpinning many objections to cultural studies, there is often nothing more substantial than an effort to retain scarce educational resources, power and prestige, none of



which has anything to do with a commitment to scientific rigour or analysis or a critical study and understanding of culture.

Having briefly outlined how cultural studies fits into academic paradigms, I now want to specify some features of cultural studies. Turning to an idea which, one might presume, lies at the heart of the cultural studies project, Lawrence Grossberg points out that cultural studies does not offer a universal totalised definition of culture and neither does it offer a “general theory of culture” (Grossberg, 2010, p. 28). Cultural studies does not cohere an idea of culture or produce rational explanations that neatly tie up and complete culture as a homogenised field. Instead, cultural studies “views cultural practices as the site of the intersection of many possible effects” (Grossberg, 2010, p. 28). Yet neither does cultural studies withdraw behind a claim that culture is entirely relative and that material reality does not play a role in determining human arrangements. This is how Grossberg puts it:

Cultural studies does not deny that there is a material reality, but it does argue, contrary to some, that it is impossible to separate what some would call brute facts from social facts. The fact that some facts are treated as brute facts, as if they were not constructed, says more about the particular organisation of reality in which such a distinction is necessary than it does about the facts themselves. (Grossberg, 2010, p. 23)

Rather than establish discrete terrains, binaries and oppositions, cultural studies regards even material reality as something culturally encoded and loaded. Culture now becomes something over which things intersect and move, and that both the factors and the lines of movement are never quite the same in any two spatio-temporal contexts. This is why Grossberg, During, and others follow Hall in using the term conjunctures to describe cultural studies research as a practice that juxtaposes different fields such as economics, art, ritual, daily practices, media and so on to arrive at a more complete understanding of an intricate mesh that make up culture. Some of these factors are political, some are historical, and others material, but all need to be somehow adequately accounted for if one is to arrive at better stories about how people live in that particular situation.

This does not mean, however, that the study of culture should focus either on or away from material conditions so as to make valid statements about culture, even if one seeks to make relatively uncontentious, even innocent, empirical statements. As Grossberg continues:

The context itself cannot be separated from those cultural practices and the relations of power, because they articulate the unity and specificity of the context as a lived environment. [...] Cultural studies has to be interdisciplinary, because context – and even culture – cannot be analysed in purely cultural

terms; understanding contexts, and, within them, specific cultural formations, requires looking at cultures relations to everything that is not culture. (Grossberg, 2010, p. 24)

So cultural studies does not follow one strategy in understanding culture, and does not dismiss non-cultural domains either. Yet neither does it cohere ideas of culture or position culture in some objective totalised field where conditions are presumed to always and universally occupy the same positions and relations of significance. For cultural studies, there are many different factors that come into play, factors that can neither be reduced or quantified to simpler formulaic propositions applied generically. The object of cultural studies remains fluid in its parameters and the situation between each of the intersecting factors always relational. Indeed, not even the presence of factors themselves are taken for granted. Cultural studies rejects ideas that the underlying conditions of life are reducible to essential elements. Here again is how Grossberg explains this:

Cultural studies is committed to the reality of relations that have determining effects, but it refuses to assume that such relations and effects have to be, necessarily, what they are. They did not have to be that way, but, given that they are that way, they are real and they have real effects. Cultural studies operates in the space between, on the one hand, absolute containment, closure, complete and final understanding, total domination, and, on the other hand, absolute freedom and possibility, openness, and indeterminateness. It rejects any claims of “necessary relations” (guaranteed) as well as of “necessarily no relations” (also guaranteed), in favour of “no necessary relations” (while accepting that relations are real). Thus, cultural studies can be seen as a contextual analysis of how contexts are (or even better, of how a specific context is) made, challenged, unmade, changed, remade, etc., as structures of power and domination. (Grossberg, 2010, p. 22-23)

This is why, for me, cultural studies provides such a fresh and liberating approach to thinking about culture, not because it provides a key to knowing how culture works, but rather because it recognises that all the relations we perceive as playing a role in determining the reality we *feel/experience* about a particular culture are indeed real. Yet cultural studies also says that none of the conditions that pertain to those relations necessarily have to remain the same forever. Things can, things do, change. And that is a much more adequate explanation of reality, especially cultural reality, as I understand it.

Yet just as cultural studies does not proffer simple or discrete definitions of culture, neither does it rely on a totalised idea of power either. As Grossberg continues:

Cultural studies sees power as complexly and contradictorily organised, along multiple axes and dimensions that cannot be reduced to one another. [...] Moreover, while power operates in institutions and the state, it also operates where people live their daily lives, and in the spaces where these fields

intersect. [...] One cannot simply assume that because a certain kind of political struggle made sense in the 1980s, it will make sense in 2010s. One cannot assume that because a certain kind of political struggle made sense in England, it will make sense in America. (Grossberg, 2010, p. 28-29)

As with culture, cultural studies holds that neither power, nor, indeed, the politics needed to address it, can be reduced to a simple formula. Foucault developed numerous strategies that seek a more complex understanding of how power works. His approach was taken up by Steven Lukes, whose *Power, A Radical View* (2005) offers both a succinct summary of earlier sociological theories about power as well as proposing his own more complex method which he calls the 3 dimensional view of power. More recently, Mitchell Dean's *The Signature of Power* (2013) synthesises many approaches in a field that also includes works by Giorgio Agamben (*Homo Sacre* (1998, *State of Exception* (2005) etc). Cultural studies draws on Marx's understanding of power then builds on this through the work of people such as Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" (2004), Pierre Clastres (Clastres' entire oeuvre is in fact an anthropologist's critique of how power works), as well as Frantz Fanon (2001) and numerous feminist critiques to arrive at sophisticated approaches to understanding how power works.

Another area cultural studies concerns itself with is language, and in particular, a regard of culture as a form of communication in which meaning and significance are created within discourses imbued by and within the daily practices attached to specific social locations in time and space. Cultural studies holds that these discursive practices can be deconstructed, studied and understood, as well as altered. This is not linguistics in a conventional sense, therefore, not in terms of ensuring that communicants follow the correct grammars of specific linguistic contexts, but more how semiotics approaches language, how signs - be they verbal, visual, sonic, performative, or whatever - carry and convey messages, construct communicants, condition norms, values and aberrations, and suggest performances. Yet cultural studies does more than analyse languages, seeks more than formal quantification of cultural discursive strategies. Cultural studies engenders critical understanding of hitherto subliminal or taken for granted formations, how they are constructed into dialogue by discursive practices, and develops critical approaches that reposition respondents in active relationships with other communicants and the conditions under which they are interacting. As Simon During suggests, cultural studies can be regarded as "a Gramscian understanding of 'conjunctural knowledge' - knowledge situated in, and applicable to, specific and immediate political/historical circumstances; as well as an awareness that the structure of representations which form culture's alphabet and grammar are instruments of social power, require critical and activist examination" (During, 2007, p. 33, see also "Constructing the Conjuncture" in Grossberg, 2010, p. 57-100).

One strategy cultural studies has evolved in manifesting a response to the politics of language is to adopt speaking positions not as authority but rather as the individual speaks and can only speak – as if, of, and for themselves. This is the speech of an author, not the objectivised depersonalised form of authority, the representation of 'scientist', 'black woman', or 'gay' person, but as autobiographer – someone speaking for and of one's self. This is how Stuart Hall puts it:

Autobiography is usually thought of as seizing the authority of authenticity. But in order not to be authoritative, I've got to speak autobiographically. I'm going to tell you about my own take on certain theoretical legacies and moments in cultural studies, not because it is the truth or the only way of telling the history. I myself have told it many other ways before; and I intend to tell it in a different way later. But just at this moment, for this conjecture, I want to take a position in relation to the 'grand narrative' of cultural studies for the purposes of opening up some reflections on cultural studies as a practice, on our institutional positioning, and on its projects. (Hall in During, 2007, p. 34)

For Hall, cultural studies is very much concerned with differentiating itself from the voice of 'the Authority' by insisting that the utterances a cultural studies practitioner makes do not use language as a form of power to shut down opposition, disable disagreement, or reduce the subject over which he or she is talking about to a uniform and totalised object. Neither does Hall want to speak as the 'Authority' over cultural studies, but rather as himself, one author amongst many. Even when he talks about the 'grand narrative' of cultural studies, Hall is careful to place the term in brackets and thus distance himself and the work of cultural studies from discursively adopting an overarching totalising position. Hall goes on to describe how cultural studies plays with many discursive positions, that indeed, cultural studies is, in large degree, a practice of positioning, and that these positions themselves are never fixed, never stable, not even within a single author.

Hall then arrives back at criticisms sometimes levelled at cultural studies, that it is not a discipline but rather a free for all, and that anybody or anything can be labelled cultural studies without formal criteria or qualification, that cultural studies is a tower of babble and incoherent “theoretical noise” (Hall in During, 2007, p. 35). Hall is very clear in replying to those critics:

Although cultural studies as a project is open-ended, it can't be simply pluralist in that way. Yes, it refuses to be a master discourse or a meta-discourse of any kind. Yes, it is a project that is always open to that which it doesn't yet know, to that which it can't name. But it does have some will to connect; it does have some stake in the choices it makes. [...] It is a serious enterprise, or project, and that is inscribed in what is sometimes called the 'political' aspect of cultural studies. Not that there's one politics already inscribed in it. But there is something *at stake* [Hall's emphasis] in cultural studies, in a way that I think, and hope, is not exactly true of many other very important intellectual and critical practices. Here one registers the tension between a refusal to close the

field, to police it and, at the same time, a determination to stake out some positions within it and argue for them. This is the tension – the dialogic approach to theory ... (Hall in Daring, 2007, p. 35)

What connects different cultural studies practices is not a discrete body of knowledge but rather what one seeks to achieve with knowledge – what is elsewhere described as cultural studies commitment to both intellectually understand as well as to transform culture, or at least to tell stories about a culture that facilitate its transformation. This is how cultural studies activates politics.

Cultural studies' refusal to play into the power discourses about knowledge has been understood to threaten underlying social relations of society. For this reason, conservative adherents to such formations have been virulent in their attempts to discredit cultural studies. Rejecting the authoritative stance that many conventional forms of knowledge adopt, it has not always been easy to show that cultural studies is more than *laissez faire* at the same time as declining the invitation to close off the area to emergent forms of knowing and cultural activity.

What gives cultural studies its edge is its willingness, indeed its demand, to put what is at stake squarely on the table and contest positions between authors while refusing them the comfort of withdrawing behind the veils of objectivity and the pretence to totalities and impartial disciplinary representations. While this reveals the contours of power, especially within institutions of knowledge, cultural studies exposes itself as well as its others for what they are – a staking out of positions based on whatever qualifies as valid in the re-production of relations in the discourse of a particular group or community in which such relationships become both the foundation of and henceforth justification for a specific kind of discourse. Working within cultural studies, however, does not call for a static adherence to such discourses. Indeed, cultural studies calls for an ever evolving articulation of positions and situations for just as cultures change, so too must our relationships in them.

So cultural studies is never cosy with its precedents, or antecedents, or even its practitioners and its descendants. There is, and always should remain, in the centre of its practice, scope for contestation and ambivalence. For cultural studies does not adopt as part of its project a totalised image or understanding of the world that *is*, as One, a cohered unity, a completed form. Rather cultural studies sees both culture and cultural studies practice as a process, a work which is always partial, and always incomplete, without an end goal to which it aims or moves towards. What there is, in cultural studies, is a constant staking out of positions in an ever changing field of fluid relations in which cultural studies seeks to actively give voice to ever

graduating difference, particularly difference that is or has been only partially or never heard before. This is the political project of cultural studies.

It now becomes clear that there really is no end to history, at least not in the teleological sense that Habermas (in Foster, 1983) or Fukuyama (1992) see it, because there is always scope for further elaboration, even within existing structures and formations. Just as cultural studies sees culture and society not as stable but rather as a field of competing ideologies, actors, and formations, so cultural studies itself continues to transform and change. What holds cultural studies together, according to Hall, is a commitment to articulating the political stakes that are being played out in any particular cultural setting, including its own stances and stakes. This is why cultural studies at least always raises the possibility of “a transformation of the social order” (Miller, 2001, p. 7).

Along with the speaking positions cultural studies adopts comes also a consideration of who it speaks to. Hall explicitly describes and identifies what he and others set out to achieve at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham in terms of Gramsci's 'organic intellectual'. This is a model for Hall's much sought after cultural studies figure, the intellectual worker who pursues two planes of activity, that of being a theorist and an intellectual at the same time as addressing not only theorists and intellectuals, but also those who don't belong to that class. This is how Hall describes the subject:

[...] it is the job of the organic intellectual to know more than the traditional intellectuals do; really know, not just to pretend to know, not just to have the facility of knowledge, but to know deeply and profoundly. So often knowledge for Marxism is pure recognition the production again of what we have always known! [...] there are no theoretical limits cultural studies can turn back. But the second aspect is just as crucial: that the organic intellectual cannot absolve himself or herself from the responsibility of transmitting those ideas, that knowledge, through the intellectual function, to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class. And unless those two fronts are operating at the same time, or at least unless those two ambitions are part of the project of cultural studies, you can get enormous theoretical advance without any engagement at the level of the political project. (Hall in During, 2007, p. 38-39)

Hall grounds his cultural studies worker not only in the privileged domains of the academy, but also requires that the knowledge cultural studies produces penetrates into everyday life and ordinary culture. This requires the cultural studies worker to not only be thoroughly conversant with bodies of knowledge he or she deals with within the institution, to not only critique that knowledge and the taken-for-granted assumptions within which knowledge is embedded and circulates, to not only move beyond the demarcations and territorial boundaries of such discourses and uncover

hitherto unexamined relations of power, but also to work concomitantly on transmitting that knowledge beyond the conversations taking place in the academy and to speak provocatively to those excluded from such conversations and to enable those excluded to not only observe but to participate and intervene in the wider practice and renewal of cultural relations. This makes the political commitment of cultural studies concrete, for no longer does knowledge remain an instrument of demarcation between different subjectivities, those empowered to participate and those excluded. Rather, the 'organic intellectual' understands their role is equally to transmit knowledge and enable those not privileged by the institution to actively participate in the ongoing articulations of culture even when they are not invited. When those excluded can participate in such conversations, so too can they contribute to and actively bring about a transformation of the social and the practices that produce it/it produces.

Hall adds that it is not a requirement to fully reconcile or resolve these two impulses. Neither Gramsci nor cultural studies rejects the importance of theory and neither seek to lessen the critical rigour of intellectual work. Rather Hall understands that the task of the 'organic intellectual' is to cross the boundaries of the institution and enter, theory and all, into the daily practices of ordinary life. But he also wants to acknowledge that to do so one runs a risk of sounding discordant, leaving cultural studies open to criticism as a "simple-minded anti-intellectual populism" (Hall in During, 2007, p. 41). Yet for Hall, the 'organic intellectual' has to deal with both imperatives and that "cultural studies must go on and on living with that tension" (Hall in During, 2007, p. 39).

Hall does not therefore see cultural studies' as pure intellectual research on the one hand, or pure practice on the other. Neither does he see it as a homogenised field of knowledge devoid of tensions, differences, and contradictions. The political commitment, the staking of positions, demanded by cultural studies means that there is an active engagement between theory and practice, an instrumental yet critically driven, theoretically informed engagement of intellectual work in the living spaces of everyday life as well as in the academy.

One of the most important contexts where the political commitment is realised is at the coal face of the transmission of cultural studies – the learning and teaching environment – and the sense of the project students gain when coming into contact with it. This gives students first hand experience of and a direct capacity to engage in the processes of transformation, a transformation that takes place in the very classroom where the student works.

One approach I adopt with students at the University of Malta is to implement teaching strategies which depend on students active participation

in our course of study. By this I mean I not only emphasise each student's active involvement in class discussions, seminars, and tutorials, but also encourage them to grow a different kind of relationship with knowledge. Specifically this means adopting a different stance towards the sources and 'authorities' they encounter at University, not as Gods whose proclamations can never be questioned, but rather as fellow travellers on a quest for greater knowledge in subjects that can never be wholly or fully reduced to a singular panoptical understanding.

This relational relationship between individuals and knowledge both highlights and democratises classroom relationships as well as student relationships with knowledge. By requiring students to dialogue with others as well as with knowledge, students actualise their own knowledge and experience and position themselves as valid equals even within the hallowed halls of the University. So students can come to regard knowledge not as something mysterious and unapproachable that they should be in awe of, or to which they should remain reverent, but as something human with which they can both influence as well as connect directly to their lives. Only on those grounds do I seek students' respect for what we do together at the University.<sup>[6]</sup>

Cultural studies activates rather than pacifies relationships individuals occupy irrespective of whatever community they are coming from or institution they happen to be in. Cultural studies does not therefore focus purely on the intellectual work involved in the production of theoretical abstractions. It embraces the task of practically situating and applying theoretical insights in the actual cultivation of everyday practice. This is why cultural studies in general can be regarded as a form of practice, and why many practitioners of cultural studies talk about “doing cultural studies”<sup>[7]</sup> or speak of the practice of cultural studies.

### **What does cultural studies practice-led research look like?**

If, as Grossberg suggests, cultural studies is a way of a “politicising theory and theorising politics” (2010), and, as Toby Miller adds, cultural studies “combines abstraction and grounded analysis” (Miller, 2001, p. p 3), what

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[6] One of the rewards in this approach to learning and teaching is the student feedback one sometimes receives, particularly comments such as “The lectures were very insightful & refreshing [...] which helps keep us more interested, confident, & induces us to take part”, or “This study unit helped me think more deeply on common day situations & also to visualise art and design in a different way” and “This study unit is relevant to my degree as it helped me think outside [the] box and think more critically which in time will help me in future designs.” Anonymous student evaluation, 2014.

[7] For example, Paul Du Gay et al. (2003) title their book about the Sony Walkman *Doing Cultural Studies*.



then does Hall's 'organic intellectual' (as Gramsci foresaw) actually do? How does the analytical grounding of theoretical abstractions give a cultural studies practitioner additional traction in everyday life and culture?

There are a number of ways cultural studies actualises practice. Earlier, I outlined my own motivation in combining cultural studies with my creative artistic production. I will now examine other examples of cultural studies practice.

I have elsewhere argued that practice-led research introduces rhetorical strategies that challenge conventional scientific discourses and the institutions within which they circulate (Grech 2006a). Hazel and Dean have subsequently pointed out that “conventional definitions of 'research'” that underpin common academic suppositions suggest that “knowledge is normally verbal or numerical” (2009, p. 3). The communication strategies of art – the means of artistic expression – complicate knowledge because they bring to bear nuanced forms and ways of speaking and knowing. These are not always reconcilable with the formal conventions of scientific and academic writing and scholarly research. As Hazel and Dean suggest, “the novel may convey the impact of historical events on the lives of ordinary people in ways which are difficult to glean from [historical] sources, which show the information they contain in a new light, and which are intellectually and emotionally extremely powerful” (2009, p. 3). One can readily substitute a painting such as Goya's *The Third of May 1808* or his equally powerful *Here neither* for the writer's novel and arrive at the same conclusion. Historical facts presented in conventional academic form certainly point to the same context, but an artistic account of the same event can arouse empathy in the receiver which both deepens and humanises one's understanding of the real impact of those events. Should not empathic and emotional knowledge be regarded as a valid form of knowledge?

There are similarities between art and the way cultural studies works in the academy. As with artistic production, cultural studies enables researchers to adopt different strategies in the way they utter their work that likewise challenge academic conventions. These challenges in part have to do with the mode of address cultural studies adopts just as much as the actual forms of research and learning and teaching outputs it engenders. This, as Hall argued, is due not only to the imperative in cultural studies to understand culture, not only to develop abstractions to represent such findings, but also to communicate those findings beyond and outside the privileged domains of the academy. Cultural studies mobilises intellectual work in a cultural (and political) as well as practical sense both inside and outside the University. Like art, cultural studies moves beyond the usual realms and institutional discourses established by the academy.

One of the strategies cultural studies adopts in doing this is to abandon the idea that knowledge is (or should be) objective, dispassionate and disinterested. On the contrary, cultural studies adopts a mode of address that engages research objects as experienced by the researcher. Cultural studies values the subjectivity and the passion of the researcher as an intricate and intimate part of the research (Johnson et al. 2004, p. 16-19, McRobbie, 1999, p. 98-99, Gray, 2003). This, in part, is what Hall is talking about when he asks for something to be at stake in the work of cultural studies.

Addressing the 'unconventional' approach cultural studies takes in relation to the researcher's speaking position, Simon During describes cultural studies as "anti-methodological" (During, 2005, p. 8). Citing Nick Couldry's *Inside Culture* (2000), During signals his agreement when Couldry says that method in cultural studies is more like a "path of reasoning" (During, 2005, p. 8), a notion During shortly after elaborates as

materialist and reflective (that is, it continually examines its own development and processes); it is anti-positivist (that is, it does not believe culture can be accounted for in objective facts); and it is theoretically eclectic.[...] cultural studies is united not by a discrete set of theoretical references but by a dual impulse which are vaguer than a method: a will to interpret the culture within the protocols of academic knowledge (providing evidence and citations for arguments; referring to well-recognised general concepts; implicitly or explicitly placing one's work within the disciplinary field; exposing one's writing to debate, and engaging in debate with others, etc.) as well as a (political) drive to connect with everyday life as lived outside the academy, and especially as lived by those with relatively little power or status. (During, 2005, p. 8-9)

This brings During to conclude that the two most salient features that characterise cultural studies are that it is 'engaged' and that it is 'self reflective'. During later elaborates the notion of engagement, for it is here that cultural studies distinguishes itself as both political and as a form of practice-led research. This is how During outlines cultural studies' imperative to engage:

By engagement – let me repeat – I mean a sensitivity to the ways in which culture is (in part) a field of power relations involving centres and peripheries, status hierarchies, connections to norms that impose repressions or marginalisations. But I also mean a commitment to celebrating or critiquing cultural forms (often in relation to the social field in which they are produced), to producing accounts of culture that can be fed back into cultural production and/or to producing new connections between various cultural forms and people (mainly, of course, students) in 'ordinary life'.

It is because cultural studies is engaged that it belongs to the humanities rather than to the social sciences which claim to analyse their objects *objectively* [During's emphasis]. And it is because it is engaged that it can so easily become a factor in cultural production itself. (During, 2005, p. 9)

During's understanding of cultural studies will be regarded by some scholars as unacceptable and out of step with the academy, for the engagement During is calling for puts it already at odds with the default communication strategies of orthodox scholarship, namely the objective modes of speech one is supposed to adopt in scientific writing and research production. During then reinforces the contrary nature of cultural studies by acknowledging that cultural studies addresses not just those who are already seeped in the discourses of the academy, cultural studies can and often does feed directly back into the cultures from which the intellectual work issued from in the first place.

This brings During to identify some direct inputs cultural studies has in the production of culture. He instances the work of young black British artists of the 1980s such as Chila Burman, Sonia Boyce, Isaac Julien, and Keith Piper whom During links to the theoretical work of Homi Bhabha and Paul Gilroy amongst others. Then citing Angela McRobbie, During reminds his reader that many journalists since the 1990s are both informed by and had their education in media *and* cultural studies. Even writers such as Don DeLillo and Jonathan Franzen, During then points out, exhibit a knowledge of contemporary cultural theory which they deploy as well as instantiate in their writing. During then rounds off on the fact that...

in countries such as Australia and the UK, cultural studies is providing the basic understanding and interpretation of contemporary culture and society in art, design, and even fashion schools, and, as such, is presupposed in much work in these fields, especially in avant-garde work. The political sense of engagement emerges surprisingly easily into this more neutral, almost economic sense of engagement. (During, 2005, p. 9-10)

Cultural studies already possess a long history of directly situating knowledge and research production as practical everyday outputs. This can be seen in the work of contemporary artists, designers, film-makers, the work of journalists, in new media productions, as well as in the academy. As suggested, cultural studies provides different approaches to help artists research their work just as it provides tools for producing it. As it has with my own artistic work, cultural studies can influence and even alter the way one thinks about and approaches one's practice.

It is possible now to argue that the most influential manifestation of cultural studies today is not the University at all but rather in the real world of culture and its myriad productions. Within that world, it is even clearer that cultural studies relevance as an intellectual practice is at the forefront of innovation, creativity, and production. So much so that During uncomfortably admits that it is possible to see cultural studies itself as "a product of the hyper-fluid economy and culture of contemporary global markets" (During, 2005, p. 11).

Cultural studies not only helps artists to participate in the daily production of culture, it has also influenced the way knowledge itself is generally understood. Examples of how cultural studies has innovated itself and the field of knowledge include the turn (first evidenced in Australian cultural studies) in the 1970s from the more classic sociological work being conducted at the CCCS to embrace experimental forms of theorising inspired by French poststructuralism. Led by Meaghan Morris, cultural studies authors in Australia, the US and the UK began to formulate new kinds of positioned writing as well as openly displaying the speculative and creative character of theoretical work (Lewis, 2003). A more recent example of this positioned practice is Katrina Schlunke's *Bluff Rock* (2005), an account of a massacre of Australian indigenous people near Tenterfield in Northern NSW during the 19th century. Taken from a number of perspectives (including Schlunke's own personal and familial connection with the region), *Bluff Rock* tells its story as if the land itself was writing an autobiography (the book is subtitled "An Autobiography of a Massacre", see Schlunke, 2005, p. ix-x).

Also in the 70s began emerging new ethnographies tracing teenager cultures from the 50s on (Clarke & Hall et al., 1978, Hall & Jefferson, 1993, Hebdige, 1979), while Hall et al's cultural study of the Sony Walkman (2003) pointed to practical approaches to conducting cultural studies research. This opened the door for other ethnographic research into soap opera (Ang, 1999, Brundsen, 2000, McRobbie, 1999) and black youth culture (Gilroy, 1993, 2007). Drawing heavily on feminist critiques of power and patriarchal 'authority', fictocriticism (first evidenced in Australian cultural studies according to Lewis, 2003) is another cultural studies innovation that adopted imagined speaking positions to articulate positions for which empirical evidence was not available. These are some of the ways that cultural studies has both modified and innovated conventional scholarship and academic practice.

### **So why no cultural studies in Malta?**

If cultural studies is so intimately concerned with and connected to contemporary life, culture, and society, and cultural studies' engagement with everyday practice places it at such an advantage to produce and deploy knowledge in both the academy as well as beyond, the question remains: Why has cultural studies found it so difficult to find a place at the University of Malta, and, more importantly, in Maltese culture and society generally? The answer to this question is difficult to pin down because the analyses needed to prize apart the machinations of contemporary life have not yet been fully assembled or brought to bear in this country. This is at least partly due to the history that has shaped the University's role in Maltese society.

That Universities everywhere are deeply implicated in maintaining the establishment in society is incontestable. What is not always as evident is the dissenting or subversive role that Universities, or at least elements within the University, sometimes play. Often located in Arts and Humanities related contexts, counter-hegemonic voices from within the University (at least sometimes) contest, if not disrupt, the unquestioned rule of authority and the representations that authority deploys in justifying society's status quo.

The University of Malta's history is seeped in a clerical tradition and goes back to a time when, under the Knights of St John, the clergy and the rulers of society were much the same. Compounding that, at least during the colonial era, the University undoubtedly 'toned down' its resistance to British rule in order to survive. This meant that many of the competing, reflexive and oppositional voices found in avant-garde modernist intellectual movements in the (Western) world and the role they played in developing critical and alternative discourses in society during the 19th and 20th Centuries have to a significant extent been compromised, if not altogether thwarted, in Malta.

This was particularly evident in the visual arts, as Dominic Cutajar and Emmanuel Fiorentino show in their essay "Trends and Influences in Maltese Art 1800 - 1964" (Mallia Milanese, 1988, p. 231-286). Taking Cutajar and Fiorentino's thoughts to their logical conclusions, one can argue that with the exception of the Nazarene movement of the 19th Century (a nostalgic minor branch of Northern European Romanticism) and Futurism (a *mucho* fascist and techno-positivist art movement), modern art, and particularly the critical intellectual avant-garde, never made it to Malta.

I acknowledge that Kenneth Wain argues that there is evidence to suggest that movements such as cubism, abstract, and abstract expressionism were practiced in Malta from about the 1950s onwards. However, as Wain admits, this was taking place well after these movements were at the critical edge of modern art. Furthermore, it appears that the Maltese artists who practiced these forms did so primarily from a stylistic and formal point of view. Few had any but the most basic grasp of or commitment to the aesthetic, cultural, intellectual and philosophical critiques those movements were making. Consequently, it can be argued that the primary reason Maltese artists adopted modern approaches in their work was not because they sought to critique culture and society, which was at least partly the motivation behind artists like Malevich, but did so mostly out of appreciation for particular stylistic values (see Wain in Vella, 2008, p. 29 - 81).

So too it can be said that the tradition of critiquing culture and society (and one's superiors and rulers) by and within the academy is a largely absent legacy at the University of Malta, a lack which restrains cultural and

intellectual debate, particularly those associated with the questioning of power and the (re-)production of social relations.

Cultural studies' emphasis on contemporary culture and its sensitivity to the way power works in everyday social relations would do much to identify the nature of day to day cultural interactions and transformations in Malta. Such analytical and intellectual work cannot be borrowed from studies of other cultures and superimposed onto a local context to produce the sort of incisive penetrations of culture needed to deeply understand Maltese society. For to reveal how a culture works, one must be prepared to deconstruct the very nuts and bolts that hold and keep a society together, and as no two societies are identical, no matter how closely they resemble each other on the surface, specific studies must be made of the particular culture one wants to understand if the object really is to understand it. This in part is why cultural studies demands that intellectual work and the researcher must be positioned in relation to their equally situated object.

Thus to understand why cultural studies is yet to make a real impact in Malta, one needs to understand how Maltese culture works, and by that I mean one has to deconstruct how knowledge, power and authority are playing out in present day society. In part at least, this would involve learning what is actually and really happening at the University, as both residual as well as main repository of knowledge through which power and authority are again made tangible and emergent.

Mapping contemporary culture would reveal both the strengths of Maltese society as well as the shortcomings, particularly relations between power and who exercises it and who and what is marginalised by it. Yet to do so may ultimately not be in the University's interest, or at least not in the interest of those who have the highest stake in the way it presently operates, for if that were done, it would expose the privileges and investments enshrined in and by and through the University's own governmental, administrative and hierarchical structures.

That there are sectional interests deeply staked within organisational structures that not only reflect the University's own power relations, but also reproduce themselves in related institutions and social arrangements in wider society, not to mention conditioning the formations that both mediate and govern as well as justify and explain the everyday norms and contours of the 'Maltese way of life', should surprise no-one.

Yet let me stress the point: I am not suggesting by any means that the University is the epicentre of governance in Malta. What I am saying is that it is deeply implicated in and right throughout the intricate and elaborate fabric that both refrains and contains people's ability to imagine and construct both

existing as well as potentially new or alternative representations of themselves and the lives of the communities in which they live.

Now if the University were to embrace a task of investigating and analysing those systems of representation, it might be accused of being politically engaged as well as deliberately instrumentalising its role of shaping the way society works. It is not difficult to foresee conservative objections to this. They might sound like this: 'But the University should remain impartial', or, 'The job of University is to impart knowledge and educate people, not to influence or to change society!' or even 'People have a right to expect that, like the Judicial system, the University merely transmits the directives it receives from its 'higher' authorities, the elected Minister of Education who stands in for and represents 'The Maltese People.'

Such objections obviate the actual political role all institutions play in society, whether they are institutions of knowledge and education, justice, health, finance or public administration. Objections to institutions openly declaring their interests and inputs in public discourse also help ensure existing relations of power and inclusion and exclusion remain invisible and beyond scrutiny.

An institution like the University is always directly complicit in forming the political, cultural, and social terrain that underpins not just the way society imagines and understands itself, but how it actually works. The central role such an important institution plays in both defining and conditioning culture would only be denied by the most naive, or the most perverse. Such denials preserve and conserve existing social and cultural relations.

Cultural studies enables individuals to gain a better and more critical understanding of themselves and the cultures from which they come or in which they live. With that understanding comes a better appreciation of the possibilities and liabilities as well as uniqueness of the way of life that these enshrine. Enriching individuals with a greater sense of self knowledge, awareness and understanding of their relationship with others in society enables individuals to participate in the day to day business of their world. This helps people to make better, more informed assessments of the issues that confront them and their community as well as participate in maintaining and/or reforming aspects of their society.

### **What would cultural studies do in Malta?**

Particularly when a culture is changing rapidly, as Maltese culture seems to be at present, a critical body of self knowledge and awareness (in individual as well as collective senses) is all the more necessary. Only with careful

examination and deliberation, a process which must remain open, rigorous as well as inclusive, can a community actively embark on the task of shaping and reshaping itself so as to reflect the actual aspirations of its members. Only when public discourses are inclusive enough so that differences of opinion and disagreement become acceptable – if not the norm – and conventional commonly held knowledge, truth and ideology does not silence or overwhelm or simply ridicule alternative or dissenting voices, can it be said that individuals genuinely participate in the production of everyday life of their society. Cultural studies offers skills and tools to enable individuals as well as groups to become critically self aware and thus to insist as well as be empowered to ensure that their communal way of life also reflects their personal realities.

As noted above, Cutajar and Fiorentino (1988) demonstrate that some important self-reflexive work has been done in critiquing Maltese culture, at least historically. That there has been so little to follow that up itself points to a major problem of maintaining a critical cultural dialogue in this country, particularly in relation to the visual arts. One significant addition to Cutajar and Fiorentino's groundbreaking work, however, is an ambitious collection of essays titled *Cross-Currents*, published in 2008, three decades after Cutajar and Fiorentino started the conversation. Yet as brave and admirable as it is, *Cross-Currents* humbly declares in its opening stanza that “A comprehensive history of contemporary art in Malta has still to be written” (Vella, 2008, p. 7). Such a statement still (and should also always) hold true, for there is an ever present need to broaden discussions about what people do, particularly when it comes to art and culture. Just as there are always new interpretations possible, even of old, and considered to be well understood forms and works and expressions. In addition, there remains an urgent need to bring out some of the many nuances that still lay hidden beneath the veneer of what is generally understood as contemporary cultural and artistic practice and production in Malta. One problem in this collection is the obvious focus on “artists” in the conventional sense, many of whom well established, at least in the local sense. While this focus may be understandable given a general lack of interest in Maltese art and artists in much of Malta's recent history, cultural studies would open the dialogue further by considering different forms of creative practice and production rather than limit itself to those practices carried out by a few 'exemplary' artists (and in which, in any case, the notion of “artist” is mostly restricted to 20<sup>th</sup> Century 'norms'). Cultural studies is interested in the aberrant, the unexpected, the unusual, the ignored, the overlooked, the unique, the rejected, and the unseen as much as it is interested in the 'notable', 'admirable', 'exemplary', and the 'recognised' and 'mainstream'. In Foucault's terms, cultural studies would help write a range of



*petite histoires* of Maltese art rather than reducing it to a unified grand narrative.<sup>[8]</sup>

Another good, but also singularly standing example of challenging intellectual work is Geoffrey Hull's *The Maltese Language Question: A case study in cultural imperialism* (1993), a book which meticulously argues that the formal codification of the Maltese language in the colonial period was fundamental in establishing and reinforcing British rule in Malta. What Hull's book ultimately does, however, is complicate and challenge commonly received ideas that Maltese language and Maltese identity are intimately connected, a connection that today circulates as an undisputed sign for "Maltese" authenticity.

So too, Paul Sant Cassia's "Authors in search of a character: Personhood, Agency and Identity in the Mediterranean" (1991, p. 1-17) identifies traits and tendencies that may permeate many Mediterranean societies. One of the most useful insights Sant Cassia provides has to do with understanding how actors choose and adapt the roles they play in everyday life, how these are actualised in the actor's public and private personae, and how these role complexes facilitate local resistance to external rule, governance and domination. Sant Cassia follows this up with another essay, "History, Anthropology, and Folklore in Malta" (1993), which focuses on how (Northern European) academic discourses such as anthropology and sociology have shaped both scholarly scientific as well as (and arguably more importantly) popular understanding of Maltese culture and identity. Significantly, Sant Cassia points out that "There has not yet been many studies of 'minority' groups in Malta" (1993, p. 312) thus foreshadowing further directions for social, cultural and anthropological research.

In a later essay, Sant Cassia turns his attention to *għana*, a traditional form of popular music found in Malta. In what is a rare example of a cultural studies approach to Maltese culture and society, Sant Cassia suggests that the rediscovery of traditional folk music signifies attempts in Malta to both invert the values attached to its sense of being on the margins of Europe as well as producing alternative notions of modernity. Sant Cassia's most revealing observations, however, come in his concluding remarks;

Societies, particularly those that cannot anymore control their interpretations of their past (meaning interpretations by dominant groups), increasingly attempt to recover it through nostalgia. [...] Nostalgia can be seen as a new way of imagining communities, harnessed in and by the post-nation state, an attempt at a connivance of a recovery of a lost childhood, a return to the m(other)land.

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[8] Foucault spells out his *petite narrative* approach to history across several sources, most notably *The Birth of the Clinic*, *The Order of Things*, and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (see Rabinow, 1991, 3 - 29). For an application of Foucault's thought on education methodology, see Kathleen S. Berry's "Locations (or Not) of Critical Pedagogy in *Les Petite et Les Grandes Histoire*" in McLaren and Kincheloe, 2007, 79-96.

Nostalgia, often the erosion of memory into (and as) history, helps create frameworks of interpretation (and narration) for sites of memory. [...] the familiarization of the marginal (such as għana), and its celebration as marginal [becomes] a means to claim centrality. (Sant Cassia, 2000, p. 299)

Although Sant Cassia's interests are anthropological, and here he limits himself to exploring traditional forms of cultural expression in Malta (see also his "Memory, Identity, and Experience: Contested Pasts in a Maltese Medieval Town"), he nevertheless foreshadows what cultural studies approaches would promise present day understanding of Maltese culture if it were developed and incorporated more fully at the University.

Cultural studies would build on the work Sant Cassia, Vella, Hull, Cutajar and Fiorentino, and others such as Carmel Borg and Peter Mayo have to some degree already instigated. For example, in music, cultural studies would open up areas of investigation about what music people in Malta actually listen to, explore the significance, meaning and influence of contemporary musical forms such as rave (which Sant Cassia acknowledges is present in Malta, see his 2000, p. 287), rap, hip hop, rock and the alternative music scene. Focusing on these (and other) largely 'invisible' expressions, cultural studies would help outline and further understand not only how nostalgic attachments to għana may be part of a broad attempt to enshrine traditional forms of expression and thus install and reinforce conservative notions of contemporary Maltese identity, cultural studies would throw different contours of contemporary society into higher relief, flushing out hitherto hidden presences and relations of so-called peripheral groups and 'minorities' as well as their dominating mainstream cousins whose ideologies, structures and institutions seek to capture the allegiances of an imagined and totalised Maltese community.

That counter-hegemonic cultural discourses exist in Malta, both within the academy and beyond, is clear. Yet competing discursive practices find it difficult to achieve adequate visibility and representation beyond established polemic oppositions that traditionally define and bind Maltese discourses. As long as different and dissenting voices are reduced to pre-existing binary formations, the values underpinning conservative views concerning the qualities and composition of Maltese society will remain structurally untouched. When one does encounter expressions of difference and/or dissent which resist such binarisation, they either remain obscure or indecipherable, or they circulate amongst specialised groups or sub-publics or simply remain within private domains of expressions. The struggle is to find adequate and appropriate forms of expressing difference in an open, generally available and accessible way, not as examples of the extraordinary, but simply as part of the richness, texture, and variability of the everyday.

In reaction, marginalisation sometimes pushes dissenting voices to adopt ever more extreme stances sometimes expressed in acts of violence. One such example of this is the vandalism of the Mnajdra Temples in 2001. Perhaps it comes to be believed by those who stand on the edges of the communities in which they live that only with such extreme acts of opposition can their voices be finally heard. What might be less obvious is that acts of violence usually come to be regarded – perhaps correctly – as both wrong and indefensible, and then dismissed – perhaps incorrectly – as aberrations or perversions of civic society. Yet if probing investigations of the possible significance and motivation behind acts like the Mnajdra Temples incident are lacking, so too critiques of the appropriateness and desirability of institutional responses to such actions such as the closing off of the temples sites and increased security surveillance are also missing.

The same can be said of other events such as when a group of African asylum seekers, protesting against their treatment by the Maltese Government, scaled the perimeter fence of the Malta airport runway in 2012 and halted arrivals and departures for a number of hours while security checks on the runway were made.<sup>[9]</sup> The action was apparently greeted with dismay and dismissed by the Maltese press who failed to thoroughly investigate and report the incident.

The easy way in which acts of difference and opposition, violent or otherwise, are classified and interpreted, as well as the immediate recourse to heavy-handed authoritarian police remedies, or, conversely, complete ignorance, avoidance and inaction, only damages and further limits the community's ability to engage meaningfully with differing positions. Only when difference is afforded the right of articulation can oppositional positions be brought into a meaningful discursive exchange and individual rights to participate in Maltese society be fully established. Art, whether it be high – such as a gallery exhibition – or low – such as graffiti or popular music or “underground” movement – has always been, at least in the modern and contemporary sense, part of the means of expressing such differences.

There is much more to say about contemporary life and culture than 'official' representations of society presently avail. There is a lot to identify in terms of how institutions unify, cohere and ultimately seek to control the communities they purport to represent. There is much to understand about how institutions shape the means for self understanding as well as transformation. And there is much work to do in examining how institutions manage community expectations; how they set limits that both censor and legally proscribe what can be said in public; how they pacify and coerce their subjects, keeping individuals restrained or receptive or pliant; how

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[9] I became aware of this event because a visitor just happened to be returning to the UK that day and he rang to tell me that his departure flight had been delayed.

institutions control the flow of information, how information is interpreted and how it is allowed to inform existing bodies of knowledge; how institutions reinforce existing social practices, hierarchies, divisions and demarcations; how institutions direct a community to form, inform and sensitise itself to the world around it. These are some areas of research cultural studies would open to further investigation.

There are natural disadvantages too in being an island that compounds institutional tendencies and inadequacies. Some of those have been brought about by both pro-, and also reactionary and anti- formations to colonialism. These have marginalised and further isolated people in Malta even further by feeding an inward looking island insularity devoid of critical self reflection. Combined with other features like a patriarchal command-obey authority structure that still dominates social relations, these are some of the factors that continue to condition social bonds and subordinate expressions of difference and dissent. This results in a lack of frank and open debate that would critically cross examine and challenge dominant and received ideas as well as critically put under the microscope whatever alternative arguments might be put. Even becoming informed about certain contested topics such as prostitution and abortion and stem cell research is prohibited merely by marginalising someone conversant in such issues as 'eccentric', 'extreme' or 'unusual'. These are just some of the directions cultural studies would encourage further research and investigations.

Cultural studies would help reveal as well as complicate the cultural discourses in Maltese society. It would show that the contours of contemporary life are never as simple or straightforward as they appear. It would chart the centres of power, mark out the peripheries, and the ways and means these are formed and changed. Exposing these by extending the range of topics and approaches that scholarly practice-led research can follow is one contribution cultural studies would make. Broadening the idea as well as the parameters of acceptable research practices at the University is another.

### **Responses and solutions: What might Maltese cultural studies look like?**

I began this essay by detailing the reasons I became interested in attaching a cultural studies approach to my practice as an artist. I then outlined the qualities that make cultural studies a form of practice-led research in itself. Then I considered some reasons why cultural studies has thus far struggled to find a discrete place in the taught curriculum at the University of Malta as well as what it might offer. Now I want to imagine what a Maltese cultural studies practice might look like.

I can see different kinds of individuals being interested in cultural studies, studying cultural studies, and using cultural studies in both their personal as well as in their professional lives. These individuals would come from diverse backgrounds, nationalities, ages, genders and race.

Creative people would be attracted because in cultural studies they find tools to both question and extend what is understood as knowledge and creativity as well as modal possibilities for extending their practice. I see artists and designers coming up with new imaginative creations that interweave many rich cultural traditions that Maltese society can and should already by now be claiming as its own; writers delving into topics in ways no-one ever before thought possible and yet formulating treatments of such events that turn even the most banal moment into a site for thoughtful discovery. I see craftspeople innovate, enhance and contemporise their practice by focusing on connections between themselves and their work and the localities within which they live. I hear musicians and see dancers and performers inspired by the unexpected, creating new languages in dance, music, and in performance art, inventing as yet unimagined forms to communicate how they feel and think and experience things. And I envisage all sorts of cultural and environmental innovations that enhance and reflect a sense of place and the people who live there.

I see smart young people working in new media developing or extending existing uses and understanding of social media or games or aesthetically enhanced applications delivering sophisticated information, or providing goods and services in fun and playful ways. I see other cultural studies informed individuals taking up leading positions in the media and introducing a form of investigative journalism and critical independent commentary not presently evident in Malta. I see such individuals working as creators, producers, writers and directors of television programmes, advertising, film and other televisual means of communication.

I imagine researchers working on original projects for a range of Maltese institutions in areas such as health, education, the provision of social services, services for children, the sick, the elderly, not to mention critical alternative approaches to spatial planning and land use. I imagine cultural studies informed individuals leading and democratising existing social processes through projects initiated by local councils that enable greater community participation in local environmental conservation, festas, fireworks displays and other communal and spiritual events. I can even imagine a cultural studies inspired programme that gently and yet sensitively integrates asylum seekers as well as other expat migrant communities into Maltese society.

I hear aural historians working together with local communities to draw out rich and yet to be told stories about the way some people live; see curatorial

staff at Heritage Malta develop new and challenging audience interactive exhibitions that both enrich and entertain as well as inform and educate; I can overhear tourist guides providing fresh and insightful interpretations of historical sites, cultural events, and cultural performances that give visitors to Malta a unique experiences of people and their culture as well as a sense of place and space; and I hear adult and community educators working with special interest groups discovering new ways of thinking about their beloved subjects.

Most of all, I imagine people interpreting information, be it from the media, electronic books or everyday life with intelligent scepticism, ordinary citizens who are sensitive and aware both of themselves as individuals and of their presence in the world as a collective with a specific history. I see people able to reason through often contradictory messages in the news, via the web, on the street, and in the home, and critically engage with their world in ways that explore and understand their own subjective relationships with what might be happening rather than just accepting at face value the stories others are telling them through that information.

Cultural studies would help people to devise authentic responses to situations that reflect who they *feel* they are, people sensitised to the interconnectedness of things and able to situate and understand themselves more critically and intelligently as well as relatively, as part of an entire life affirming ecology. The education cultural studies gives people, both individually and collectively, delivers increasing autonomy based on a growing capacity to “read the word and read the world”<sup>[10]</sup> as well as to re-write it. What I would not hear much anymore are people making excuses for themselves with self dismissing and belittling statements such as “But this is Malta!”

Instead I see the irrepressible humanity of the people living in Malta continue to mature, from the “maybe” and “if only” culture of mediocrity in the past, to a “lets give it try” attitude that seems to be emerging, until people living in Malta finally embrace and manifest what every human collective and individual can achieve anywhere in the world, the wilfulness “to be” in a “will do” society.

One of the things that strikes me about Malta, once one gets to know the lay of the land and learns about the nooks and crannies that exist in what is still a

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[10] Or, as Peter Mayo, referring to Paolo Friere, recently put it in his 45th thesis “The major challenge is to read not only the word and the world but also the construction of the world through the mass media.” Mayo, P., (2014), “Competences and the Right to Lifelong Education. 45 Theses for an Alternative Critical Discourse” delivered at University of Barcelona, 22nd May, Laboratori Ettore Gelpi, sighted at [www.academia.edu/7141584/Competences\\_and\\_the\\_Right\\_to\\_Lifelong\\_Education\\_45\\_Theses\\_for\\_an\\_Alternative\\_Critical\\_Discourse](http://www.academia.edu/7141584/Competences_and_the_Right_to_Lifelong_Education_45_Theses_for_an_Alternative_Critical_Discourse)

bitter-sweet country, is how innately talented and capable some people living here are. This is even more surprising when one recalls how these individuals struggle against all odds and with so few resources to help them discover and develop their skills and talents so that they too can play their role in elaborating the rich texture of human possibilities on a global stage. The fact that there is such diversity and richness in the qualities of the people, even though so very little is ever properly recognised or acknowledged, ought to make people confident that the individual in this country can and does achieve the impossible when they set their minds to it.

When I recall Etnikafe's poignantly satirical *Karavan Petlor*, the deliciously irreverent music of *il Brikuni*, the uncompromising installations of Norbert Attard, the thoughtful provocations of the Start group of artists, the collecting passions of art autodidact Joe Philippe Abela, and the eclectic taste of film aficionado Saviour Catania, the inexplicable originality I see in some of the students I've encountered at the University of Malta becomes more contextual. What astonishes me about some individuals I've met and worked with in Malta is their ability to rise above their circumstances and reach heights that belie what can otherwise appear to be a barren landscape devoid of curiosity, creativity or critical self understanding. Even though lacking recognition, the fact that such individuals exist speaks loads for their irrepressible creativity. Just as Austin Camilleri's three legged horse, standing Trojan like at Valletta's city gates, defies the lack of understanding and appreciation it has so far garnered, the irrepressible humanity of these extraordinary ordinary individuals will eventually overcome the limitations one encounters in Malta.

And yet, I have also found myself ruing the lack of opportunities students have as they progress through their studies at the University. No more so than when some have sought advice about how they might continue their education in areas I have taught or opened up for them. Yet without a comprehensive or co-ordinated programme of studies in either contemporary art or cultural studies on offer, I can only advise them to look elsewhere. The last thing a teacher wants is to lose their best students, but a responsible teacher is obliged to act in the best interest of their students rather than pretend otherwise when they know the education students need and want is not available. Teachers are in the business of helping students learn how to live full and productive lives, not keeping classrooms filled with dull and uninspired individuals capable only of mindlessly repeating the dictates of their 'superiors'.

It is unfortunate that the visions some students have developed through their course of studies with me has opened doors for them to leave Malta rather than pursue their education and practices here, for they are precisely the people whose contribution to the cultural and intellectual life of their

communities would become most vital. As long as this appalling situation persists, the question must be asked: Why should it only be students wealthy or determined enough to relocate overseas and pay exorbitant international student fees be the ones who get the education they deserve?

That Malta still loses its most motivated and innovative individuals is shameful and nothing damns the small time narrow-minded visions that guide and control not just the University but the entire community more than the fact that the possibilities presently on offer satisfy only those willing to regurgitate what has been served up to people since time immemorial. Evidently, the problem is the lack of vision guiding the decisions taken by those in positions of leadership, and this points back to a problem that has historically plagued the University, perhaps since its inception. The challenge of stepping outside the norms established by tradition is always daunting, yet is it not the role of creative practice-led researchers to overcome such challenges?

While there are many hardworking individuals presently manning Maltese society, well meaning toilers who have perfectly mastered the responses expected of working within tradition bound systems, only those who muster the self confidence to be different and original rise above their circumstances. Realising self knowing and self critical individuals, people who do rise above the circumstances of today and imaginatively and authentically meet the challenges of tomorrow, this is what cultural studies has to offer not only to the University, but more importantly, to the wider Maltese community.

## **Conclusion**

Theoretically, cultural studies, like anthropology and sociology, interrupts the seamless flow between knowledge, power and authority in the re-production of culture, particularly when these act to suture cohesions between status, taste and value, inclusion and exclusion, domination and subservience. However, the thing that marks cultural studies as an intellectual practice is that it is not only concerned with theorising flows in culture, it also seeks to transform relations these engender so that culture, as Grossberg suggests, “empowers the possibilities that people have to live their lives in just, dignified, and secure ways” (Grossberg, 2010, p. 29). Cultural studies does not valorise age-old performances unless such rituals reflect and represent what people actually do and live by today. Neither does cultural studies seek to cohere and re-package people into a perfect image of 'The Nation' or 'The People' replete with quantified qualities, rights and obligations conferred upon 'citizens' whose actions are henceforth rendered both predictable and



containable within existing social arrangements.<sup>[11]</sup> Rather, cultural studies subjects contemporary cultural bonds and social relations to a considered and sustained critique, exposing as it goes not only the interests of the researcher but also what is at stake for other players in the system.

As an educational strategy, cultural studies makes these critical tools available in the way it engages not only the refined intellectual discourses conducted by and within the academy, but also by those bearing these tools into the production of everyday life and culture – in the first instance, the world of its students. In this way cultural studies has both a capacity as well as the impulse to not only theorise culture and to present its findings in intelligible scholarly and scientific discourse, it also legitimates and recognises ignored or overlooked expressions within the authorised knowledge production systems of society. Acknowledging these hitherto ignored and/or invisible articulations already and inevitably transforms the social order, changing both the nature of the academy as well as sending ripples out into the wider community. At the least, this results in a broadening of discourses, the complication of which frees inhabitants of a community to arrive at new innovative articulations of and for themselves. This is both a theoretical as well as practical project and it is this dual emphasis and imperative that makes cultural studies pre-eminently a form of practice-led research.

Cultural studies, by its very nature, would shear away at the shroud under which the workings of culture reside, the processes that enshrine value and endow meaning in the (re)production of power. The sort of critical self reflection cultural studies practice engenders not only strips the Emperor of his clothes, it also enables utterances presently kept on the margins to be openly expressed, not as the subversive almost incomprehensible warnings of a Courtly Jester or Shakespearean Hamlet's Fool, but as legitimate acts in the expression and communication of difference. Only then can the marginalised lives of individuals living in Malta come and enter and contest the centres where dominant discourse presently refrains and seeks to purge culture of nuance and complexity by keeping in place self serving reproductions of mythologised and nostalgic images of a unified self, identity, and community. Acts presently almost impossible to express or that remain invisible, or acts reduced to illegibility, violence and/or illegality, cultural studies would help rehabilitate into a constantly transforming field of social and cultural relations that form the basis for a more inclusive and vibrant, a more creative and

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[11] See Foucault's analysis of how the nation-State subjugates and proscribes individuals freedom by limiting them to 'rights' and 'responsibilities' of citizenship, a move which, according to Foucault, actually alienates individuals from their rights and freedom to occupy and inhabit and utilise the world along with all the other creatures under the heavens, great and small, as an indivisible whole. See Foucault, M. (2000). *The Subject and Power*. *Power*, 3, (pp. 326-348). London, Penguin.

innovative society. With complementing emphases on both intellectual discourses in the academy as well as discourses circulating widely in the Maltese community, cultural studies is well placed to play a central role in the formation of a critical, self reflexive practice-led learning and teaching and research environment.

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For my son Tui and my daughter Serafina Moana; may you both one day fully reclaim the love and inheritance that's been denied you, due, in no small part, to the deficiencies, inadequacies and indifference of the society in which you were born.

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