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## BOOK REVIEW

John Baldacchino, *Makings of the Sea: Journey, Doubt and Nostalgia*, Gorgias Press, 2010. ISBN: 978-1-61719-940-0

To speak of the Mediterranean is to speak of migration. From the start, hence, any discussion of this geographical region is characterised by mobility, flux, and by an internal tension that defies the levelling tendencies of any generic definitions of cultural identities. Fernand Braudel's classic study of *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* spoke of the sea in relation to the routes that crossed land and water: the sea's networks and connections transformed it into a transnational geographical space that made any singular perception of this sea sound unbecoming to such a perpetually evolving region. This fluidity in our understanding of the region and its multiple groupings of inhabitants, is not only perpetually incomplete—because it is always on the move—but our reasoning must also take account of the undeniable fact that the region is criss-crossed by an influx of currents from outside the peripheries of the area that challenge its political and cultural stability. Iain Chambers reminds us of this as he writes of the characteristic fluctuations in the Mediterranean that affect people all over the region despite the sharing of a common sea:

Today's immigrants from the south of the planet, however feared, despised, and victimized by racism and social and economic injustice, are the historical reminders that the Mediterranean, firmly considered the origin of Europe and the 'West', has always been part of a more extensive elsewhere. If its 'internal' constitution has...always depended on 'external' forces, its histories, cultures, and peoples...have also consistently abandoned its shores for other places. If Ulysses is the mythical figure of the traveller, the stranger, with which that history commences, it is once again with the traveller and the stranger that this history continues (Chambers, 2008, p.39).

Interestingly, or rather, inevitably, it is with the classic figure of Ulysses and that figure's mythical and metaphoric journey that John Baldacchino commences his own substantial contribution to Mediterranean studies, *Makings of the Sea: Journey, Doubt and Nostalgia*. For Baldacchino, the Greek epic story illustrates the idea that the 'journey is an excuse for further journeys. It leaves no choices, but entertains more than an excuse to move on and to keep going in the hope of surviving' (12). Odysseus's journey is, for Baldacchino, a struggle or predicament that haunts our

understanding of the Mediterranean, whether this is expressed in a filmmaker's Eastern European journey in the film *Ulysses's Gaze* (1995) by Theo Angelopoulos, or in Tennyson's depiction of the hero's restlessness on his return home to Ithaca, or again in the Greek Alexandrian poet Constantine Cavafy's musings on the significance of a journey that never ends in *Ithaka*. A fascinating and related aspect of Baldacchino's book is gradually recognised as the reader progresses through the text and realises that the book is itself an embodiment of this epic journey, carrying him or her from one land to another, connecting one discipline to several others, and leaping into the sea during different decades of the twentieth century. As he or she traverses a complex interdisciplinary series of fields, the reader will find that this journey is not an easy one, but then again, a smoother reading would probably serve only to undermine the idea of a horizon that is replete with uncertainties.

The hybridity, richness, and indeed, the doubts that permeate any serious engagement with the Mediterranean are not only palpable in the author's scholarly insights and in the complex moves that the book performs, but especially in the fact that this book is actually only the first of a trilogy of texts on Mediterranean aesthetics that Baldacchino is working on. This first volume, *Makings of the Sea*, focuses on Southern Europe and on specific instances from the literary field and, to a lesser extent, the visual arts in the twentieth century (with fascinating connections between writers and artists like Calvino, Cavafy, Mahfouz, Montale, Sciascia, Pirandello, Guttuso, Kazantzakis, Lorca and Dali). The second volume, *Composed Identities: Sound, Number and Desire*, will study the problem of a Mediterranean identity within the context of musical compositions produced in the region, while the last volume in this project, *The Carob and the Olive: Land, Art and Polity*, will focus on North Africa, the Middle East and the relationship between art, politics and colonialism. The scope of this vast project can be gauged by the author's decision not to restrict his attention to the political history of the region (an area that has been tackled by some precursors) but to weave an 'aesthetics' (or to discuss the possibility of such an 'aesthetics') into the fabric of the geopolitical realities that form the Mediterranean. The author's highlighting of the sheer wealth and depth of artistic thought in the region (hardly surprising, given his academic interests in aesthetics and cultural theory) provides the whole project with a unique approach to Mediterranean studies that is very refreshing.

In his introduction, Baldacchino immediately warns his readers that the quest for some definition of Mediterranean aesthetics is bound to be problematic and that the reader should expect 'more questions than answers' (3). Doubt—the second term in the book's sub-title after 'journey' (the sub-title is borrowed from Angelopoulos's film *Ulysses's Gaze*)—therefore permeates the book's engagement with the art and literature of the region. It also leads to the third and possibly the most significant term in the sub-title, nostalgia, a word that—as the author reminds us—is etymologically linked to the Greek *nóstos*, referring to a perpetual homecoming. Baldacchino links this notion to his own earlier work on the subject (2002), where he coined the term *avant-nostalgia*. *Avant-nostalgia* reverts 'nostalgia into a force that looks forward'; it

is therefore a 'nostalgia that acts as a vanguard' and 'distances the idea of a *return* away from an image of linear regression' (119-120).

This political reading of a return or remembrance brings the reader back to Baldacchino's emphasis on the journey as an essential trait of Mediterranean consciousness, with a heritage that can be traced to the work of Cavafy and others. Sometimes, the art produced in the 'South' may be perceived as a laid-back follower of its Northern counterparts, a kind of waning of artistic strength in a region that lies on the peripheries of the avant-garde movements and places associated with the development of modernism in the twentieth century. Such an assessment of the South would probably place an artist like Sicilian painter Renato Guttuso in a category of artistic misfits: a maker of anachronistic pictures that may look reactionary when compared to a progressive aesthetic that looks suspiciously at any move that transports art away from the sort of teleological drive espoused by so many modernist critics and theorists. Yet, Baldacchino challenges this reading by seeking Guttuso's political critique precisely in the painter's defiance of 'the myth of progress' (77). Rather than seek Guttuso's 'truth' within some political grand narrative, one must seek it in the small narratives of his subject-matter, its cultural specificities and 'banal' details of everyday life.

This postmodern, Lyotardean incredulity toward metanarratives is cited in Baldacchino's concluding pages, where he underscores the importance of understanding that 'our notion of the Mediterranean imaginary begins to reveal a steady resistance to the pretence of certainty' (149). Despite these constant reminders of the author's mistrust of certainties and a preference for an 'aesthetics of suggestion' (148), *Makings of the Sea* is an extremely rich and rewarding account of the ideas and works of several central artistic figures from Southern Europe and Northern Africa, and the book augurs well for the two sequels that will complete this important trilogy.

## REFERENCES

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