Malta, a Story in Pictures

Culture was in the spotlight during 2018 in the Maltese Islands. In October 2012, Malta’s capital Valletta was named European Capital of Culture for 2018. This initiative, established by the European Union, is intended to emphasize the wealth of European cultures and celebrate the cultural elements that are common to Europeans. Locally, it brought about a higher focus on literature, events and advertising material that were specifically invested in culture.

When conducting this research, my primary objective was to demonstrate that although culture is difficult to explain in tangible terms, local photographers have established their own opinions on what to portray. The second objective was to gain detailed understanding on what is portrayed by these twelve photographers in relation to culture. In order to do this, I asked twelve photographers to submit two photos each from their existing repertoire, which according to them best represent ‘Maltese culture’. I then examined these photographs and interviewed the photographers in depth, in order to understand any observable outcomes.

One of the first things I realised is that the context accompanying the photographs provided the photos with much greater depth and at times transformed my understanding or interpretation of the photo altogether. A prominent themes to emerge immediately was the importance attributed to religion and traditional Maltese feasts in most of the photographs submitted. When considering the way photographers replied when asked what culture means to them, it is clear that they seek to portray that which identifies the Maltese as unique, and that religious practices are regarded as playing an important role in this. I was expecting to find an element of celebration as a prominent theme within the photos, especially relating to the Maltese festa. However, I was surprised to find that some photographers presented a grim scene in their photos depicting religious feasts, be it through the usage of black and white photography or the depiction of physical pain that comes with activities such as carrying the statue of the patron saint during religious processions.

During the course of the interviews I conducted, many of the photographers mentioned a sense of loss as one of their reasons for presenting their choice of photos. This was manifested in the types of expressions, the choice of colour, and the focus on activities that no longer take place. Another observable factor amongst the photos is the contrast between the portrayal of elements that are part of everyday life and the portrayal of extraordinary or celebratory circumstances.
This study leads me to conclude that when unprompted, there is a tendency for photographers to refer to the traditional elements of Maltese life to portray culture. Although the photographers described culture as being hard to define, or explained it in general or intangible terms, they all thought of elements that have been known to pertain to Maltese society for a very long time. Religion and the celebration of the Maltese festa are a case in point, as are the references to traditional habits and occurrences such as singing, participating in games, or carrying out traditional jobs. The most spontaneous act of having a conversation was portrayed as a manifestation of culture, although this was done with reference to elderly people.

Culture through the eyes of the twelve photographers was often associated with elements that can be lost and not elements that can evolve. A sense of loss is felt and communicated, as the photographers emphasized the importance of preserving traditional elements. A sense of modernity related to culture is rare, save for one exception. Even then, the young subject portrayed is partaking in a traditional activity that many youths today would not dream of participating in. This is remarkable, seeing as 2018 is the year when Malta’s capital was declared cultural capital and an enormous amount of events were organized in an attempt to push forth Maltese culture. None of these efforts are presented in these photographs. None of the photographers make reference to the activities organized as part of the celebrations and only three of the photos portray Valletta.

This leads me to conclude that there needs to be a thorough discussion about whether the efforts partaken by entities such as Valletta 2018 Foundation or the Arts Council Malta are, in fact, reflected in the sentiments of the Maltese artists and the general Maltese population. The very tangible sense of loss that can be felt in the photos and the photographers’ messages does very little justice to the efforts that are being undertaken in order to elevate various elements of Maltese culture. In view of this, I conclude that there needs to be further in-depth research on whether the concepts that Maltese authorities are attempting to portray; featuring Malta as a vibrant cultural hub, are in fact being reflected in the sentiments of artists in general and the general population. This dissertation has led me to converse with those spearheading artistic direction on behalf of entities such as Arts Council Malta, Valletta 2018 Foundation and the Malta Tourism Authority.

Such conversations lead me to the stark realisation that very little research is being conducted prior to the selection of visuals that accompany published material. On the contrary, the
selection of images is largely haphazard and dependent on individual needs and tastes. My conversations with the photographers interviewed make me realise that there is a series of needs that ought to be addressed.

There is a discrepancy between the photos presented by the unprompted photographers and what local authorities portray when they feature culture in their promotional material on the island. Very little reference is made in the photos submitted to elements such as architectural features, historical sites, activities related to the sea and the sunshine, or the modern, vibrant side of the Maltese islands. Instead, when unprompted with any particular agenda except to present what they believe is culture, photographers selected photographs that are both interesting to look at but, more importantly, laden with personal meaning. Each photographer described their photograph to me referring to elements that were, in fact, not visible in the photos themselves, but tangible in their experiences, having had the opportunity to experience Maltese culture.

Whilst keeping in mind that material about Malta does not only address the Maltese and therefore cannot be entirely personal, I believe that the various entities should at least discuss subjects such as the transitional character of the Maltese nation. By this, I refer to the fact that Malta is prospering as a technological hub, an island invested in block chain and crypto technology, an igaming landmark, a tourism hotspots and the home for massive international festivals, where religion and traditional activity feature very little. However, it is clear from the emergent themes that there is a yearning for the recognition of traditional Maltese elements. Perhaps the very way in which Malta has progressed within a short span of time triggers this sense of attachment to a past that is not so distant. Although I cannot prove this, I can recommend that striking an intelligent balance between a sense of evolution and a sense of what is traditional is of essence, and that there needs to be a sensible middle ground between the romantic, archaic versions of the Maltese islands and the modernity that is leading it to evolve.

On a deeper level that goes beyond photography, I would recommend a thorough investigation on whether a sense of loss related to cultural elements is widespread, and if so, why this sentiment is felt. Answers to these types of questions will benefit society as a whole and provide a clearer idea on what to portray when visually representing Malta. Additionally, striking a balance between visually portraying the mundane elements of Maltese life and the extraordinary events could possibly benefit both the Maltese themselves, who might feel like
the elements they fear losing are being portrayed, and sectors such as tourism, whereby tourists get a more realistic idea of what they can experience, which is in line with current trends in immersive tourism.

My research leads me to recommend that the various entities that are responsible for publishing material that is directly related to culture consider holding discussions across entities about what they are portraying. This is not to say that there should be common rules or stifling regulations when it comes to visual direction. Rather, I would recommend a regular review of what is being published, how it is being published and why it is being published. In order to be able to discuss effectively, I would recommend a repeat of this study, based on how photographers perceive and portray culture when they are not limited by a particular agenda, involving a much larger sample of photographers. This could start leading towards a better understanding on how best to cater for the individual interests of the various entities involved in culture, whilst simultaneously allowing for the artistic expression of the photographers involved.

Finally, I recommend that the visual aspect of portraying Malta is given the importance it deserves. One of the islands’ most distinct features is that there is plenty to see, as well as plenty to do. Many aspects of Malta, including its culture, are visually intense, are a rich experience for photographers and an opportunity for interesting photography. Therefore together with a national cultural strategy that is already in place, there needs to be visual strategy, in order to do justice to the intensely interesting melting-pot of elements and emotions that are the Maltese islands.

This study was only conducted thanks to the help I received in terms of funding. Were it not for the Endeavour Scholarship Scheme, I would simply not have afforded to study. Living alone with a child and a full time career, I never thought I could make it. However, I felt that I needed to study in order to be able to advance properly. Although I already had a considerable amount of experience in the media, I wanted to strengthen my academic knowledge. For a long while, I used to insist that media in Malta needs to be studied professionally, despite the fact that, unlike most professions, it is possible to be introduced to the field without much academia or experience. I am forever grateful to the fact that the Endeavour scheme shared my vision. Thanks to the course, I am able to analyse work matters with more scrutiny, depth and insight and this rubs off on my personal life too, considering the massive amount of exposure we all have to modern media. One final, great thing about
the funding scheme was the feeling that I was not alone in this, but there was a group of people eager to see me succeed. The local team was extremely kind, understanding and encouraging. This was not taken for granted at all, and I really recommend prospective students to apply in order to be in for a chance of receiving help throughout their journey of learning.

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