

Bangor University

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Storytelling and Screenwriting in Malta from 1970 to 2020

Maslowska, Monika

Award date:
2022

Awarding institution:
Bangor University

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Storytelling and Screenwriting in Malta from 1970 to 2020

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

Monika Malgorzata Maslowska

School of Arts, Culture and Language
College of Arts and Humanities and Business

Bangor University

July 2022

Declaration

‘Yr wyf drwy hyn yn datgan mai canlyniad fy ymchwil fy hun yw’r thesis hwn, ac eithrio lle nodir yn wahanol. Caiff ffynonellau eraill eu cydnabod gan droednodiadau yn rhoi cyfeiriadau eglur. Nid yw sylwedd y gwaith hwn wedi cael ei dderbyn o’r blaen ar gyfer unrhyw radd, ac nid yw’n cael ei gyflwyno ar yr un pryd mewn ymgeisiaeth am unrhyw radd oni bai ei fod, fel y cytunwyd gan y Brifysgol, am gymwysterau deuol cymeradwy.’

Rwy’n cadarnhau fy mod yn cyflwyno’r gwaith gyda chytundeb fy Ngrichwyliwr (Goruchwylwyr)’

‘I hereby declare that this thesis is the results of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. All other sources are acknowledged by bibliographic references. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree unless, as agreed by the University, for approved dual awards.’

I confirm that I am submitting the work with the agreement of my Supervisor(s)’

Monika Maslowska

Acknowledgements

For his encouragement, expert criticism, insight, guidance and patience, I thank my supervisor, Professor Steven Price.

I am indebted to all my colleagues who have taken part in this research. Completing it without their support and advice would have been simply an impossible task.

My gratitude goes to:

Andrea McEwen, Charles Stroud, Martin Bonnici, Rebecca Cremona, Joshua Cassar Gaspar, Albert Marshall, Jamie Vella, Jeremy Vella, Pierre Ellul, Rebecca Anastasi, Alan Cassar, Mark Dingli, Malcolm Galea, Danjel Bugeja, Mark Doneo, Lino Farrugia, Abigail Mallia, Alex Camilleri, Audrey Brincat Dalli, Carlos Debattista, Samira Damato, Charlie Cauchi, Chris Zarb, David Serge.

Caldon Mercieca, Prof Vince Briffa, Prof Charles Briffa, Dr Marie Briguglio, Prof Saviour Chircop, Prof Adrian Grima, Prof Ġorg Mallia, Prof Raphael Vella, Prof William Zammit, Prof Albert Gatt, Louiselle Vassallo, Clint Gerald Attard, Chris Gruppetta, Rachel Vella, Steve Bonello.

Alice Battistino, Kim Bezzina-Jones, Sean Montebello, Karl Sciberras, Marco Portelli, Clive Sciberras,

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to present the first extensive critical study of screenwriting and storytelling in Maltese television and film. It focuses on two pivotal periods in Malta's modern history—post-Independence and post-EU accession—and the different ideologies that each period represents. It investigates a series of connected themes through analyses of particular texts—screenplays, television series, short, and full feature films—written and produced between 1970 and 2020.

While the main objective of this research is to investigate and evaluate Maltese television and film screenplays and their authors using qualitative methodology, the main argument sets out to understand how the island's past and present socio-political and historical environments (termed as the 'Maltese condition') shaped Malta's screenwriters and writer-directors. The objective is to encourage a critical reflection, mediated through the contextualized image of self-representation, on the steady growth of mature and significant Maltese screen texts (television series, short films, and full feature films). The selection criterion of the screen texts is the Danish Broadcasting Corporation's 'double storytelling' technique, namely a personal story about a human condition embedded in a greater context of cultural, political, social, and ethical significance.

Since there is almost no existing work that investigates contemporary Maltese screenwriting the primary data for the present thesis derives from the material written and produced by Maltese screenwriters and writer-directors. In order to compensate for the lack of written secondary material on Maltese screenwriting, the present study also draws extensively on the author's original interviews with Maltese screenwriters, writer-directors, and film practitioners. This primary source derives from forty-six in-depth semi-structured personal interviews and surveys conducted between 2016 and 2021. Additional data is collected through an open-ended questionnaire, which seeks validation of the main research question. The research also includes speaking to academics from the University of Malta, who also provided supplementary material pertaining to the history of Malta, Maltese culture and language, contemporary and visual arts, media and communications, small islands, anthropology, and sociology. The thesis also looks at Malta as a location that implements the island's landscape as part of the storytelling narrative. The last Chapter is drawn on my own experiences as a screenwriter and screenwriting educator in Malta and examines *The Maltese Fighter* in terms of the 'double storytelling' technique and production grants. The approach adopted here is practice-based.

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A Contextual Timeline

This timeline is designed to provide context for key moments relevant to this research.

60AD	The [presumed] arrival of Saint Paul in Malta.
870-1090	The Arabs conquest of Malta.
1530-1798	The arrival of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem in Malta.
1565	The Great Siege of Malta by the Ottoman Empire.
1798-1799	The French occupation of Malta.
1800-1979	Malta becomes a British colony.
1813-1934	The Language Question emerges.
1932	Radio Distribution (Malta) Ltd introduce radio broadcasts.
1932	The BBC Empire Service starts regular broadcasts.
1934	The Language Question is resolved as Maltese and English legally recognized as the official languages of Malta, subsequently removing Italian from daily use within official Maltese institutions.
1935	Rediffusion (Malta) Ltd broadcasts regularly. Switch A relays the BBC Empire Service. Switch B transmits local news and relays from other European radio stations.
1942	The Second Siege of Malta by the German planes that bombarded the island around the clock in an attempt to neutralize British bases in Malta.
1942	Malta is awarded the George Cross for bravery.
1947	Kelinu Vella Haber writes and produces the first-ever radio drama written in Maltese.

- 1952 Introduction of tape recorders (radio).
- 1961 The Malta Broadcasting Authority is set up.
- 1962 Malta Television station (MTV) begins its own local broadcasts under the direct responsibility of the Broadcasting Authority.
- 1964 Malta is granted its independence from the British Crown.
- 1974 Malta becomes a constitutional republic.
- 1975 TeleMalta Corporation is set up absorbing all Malta's telephone, telegraph, telex, and other telecommunication services, including broadcasting. Xandir Malta (Broadcast Malta) is established as the state broadcasting division within the TeleMalta, operating all the companies previously owned by Rediffusion in Malta.
- 1987 Nationalist government introduces media pluralism ownership in broadcasting.
- 1989 Rediffusion Radio Cable is closed down.
- 1991 Xandir Malta becomes PBS Ltd (Public Broadcasting Services Ltd.).
- 1994 Super One television station broadcasts begin. The station is owned by the Labour Party (LP).
- 1998 NET TV station broadcasts begin. The station is owned by the Nationalist Party (PN).
- 1999 The Malta Film Commission is set up.
Malta Film Commissioners:
- | | |
|-------------------|-----------|
| Winston Azzopardi | 1999-2002 |
| Oliver Mallia | 2002-2007 |
| Louisa Bonello | 2007-2011 |
| Peter Busuttil | 2011-2013 |
| Engelbert Grech | 2013-2017 |

Johann Grech

2017-

2004

EU Accession.

2008

The Malta Film Fund is set up.

2020

The Malta Film Fund is rebranded as Screen Malta.

Contributors Index—Screenwriters, Writer-Directors and Film Professionals

1.	Rebecca Anastasi	film producer, academic	9 April 2018
2.	Antonella Axisa	theatre and film actor, screenwriter	16 October 2017
3.	Mario Philip Azzopardi	writer-director, producer	15 December 2020
4.	Winston Azzopardi	writer-director, producer	17 April 2018
5.	Martin Bonnici	producer, writer-director	30 January 2018 15 April 2018 11 July 2022
6.	Ben Borg Cardona	producer	27 September 2021
7.	Marie Briguglio, Dr	screenwriter, Behavioural and Environmental Economics	13 February 2018
8.	Audrey Brincat Dalli	screenwriter	17 September 2018
9.	Danjel Bugeja	editor, educator	2 February 2018
10.	Alex Camilleri	writer-director	24 May 2021
11.	Alan Cassar	writer-director	25 April 2018 16 July 2022
12.	Joshua Cassar Gaspar	producer, writer-director	2 September 2021
13.	Charlie Cauchi	visual artist, director, academic	23 September 2018
14.	Rebecca Cremona	writer-director	9 April 2018
15.	Samira Damato	writer-director	21 December 2020 10 July 2022
16.	Carlos Debattista	screenwriter	11 July 2018

17.	Mark Dingli	writer-director	11 April 2018 17 July 2022
18.	Mark Doneo	writer-director	13 September 2018
19.	Pierre Ellul	producer, writer-director	20 September 2016
20.	Lino Farrugia	writer-director	25 September 2018
21.	Malcolm Galea	screenwriter	8 April 2018
22.	Albert Marshall	TV director, Malta Arts Council executive, Screen Malta fund evaluator	20 July 2018
23.	Tony Parnis	writer-director	26 April 2018
24.	Paul Portelli	screenwriter	9 December 2019
25.	Peter Sant	writer-director	12 April 2018
26.	David Serge	writer-director	19 December 2018
27.	Charles Stroud	writer-director	28 September 2017 19 April 2018 26 August 2021
28.	Jamie Vella	writer-director	28 March 2019
29.	Jeremy Vella	writer-director	8 December 2020 4 July 2022
30.	Chris Zarb	writer-director	11 April 2018 7 July 2022

Contributors Index—Scholars

- | | | | |
|-----|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| 1. | Clint Gerald Attard | media educator | 27 April 2021 |
| 2. | Paul P. Borg | biographer, researcher | 14 August 2018 |
| 3. | Charles Briffa, Prof | Maltese and Translation Studies | 24 July 2017 |
| 4. | Vince Briffa, Prof | artist, curator, Digital Arts | 26 January 2018
2 March 2021
15 March 2021 |
| 5. | Joseph M. Brincat, Prof | Maltese Language Studies | 19 May 2017 |
| 6. | Saviour Catania, Prof | Film Studies | 30 May 2016 |
| 7. | Saviour Chircop, Prof | Media and Communications Studies | 29 January 2018 |
| 8. | Albert Gatt, Prof | Linguistics and Language Technology Studies | 2 March 2018 |
| 9. | Christopher Gruppetta | book publisher | 29 May 2020 |
| 10. | Joyce Grech | media producer, journalist | 1 June 2018 |
| 11. | Ġorġ Mallia, Prof | artist and cartoonist, Media and Communications Studies | 22 July 2021 |
| 12. | Caldon Mercieca | academic, Culture and Heritage Studies | 19 December 2019 |
| 13. | Immanuel Mifsud | poet and novelist | 6 February 2018 |
| 14. | Rachel Vella | television series researcher | 20 July 2018 |
| 15. | Raphael Vella, Prof | artist and curator | 26 June 2017 |
| 16. | William Zammit, Prof | Library Information & Archive Sciences | 19 July 2017 |

Contributors Index—Former Students

1. Alice Battistino	former student	15 September 2021
2. Kim Bezzina-Jones	former student	3 September 2021
3. Sean Montebello	former student	2 September 2021
4. Marco Portelli	former student	2 September 2021
5. Clive Sciberras	former student	3 September 2021
6. Karl Sciberras	former student	3 September 2021

CHAPTER 1 - Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to present the first extensive critical study of screenwriting and storytelling in Maltese television and film. It focuses on two pivotal periods in Malta's modern history—post Independence and post EU accession—and the different ideologies that each period represents. It investigates a series of connected themes through analyses of particular texts—screenplays, television series, short and full feature films—written and produced between 1971 and 2020. The primary argument is that unlike in many other small-nation film industries, Malta has shied away from a close engagement with the dominant political and cultural concerns of the time. This is due largely to the political, social, cultural, and logistical complexities and contradictions that give rise to a phenomenon called the 'Maltese condition', and more specifically, to the stifling and enduring effects on screenwriting and screen productions of patronage and internalised forms of self-censorship. Understanding the 'Maltese condition' is crucial in understanding Maltese screenwriters and writer-directors and their creative outputs. The objective of this thesis is, therefore, to investigate and evaluate a critical reflection mediated through the contextualized image of self-representation, on the steady growth of mature and significant Maltese screen texts (television series, short films, and full feature films). A crucial part of the assessment is the application of the storytelling technique called 'double storytelling', also termed as a 'dual narrative'¹, that has been developed by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR) in 2003 for the high-end television series. The term 'double storytelling' was loaned from DR and applied to this research argument. It is important to note that the authors selected for the present research, applied the 'dual narrative'² to their screen texts as a result of their intuitive understanding of a good story premise (containing more than one storytelling layer) rather than their awareness of the DR strategy. The DR's strategy was twofold: to compete with the 'best foreign fare'³ and to ground television narratives 'in a public service mindset providing not only an entertaining plot but also addressing larger ethical and societal issues'.⁴ It is important to clarify that despite the titular promise of *Storytelling and Screenwriting in Malta from 1970 to 2020*, screen texts written and produced between the 1980s and early 2000s do not comprise much of the present research since the screen authors did not implement the 'double storytelling' technique.

¹ Eva Novrup Redvall, *Writing and Producing Television Drama in Denmark: From the Kingdom to The Killing*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 69.

² Redvall, *Writing and Producing Television*, p. 69.

³ Eva Novrup Redvall, 'Building European Series on Nordic Production Strategies', in *Danish Television Drama: Global Lessons from a Small Nation*, ed. by Anne Marit Waade, Eva Novrup Redvall and Pia Majbritt Jensen (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp.127-45 (p.128).

⁴ Redvall, 'Building European Series', p.128 and *Writing and Producing Television*, pp. 68-69.

This research project is also confronted by a number of challenges that are symptomatic of the low esteem in which Malta has held its own audio-visual industries. The main difficulty lies in the lack of a comprehensive archive for film, a problem exacerbated by the unfortunate circumstance that the archives at the Public Broadcasting Services have been undergoing a digitization process since 2014, making some important material unavailable. Other film-related materials and data that have gone undocumented, are lost or are unavailable, while part of the initially proposed enquiry into the Rediffusion radio drama scripts also had to be omitted. The paucity of primary resources is mirrored by the near-absence of substantial secondary materials, with the Literature Review below being unavoidably based mainly on the work of just two researchers: Rachel Vella, who examines a number of Maltese television series, and Charlie Cauchi, who researches two Maltese feature films that reflect the post-independent Malta and the post-EU accession Malta.

However, two additional modes of research have enabled the development of a more comprehensive analysis than would otherwise have been possible. First, a substantial amount of data has been gathered from extensive questionnaires, interviews and conversations with screenwriters, writer-directors, and other figures working in and around Maltese film and television. Second, my own professional position within the Maltese film industry has enabled me to provide a detailed inside account of how funding and script development are managed by Screen Malta (formerly Malta Film Fund).

Despite these largely discouraging conditions, since around 2016 a number of film writers and directors have become more engaged in exploring, commenting on, or questioning Malta's contemporary socio-political environment, and this thesis pays particular attention to these works and offers explanations for these promising recent developments. The aim of the research, however, is not to encourage political cinema *per se*, nor dramatic writing in the vein of Roberto Saviano (*Gomorrhah*, 2008), but to explore the possibilities of 'double storytelling'.

This research also discusses the three funding bodies that support the Maltese audio-visual industry: Screen Malta, which supports script development, production, marketing and distribution of short films, feature films, television series, and documentary films; the National Book Council, which supports cinematic adaptations of Maltese short stories and novels into short films and full features films respectively; and *Kultura* TV of Arts Council Malta, which supports writing and producing an original and fictional television series (a one-off, two-part, three-part drama or a series) on private broadcasting stations.⁵

⁵ *Kultura* TV Guidelines and Regulations 2021
<<https://www.artscouncilmalta.org/files/uploads/misc/Kultura%20TV%20Guidelines%20Eng.pdf>>
[accessed 15 June 2021], p. 3.

Lastly, the final Chapter is drawn on my own experiences as a screenwriter (working in the film industry), and screenwriting educator (working in the academy) in Malta and examines *The Maltese Fighter* in terms of the ‘double storytelling’ technique and production grant.

1.1 Research Aims and Approach

While the main objective of this research is to investigate and evaluate Maltese television and film screenplays and their authors, the main argument sets out to understand how the island’s past and present socio-political and historical environments shaped Malta’s screenwriters and writer-directors. A secondary aim is to encourage a critical reflection, mediated through the contextualized image of self-representation, on the steady growth of mature and significant Maltese screen texts (television series, short films, and full feature films) implementing the double storytelling technique. This is pivotal to the further development of Malta’s screenwriting and film industry; since Malta does not have a long-standing tradition of indigenous cinematic storytelling focused on contemporary concerns. One of the main reasons for this, in addition to the more straightforward limitations of being a small island nation, is that the national identity tends to define itself nostalgically, via three prevailing narratives: the (presumed) arrival of Saint Paul in 60 AD, ‘the Great Siege’ of 1565 by the Ottoman Empire, and the ‘Second Great Siege’ during the Second World War in 1942.⁶ These events helped to create Malta-specific forms of patronage and nepotism that continue to exert a distorting influence in the cultural as well as the political realm. The contemporary Maltese situation is also significantly defined by the two most significant moments in Malta’s history since the Second World War: its independence from the British Crown in 1964, and its accession to the European Union in 2004.

The present study is a text-based research project examining the extent to which screen authors are engaged in exploring, commenting on, or questioning Malta’s contemporary socio-political environment. The study, therefore, investigates a series of connected themes through (discussed in Chapters 2 and 3) analyses of screen texts written and produced between 1971 and 2020. It is pertinent to clarify that even though the period under discussion covers almost fifty years of fictional audio-visual storytelling in Malta, the research focuses on twenty-four texts (five works written and produced in the 1970s, three between 2005-2009 and sixteen between 2014-2020). The screenworks written and produced between the 1980s and early 2000s did not qualify to be part of the research because they did not reflect the ‘Maltese condition’, one of the main objectives of this

⁶ Caldon Mercieca, in discussion with the researcher, 19 December 2019. Mercieca is a lecturer in creative thinking, critical perspectives on performance, creative writing and cultural heritage management at the University of Malta.

research. In television drama this was occasioned in part by political changes that resulted in a greater emphasis being placed on advertising and commercial opportunities to create content that is interesting to the advertiser not the audience,⁷ whereas in the film industry, there were no indigenous full feature produced during the 1980s. In the 1990s, two full feature films were produced: *Operation While Dove* (writer/director Tony Paris, 79 min.) in 1992, and a personal drama *Mera tal-Passat / Mirror of the Past* (writer/director Louis Cuschieri, 122 min.) in 1996, both having minimal if any relevance to my own primary aim of researching the effects of the ‘Maltese condition’. In early 2000s to 2005, two features were produced: *Genesis* in 2001 (director Kenneth Scicluna, 80 min) and *Angli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie* in 2005 (director Mario Busietta, 114 min.)⁸ only *Angli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie* was selected because the narrative incorporated themes of the ‘Maltese condition’ such mediocrity, politics, culture and language embedded racism while reflecting the post EU accession ideology.

The only constant in Maltese screen productions is the work of Elio Lombardi, an amateur writer-director, whose productions go directly to DVD. Up to the date of 2021 Lombardi, 84, has produced almost 100 films. Lombardi writes, films, cast, and edits his productions, and is determined to continue producing films until his death. The main reasons for the exclusion of Lombardi’s work from the present research are two-fold: first, his storytelling and cinematic approach lack professional qualities, and second, his major thematic concerns are generic and repetitive. Moreover, these concerns do not engage with my primary research areas, centring instead around Christian values and vices, with the repentant sinner being a recurring theme.

The main focus remains on the written script, although in cases where a screenplay is not available, I have drawn more substantially on the screen text of a film or a television series. In all, the present research examines twenty-four texts.

The two major post-war events, independence from the British Crown and the accession to EU membership present two quite different Maltas, expressing different self-representation and different thematic concerns. The study, therefore, seeks to explore the discourse of the ‘Maltese condition’ examined through politics and economy, culture, language, and identity in post-independence and post-EU accession Malta. Furthermore, the research seeks to illuminate the following:

⁷ Joyce Grech, discussion with the researcher, 1 June 2018.

⁸ Angela Peel, *Malta on the Silver Screen: Feature Films Shot in Malta* (self-published, 2014), p. 216 and p. 217.

1. Who are the Maltese screenwriters and writer-directors?
2. What constitutes Maltese cinematic identity?
3. What is the concept of self-representation and self-perception?
4. What are the thematic concerns?
5. Why do screenwriters and writer-directors self-censor their work?

The purpose of these questions is to offer a deeper context since the national and cultural identity of the Maltese screenwriters and writer-directors developed out of an environment of constant exploitation and neglect by past power-holders. Ian Macdonald refers to this environment as a ‘Screen Idea System’ since it ‘shapes the people involved and by the particular places and media systems from which new ideas emerged, and where they are produced and distributed’.⁹ This has affected how the Maltese identify and define themselves, and how they wish to be identified and defined by others.¹⁰ Therefore, the texts examined in this thesis reveal Maltese attitudes, ‘create conventions of style and behaviour, reinforce, or undermine the wider values of society’, and at times offer ‘a mirror’ of ‘heightened self-reflection’ and self-representation of contemporary Malta, that can be shared with other nations.¹¹ The latter is key since Malta, as a small nation where the film market is also small, needs to be able to export its screen narratives. However, before it can do that, screenwriters and writer-directors need to understand who they are in order to create psychologically resonant narratives. As Alex Camilleri, writer-director of *Luzzu* (2020),¹² insightfully notes: ‘sometimes, it is in the most specific of stories, and the most specific of circumstances, that you see those universal ideas, feelings and emotions that cut right through international boundaries’.¹³ Camilleri adds that ‘you need to have a great love of the country but also great curiosity about it’.¹⁴

⁹ Ian W. Macdonald, *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 9.

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, ‘The Question of Cultural Identity’, in *Modernity and its Futures*, ed. by Stuart Hall, David Held and Tony McGrew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 273-326 (p. 293).

¹¹ David Puttnam, *The Undeclared War. The Struggle for Control of the World’s Film Industry* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), pp. 348-50.

¹² *Luzzu* is a Maltese full feature screen production supported by the Screen Malta fund. It has premiered at the Sundance Film Festival on 29 January 2021, winning the Sundance World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award.¹²

¹³ Rebecca Anastasi, ‘Malta Has So Many Worlds to Discover’, interviewed by Raphael Vassallo, *Maltatoday*, 8 September 2021

<https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/interview/111881/malta_has_so_many_worlds_to_discover_rebecca_anastasi> [accessed 8 September 2021] (para.4 of 37).

¹⁴ Alex Camilleri, ‘Malta Seems to Spark Imagination’, online video interview with Coryse Borg, *Newsbook*, 29 January 2021 <<https://newsbook.com.mt/en/watch-malta-seems-to-spark-my-imagination-alex-camilleri-filmmaker/>> [accessed 10 February 2021].

The assertion contained in the fifth and final research question, that self-censorship among Maltese writers is prevalent, requires some immediate justification and explanation. Daniel Biltereyst and Roel Vande Winkel outline three forms of censorship, distinguishing between censorship systems (overall legal framework), censorship modalities (the tools of censorship), and censorship practices (applications of the modalities).¹⁵ In Malta, the censorship modality and censorship practice is self-regulating censorship (discussed below in section 1.9, ‘Production Studies’).¹⁶ Self-censorship suggests that individuals internalise aspects of the public censor and then self-administer censorship. Private self-censorship, on the other hand, is ‘the suppression by an agent of his or her own attitudes where a public censor is either absent or irrelevant’. Private self-censorship is a process of regulation between ‘what an individual regards as permissible to express publicly’, and that which the individual wished to express publicly.¹⁷ Public self-censorship in Malta is connected to the political parties—Malta is highly insular and highly polarized between the right-wing Nationalist Party (strongly supported by the Catholic Church) and the left-wing Labour Party (formerly known as Malta Labour Party¹⁸)—in order to retain political allegiance and patronage. Both political allegiance and patronage bring not only a strong sense of belonging to a party but also encourage clientelism and nepotism.¹⁹ Therefore Maltese screen production culture—the term ‘production culture’ in this study signals this tension between the screenwriter’s agency and the social conditions within which agency is embedded—dissuades criticism or mockery of a political party in Malta because this is not readily accepted by its members or supporters. Of course, this is a sign of deep intolerance, for, unlike religious censorship, what is censored politically is not usually censored for being offensive to a party, but merely for being inconvenient.²⁰ It means, therefore, that Maltese film and television production culture must apply its ‘creativity within constraints’²¹ by navigating the tension between the screenwriter’s agency and the political and social conditions within which agency is embedded. However, unlike the balance the media content creators need to

¹⁵ Daniel Biltereyst and Roel Vande Winkel, ‘Introduction’, in *Silencing Cinema Film Censorship Around the World*, ed. by Daniel Biltereyst and Roel Vande Winkel (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 1-12 <doi: 10.1057/9781137061980>.

¹⁶ Christopher Gruppetta, in discussion with the researcher, 29 May 2020.

¹⁷ Philip Cook and Conrad Heilmann, ‘Two Types of Self-Censorship: Public and Private’, *Journal of Political Studies*, 61 (2013), 178-96 (p.179) <[https://doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9248.2012.00957.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2012.00957.x)>.

¹⁸ Michael Briguglio, ‘Malta’s Labour Party and the Politics of Hegemony’, *Journal of the Research Group on Socialism and Democracy*, 24.2), 213-26 (p.223) <[https://doi: 10.1080/08854300.2010.481443](https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2010.481443)>.

¹⁹ Jean Claude Cachia and André P. DeBattista, ‘The Malaise of Malta: Social Divisions, Weak Institutions, and Political Partisanship’, in *Political Studies Association 68th Annual International Conference* (Cardiff University, 2018), 1-26 (p. 2).

²⁰ Christopher Gruppetta, ‘Stage and Film Censorship: How Far Can, and Should It Go?’ (unpublished master’s thesis, University of Malta, 1997), p. 40.

²¹ Jonathan Corpus Ong, ‘Charity Appeal as “Poverty Porn?”’, Introduction: Production Studies: Roots and Routes, Production Studies’, in *Production Studies*, ed. by Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks and John T. Caldwell (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), pp. 89-104 (p. 90).

strike between generating popular culture and generating capitalism,²² the Maltese creatives need to strike that balance between narratives that reflect contemporary Malta and politics/politicians and their expectations. The Malta-specific forms of self-censorship are discussed more fully in Chapter 2.

Although Malta does not have its own mythology, it offers rich and varied folklore. It is here, in this meeting place of East and West, where the rich colour and imagery of the Orient blends with Mediterranean culture and Catholic traditions to generate its stories. Indeed, potential stories for Maltese screenwriters are everywhere. They may not be the foreground narratives but can be background stories. A cursory look at the book written by Marie Briguglio, *No Man's Land*, suggests many possible 'double storytelling' narratives, for example, stories about the compulsive construction and demolition, the obsession with cement and suspicion of nature, the obliteration of community space, the love affairs with cars, the incessant noise and the prolific generation of litter and waste.²³ As will be discussed in detail in Chapters 2 and 3, Maltese screenwriters have begun to engage with all of these contemporary concerns.

Such stories need not be in the foreground: a thread running in the background supporting the main plot will suffice. This approach is of particular importance since the Maltese film industry falls not only into the category of 'small cinemas', but also into the 'micro cinema'²⁴ category along with Iceland. Small cinemas, however, use their locations with their own articulation of the geographical place (the actual place) employing the narrative diegetic space.²⁵ Iceland, for example, presents its own articulation of the Icelandic landscapes, attracting international audiences by trapping them in the isolation of a small island where the weather is as much a character as the setting.²⁶ Malta's location presents an equally significant integration of the landscapes in its film and television productions.²⁷

Any discussion about Malta, however, should begin with an appreciation of its minuscule size of 316km² and its geographical position which includes two sister islands of Gozo and Comino. With an indigenous population of 514,564,²⁸ Malta is the smallest and most densely

²² Mayer, 'Introduction: Production Studies', p. 2.

²³ Marie Briguglio, *No Man's Land: People, Place & Pollution* (Malta: Kite Group, 2018), p.16.

²⁴ Henning Camre, 'Think Tank on Film and Film Policy Small Cinema Conference', in *Valletta Film Festival: The Cinema of Small Nations Conference*, 10 June 2016, Malta.

²⁵ Kim Toft Hansen and Anne Marit Waade, *Locating Nordic Noir from Beck to The Bridge* (Cham: Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 8.

²⁶ Anne Marit Waade and others, 'Transnational Television Drama? Lessons Learned from Danish Drama'. in *Danish Television Drama: Global Lessons from a Small Nation*, ed. by Anne Marit Waade, Eva Novrup Redvall and Pia Majbritt Jensen (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp.1-22 (p. 10).

²⁷ Kim Toft Hansen and Anne Marit Waade, *Locating Nordic Noir from Beck to The Bridge* (Cham: Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 11.

²⁸ National Statistics Office, Regional Statistics Malta, 2020 Edition, 13-35 (p. 2).

< https://nso.gov.mt/en/News_Releases/Documents/2020/07/News2020_114.pdf > [13 October 2021].

populated member state of the European Union. Due to its size and historical legacy, Malta is a heavily networked society, particularly between citizens and politicians who are in constant and direct contact by means of house visits, office hours, and so-called constituency clinics with politicians continuously reaching out to voters, creating a ‘blurred boundary between professional and private relationships’,²⁹ which contributes to the previously mentioned clientelism and nepotism.

This situation creates a difficult context for the production of screen texts. Cinema and television writers, as much as other artists, can be considered potentially more persuasive than politicians, and their works may be seen as having a greater influence on the public. Herbert Marcuse’s quotation about art can be applied to screen artworks too:

Art breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience, a dimension in which human beings, nature, and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality. Subjects and objects encounter the appearance of that autonomy which is denied them in their society [...] the autonomy of art reflects the unfreedom of individuals in the society. If people were free, then art would be the form and expression of their freedom. Art remains marked by unfreedom; in contradicting it, art achieves its autonomy.³⁰

In Malta, however, works commenting on the political parties are perceived as problematic since they may expose a weakness the political parties would rather leave unexamined, which usually leads to self-censorship by the artists, including screenwriters and writer-directors.³¹ Moreover, the introduction of the plurality of expressions in the 1990s permitted the two political parties to set up their own television stations: Net TV owned by the Nationalist Party (Christian Democrats) established in 1998 and Super One Television owned by the Labour Party (Democratic Socialism) in 1995. In addition, there is the state-run station *Television Malta (TVM, TVM 2)*, run by the Public Broadcasting Services (PBS), and two commercial stations, *Smash TV* and *Favourite TV*. TVM, One TV and Net TV dominated the local audience share.³²

²⁹ Wouter Veenendaal, ‘How Smallness Produces Clientelism, Polarisation, Record Turnout and Corruption in Malta’, *LSE*, 16 May 2019

<<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2019/05/16/how-smallness-produces-clientelism-polarisation-record-turnout-and-corruption-in-malta/>> [accessed 10 September 2021] (para. 4 of 14).

³⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, trans. by Herbert Marcuse and Erica Sherover (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), pp. 72-73.

³¹ Gruppeta, ‘Stage and Film Censorship’, p. 40.

³² Broadcasting Authority, [11/21] Audience Survey November 2021 <<https://ba.org.mt/en/1121-audience-survey-november-2021>> [accessed 29 May 2022].

Since the introduction of deregulation in the media, Maltese has become the dominant language in television production and, to this effect, the majority of all programmes are local productions.³³ However, the two main political parties dominate the Maltese mediascape.³⁴

A 2021 report commissioned by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom reports that Malta is the only European Union country that has such extensive media ownership by the political parties.³⁵

Malta still does not have an integrated comprehensive media authority, but only a broadcasting authority, leaving unregulated gaps in the media landscape. The Malta Communications Authority operates in tandem with the Broadcasting Authority but has a very specific and limited role in the overall regulation of media outlets. The Malta Communications Authority was established on the 1st of January 2001 and is the statutory body responsible for the regulation of the various electronic communications sectors, which include fixed and mobile telephony, Internet and television distribution services.³⁶

The media landscape, and thus Malta's system, falls (among others) under what Hallin and Mancini describe as the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralistic model. According to these media theorists, the mass media in Southern European countries were involved in the political conflicts that mark the history of this region, and there is a strong tradition of regarding them as means of ideological expression and political mobilisation. At the same time, the development of commercial media markets was relatively weak, leaving the media often dependent on the state, political parties, the Church or affluent private patrons. Because of this dependency, the media lacks autonomy.³⁷

Following the Mediterranean/Polarized Pluralist media model, the regulatory institution in Malta, as in some other Southern European countries, is in a way party politicized. This is reflected in the structure of the Broadcasting Authority itself, which is not strong enough to enforce its regulations. While television governance and regulations have to be robust to allow broadcasters to follow their editorial and not their political instincts and critique government performance, the

³³ Joseph Borg and others, *Exploring the Maltese Media Landscape* (Malta: Allied Publications, 2009).

³⁴ Carmen Sammut, *Media and Maltese Society* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007), p. 56.

³⁵ Louiselle Vassallo, 'Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of Macedonia, Serbia & Turkey in the Year 2020. Country Report: Malta', Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF), 2021 <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/71955/malta_results_mpm_2021_cmpf.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> [accessed 12 October 2021].

³⁶ Malta Communications Authority <<https://www.mca.org.mt/aboutmca/roles-and-functions>> [accessed 28 September 2021] (para. 1 of 10).

³⁷ Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems – Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 90.

Broadcasting Authority in Malta still struggles to regulate both the public service broadcaster and the other commercial and political stations.³⁸

Joanna Spiteri, a Maltese media scholar, makes a clear distinction in the Maltese media landscape between private and public service broadcasters and distinguishes between three basic different broadcasting categories:

- a. public service broadcaster – impartially informs, educates, and entertains with a heavy reliance on public funding.
- b. political – targeting the audience with political and religious messages and is funded by entities with profitable sister companies.
- c. commercial – profit motive uppermost.³⁹

Thus, the Maltese private broadcasting industry consists of two political party-owned television and radio stations, which is quite unique within the European context.⁴⁰ Although media ownership is, on balance, transparent, this is an area that remains problematic in the Maltese media landscape, since the two main political parties still own and operate outlets incorporating multimedia platforms running on the patronage system.⁴¹

Historically, patronage flourished in Malta into a characteristic social institution from the time of the Knights of St. John onwards and was already well established in the Middle Ages. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the general features of the Maltese social structure were already emerging. These trends became accentuated during the 1530-1798 period when Malta was ceded to the Order of the Knights of St. John. Thus, for example, during the rule of the Knights, the presence of the Inquisitor, the Bishop and the Grandmaster provided an opportunity for the Maltese to exploit patronage to their own advantage.⁴² This still stands today. A substantial number of the Maltese have a family member who works for the Government or ‘relies heavily on Government direct orders to keep their business ventures afloat’.⁴³ The institutionalised embodiment of such networking functions on oligo/monopolistic lines:

³⁸ Joanna Spiteri, ‘The Challenge of Achieving Impartiality in Maltese TV News Programming’, (unpublished doctoral research, University of Sterling, 2014), pp. 56-57.

³⁹ Spiteri, ‘The Challenge of Achieving Impartiality’, p. 101.

⁴⁰ Vassallo, ‘Monitoring Media Pluralism’, p.11.

⁴¹ Vassallo, p.11.

⁴² Edward L. Zammit, *A Colonial Inheritance: Maltese Perceptions of Work, Power and Class Structure with Reference to the Labour Movement* (Malta: Malta University Press, 1984) p. 9.

⁴³ Karl Sciberras, in discussion with the researcher, 3 September 2021.

It is not what you do (that is, occupation) or what you know (that is formal qualification) which matters but, more importantly, who you know and who you are, as well as who you know well, and who would therefore not just promise but will, at the end of the day, deliver the goods.⁴⁴

This network of prior relationships exerts a powerful influence on television and film production, including the suppression of political commentary via the previously mentioned processes of self-censorship. However, it is important to note that political networking does not appear to deter socio-political cartoonists in Malta from engaging in political satire or from commenting on the situation in Malta. Indeed, Malta has a thriving cartoonist community, and most newspapers now have a resident cartoonist.⁴⁵ By contrast there is little political satire in the local television series, which manifest a kind of timidity and anxiety about political themes in general.⁴⁶ In fact, satire in Maltese screenplays, whether television or film, is quite rare, but when it does appear, it tends to take a ‘mellow and light-hearted’ comedic shape such as in the full feature film *Maltageddon* (2009), or in the television dramedy *Il-Miraklu/ Holy Mary!* (2018). Cartoons in Malta, then, possesses a degree of political courage that its dramatic works lack. The immediate question is why? Why there is tradition of a socio-political cartooning in the political cartoons but not in the other artistic forms of expression?

Therefore, this thesis will attempt to answer the question of why this diffident approach to politics in screenwriting and film-making is so prevalent, while also suggesting that the situation is starting to change. This is apparent in two recent exceptions to the general rule. A young Maltese film director, Jamie Vella, produced a short film *Arcadia* (2017)—the only work that directly addresses the ongoing destruction of Malta by the land developers since Independence. A line of dialogue taken from *Arcadia* sums up the situation: ‘Malta is no longer a country [...] Malta is business.’⁴⁷ Alex Camilleri’s *Luzzu* (2020), a neo-realist drama, is another screenwork that refers directly to political corruption. These screenworks and socio-political cartooning are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Lastly, while the main objective of this research is to investigate and evaluate Maltese television and film screen texts and screenworks and their authors, the main argument aims to understand Malta’s socio-political and historical impact on the screen authors. The study stems from my personal and professional interest in the subject matter that led me to commence the

⁴⁴ Godfrey Baldacchino, ‘Social Class in Malta: Insights into a Homegrown Relationship with Special Reference to Education’, *Education (Malta)*, 5.1 (1993), 23-32, (p. 26) (emphasis in original).

⁴⁵ Ġorġ Mallia, in discussion with the researcher, 22 July 2021.

⁴⁶ Christopher Gruppetta in discussion with the researcher, 29 May 2020.

⁴⁷ *Arcadia*, dir. by Jamie Vella (2017), 00:11:29-00:11:33, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OM69K-pZ6Xc>> [accessed 2 October 2019] (ellipsis in original).

doctorate. According to Craig Batty and Alec McAulay, established professionals and academic educators commence a doctoral study for three motivations: (1) there are those who are experienced or emerging industry practitioners joining the academy to enhance their screenwriting for professional development reasons, which might include frustrations with industry and/or their own practice methodologies; (2) there are those who start from a firmer foothold in the academy, as researchers in the conventional sense who wish to conduct screenwriting as a form of research fieldwork to better understand what it is they teach or wish to teach; (3), there is a kind of hybrid, now popular in creative writing and screen productions: the commercially published or produced practitioner who teaches from experience and undertakes a research degree to complement that experience with theoretical knowledge.⁴⁸ In my case, it is the first definition that reflects my motivation to begin this study, that is, my frustration as both a screenwriter and a teacher, attempting to understand the late development and the delayed support in the development of Malta's indigenous film and television industry.

1.2 Research Challenges

Charlie Cauchi, a Maltese scholar who examined the indigenous film industry as part of her unfinished doctoral research at the Queen Mary University of London in 2010-2015, admits that during the research she has had 'to navigate rumour, speculation and negation, a customary process in the Maltese context'.⁴⁹ This was my experience too. As noted above, relevant film and screenplay archives are either non-existent or, in the case of the archives at the Public Broadcasting Services, unfortunately, unavailable due to a digitization process that has been ongoing since 2014. These circumstances have caused the research approach for this thesis to be modified twice over the course of the enquiry. An equally challenging aspect of the research is the lack of published material and academic studies on Maltese screenwriting; this is discussed in the literature review, below.

⁴⁸ Craig Batty and Alec McAulay, 'The Academic Screenplay: Approaching Screenwriting as a Research Practice', *Writing in Practice: The Journal of Creative Writing Research*, 2 (2016), 1-13 (p. 3).

⁴⁹ Charlie Cauchi, 'Mapping Film Education and Training on the Island of Malta', in *The Education of a Filmmaker in Europe, Australia, and Asia*, ed. by Mette Hjort (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 45-65 (p. 47).

Another challenge this research faces lies in securing the screenplay texts. True to the school of thought that a screenplay text is a working document that ‘dies in the film’,⁵⁰ or is ‘both absent and present, dead and alive, erased yet detectable’,⁵¹ not all screenplay texts are available. Indeed, a screenplay is ‘a textual invocation of a film, never the film’;⁵² the written text itself can be simply ‘the hint fixed on paper’,⁵³ a set of notes that the director would change during the shooting, rather than a formal screenplay. As far as the present project is concerned, out of the twenty-four produced screenplays informing this research, eight are not available. In order to make up for their absence, I transcribed the relevant scenes from the extant screen texts. Therefore, sixteen screenplay texts and eight screen texts are analysed. The following tables provide a detailed breakdown of the production genre.

Table 1: Television Screenplays Breakdown

Television Screenplays	
Available	Not Available
1. <i>F’Bahar Wiehed/In One Sea</i> , 1976	1. <i>Il-Madonna taċ-Ċoqqa/Our Madonna of the Hood</i> , 1978
2. <i>Strada Stretta/Strait Street</i> , 2015-2017	
3. <i>Carmelo</i> , 2018	
4. <i>Il-Miraklu/Holy Mary!</i> , 2018	
5. <i>L-Gharusa /The Bride</i> , 2019-2020	

The screenplay of *Il-Madonna taċ-Ċoqqa /Our Madonna of the Hood* is no longer available.⁵⁴ Once the television series was produced, the written text was simply discarded, in keeping with a commonplace view of screenplays as being ‘as a mere preparation for the production’,⁵⁵ or ‘a kind of prescient transcript of the finished film’⁵⁶ rather than something worth preserving for artistic or archival purposes.

⁵⁰ Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. by Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), p. 134.

⁵¹ Steven Price, *The Screenplay: Authorship, Theory and Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. xi.

⁵² Price, *The Screenplay*, p. 48.

⁵³ Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. by Jay Leda (New York, NY: A Harvest/HBJ, 1949), p. 263.

⁵⁴ Lino Farrugia in discussion with the researcher, 25 September 2018.

⁵⁵ Price, p. 50.

⁵⁶ Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, p.126.

Table 2: Short Screenplays Breakdown

Short Screenplays	
Available	Not Available
1. <i>The Maltese Fighter</i> , 2014	1. <i>I'm Furious-Red!</i> , 1970
2. <i>Laqgħa ma' Mara Morbi/Meeting with Mara Morbi</i> , 2014	2. <i>Arcadia</i> , 2017
3. <i>Dritt għall-Punt/Straight to the Point</i> , 2017	
4. <i>Žiemel/Horse</i> , 2017	
5. <i>Hallini Ħanini/Let Me Be, Dear</i> , 2020	
6. <i>Orrajt/Alright</i> , 2020	

The screenplay of *I'm Furious-Red!*, since similarly like the screenplay of *Il-Madonna taċ-Ċoqqa /Our Madonna of the Hood*, no longer exists,⁵⁷ while *Arcadia* even though was shot from a screenplay, the writer-director was uncomfortable sharing the document with me since the director is a self-taught writer unsure of the professional execution of a professional screenplay.⁵⁸

Table 3: Full Feature Screenplays Breakdown

Full Feature Screenplays	
Available	Not Available
1. <i>Ġaġġa /The Cage</i> , 1971	1. <i>Katarin/Catherine</i> , 1977
2. <i>Simshar</i> , 2014	2. <i>Angli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie</i> , 2005
3. <i>Do Re Mi Fa</i> , 2016	3. <i>Kont Diġà/I Was Already</i> , 2009
4. <i>20,000 Reasons</i> , 2016	4. <i>Maltageddon</i> , 2009
5. <i>Is-Sriep Reggħu Saru Velenużi/The Vipers' Pit</i> , 2019 ⁵⁹	5. <i>Luzzu</i> , 2020

As far as *Katarin/Catherine* (1977) is concerned, upon contacting the British Film Institute archive in London, it transpired that only the dialogue transcript was available; this offered very little context to answer the research questions. The writer-director of *Kont Diġà/I was Already* worked

⁵⁷ Jean Pierre Borg, email communication, 30 January 2020.

⁵⁸ Jamie Vella, survey, 28 March 2019.

⁵⁹ The literal translation is *The Snakes Have Become Poisonous Again*, trans. by the researcher.

from a set of notes rather than a completed screenplay,⁶⁰ as did the writer-director of *Maltageddon*.⁶¹ The writer-director of *Luzzu*, Alex Camilleri, initially consented to the inclusion of the *Luzzu* screenplay in my research. However, Camilleri later changed his mind, saying that ‘I feel these screenplays will always be incomplete and not representative of what I’ve tried to accomplish in the films. For better or for worse, the finished films are the only incarnation that I am comfortable sharing’.⁶²

1.3 Scope and Limitations of the Research

As noted above, the research, which began in October 2013, required two significant adjustments of the main research question and the critical material examined. I initially concentrated on examining the absence, rather than the presence, of cinematic narratives reflecting Malta, particularly contemporary Malta. It took me by surprise that there were practically none. Malta as an island with its long and tumultuous history simply lends itself to cinematic storytelling. My academic interest, however, was always in contemporary Malta, not the historical one, for collective memory tends to aggrandize, idealise and glorify the past.⁶³ The political and ideological consequences of the dominant focus on historical and nostalgic narratives, which are being elevated to ‘nation forming events’ that informs ‘the national psyche’, is that these past events are safe to talk about.⁶⁴ One of my main research questions, therefore, was why Maltese screenwriters suffered from non-participation in the events that take place in contemporary Malta.⁶⁵

Fortunately, the latter part of 2016 witnessed a shy but steady emergence of Maltese short screenplay and full feature screenplay texts rich in self-representation and self-perception. Similarly, 2017 witnessed the same process in television screenplays taking a timid but consistent control of Malta’s televisual storytelling. By the standards of international output, the number is negligible, but for Malta, and for this research, it was significant. In addition to the emergence of new funding programmes such as *Kultura TV* (within the Arts Council Malta), the National Book Council offer new opportunities for financing television series and films, independent of Screen Malta. The funding programmes are discussed in Chapter 6.

Another possible factor that contributed to the emergence at this time of screenplays and films reflecting Maltese culture and identity was the fact that Valletta, the capital of Malta, was

⁶⁰ Mark Dingli, survey, 11 April 2018.

⁶¹ Alan Cassar, e-mail communication, 25 April 2018.

⁶² Alex Camilleri, e-mail communication, 24 May 2021.

⁶³ Briffa, 26 January 2018.

⁶⁴ Mercieca, 19 December 2019.

⁶⁵ Mercieca, 19 December 2019.

named in 2012 as the European Capital of Culture for 2018. The year 2018 was highly significant for Malta, creating an opportunity to transform the island into a hub for creative audio-visual exchange and to raise awareness of improving accompanying infrastructures of culture, education, and government policy. A slow but steady emergence of Maltese screenworks in the last four years has allowed the present study to explore the concept of ‘national cinema’ within Malta. In this context, I am motivated by Andrew Higson’s research into the term ‘national’ in discourse about film and television.⁶⁶ The first major adjustment in the present research, then, lay in recognising that the Maltese film and television industries were starting to engage more extensively with contemporary experience, and that my research therefore had to account for and investigate the representation of contemporary Malta in these works rather than concentrating solely on its previous near-total absence.

The second adjustment to the direction of my research was made in 2019. Initially, the research included Rediffusion radio play texts, since the development of screenwriting practices in Malta is indebted to Rediffusion radio and its pioneers: Kelinu Vella Haber (1913-2014) and Father Winston Born (1910-1986), a Dominican friar. Vella Haber and Born not only wrote radio drama plays—Born was the most prolific radio drama series writer in the 1950s and 1960s—but they also taught screenwriting for radio in Malta in the 1940s and 1950s.

Rediffusion is of key importance to the screenwriting industry in Malta since writing for audiovisual media can be traced to Rediffusion (Malta) Ltd (henceforth Rediffusion), which began its first broadcast on 11 November 1935.⁶⁷ Rediffusion offered service on two channels (Switch A relaying the BBC Empire Service, and Switch B offering light entertainment in English and Maltese in the form of music, sports, and radio drama). At its beginning, the Rediffusion radio drama consisted of translations of the BBC’s radio plays and of recorded theatre performances, because it was assumed that it was possible in this way to present the radio audience with relayed stage plays—some of which were translations.⁶⁸ Despite this, radio drama very quickly gained popularity with Maltese audiences, and this form of storytelling had captured the imagination of post-war Malta.

⁶⁶ Andrew Higson, ‘The Concept of National Cinema’, *Screen*, 30.4 (1989), 36–47 (p.36) < <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/30.4.36>>.

⁶⁷ Toni Sant, *Remembering Rediffusion in Malta. A History Without Future* (Malta: Midsea Books Ltd, 2016), p. 50.

⁶⁸ Sant, *Remembering Rediffusion*, p. 107

While the copy of the first indigenous radio drama *L-Għaniqa ta' Wiżu/Louis' Goat* (1947),⁶⁹ adapted by Kelinu Vella is available through the research of Paul P. Borg,⁷⁰ my attempts at locating Born's relevant radio plays at the library at the Dominican Jesus of Nazareth Parish House in Sliema, Malta proved futile: the key screenplays no longer exist. Of particular interest would have been *Hajja Maltija/A Maltese Way of Life* (1953), the first-ever television soap opera to be produced on the island, which reflected life in immediate post-war Malta. The other works by Born included the first comedy trilogy (1962) with Spiru Cefai, a Jerry Lewis-like character which consisted of *Spiru Cefai jmur għall Gwerra/Spiru Cefai Goes to War*, *Spiru Cefai u l-Kurunell/Spiru Cefai and the Colonel*, *Spiru Cefai wara l-Gwerra/Spiru Cefai After the War*.⁷¹ Contacting the audio-visual archives of Malta's Public Broadcasting Services in 2015 was equally unsuccessful because, as noted, as of mid-2021 the digitization process that began in 2014 is still taking place. The unavailability of the catalogue does not permit enquiry into whether Born's recorded radio plays still exist. Nevertheless, the importance of Born's contribution to Maltese radio drama is discussed and acknowledged in the Screenwriting Education in Malta section in Chapter 6.

1.4 Methodologies and Data Collection

The main objective of this study was to investigate and evaluate Maltese television and film screenplays and their authors to understand how they were shaped by the Island's past and present socio-political and historical environments. However, to compensate for the lack of written secondary material on Maltese screenwriting, a substantial amount of data has been gathered from multiple forms of data, such as questionnaires, interviews and conversations with the screenwriters, writer-directors and other figures working in and around Maltese film and television and their screen texts and screenworks. This data forms part of a 'qualitative' approach in developing the argument of the present thesis. A qualitative approach is not concerned with the objective, measurable 'facts' or 'events' that the quantitative approach demands while testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables,⁷² but with the ways that people construct,

⁶⁹ *L-Għaniqa ta' Wiżu* is an adaptation of a short story written by Sir Temi Zammit, 'Lies are Short Lived', (1864-1935). In the short story Zammit depicted the Maltese mentality in the common speech of the villages, often in an amusing. Charles Briffa, 'A Brief History of Maltese Literature', in *This Fair Land: An Anthology of Maltese Literature*, ed. by Charles Briffa (London: Francis Boutle Publication, 2014), p. 277.

⁷⁰ Paul P. Borg, *Kelinu Vella Haber Hidmietu u l-Moviment tal-Malti/ Kelinu Vella Haber His Works and the Maltese Movement*, (Malta: Union Print Co. Ltd, 2003).

⁷¹ Mark Montebello, 'Prologue', in *Il-Kappillan Ta' Malta*, ed. by Mark Montebello, (Sliema, Malta: Il-Patrijiet Dumnikani Tas-Sliema, 2018), pp. 9-87 (pp. 41-42 and 72-77).

⁷² John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd., 2018), p. 4.

interpret, and give meaning to these experiences.⁷³ In this pursuit, qualitative research involves several methods of data collection, such as focus groups, field observation, in-depth interviews, and case studies. The present research relied on questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Since the main suggestion is that the shape of the narrative should be ‘double storytelling’ that is not only entertaining, but which also contains ‘larger ethical and social connotations’,⁷⁴ the research also examines a case study of my own work, a produced short screenplay of *The Maltese Fighter*,⁷⁵ as both a practice-based enquiry and research artefact. The approach allows valuing screenwriting as a way to generate and disseminate new knowledge and, most importantly, implements the dual narrative structure.⁷⁶ The screen text also permitted me to provide a direct insider perspective while thinking as an outsider.⁷⁷ To accomplish this, I had to make use of an internal dialogue that repeatedly examined my knowledge and question how I came to know this.⁷⁸ The overall aim is to indicate how and why Maltese screenwriters and writer-directors have largely neglected the investigation of socio-political beliefs and values, although there have been more encouraging developments in this area since around 2016. A corollary aim to elucidate the realities of funding for Maltese screen productions, and to assess how funding considerations impact on the kinds of films that have been produced.

Reflexivity

Drawing on my own practice is an example of reflexivity in qualitative research, reflexivity is commonly understood as ‘the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher’s positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome’.⁷⁹ Additionally, since the researcher is the primary tool for the data collection and the analysis, reflexivity is crucial to guarantee the quality of the research and for ‘maintaining a balance between the personal and the universal’;⁸⁰ this

⁷³ Ruth Horowitz and Kathleen Gerson, ‘Observation and Interviewing: Options and Choices in Qualitative Research’, in *Qualitative Research in Action*, ed. by Tim May (London: Sage Publications, 2002), pp. 199-224 (p. 199).

⁷⁴ Eva Novrup Redvall, ‘Dogmas for Television Drama: The Ideas of ‘one vision’, ‘double storytelling’, ‘crossover’ and ‘producer’s choice’ in Drama Series from the Danish Public Service Broadcaster DR’, *Journal of Popular Television*, 1. 2 (2013), 227-34 (p. 229) <[http://doi: 10.1386/jptv.1.2.227_1](http://doi:10.1386/jptv.1.2.227_1)>

⁷⁵ Eva Novrup Redvall, ‘Dogmas for Television Drama: The Ideas of ‘one vision’, ‘double storytelling’, ‘crossover’ and ‘producer’s choice’ in Drama Series from the Danish Public Service Broadcaster DR’, *Journal of Popular Television*, 1. 2 (2013), 227-34 (p. 229) <[http://doi: 10.1386/jptv.1.2.227_1](http://doi:10.1386/jptv.1.2.227_1)>

⁷⁶ Baker and others, p. 3.

⁷⁷ Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2017), p. 131.

⁷⁸ Berg, p.131.

⁷⁹ Roni Berger, ‘Now I See It, Now I Don’t: Researcher’s Position and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research’, *Qualitative Research*, 15.2 (2015), 219–34 (p.220) <<https://doi:10.1177/1468794112468475>>.

⁸⁰ Berger, ‘Now I See It’, p. 220.

‘increases the integrity and trustworthiness of the findings’.⁸¹ Biases (conscious and unconscious), theoretical, political, ethical, and ideological stances are inevitable characteristics in any research because ‘no research is free of the biases, assumptions, and personality of the researcher and we cannot separate self from those activities in which we are intimately involved’.⁸² Nonetheless, reflexivity can help to overcome the ethical issues and biases because it encourages researchers to employ self-criticism and ‘to explicitly acknowledge that any research is partisan, partial and fundamentally bound to the context and rhetoric of the investigation’.⁸³

Qualitative Approach

Any investigative study adopts a research method (evidence gathering process) that best suits the objective of the study. In this case, research began with questionnaires to understand better the authors’ interpretations and perceptions of the indigenous audio-visual storytelling. Their responses enabled me to probe deeper into the nature and context of Maltese screenplays. This first-pass exploration proved beneficial in many ways. It reinforced the research objectives, identified key contributors, and confirmed the qualitative approach as the most appropriate methodology to employ, since qualitative research always involves some kind of direct encounter with ‘the world’, whether it takes the form of ongoing daily life or interactions with a selected group. Furthermore, qualitative researchers are also routinely concerned not only with objectively measurable ‘facts’ or ‘events’, but also with the ways people construct, interpret and give meaning to these experiences. Qualitative approaches typically include attention to dynamic processes rather than (or in addition to) static categories, and they aim to discover or develop new concepts rather than imposing preconceived categories on the people and events they observe.⁸⁴ Drawing on my professional knowledge of the field as well as the information derived from the interviews, I aimed to assess how these experiences and dynamic processes contributed to the development of Malta’s application of the ‘double storytelling’ concept, taking into account historical and cultural processes of change.

Validity and Reliability

Research attempts to convince its readers that a specific study, and therefore its findings, accurately reflect the phenomena being investigated. This is what is meant by validity. However, validity in

⁸¹ Linda Finlay, ‘Negotiating the Swamp: The Opportunity and Challenge of Reflexivity in Research Practice’, *Qualitative Research*, 2.2 (2002), 209–30 (p. 210) <[https://doi:10.1177/146879410200200205](https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410200200205)>.

⁸² Wendy Sword, ‘Accounting for Presence of Self: Reflections on Doing Qualitative Research’, *Qualitative Health Research*, 9.2 (1999), 270–78 (p. 211) <[https://doi:10.1177/104973299129121839](https://doi.org/10.1177/104973299129121839)>.

⁸³ Finlay, ‘Negotiating the Swamp’, p. 211.

⁸⁴ Horowitz and Gerson, ‘Observation and Interviewing’, p. 199.

qualitative studies is not manifested in the same way as in quantitative research, nor is it a companion to reliability or generalizability. Validity in qualitative work means that researchers check for the accuracy of the findings by using certain procedures, whereas qualitative reliability indicates that the researcher's approach is consistent across different researchers and among different projects.⁸⁵ Terms used in the qualitative literature address validity, such as trustworthiness, authenticity, corroboration, and credibility.⁸⁶

Creswell and Creswell recommend a procedural perspective that the researchers actively incorporate validity strategies to ensure and enhance the researcher's ability to assess the accuracy of findings as well as convince readers of that accuracy.⁸⁷ There are eight primary strategies:

1. Triangulation of different data sources by examining evidence from diverse sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes. If themes are established based on converging several sources of data or perspectives from participants, then the process can be claimed as adding validity of the study.

The hypothesis of the 'Maltese condition' emerged from my professional knowledge as a screenwriter and co-writer and from the textual analysis of the selected screenworks. The validity and reliability of the themes were corroborated and expanded upon by many screenwriters and film professionals, and Maltese scholars. The screenwriters and film professionals (Charles Stroud, Martin Bonnici, Mario Philip Azzopardi, Alex Camilleri, Samira Damato, Alan Cassar, Carlos Debattista, Mark Dingli, Jamie Vella, Jeremy Vella, Charlie Cauchi, Rebecca Anastasi, Joyce Grech) agreed that Malta needs more challenging screenworks telling Malta's story and reflecting Maltese cinematic identity, with some of the narratives including the island's contemporary problems, but they were all aware of self-censoring as a storyteller. In fact, Charlie Cauchi commented that Malta would benefit from examining screenworks from Iran, Iraq and Egypt whose filmmakers create narratives that 'allow subtextual reading while overtly saying very little to bypass the self-censorship'.⁸⁸ The screenwriters and film professionals have also insisted on the importance of education and training to professionalize the indigenous film and television industry. In addition to this, Maltese scholars (Dr Marie Briguglio, Prof Vince Briffa, Prof Godfrey Baldacchino, Prof Raphael Vella, Prof Saviour Chircop, Prof Saviour Catania, Prof Albert Gatt, Prof William Zammit, Caldon Mercieca and Chris Gruppetta) agreed that Malta is a heavily

⁸⁵ Graham, R. Gibbs, 'Analyzing Qualitative Data', in *Sage Qualitative Research Kit*, ed by Uwe Flick (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), p. 95.

⁸⁶ Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, pp. 201-202.

⁸⁷ Creswell and Creswell, pp. 201-202.

⁸⁸ Charlie Cauchi, in discussion with the researcher, 23 September 2018.

networked society that is politically divided, suffering from mediocrity, the ‘tall poppy syndrome’, political elitism, favouritism, and a lack of critical thinking that is also evident in other art forms in Malta.

2. Using member checking to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings by taking the specific descriptions or themes, or findings back to the participants and assessing whether they deem them to be accurate and hearing their comments.

The specific sections and themes of the ‘Maltese condition’ were sent to the contributors (Charles Stroud, Martin Bonnici, Rebecca Cremona, Rebecca Anastasi, Jeremy Vella, Vince Briffa, Samira Damato, Louiselle Vassallo) who agreed that the descriptions and key conclusions reached were in agreement with their own understanding of the situation in Malta.

3. When applicable, it is recommended to use a rich, thick description to convey the findings. The description may transport readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences. Detailed descriptions of the setting may offer more than one perspective about a theme, the results, therefore, become more realistic and richer.

The material presented gives the present study a lot of rich detail and multiple perspectives while the writing style provides the immediacy of experience conveyed by my descriptions of my own experiences and the Maltese-specific aspects of language and culture. In addition to this, a number of contributors have significantly enriched the research by providing a different perspective on the themes deriving from their different professional backgrounds and interests. Prof Vince Briffa brought to my attention two facts, first, that the Maltese tend to idealise, aggrandize, and glorify the past,⁸⁹ and second, that what cannot be expressed in screenwriting can be expressed in political cartooning.⁹⁰ The latter was one of the pivotal moments in the present research.

Caldon Mercieca, who corroborated Prof Briffa’s insight into the aggrandization of the past by the writers, enriched the research by positing that the Maltese tend to define their national identity around three key moments in the history of Malta: (1) the arrival of Saint Paul in 60 AD; (2) ‘the Great Siege’ of 1565 by the Ottoman Empire; (3) and the ‘Second Great Siege’ during the Second World War in 1942.⁹¹ This information has helped the validity of the hypothesis that the screenwriters and writer-directors tend to keep away from more recent events and remain in the

⁸⁹ Vince Briffa, discussion with the research, 26 January 2018.

⁹⁰ Vince Briffa, discussion with the research, 2 March 2021.

⁹¹ Caldon Mercieca, in discussion with the researcher, 19 December 2019.

past in their narratives to conform to the expectations of the patronage system in Malta, and to abstain from antagonizing the sponsors. This was also confirmed by Briffa, Chris Gruppetta, and Charles Stroud.

Prof William Zammit, Prof Joseph Brincat, and Prof Albert Gatt have helped in elucidating the language aspect from both historical and contemporary perspectives of what it means to be Maltese, a nation with a rich language, long history and palimpsestic culture, still suffering from the postcolonial residue, whose engagement with the past can be a difficult endeavour.

Dr Marie Briguglio, Prof Saviour Chircop, Prof Vince Briffa, and Prof Albert Gatt have commented on the prevailing phenomenon of ‘mediocrity’ in Malta, which seems to be part of the conformity condition; however, it was enlightening to learn that mediocrity may not necessarily be negative nor is it limited to Malta only, as Gatt noted, it may be a ‘general malaise’ in any small country.⁹² A very interesting interpretation of mediocrity was presented by Prof Saviour Chircop, who claimed that mediocrity is historically motivated since Malta, as a subjugated nation, quite often offered no formal education nor training to its people; thus mediocrity allowed the untrained and unskilled workers to ‘get things done’.⁹³

4. Bias that the researcher brings to the study needs to be clarified. The self-reflection creates an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with readers. Good qualitative research contains comments by the researchers about how their interpretation of the findings is shaped by their background, which includes gender, culture, history and socioeconomic origin.

My personal and professional knowledge of the island and of the researched discipline along with my socioeconomic origins have not only shaped my research approach and but also the research hypothesis, both inevitably laden with my conscious and unconscious biases, be they ‘theoretical, political, ethical, and ideological stances’.⁹⁴ My biases were acknowledged and regulated by my self-awareness, my openness to self-criticism, and by an on-going internal dialogue to ensure maintaining the balance between my assumptions and the facts, between ‘the personal and the universal’,⁹⁵ between my experiences as an outsider looking in and the experiences of the native Maltese screenwriter and scholar.

5. Present negative or discrepant information that runs counter to the themes. Discussing contrary information adds to the credibility of an account. A researcher can accomplish this by

⁹² Albert Gatt, in discussion with the researcher, 2 March 2018.

⁹³ Saviour Chircop, discussion with the researcher, 29 January 2018.

⁹⁴ Wendy Sword, ‘Accounting for Presence of Self: Reflections’, p. 211.

⁹⁵ Berger, ‘Now I See It’, p. 220.

discussing evidence about a theme and for the theme but presenting contradictory information ensures the account is more valid.

There were two writer-directors, Winston Azzopardi and Chris Zarb, who did not agree with the concept of the double storytelling technique, the research hypothesis, or the concept of the Maltese condition being expressed in cinematic terms. Azzopardi's interest, as a writer-director, lies in telling more generic and more universal stories, particularly maritime stories, being a skipper himself. In addition, Azzopardi deems the more generic stories to be more entertaining and, in the case of maritime-themed stories, more complicated to shoot. Azzopardi also believes that the writers who stay close to stories of 'their homeland tend to make films around social issues', which he finds unappealing and unexciting.⁹⁶ Films, to Azzopardi, are made 'purely for entertainment [and] social issues should be made into documentaries'.⁹⁷ In fact, Azzopardi's most recent production is a horror screen production, *The Boat*.⁹⁸

Chris Zarb, on the other hand, is interested in the psychology of the characters 'with a surrealist slant'; therefore, Malta's contemporary ailments and dilemmas—for instance, the destruction of the Maltese countryside—do not interest him. However, the theme may interest Zarb if the focus would be the 'greed of the powers' that allow destruction for financial gain. Zarb's interest in Malta's contemporary ailments is more coincidental than intentional, which is reflected in his first full feature production *Do Re Mi Fa* (2016). In this film, Zarb comments about racism in Malta, and for this reason, it was selected to be part of the present research.⁹⁹

6. Spend prolonged time in the field. This allows the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study. It can convey details about the site and the people that lends credibility to the narrative account. The more experience the research has with participants in their setting, the more accurate or valid the findings are.

As previously mentioned, my familiarity with the setting has allowed me to provide an insider's account of the phenomenon under study which has shaped the research questions and the direction of the enquiry. Nonetheless, reflexivity in qualitative research acts as a counterbalance, while the researcher is required to reflect about how their role in the study and the manner in which their personal background, culture, and experiences may shape their interpretations, such as the themes

⁹⁶ Winston Azzopardi, survey, 17 April 2018.

⁹⁷ Azzopardi, survey.

⁹⁸ *The Boat*, dir. Winston Azzopardi, 2019

<https://www.imdb.com/video/vi1583856409/?playlistId=tt7468616&ref_=tt_ov_vi> [30 April 2020].

⁹⁹ Chris Zarb, survey, 11 April 2018.

they advance and the meaning they ascribe to the data. This aspect of the method, however, is more than simply ‘advancing biases and values in the study’, for the researcher’s background and familiarity with the phenomenon under study may shape the direction of the study, which has occurred in the present research.¹⁰⁰

7. Use peer debriefing to enhance the accuracy of the account. This involves locating a person who reviews and asks questions about the qualitative study so that the account will resonate with people other than the researchers.

The research, or chapter research, was presented at the following international conferences and seminars:

- i. ‘Emerging screenwriters in Malta - Whose Stories Will They Tell?’, Screenwriters Research Network in Potsdam, Germany, 17 October–20 October 2014.

The presented paper discussed the Maltese indigenous film industry and the appreciation of the efforts of the Malta Film Commissioner, Engelbert Grech, to foster a culture of scriptwriting while stressing the importance of professional education and training of the screenwriters and film directors.

- ii. ‘Malta: Haecceity and Imitation’, Cinema of Small Nations, Small Cinemas Conference in Valletta, 9 June 2016-10 June 2016.

The paper discussed Malta as a shooting location offering a layered landscape with its own articulation of the geographic space and the filmic space.

- iii. ‘Storytelling and Screenwriting in Contemporary Malta’, Bangor University, School of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics, 6 August 2020 (online).

The paper presented a brief overview of the research to the Bangor doctoral researchers.

- iv. ‘Storytelling and Screenwriting in Contemporary Malta, 1970-2020’, University of Malta, Faculty of Media and Knowledge Science, 27 October 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Creswell and Creswell, p. 235.

The paper presented a full overview and findings to the scholars, film practitioners, and students.

An important reviewer was my doctoral supervisor, Prof Steven Price, and later on, the second viewer was Prof Zoë Skoulding, the second supervisor; and at the beginning of 2021, the thesis was read by Prof Vince Briffa of the University of Malta.

8. Use an external auditor to review the entire project. It is distinct from a peer debriefer. The auditor is unfamiliar with the researcher or the project and can provide an objective assessment of the project either throughout the process or at the conclusion of the study.¹⁰¹

This point has not been met since the present study needs to be assessed by the external examiner.

Reliability in qualitative studies is applied when researchers document the procedures of their case studies and document as many of the steps of the procedures as possible. One way of doing this is by setting up a detailed case study protocol and database so that others can follow the procedures. One of the steps is making sure the transcripts are free from mistakes.

The transcripts in the present study were not free from mistakes. The sheer volumes of listening to the initial seventy-five interviews before the final selection of twenty-six contributors (some were interviewed more than once) proved to be challenging. However, multiple listening to the recordings, in addition to the notes received from Prof Steven Price, the research supervisor, have eliminated transcript errors.

Themes/Codes

The process of designing a qualitative study that emerges during research generally begins with broad assumptions central to qualitative enquiry which are eventually reduced to grouping information into codes, themes, or categories.¹⁰² The present study does not utilise codes but themes that emerged from the ‘Maltese Condition’, that is, the inherent and accrued political, cultural and logistical complexities and contradictions of the island, which have given rise to a phenomenon known as the ‘Maltese condition’. The ‘Maltese condition’ is one of the most important premises that the present research looks at and is being examined through the application of the ‘double storytelling’ but also how this condition is interpreted by the indigenous

¹⁰¹ Creswell and Creswell, pp.202-203.

¹⁰² John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design. Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 4th edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2018) p. 104.

screenwriters and writer-directors. The themes that emerged through the present research are the ‘tall poppy syndrome’, patronage and conformism, mediocrity, bird hunting, illegal immigration, construction, Catholicism, Maltese language, racism, identity, and internalised forms of self-censorship.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics clearance was obtained from the University of Bangor through the School Arts, Culture and Language and Media Research Ethics Committee. Participants were informed of the objectives of the study and asked to provide their consent so that this researcher could use their information prior to data gathering. Verbatim transcriptions and interpretation were made available to the participants for approval. All Facebook posts cited were cleared by the persons who posted them. They were contacted by email and sent excerpts of relevant material whereby their posts were cited. All were approved.

The first-pass questionnaire mentioned above was followed by forty-six in-depth semi-structured personal interviews and surveys, conducted between 2016 and 2021. Ultimately thirty-two contributors (twenty-six recorded personal and via Zoom interviews and twenty surveys sent by email) were selected since not every participant was equally articulate and perceptive. The key reasons for conducting these interviews were: first, to understand how the island’s past and present socio-political and historical environments shaped them and their storytelling vision; and secondly, whether they are aware of the ‘Maltese condition’ and whether this forms a part of their thematic concerns. The research also included speaking to academics from the University of Malta, who also provided supplementary material pertaining to the history of Malta, Maltese culture and language, contemporary and visual arts, media and communications, small-island concerns, anthropology, and sociology.

Questionnaire and Interviews

Interviewing is a qualitative method enabling researchers to present views, on some central issues and aims to obtain information from participants. This researcher is looking for representatives of film and television screenwriting who used the form of double storytelling (discussed in section 1.10 Small Nation Storytelling in Television and Cinema). Given that most films and television works begin with a script, the present research examines works that reflect double storytelling applicable to both film and television storytelling.

To add to the overall perspective, a set of questions were sent to my twenty-three former students. Consciously or unconsciously, they had been quite reticent in locating their narratives in Malta. When asked ‘why not Malta?’ this researcher would get a very standard reply that Malta has no

stories (particularly contemporary Malta), or that Malta is not really an interesting place to write about, or simply put, locating cinematic stories in Malta seems counter-intuitive. In fairness, the students are exposed just to fifty-six hours of screenwriting practice taking a *Scripting Video 1* study unit in the first semester (twenty-eight hours) and *Scripting Video 2* study unit in the second semester (replaced in 2020 as the *Adaptation for Film and Television* study unit) offering additional twenty-eight hours. Nine students replied, but only seven were included in the present research. Their contribution and reaction are discussed in Chapter 7.

The purpose of these questions was to offer a deeper context since the national and cultural identity of Maltese screenwriters and writer-directors developed out of constant exploitation by foreigners and neglect by past power-holders. This experiential interaction has affected how Maltese identify and define themselves, and how they wish to be identified and defined by others. Therefore, the texts examined in this thesis reveal Maltese attitudes, how they ‘create conventions of style and behaviour, reinforce, or undermine the wider values of society’, and at times offer ‘a mirror’ of ‘heightened self-reflection’¹⁰³ and self-representation of contemporary Malta, that can be shared with other nations.

Data Collection

The method applied to the primary material was a thematic evaluation of twenty-four screenworks in all, very few of which had previously received extended critical attention: seventeen screenplays, and seven screen texts of Maltese key screenwriting figures. These twenty-four works, written between 1971 and 2020, encompassed three different fiction production genres: six television texts (five screenplay texts and one screen text), eight short texts (six screenplay texts and two screen texts), and ten full feature texts (five screenplay texts and five screen texts). In addition to this, the selected screenworks were divided into two categories: the immediate post-Independence with the dominant ideology of Catholicism and the State¹⁰⁴ and the post-EU Accession governed by entrepreneurial businessmen and the State.¹⁰⁵ Both ideologies inform the creative output of the Maltese screenwriters and writer-directors with each era representing a different Malta, hence the texts studied are divided accordingly and examined through the ‘Maltese condition’:

¹⁰³ David Puttnam, *The Undeclared War*, pp. 348-50.

¹⁰⁴ Pawlu Mizzi ‘Malta’s Dominant Culture Through Forces Sustaining Ideology’, <http://pawlumizzi.com/articles/research/maltas-dominant-culture-through-forces-sustaining-ideology/> [accessed 10 March 2020] (para.5 of 9).

¹⁰⁵ Briffa, 15 March 2021.

Table 4: Television Screenworks: Post-Independence and Post-EU Accession

TV screenplays and series	Post-Independence	Post-EU accession
1. <i>F'Baħar Wieħed/In One Sea</i> (1977)	√	
2. <i>Il-Madonna taċ-Ċoqqa/Our Madonna of the Hood</i> (1978)	√	
3. <i>Strada Stretta/Strait Street</i> (2015-2017)		√
4. <i>Carmelo</i> (2018)	√	
5. <i>L-Għarusa/The Bride</i> (2019-2020)		√
6. <i>Il-Miraklu/Holy Mary!</i> (2018)		√

Table 5: Short Screenworks: Post-Independence and Post-EU Accession

Short Screenplays and Films	Post-Independence	Post-EU accession
1. <i>I'm Furious-Red!</i> (1970)	√	
2. <i>The Maltese Fighter</i> (2014)	√	
3. <i>Laqgħa ma' Mara Morbi/Meeting with Mara Morbi</i> (2014)		√
4. <i>Dritt għall-Punt /Straight to the Point</i> (2017)	√	
5. <i>Żiemel/Horse</i> (2017)		√
6. <i>Arcadia</i> (2017)		√
7. <i>Ħallini Ħanini / Let Me Be, Dear</i> (2020)	√	
8. <i>Orrajt / Alright</i> (2020)		√

Table 6: Full Feature Screenworks: Post-Independence and Post-EU Accession

Full Feature Screenplays and Films	Post-Independence	Post-EU accession
1. <i>Gagħa/The Cage</i> (1971)	√	
2. <i>Katarin/Catherine</i> (1977)	√	
3. <i>Anġli: The Movie</i> (2005)		√
4. <i>Maltageddon</i> (2009)		√
5. <i>Kont Diġà /I was Already</i> (2009)		√
6. <i>Simshar</i> (2014)		√
7. <i>20,000 Reasons</i> (2016)		√
8. <i>Do Re Mi Fa</i> (2016)		√
9. <i>Is-Sriep Reggħu Saru Velenużi/The Vipers' Pit</i> (2019)	√	√
10. <i>Luzzu</i> (2020)		√

The data collected from the questionnaires aimed to answer the five aforementioned research questions, namely:

1. Who are the Maltese screenwriters and writer-directors?
2. What constitutes a Maltese cinematic identity?
3. What is the concept of self-representation and self-perception?
4. What are the thematic tendencies?
5. Why do screenwriters and writer-directors self-censor their work?

The greatest immediate challenge, however, arose in securing the screenplays. When screenplays, important for the study were unavailable, this researcher transcribed the relevant scenes from the extant screen texts. In addition, certain categories of material were excluded from the study like, for example, screen texts of screenwriters who were based in Malta but were not themselves Maltese; texts by Maltese screenwriters and industry practitioners from the Maltese diaspora; non-fiction texts such as documentary, docu-drama, mockumentary and reality shows; and dramatic writings that were not intended for the screen (stage plays and contemporary radio plays).

Language in Screenplays and Screenworks

In Maltese screen production culture, television series can be written in the Maltese language or the English language, or both (action in English and dialogue in Maltese), but the final dialogue needs to be in Maltese unless the story demands otherwise. The breakdown of the available television screenplays revealed the following: action written in English with dialogue written in Maltese was found in *Strada Stretta/Strait Street* (2015-2017), *L-Għarusa/The Bride* (2019-2020) and *Il-Miraklu/Holy Mary!* (2018). *F'Baħar Wieħed/In One Sea* (1977) and *Carmelo* (2018) were written in Maltese only (action and dialogue). The screenplay of *Il-Madonna taċ-Ċoqqa/Our Madonna of the Hood* (1978) was not available, but the screenwork was in Maltese language only. It needs to be noted that the choice of the language during the writing phase is a matter of the writer's preference.¹⁰⁶ In addition to this, the guidelines and regulation of the *Kultura* TV fund does not specify the screenplays be written in Maltese; however, it does expect the final product—the filmed television drama—to be in Maltese language.¹⁰⁷ Another example are the screenplays of *Il-*

¹⁰⁶ Mark Doneo, Audrey Brincat Dalli, Charles Stroud.

¹⁰⁷ *Kultura* TV, Guidelines and Regulations 2021

Miraklu/Holy Mary! (2018)—the recipient of *Kultura* TV funding in 2016¹⁰⁸—whose action was written in English while dialogue in Maltese, but its final product that broadcast was in Maltese.

In cinematic productions, the writing of short and full feature screenplays similarly tends to have action written in the English language with dialogue written in Maltese. The guidelines of the Nation Book Council stipulate that the submitted screenplays must be written in Maltese,¹⁰⁹ while screenplays submitted to the Screen Malta funding in Maltese are required to be translated into English as a courtesy to the foreign evaluators.¹¹⁰ In order to circumvent the translation cost, the submitted screenplays are written in English with the dialogue written in dual columns, Maltese and English,¹¹¹ like in *Simshar* (2014) and *The Maltese Fighter* (2014). If the production is self-funded, then it depends on the screenwriter and writer-director. For the purposes of this study, where screenplay texts are written in Maltese, or screen texts are not subtitled into English, the translation of the dialogue into English is made by the researcher and is presented in square brackets.

The following is the breakdown of the languages used in screenplays: *The Maltese Fighter* (2014), *Laqgħa ma' Mara Morbi/Meeting with Mara Morbi* (2014), *Żiemel/Horse* (2017), *Hallini Hanini / Let Me Be, Dear* (2020) and *Orrajt? Alright* (2020) have action written in English and dialogue in Maltese, with the exception of *Dritt għall-Punt /Straight to the Point* (2017), which is written fully in Maltese. The screenwriter, Charles Stroud, provided a translated copy of the screenplay. *I'm Furious-Red!* (1970) is omitted from the breakdown since the screenwork contains no dialogue, and for *Arcadia* (2107), as previously noted, the writer-director worked from a set of notes, not the screenplay.

Correspondingly, the full feature screenplays of *Gagġa/The Cage* (1971), *Anġli: The Movie* (2005), *Maltageddon* (2009), *Kont Diġà /I was Already* (2009), and *Luzzu* (2020) were not available, whereas the available screenplay of *Katarin/Catherine* (1977) at the British Film Institute contained the dialogue transcript. *Do Re Mi Fa* (2016) was entirely written and filmed in English. *20,000 Reasons* (2016) and *Is-Sriep Reggħu Saru Velenużi/The Vipers' Pit* (2019) had action written in English with some single dialogue lines in Maltese as per the demands of the storyline.

<<https://www.artscouncilmalta.org/files/uploads/misc/Kultura%20TV%20Guidelines%20Eng.pdf>> [accessed 15 June 2021], p. 8.

¹⁰⁸ *Kultura* TV, Funded Projects <<https://www.artscouncilmalta.org/funds/kulturatv/main-strand/results-2016>> [accessed 15 June 2021], p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ The NBC Film Adaptation Fund <https://ktieb.org.mt/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/GUIDELINES-NBC-Film-Adaptation-Fund-2021-ENG.pdf> [accessed 29 May 2022], p. 4.

¹¹⁰ Screen Malta Regulations, 2021 <<https://maltafilmcommission.com/screen-malta/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Screen-Malta-Regulations-LIVE-ACTION-12.04.2021.pdf>> [accessed 10 September 2021], p. 7.

¹¹¹ My own experience and interviews with other beneficiaries: Mark Doneo, and Abigail Mallia.

1.5 The ‘Maltese Condition’ and Self-Representation

The principal research approaches taken in this project are, then, largely empirical: locating and analysing screenplays and cinematic and televisual screenworks using double storytelling, and gathering oral and written testimonies, in order to provide the first comprehensive study of the development of Maltese screenwriting within the island’s film and television industries. However, establishing the significance of this material and explaining why it takes the forms it does requires theoretical and historical forms of research into the inherent and accrued political, cultural and logistical complexities and contradictions of the country, which have given rise to a phenomenon known as the ‘Maltese condition’. The ‘Maltese condition’ is one of the most important premises that the present research looks at and is being examined through the application of the ‘double storytelling’ technique but also how this condition is cinematically coded by indigenous screenwriters and writer-directors.

Islands like Malta are not created overnight. They are the result of gradual political and cultural processes, which entail centuries of socio-political negotiations between themselves and their larger neighbours or colonizing powers.¹¹² Part of the result is self-perception of being ‘the ambiguous island’,¹¹³ ‘the hybrid island’,¹¹⁴ ‘the liminal island’ or ‘an in-between space’.¹¹⁵ To others, Malta is a unique island with its multiple colonial, geopolitical and religious thresholds standing on a rift dividing Europe and North Africa.¹¹⁶ Indeed, the hybridity that is equally attested to in the Maltese language consists of a modern form imbued with English code-switching, code-mixing and some occasional loan words from Italian and French substituting original Semitic terms.¹¹⁷ Despite, or perhaps because of, this hybridity, Maltese cinema can be seen to reflect recurrent visual self-representations and stereotypes’.¹¹⁸ These two elements are important since stereotypes, as Homi Bhabha posits, offer ‘a *secure* point of identification’,¹¹⁹ or in Nathan Abrams’ words, stereotypes provide ‘reassurance’¹²⁰ and enjoyment since they ‘permit us to see

¹¹² Jodie Matthews and Daniel Travers, ‘Introduction’, in *Islands and Britishness: A Global Perspective*, ed. by Jodie Matthews and Daniel Travers (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp.1-11 (p. 7).

¹¹³ Marco Galea, ‘A Study of Postcolonial Drama in Malta’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Birmingham, 2004), p. 28.

¹¹⁴ Godfrey Baldacchino, ‘Il-Mina/The Gate’, in *Homo Melitensis: An Incomplete Inventory in 19 Chapters*, ed. by Raphael Vella and Bettina Hutschek (Malta: Mousse Publishing, 2017), pp. 243-46 (p. 244).

¹¹⁵ Sandro Debono, ‘Visualisations of Identity. The Malta National Collection of Paintings and Sculptures in the Making (1903-1974)’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, 2018), p.3.

¹¹⁶ Debono, p.17 and p. 36.

¹¹⁷ Rachel Galea, ‘Translating the First Part of Act 1 of Francis Ebejer’s “Il-Ġaħan ta’ Bingemma”/A Wise-Fool of Bingemma’ (unpublished master’s thesis, University of Malta, 2011), pp.7-8.

¹¹⁸ Bhabha, *The Location in Film*, p. 100.

¹¹⁹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), p. 99 (emphasis in original).

¹²⁰ Nathan Abrams, *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), p. 1.

contested images at work and understand their ideological implications'.¹²¹ Bhabha continues to define stereotype as 'a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive, and demands not only that we extend our critical and political objectives but that we change the object of analysis itself.'¹²² Stereotypes are further reinforced by film and television narratives utilising 'regularly repeated, simplistic, easily understood and inaccurate categorization of a social group'.¹²³ The creation of the Maltese screen texts, therefore, include locating identifiably Maltese characteristics, behaviours, beliefs or other aspects, either explicitly or by a range of other undeniable, if submerged, signifiers.¹²⁴ Important clues include looks, intellect, behaviour, profession, name and physiognomy, all of which require prerequisite knowledge of being Maltese. Maltese symbols and codes come in the form of historical and cultural references, names, foods, weather, verbal and body language, phenotype, and religious rituals, all of which rely upon individual viewers to identify these clues that represent things Maltese and elements that can be read as possibly Maltese.¹²⁵ The earliest examples of stereotypical (self-) representations of the Maltese studied in this theses appeared in the early 1970s in Cecil Satariano's and Mario Philip Azzopardi's films (see Tables 5 and 6), playing on social class differences, religious issues, political allegiances, socioeconomic issues.

The aforementioned stereotypical visual representation of Malta also includes 'stereotypical weather conditions', that is, hot, sunny, and dry summers and windy, humid winters. Both seasons contribute to the notion of 'local colour' used to describe the images, the atmosphere, the sounds and the colours of a particular place.¹²⁶ In addition, the stereotypical representation of Malta is what generates and sustains screen tourism and the tourists' imagination of Malta, even when it acts as a stand-in location. Malta's iconography permits the island to retain its identity and ability to be still recognized as Malta.¹²⁷

The Maltese archipelago (henceforth Malta) is an island microstate in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, with a multi-layered history spanning over 7000 turbulent years, whose geographical position and historical events shaped Malta into a nation. Malta is, therefore, an ancient island but as a nation, a very young one since it gained its independence from the British Crown only in 1964. The 'Maltese condition' is a construct created to accommodate the belief of

¹²¹ Abrams, *The New Jew*, p. 2

¹²² Bhabha, *The Location in Film*, p. 100.

¹²³ Nathan Abrams and others, *Studying Film* (London: Arnold Publishers 2001), p. 365.

¹²⁴ Abrams, *The New Jew*, p. 17.

¹²⁵ Rosalin Krieger, "Does he actually say the word Jewish?" – Jewish Representations in *Seinfeld*, *Journal for Cultural Research* 7.4 (2003), 387–404 (p.388) <<http://doi:10.1080/1479758032000165048>>.

¹²⁶ Kim Toft Hansen and Anne Marit Waade, *Locating Nordic Noir from Beck to The Bridge* (Cham: Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 34

¹²⁷ Charlie Cauchi, 'Malta, Island of the Imagination', in *World Film Locations Malta*, ed. by Jean Pierre Borg and Charlie Cauchi (Intellect Books: Bristol, 2015), pp. 6-7 (p.7).

being ‘an island race with a fortress mentality’ with ‘a raw sense of exceptionalism’, moulded into ‘an identity amalgam that is more complex than the binary duality of “us and them”, Mediterranean yet European, insular yet cosmopolitan, speaking both Maltese and English.’¹²⁸

Malta, unlike other countries in the European Union, does not possess a long cultural tradition that privileges art. The cultural delay is due to being politically subservient during the period of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem and the historical and political motivations that corresponded with Malta’s role as a military base during British rule.¹²⁹ Therefore, it was only between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, closer to Malta’s independence, that the island could begin growing in terms of its culture. That being said, the ‘Maltese condition’ informs Malta’s national identity and culture, but it equally suggests a deep implicit conflict, almost a disjuncture, that reverberates in contemporary Malta to this day. Within this discourse, the relationship between identity, language, culture, and politics provides a constant throughline when the nature of Maltese screenwriting is examined. The dynamics between these four attributes generate a wealth of storytelling possibilities and a solid base upon which cinematic identity can be expressed. Studying the cinematic output provides an insight into how themes reveal, or conceal, the deep cultural, psychological, and sociological essence of a nation with all its contradictions and complexities.¹³⁰

Prior to the international success of the full feature film *Luzzu* in 2020, the rebranding of the Malta Film Fund to Screen Malta in 2020, and the restructuring of the Evaluation Board at the Screen Malta fund in 2021, the Government’s perception of the local film industry had been discouraging. The previous Malta Film Commissioners and the Ministries for Culture and Tourism believed that Malta has no stories to tell in film and media;¹³¹ this attitude was indirectly connected to the original aim of this research, which examined the absence rather than the presence of Maltese indigenous audio-visual screenworks. The attitude not only hindered the development of Malta’s national film industry but gave preferential treatment to the film servicing industry. Indeed, Malta’s history as a stand-in location to some of the most high-profile Hollywood productions began as long ago as 1964. The Malta Film Studios is one of the largest production facilities in the world, having serviced over 200 feature films television movies, documentaries and commercials,¹³² and offers one indoor tank and two large exterior water tanks situated along the coast and therefore

¹²⁸ Baldacchino, p. 244.

¹²⁹ Raphael Vella, ‘Introduction to Maltese Nomadic Roots: When ‘Home’ is on the Periphery’, in *Cross-Currents Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta*, ed. by Raphael Vella (Malta: Allied Publications, 2008), pp. 15-25 (p.16).

¹³⁰ Carlo Celli, *National Identity in Global Cinema-How Movies Explain the World* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p.1.

¹³¹ Martin Bonnici, in discussion with the researcher, 30 January 2018 and Briffa, 26 January 2018.

¹³² Malta Film Commission <<https://maltafilmcommission.com/malta-film-studios/>> [accessed 13 October 2021] (para 1 of 2).

affording a natural horizon. They are amongst the largest in the world.¹³³ It did not come as a surprise when Daniel Rosenthal in 2002 named Malta as ‘an island of everywhere’, and as ‘the Mediterranean's mini-Hollywood’.¹³⁴ Rosenthal explains that the foreign producers were initially drawn to Malta for the water tanks, but very soon recognised Malta’s other assets such ‘as a superb climate, easy access from major European cities and English-speaking craftsmen available at extremely competitive rates’.¹³⁵ Over the years, Malta attracted high-profile productions such as *Gladiator* (2000), *Munch* (2005), *Captain Phillips* (2013), *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* (2013), *Assassin Creed* (2016), and *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017).¹³⁶

Despite such an important contribution to the international film industry, Malta neglected its indigenous film industry. Despite this, a number of short and full feature screenworks that tell a Maltese story have won international cinematic awards. The earliest international appreciation was attracted by the work of the writer-director Cecil Satariano for his short screen text *Giuseppe* (1971), which secured awards at the International Amateur Film Competition in Nagasaki, London, Cannes, Tokyo, New York, Lisbon, and Hiroshima.¹³⁷ It is only since 2014, however, that international awards and recognition for Maltese films have begun to acquire critical mass. *Simshar* (2014), by writer-director Rebecca Cremona, a full feature screen text, was a selected entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 87th Academy Awards;¹³⁸ *The Maltese Fighter* (2014), a short screen text written by Monika Maslowska and Arev Manoukian, won in the category of ‘Best Short Film’ at the Santa Marinella Short Film Festival and at the Grand OFF World Independent Short Film Awards in 2016 for ‘Best Dramatic Performance’;¹³⁹ while the previously mentioned, most recent full feature production *Luzzu* (2020) premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2020. Therefore, the claim that Malta has no stories to tell in film and media fails to do justice to Malta’s talent and narrative possibilities. Contemporary Malta represents an even more fragile island than it did 7000 years ago: it is an island where journalists are silenced, migrating birds are shot, nature is violated, architectural legacy is razed to the ground, and passports— a symbol of belongingness— are sold.¹⁴⁰ It is a place where social responsibility is disregarded, critical thinking is lacking, and

¹³³ Malta Film Commission, (para. 2 of 2).

¹³⁴ Daniel Rosenthal, ‘An Island of Everywhere’, *The London Times*, 18 April 2002 <<http://www.pcpmalta.com/malta-film-industry-article-the-island-of-everywhere.html>> [accessed 15 October 2021] (para. 3 of 17).

¹³⁵ Rosenthal, (para. 7 of 17).

¹³⁶ Malta Film Commission, (para. 2 of 2).

¹³⁷ Cecil Satariano, *Canon Fire! The Art of Making Award-Winning Amateur Movies* (London: Bachman & Turner, 1973), p. 8.

¹³⁸ ‘83 Countries in Competition For 2014 Foreign Language Film Oscars’ <<https://www.oscars.org/news/83-countries-competition-2014-foreign-language-film-oscarr>> [accessed 11 October] (para.1 of 4).

¹³⁹ MaltaFilm Ltd, online video recording, Vimeo, <<https://vimeo.com/maltafilm>> [accessed 11 July 2021].

¹⁴⁰ Lorenzo Bagnoli, ‘Murdered Maltese Journalist Was Investigating Island’s Golden Visas’, *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, 18 April 2018

environmental awareness is just a political manifesto.¹⁴¹ It is a place where money is power and sound judgement is not.¹⁴²

The above statements not only offer storytelling possibilities but are actually a provocation aimed at those key decision-makers who claim on the one hand that Malta has no stories to tell while maintaining on the other that the island needs to preserve its status as a film serving the industry in order to maintain its economic growth.¹⁴³ The frame of mind is reinforced by another sentiment: that Malta's size prevents the island from investing in a national television and film school to foster an indigenous screenwriting industry. This *status quo* reinforces the belief that anybody planning to become a professional screenwriter is utopian. This stops Malta not only from solidifying its existing screenwriting industry but also from developing a financially sustainable and internationally appreciated industry.

1.6 Ideologies and Contemporary Storytelling Environments

Malta's modern history pivots on three periods, each offering seemingly different ideologies. The first is the pre-Independence Malta, offering an ideology based on a paternalistic and patronage system inherited from the Order of the Knights St John of Jerusalem and continued by the British Crown, whereby any Maltese development was primarily driven (though not quite determined) by political and economic imperatives in London.¹⁴⁴ This in turn enabled the British, like all the previous colonial power holders, to legitimize the force behind the perpetual propagation of a subordinate value system among the Maltese population.¹⁴⁵ The British sought to interfere in domestic affairs as little as possible, but in so doing, they introduced social and material reforms against the opposition of the Maltese elites, namely the clergy, the merchants, and the lawyers, particularly on the ideological and political levels.¹⁴⁶ In pre-independent Malta, a language concern

<<https://www.occrp.org/en/thedaphneproject/murdered-maltese-journalist-was-investigating-islands-golden-visas>> [accessed 16 March 2021] (para. 9 of 13).

¹⁴¹ Bagnoli, (para. 10 of 13).

¹⁴² Briguglio, 13 February 2018 and Mercieca, 19 December 2019 and Herman Grech, 'How Has Malta Changed After Daphne's Murder?', *Malta Independent*, 14 October 2018

<<https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2018-10-14/local-news/How-has-Malta-changed-after-Daphne-s-murder-the-editors-view-6736197735>> [accessed 15 March 2021] (para. 2 of 30).

¹⁴³ 'More Interest in PR Exercises and Glitzy Videos Than Nurturing Local Productions – MPA', *The Malta Independent*, 20 August 2020 <<https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2020-08-20/local-news/More-interest-in-PR-exercises-and-glitzy-videos-than-nurturing-local-productions-MPA-6736226284>> [accessed 20 August 2020] (para. 1, 2 and 10 of 11).

¹⁴⁴ Mario Brincat, 'The Birth of the 'Maltese Mode' of Development, 1945-1959', *Journal of Maltese History* 1.2, 2009, 34-52 (p. 37) <<https://www.um.edu.mt/arts/history/jmh/docs/2009/brincat-34-53-1.pdf>> [accessed 2 April 2018].

¹⁴⁵ Zammit, *A Colonial Inheritance*, pp. 32-3.

¹⁴⁶ Zammit, pp. 10-11.

emerges—termed as ‘the language question’—exposing Malta’s desire to be perceived as European. Consequently, legitimising the Maltese language, a Semitic language and in that sense not ‘European’, would be equivalent to admitting that the Maltese were not, racially or culturally, ‘European’,¹⁴⁷ feeding into the post-colonial discourse of being ‘not quite/not white’.¹⁴⁸ This explicitly racist fear is historically motivated since Malta has always found itself at the cross-roads of different cultures, built on the ‘tensions between insularity and openness, authenticity and hybridity, identity and otherness, peripherality and majority’:¹⁴⁹ but Malta was always determined to make it clear that it is not ‘Arab’. Robert Noël Bradley in his book *Malta and the Mediterranean Race* (1912)¹⁵⁰ addresses the Maltese denial of the suggestion that they are direct descendants of what Bradley defines as the ‘long-headed Eurafrican or Mediterranean race’:

We can quite understand this pride among an insular people who desire to hold up heads with the English and Italians and to point to an ancestry as noble and famous as any in the world; we can understand the aversion to being in any way connected with Arabs, especially when the Englishman’s lack of discrimination with regard to foreigners is remembered. All this, however, is to the scientific mind of little avail compared with the value of truth.¹⁵¹

This presumed ‘superiority’ of the English and Italians has constructed a certain knowledge base, a hierarchy of ‘race’ that situates the historical construct of the ‘West’ against the ‘Rest’.¹⁵² The need for the Maltese population to be acknowledged as ‘European’ can perhaps be understood as one response in the effort to be dissociated from the perceived inherently inferior Arab or ‘Eurafrican’ race.¹⁵³ Bradley also quotes the words of an anonymous Maltese writer: when Bradley queried him as to ‘why he favoured the Hebrews rather than an Arabic derivation’, the writer replied that ‘the Hebrews were the people of Christ, whereas the Arabs were the people of Mahomet’.¹⁵⁴ The

¹⁴⁷ Godfrey A, Pirota, ‘Maltese Political Parties and Political Modernization’, in *Maltese Society. A Sociological Inquiry*, ed. by Ronald Sultana and Godfrey Baldacchino (Msida, Malta: Mireva Publications, 1994), pp. 95-112 (p. 107).

¹⁴⁸ Bhabha, *The Location*, p. 131.

¹⁴⁹ Ivan Callus, ‘Maltese Literature in the Language of the Other: A Case Study in Minority Literatures’ Pursuit of “Majority”’, *Acta Scientiarum: Human and Social Sciences*, 31.1 (2008), p. 31.

¹⁵⁰ Robert Noël Bradley based his research ‘on the shape of the skull, the feature less susceptible of change’ *Malta and the Mediterranean Race* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1912), p. 31.

¹⁵¹ Bradley, *Malta and the Mediterranean Race*, pp. 161-62.

¹⁵² Stuart Hall, ‘The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power’ in *Formations of Modernity*, ed. by Bram Gieben and Stuart Hall (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 277.

¹⁵³ Maria Pisani, ‘We Are Going to Fix Your Vagina, Just the Way We Like It.’ Some Reflections on the Construction of [Sub-Saharan] African Female Asylum Seekers in Malta and Their Efforts to Speak Back’, *Postcolonial Directions in Education*, 2.1 (2013), 68-99 (p. 75).

¹⁵⁴ Bradley, p. 161.

historically, an inherently racist construction of argument, is addressed in Section 2.6 Language and Racism.

The second period was post-Independence Malta governed by the Nationalist Party which was supported by the Catholic Church, thus shifting the power of the political masters to the religious masters, entrenching further the paternalistic system.¹⁵⁵ Historically, the Labour Party—the secularized part of society—was involved in a bitter conflict with the Catholic Church, which had imposed an interdiction on all members of the party’s national executive committee for allegedly steering the party towards the extreme left.¹⁵⁶ In 1971, the Labour Party that won the general elections was headed by Dom (Dominic) Mintoff, who became the Prime Minister for the second time in his career. Mintoff was a pivotal figure in Maltese politics during the period when Malta was transitioning from a ‘semi-feudal mindset dominated by religion to a more modern Malta’.¹⁵⁷ Mintoff was Malta’s Prime Minister from 1955 to 1958 and again from 1971 to 1984; he was a complex and charismatic figure with ‘remarkable dash and zest’, with a ‘striking earnestness, vigour and stamina [...] swaying between authoritarianism and paternalism’.¹⁵⁸ Mintoff, an architect who was influenced by the British social democracy of the Fabian Society as well as by national-liberation socialism, was a charismatic figure who used rhetoric similar to that of his contemporaries Colonel Nasser of Egypt and Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus.¹⁵⁹

Mintoff aimed to curtail the influence of the Church, which had a great influence over a government-run ‘in the hands of priests’.¹⁶⁰ He set up a network of social protection through the introduction of a minimum wage, the child allowance and benefits and parental leave, and championed the concept of a universal welfare state without any means of testing; even if benefits, such as the child allowance, were limited to the first three children, while stipends were tied to a patronage system, where students were required to get sponsors. Mintoff also replaced the existing Maltese educational system, founded on the British educational model of testing and tracking, with a socialist vision of education, denouncing the British system as hierarchical and discriminatory.¹⁶¹ Public schools were reorganized, and competency testing was largely abandoned in order to promote equality. Desiring to eradicate what Mintoff referred to as ‘elitism’, he sought to eliminate private and church education, stressing vocational rather than academic courses. Graduates of state

¹⁵⁵ Mercieca, 19 December 2019.

¹⁵⁶ Michael Briguglio, ‘Malta’s Labour Party and the Politics of Hegemony’, *Journal of the Research Group on Socialism and Democracy*, 24.2, 213-226 (p.225) <[https://doi: 10.1080/08854300.2010.481443](https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2010.481443)>.

¹⁵⁷ Mark Montebello, *The Tail That Wagged the Dog: The Life and Struggles of Dom Mintoff 1916-2012*, (Malta: Mark Montebello & SKS, 2021).

¹⁵⁸ Montebello, 2021, p. 19.

¹⁵⁹ Uwe Jens Rudolf and Warren G. Berg, *Historical Dictionary of Malta* (Plymouth: Scarecrow, 2010), p. 166.

¹⁶⁰ Montebello, pp. 507-09.

¹⁶¹ ‘Malta: History and Background’ <<https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/953/Malta-HISTORY-BACKGROUND.html>> [accessed 9 September 2021] (para. 3, 4 of 8).

schools benefitted from preferential treatment in admission to higher education, while the Government grants to Church schools were eliminated.¹⁶² Mintoff was as much admired as he was despised for ‘allowing aggression permeating Maltese politics and institutions between the 1960s and 1980s’.¹⁶³ Independence thus engendered a debilitating polarization between the Labour Party and the Nationalist Party, dividing Malta into two ‘nations’ and their corresponding socio-cultural networks,¹⁶⁴ thereby initiating the political timidity of artists, screenwriters, and writer-directors. According to Alfred Sant, a former Labour Party Prime Minister of Malta and a writer/playwright, the post-Independence ideology was still based on elitism. The elites, as Sant sees it, in a small island tend to resist pressure and resist change; and when change does come, it is accommodated within the old structures. The elites of pre-Independence Malta became the new businessmen and the politicians in post-Independence Malta, and the proximity between the two elites may indeed offer a new structure but one that is ‘still running on old engines, old ways of doing things’.¹⁶⁵ The texts analysed in the present research refer frequently to the figure of Mintoff, either directly or indirectly, and to his social and political successes or misdemeanours. Works that examine this are *Gagġa/The Cage* (1971), *F’Baħar Wieħed/In One Sea* (1976), *Katarin/Catherine* (1977), *Il-Madonna taċ-Ċoqqa/Our Madonna of the Hood* (1978), *The Maltese Fighter* (2014), *Is-Sriep Reġġu Saru Velenużi/The Vipers’ Pit* (2019), *Hallini Hanini/Let Me Be, Dear* (2020).

In the third period, the post EU accession of Malta after 2004, the country can be perceived as a democratic nation, with the European Union demanding political and economic reforms to the paternalistic and patronage state system. However, the system still remains very much the same one inherited from the colonial system, with paternalism and patronage both used as essential tools whereby individuals benefit within the highly polarized two-party political system, which is very much responsible for the endemic political allegiances, nepotism, corruption and violence.¹⁶⁶ Malta’s accession to the European Union in 2004 was preceded by a harshly fought referendum campaign in 2003 between the ‘Iva għall-Ewropa’ [Yes for Europe] led by the NP in Government, and the Eurosceptic ‘Le’ [No] movement headed by the Labour Party opposition. The Labour Party

¹⁶² ‘Malta: History and Background,’ (para. 6, 7, 8 of 8).

¹⁶³ Matthew Vella, ‘A Theory of Violence’, *Maltatoday*, 4 March 2015 <https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/50213/a_theory_of_violence> [accessed 19 July 2021] (para. 4 of 28).

¹⁶⁴ Vicky Ann Cremona, ‘Politics and Identity in Maltese Theatre: Adaptation or Innovation?’, *The Drama Review*, 52.4 (2008), p. 119.

¹⁶⁵ Alfred Sant interview with Herman Grech ‘Malta’s Problem with Friends of Friends’”, *Times of Malta*, 14 March 2021 <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/maltas-problem-with-friends-of-friends-alfred-sant.857803?fbclid=IwAR0fFSIO1M8dQbh0rZd8JZOdrBHHZCx0SeUKel0xJMZKWX4Y_74xa7g9gs#.YE2nf-OTfoU.facebook> [accessed 14 March 2021] (para.7 and 8 of 95).

¹⁶⁶ Farukh Wahidi, and others, ‘Republic of Malta’, in *Localising Leadership: Empirical investigations of cross-cultural differences in leadership styles and practices*, ed. by Chris Higgins and Sander Schroevers (Amsterdam: Cross-Cultural Business Sills (CCBS)-Press and the Hogeschool van Amsterdam, 2020), pp. 69-78 (pp.75-76).

was campaigning for ‘Partnership with Europe’ (rather than full membership),¹⁶⁷ the official slogan being ‘Partnership l-Aħjar Għazla’ [Partnership is the best choice].¹⁶⁸ In fact, the EU referendum reflected Maltese self-perceptions: on the one hand, the appeal of a mature state embracing Europeanness taking its place among equals, and on the other hand, an appeal to nationalistic isolationism, and a ‘realpolitik’ acceptance of Malta’s smallness.¹⁶⁹ Texts that examine post EU Malta are *Anġli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie* (2005), *Maltageddon* (2009), *Kont Diġà/I was, Already* (2009), *Simshar* (2014), *Do Re Mi Fa*, (2016), *Is-Sriep Reġġhu Saru Velenużi/The Vipers’ Pit*, (2019), *Luzzu* (2020).

While independence and EU accession constituted profound structural changes in Maltese identity, another more local but equally important historical event must be mentioned, one that exemplifies a 7000-year history of political turbulence and violence—the assassination of Caruana Galizia in 2017. The assassination was a watershed moment in Malta, for the general public understood the dangers of continuing to take a complacent view of the Government.¹⁷⁰ It may take a while for the screenwriters and writer-directors to do away with self-censorship, and perhaps one day look more critically at itself. The hope lies in the younger generation, the new screenwriters and writer-directors who will embrace this new mentality, who will be able to think transversely and provide the kind of commentary on socio-political life already offered by outspoken artists and socio-political and political cartoonists such as Maurice Tanti Burlò, Steve Bonello, and Ġorġ Mallia amongst others, and in the theatre, including in such recent plays such as ‘They Blew Her Up’, *Ix-Xiħa* / ‘The Witch’ and ‘Min qatel lil Daphne Caruana Galizia?/Who killed Daphne Caruana Galizia?’.¹⁷¹ This is discussed in Chapter 3.

1.7 Literature Review

While there is a vast body of texts produced by University of Malta academics on the history of the development of the Maltese language, the formation of the Maltese national identity, and the literal forms of traditional narratives, there is a scarce critical study of indigenous writing for television drama aside from undergraduate dissertations and Masters theses. The investigations by the

¹⁶⁷ David Hudson, ‘Sant still regrets not convincing nation on ‘Partnership’ instead of EU membership’, *Maltatoday*, 21 March 2019
<https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/xtra/93779/sant_still_regrets_not_convincing_nation_on_partnership_instead_of_eu_membership> [accessed 19 July 2021] (para. 3 of 18).

¹⁶⁸ Michael Briguglio, p. 12.

¹⁶⁹ Fenech, Michael Angelo, ‘A New Rupture for Contemporary Art in Mala Context and Beyond’ (unpublished master’s thesis, University of the Arts London, 2013), pp. 29-30.

¹⁷⁰ Briffa, in discussion with the researcher, 15 March 2021 and Dennis Vella, and others, ‘Maltese Political Cartoons 1980-1995’, exhibition catalogue, (Malta: 1995).

¹⁷¹ Briffa, 15 March 2021 and Dennis Vella.

university students are quite broad, ranging from analyses of values and social impact of teleserials and soap operas on the local audiences, Maltese television and political institutions, children's media literacy, financial evaluations of Maltese television production houses, broadcasting history, Maltese celebrity TV and social media, acting in Maltese television drama, analysis of Maltese society and culture, the adaptation of Maltese stage plays, and short stories into television drama. Some of these broach the subject of indigenous screenwriting practices or screenwriting orthodoxy; others omit it altogether. Overall, the academic approach taken in these studies betrays a lack of awareness of the importance of screenwriting practice, which in turn leaves the creative output and creative processes of the Maltese screenwriters and filmmakers unacknowledged. Indeed, the scarcity of academic material about Maltese screenwriting is symptomatic of the lack of esteem that Maltese academia feels towards indigenous screenwriting.

Perhaps the most important academic contribution to the study of Maltese television drama is that of Rachel Vella, whose master's research examines the historical development of teleserials, and how the medium's technological progress contributed to the creation of six Maltese television dramas from 1966 to 1981: *F'Baħar Wieħed /In One Sea* (1976), *Il-Madonna taċ-Ċoqqa/Our Madonna of the Hood* (1978), *Wenzu u Roži/Lorrie and Rosie* (1977), *Min Hu Evelyn Costa/Who is Evelyn Costa?*(1966), *Anestesija/Alienated* (1972) and *Id-Dar tas-Soru/A Nun's House* (1977-1978).¹⁷² The first two works are also part of this study, with the research focus converging with Vella's in terms of thematic preferences and socio-political influences, but diverging in terms of screen texts analyses, assessment of the external forces conditioning the screenwriters, and the relationship between identity, language, economy, politics and culture in these seven Maltese televisions series written and produced between 1976 and 2018.

Vella's approach to the analysis of the Maltese television drama is two-fold: firstly, she traces the historical development of television in Malta; secondly, she examines thematic tendencies and characters populating the selected Maltese television dramas, which she refers to as 'teleserials'.¹⁷³ Vella analyses the elements of Maltese culture and native cinematic storytelling, but she does not examine the cinematic identity or self-representation of these television screenplays. While gathering material to contextualize the technical aspect of the first Maltese sitcom *Wenzu u Roži/Lorrie and Rosie* (1977), Vella finds no critical academic literature discussing the technical aspects of the production of Maltese television series. She laments that the material she locates either broaches the subject or side-lines it. Most of the material she has unearthed consists of personal reflections and memoirs, making this part of her research somewhat anecdotal. Similarly,

¹⁷² Rachel Vella, 'Storja kritika tad-dramm televiżiv Malti: mill-1964 sal-1981'/'Critical History of the Maltese Television Drama from 1964 to 1981' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Malta, 2013).

¹⁷³ Vella, p. 24.

the most relevant material of pre-1970s television productions stored at the national Public Broadcasting Services archives are not available, while the productions of the 1970s are either incomplete or without audio.¹⁷⁴ These two major obstacles Vella faced are shared by the present study, in each case forcing the researcher to adjust part of the material that informs the argument.

In writing about *F'Baħar Wieħed /In One Sea* (1977) Vella examines the self-representation themes of small-mindedness, patriarchy, individual struggle, and traditional ways of life.¹⁷⁵ The present study, however, examines other issues related to ethnicity, the tall poppy syndrome, and the mobility of the social classes.¹⁷⁶ This is also true of *Il-Madonna taċ-Ċoqqa/Our Madonna of the Hood* (1979), where Vella analyses the play by Ġuże Diacono rather than its adaptation, for she feels the novel represents a much richer and more apt representation of Malta in the late 1970s. The researcher compares the protagonists to 'the victims of the circumstances and society' in ways that are reminiscent of Émile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* (1873).¹⁷⁷ In Diacono's play, according to Vella, what renders the narrative powerful is the portrayal of family, religion, small-minded community, change, and morality, but most importantly the extravagant wealth of the Church in contrast to the poverty of its congregation.¹⁷⁸ Indeed, Vella concludes the analysis by suggesting that as a social commentary *Il-Madonna taċ-Ċoqqa/Our Madonna of the Hood* is the most accomplished Maltese television series, depicting Malta as it is 'with no reserve'.¹⁷⁹ This perspective is also taken in this present thesis; however, the main argument of the present study sets out to understand how the island's past and present geo-political and socio-cultural environments shaped its screenwriters and writer-directors.

My research did not locate any previous critical account of screenplays for short films in Malta, but a small number of studies of feature-length screenplays and films have been conducted. These include two published chapters by Charlie Cauchi, as part of Cauchi's incomplete doctoral research, and a handful of University of Malta undergraduate dissertations. The latter, however, are submerged within general film studies, thereby side-lining indigenous screenwriting practices. The paucity of data is illuminating and helps to establish the validity and originality of the research in the present thesis.

Cauchi's study coincides with two key aspects of my own research. Firstly, she examines Malta's cinematic expressions of cultural identity, which is mediated through two full feature films: *Ġagġa/The Cage* (1971) and *Anġli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie* (2005). These two films are also included in the present study. In fact, my research examines twelve full feature screenplays and

¹⁷⁴ Vella, pp. 67-8.

¹⁷⁵ Vella, pp. 113-15.

¹⁷⁶ Vella, p.120.

¹⁷⁷ Vella, p.151.

¹⁷⁸ Vella, p.212-15.

¹⁷⁹ Vella, p.221.

films while looking at the external forces that condition Maltese screenwriters and writer-directors, such as the relationships between politics, economy, culture, language, and identity. The two studies, however, converge in terms of cinematic identity expressions, thematic concerns and the education of filmmakers in Malta. Additionally, Cauchi argues that ‘the complexities of Malta’s particularly polarized political system influence the filmmakers’.¹⁸⁰ Here, we are in agreement; indeed, Cauchi’s observation forms part of my main argument that the complexities of Malta’s particularly polarized political system are directly connected to self-censorship and political allegiances, which, in turn, secure projects and funding. I also add that the situation was further exacerbated when in the early 1990s the ruling Nationalist government passed the Broadcasting Act, which permitted Malta’s two political parties to set up their own media, the aforementioned ONE TV (established by the Labour Party, and the station previously known as Super One Television) and Net TV (by the Nationalist Party). While Cauchi’s aim in the chapter ‘Mapping Film Education and Training on the Island of Malta’ is to assess the educational and practical training schemes offered to the local film practitioners,¹⁸¹ the present study examines the pedagogical opportunities and routes taken by television writers, screenwriters, and writer-directors.

Cauchi also explores cinematic expressions of cultural identity in Maltese filmmaking and wonders why Malta—well-established within the film servicing industry—fails to produce a more substantial cinematic output. Cauchi appreciates that Malta’s small size and financial constraints are not conducive to creating a vibrant national television and film industry, but she also believes that the argument that the issue is related to Malta’s size is ‘an oversimplification as it disregards a variety of cultural, national and historical forces’ that contribute to the creation of a country’s national cinema. Cauchi’s research also revealed that in 2009, the then film commissioner demurred from naming the local creative output as ‘films’;¹⁸² instead, the film commissioner labelled Maltese cinematic output as ‘local productions that are released in Maltese cinemas.’¹⁸³ The significance of this statement is that not even the Maltese film commissioner esteems the local creative audio-visual output; whatever it is that the Maltese produce, it does not merit being

¹⁸⁰ Farukh Wahidi, and others ‘Republic of Malta’, in *Localising Leadership: Empirical investigations of cross-cultural differences in leadership styles and practices*, ed. by Chris Higgins and Sander Schroevers (Amsterdam: Cross-Cultural Business Sills (CCBS)-Press and the Hogeschool van Amsterdam, 2020), pp.69-78 (pp. 75-6).

¹⁸¹ Charlie Cauchi, ‘Mapping Film Education and Training on the Island of Malta’, in *The Education of a Filmmaker in Europe, Australia, and Asia*, ed. by Mette Hjort (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 45-66 (pp. 59-60).

¹⁸² Cauchi, ‘Mapping Film Education’, p. 65.

¹⁸³ Luisa Bonello cited by Charlie Cauchi, ‘Maltese Cinema? Politics and Identity on Screen from Independence to EU Accession’, in *European Visions: Small Cinemas in Transition*, ed. by Janelle Blanshenship and Tobias Nagl (Transcript-Verlag, 2012), 65-83 (p. 65).

referred to as ‘Maltese cinema’. This issue is discussed in more detail in later chapters of the present thesis.

Cauchi does not explore the nature of Maltese screenwriting in any detail, but she refers briefly to Maltese ‘movie-making’¹⁸⁴ and successfully establishes ‘thematic concerns [...] and disparities’¹⁸⁵ between two Maltese screen texts, looking at cinematic expressions of Malta’s identity and culture, both written and produced, at different seminal political moments. The first screenwork discussed is *Gagga/The Cage* (1971), while the second screenwork *Angli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie* (2005) is a post EU accession production, Cauchi looks closely at the way both works are anchored in Maltese culture but simultaneously looks for the connections between the two works and the way they interact with historical and political events in Malta. *Gagga/The Cage* comments on ‘the political polarization characteristic of twentieth-century Malta’¹⁸⁶ and the changes made to social and cultural life during a time when Malta was undergoing liberation from colonial subjugation.¹⁸⁷ Moreover, the narrative encapsulates many of the characteristics and intricacies associated with Malta’s own national identity, namely the negotiation between politics and religion. *Angli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie* on the other hand, as a screenwork, uses Malta as a product placement vehicle while mimicking the Hollywood paradigm in ways which can be only classified as ‘a poor man’s version of the [Hollywood] action/detective genre’.¹⁸⁸ Bhabha would posit that this would be an issue of mimicry emerging as effective residue of colonial power and knowledge;¹⁸⁹ mimicry that is ‘never very far from mockery since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics’¹⁹⁰ and the difference of being American and being Americanized.

Cauchi argues that defining national identity, and Maltese identity in particular, can be challenging. Its geo-historical position and its colonial past never allowed it to develop into nationhood until 1964. As Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie contextualize it in *The Cinema of Small Nations*:

the cultural and political value of the moving image in nation-building was quickly recognised in some nations, particularly following independence from former colonial rule and in connection with other revolutionary struggles, in other

¹⁸⁴ Cauchi, ‘Maltese Cinema?’, p. 66.

¹⁸⁵ Cauchi, ‘Maltese Cinema?’, p. 66.

¹⁸⁶ Jon P. Mitchell, *Ambivalent Europeans: Ritual, Memory and the Public Sphere in Malta* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 9.

¹⁸⁷ Cauchi, ‘Maltese Cinema?’, p. 66.

¹⁸⁸ Cauchi, ‘Maltese Cinema?’, p. 66.

¹⁸⁹ Bhabha, p. 122

¹⁹⁰ Bill Ashcroft and others, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 139.

cases the opportunities for filmmakers to address the complex specificity of national formations, post-colonial or otherwise, took time to arise.¹⁹¹

Cauchi finds *Gagġa/The Cage* particularly relevant since the narrative not only gave voice to national concerns, but also to Maltese as a national language. Thematically, it was rooted in the very themes that mattered to young Malta. As Cauchi notes, the importance of *Gagġa/The Cage*, both the novel and the cinematic adaptation, cannot be ignored, since it commented on the ‘maladies of their [novelists’ and poets’] community and directly suggested a diversification founded on integrity, the immediate consequence of the elimination of sanctified hypocrisy which they believe to detect in religion, society and family life.’¹⁹² *Angli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie*, on the other hand, shows a modern and European nation coming to terms with becoming the twenty-third EU member state.

Rachel Vella in her research on the Maltese television drama looks at the historical, narrative and technical developments that televisual storytelling offers. Vella also investigated whether the six texts she examined (*F’Baħar Wieħed /In One Sea*, 1977, *Il-Madonna ta-Ċoqqa/Madonna of the Hood*, 1978-1978, *Wenzu u Rożi/Lorrie and Rosie*, 1977, *Min Hu Evelyn Costa/Who is Evelyn Costa?*, 1966, *Anestesija/Alienated*, 1972, and *Id-Dar tas-Soru/A Nun’s House*, 1977-1978) share the theme of a family and its importance in the life of the Maltese. Vella concludes that, indeed, the six texts are connected thematically. In my research I look at seven texts; however, my focus is on the screenwriters themselves, and their self-representation in the television storytelling. Charlie Cauchi, on the other hand, in her own research, looks at the two seminal full feature films (*Gagġa/The Cage*, 1971 and *Angli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie*, 2005). The new material that I add is a perspective of writer-directors and their self-representation in the short and full feature films.

1.8 Screenwriting Studies

Until recently there was historical neglect of the screenplay and screenwriting in academic approaches, with a few notable exceptions, such as Kristin Thompson’s *Storytelling in the New*

¹⁹¹ Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cinema of Small Nations*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 1-19 (p.15).

¹⁹² Oliver Friggieri, ‘Literature’, in *Malta: Culture, and Identity*, ed. by Henry Frendo and Oliver Friggieri (Malta: Ministry of Youth and Arts, 1994), pp. 51-79 (p.58).

Hollywood (1999).¹⁹³ Interest in this area was mainly limited to vocational instructions about the business of screenwriting, publication of ‘how-to’ screenwriting manuals, and discussions about storytelling structure.¹⁹⁴ In the last two decades, however, the research field has expanded while scholars, hailing from different backgrounds and with different interests, clustered together to form various research streams.¹⁹⁵ Contemporary screenwriting studies examines such matters as the nature and history of the screenplay, education and training of the screenwriter (discussed in Chapter 6), creative labour in the screenwriting process, script development, different production cultures, research methodologies, and ethics in screenwriting. This list is by no means comprehensive; rather, it is meant to show the expansion of the scholarly investigations, which in turn, led to the foundation of the Screenwriting Research Network (SRN) in 2006 by Ian Macdonald (University of Leeds) and Kirsi Rinnie (University of Aalto). The SRN defines itself a ‘research group consisting of scholars, reflective practitioners, and practice-based researchers interested in research on screenwriting’ whose aim is ‘to rethink the screenplay in relation to its histories, theories, values, and creative practices.’¹⁹⁶ In 2009—again, as a result of the scholarly interest—Jill Nelmes (University of East London) established the *Journal of Screenwriting*, an international double-blind peer-reviewed journal.¹⁹⁷ The journal supports academic and professional views and opinions about the screenplay and screenwriting while ‘encouraging and stimulating discussions about contemporary and historical screenwriting practices, as well as the education screenwriting and training of screenwriters’.¹⁹⁸ Concurrently with the growth of screenwriting as an academic discipline, a number of important publications were published. Representative examples include Steven Maras’ *Screenwriting: History, Theory and Practice* (2009), Steven Price’s *The Screenplay: Authorship, Theory and Criticism* (2010) and *A History of the Screenplay* (2013), which collectively examine such matters as the ontological status of the screenplay, its relation to current theories of authorship, and the screenplay’s historical development.

These particular issues are of only marginal concern to the present research, which is more directly concerned with matters of cinematic storytelling environment, the professionalisation of the

¹⁹³ Jill Nelmes, ‘Critical Appraisal - PhD by publication, p. 4 <<https://repository.uel.ac.uk/download/2d3f2fc5708c2e2177b04b7ffa1f39c5f92661473875ba7b7fc47b1588dbee14/159525/Jill%20Nelmes.pdf>> [accessed 2 May 2022].

¹⁹⁴ Kevin Alexander Boon, *Script Culture and the American Screenplay* (Detroit, SN: Wayne State University Press, 2008), p. vii-viii.

¹⁹⁵ Ted Nannicelli, *A Philosophy of the Screenplay* (New York, NY and Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), p.2.

¹⁹⁶ Screenwriting Research Network <<https://screenwritingresearch.com/>> (para. 1 of 4) [accessed 1 April 2022].

¹⁹⁷ Screenwriting Research Network <<https://screenwritingresearch.com/journal/>> [accessed 1 April 2022].

¹⁹⁸ Journal of Screenwriting <https://www.intellectbooks.com/journal-of-screenwriting> [accessed 1 April 2022].

screenwriting career, screenwriting training and education, ethical considerations in film and television production cultures in the small-nation context. In the absence of prior studies of Maltese cinema, the secondary works that have provided the clearest sense of direction for the present research are those of Eva Novrup Redvall and Mette Hjort. Redvall's monograph *Writing and Producing Television Drama in Denmark: From The Kingdom to The Killing* (2013) focuses on pre-production processes, examining specifically Danish television production culture and identifying some of the reason behind its success. The monograph also highlights that an important part of this success is education of the writers, whose work is based on close collaboration with directors, actors and producers, this collaboration being termed as 'one vision'.¹⁹⁹ Redvall's later chapter 'Craft, Creativity, Collaboration, and Connections: Educating Talent for Danish Television Drama Series' published in *Production Studies, The Sequel!* has further contributed to the importance of education and networking in the television industry.²⁰⁰ Redvall's investigation of screenwriting education in Denmark is also applies to Malta when discussing the importance of screenwriting education at Malta's public and private television stations (discussed in 4.6 The Decline of Maltese Television Screenwriting).

Another important contribution to the education of the writer-director is the two-volume anthology *The Education of the Filmmaker* (2013) edited by Hjort, examines a wide range of approaches adopted by different countries, their production cultures, professional education and training of the film-makers. The latter is of particular importance since it has 'far more reaching implications for the quality of the screen storytelling but also cultural and societal aspects'.²⁰¹ Again, Hjort's observation about professional education is crucial to professionalisation of the Maltese writer-directors, which (discussed in the following section Small Nation Storytelling in Television and Film) reveals an unsystematized approach to education, and by extension, an unsystematized screenwriting orthodoxy.

Another monograph which helped understand and systemize, but also appreciate the historical shortcomings of the Maltese screenwriting practice was Ian Macdonald's *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea* (2013). Macdonald investigated screenwriting practice (orthodoxy), focusing on the fluidity of 'the screen idea' and the pervasiveness of the screenwriting conventions and paradigms that dominate screenwriting education and screenwriting manuals (discussed in

¹⁹⁹ Redvall, *Writing and Producing*, p. 69.

²⁰⁰ Eva Novrup Redvall, 'Craft. Creativity, Collaboration, and Connection', in *Production Studies, The Sequel!* ed. by Miranda Banks, Bridget Conor, and Vicki Mayer (New York and London: Routledge 2016), pp. 73-87.

²⁰¹ Eva Novrup Redvall, 'Craft. Creativity, Collaboration, and Connection', in *Production Studies, The Sequel!* ed. by Miranda Banks, Bridget Conor, and Vicki Mayer (New York and London: Routledge 2016), pp. 73-87 (p. 76).

Chapter 4). Macdonald also investigated the ‘domain’ and the ‘field’²⁰² as part of the creative process of developing the screen idea, which in Maltese film and television production cultures, is constrained by the tension between the screenwriter’s agency and the political and social conditions within which agency is embedded. Indeed, understanding screenwriting practice in Malta in historical and cultural terms, which in Macdonald’s words is the ‘Screen Idea System’ (the belief system behind the modes of production),²⁰³ is crucial to the research in not only understanding the Maltese screenwriters and writer-directors but also focusing on the influencing factors, institutions, individuals and assumed, widespread knowledge. In the case of Malta, the ‘screen idea system’ remains embedded in the micro-politics of screen production cultures.

Macdonald’s research is focused on the ways in which the ‘screen work’ is defined, constructed and discussed, and is ‘attendant to practices of screenwriting’ as well as ‘screen reading’. Macdonald builds his argument on Philip Parker’s concept of ‘screen idea’, which the latter defines from the point of view of a screenwriting practitioner rather than a scholar, and as such as a practitioner, one needs to possess ‘a clear sense of the story /subject and / thematic concerns. as a practitioner, one needs to possess ‘a clear sense of the story /subject and / thematic concerns and its dramatic potential [...] [in terms of] the genre, the style and its dramatic structure’ before assessing the potential of the idea.²⁰⁴ Macdonald, on the other hand, defines the ‘screen idea’ as:

Any notion held by one or more people of a singular concept (however complex), which may have conventional shape or not, intended to become a screenwork, whether or not it is possible to describe it in written form or by other means.²⁰⁵

The contribution of the ‘screen idea’ concept is also relevant to the remaining three research questions, mainly, what constitutes Maltese cinematic identity and their concept of self-representation and self-perception; what themes concern them; and why do they self-censor their work. Macdonald also draws on Bourdieu’s field theory in order to sketch out a theoretical approach to the analysis of screenwriting that he argues takes the study of screenwriting beyond ‘how-to’ screenwriting manuals and enables a critical engagement in film and television productions.²⁰⁶ The prevailing approach to screenwriting orthodoxy in Malta remains unclear since it tends to oscillate between the Hollywood big-budget approach (the film serving industry is

²⁰² Macdonald, *Screenwriting*, p. 24.

²⁰³ Macdonald, *Screenwriting*, p. 9.

²⁰⁴ Philip Parker, *The Art & Science of Screenwriting*, 2nd ed (Bristol: Intellect Books, 1999), pp. 57-58.

²⁰⁵ Ian Macdonald, pp. 4-5

²⁰⁶ Michela Cortese, ‘Script Development and Interdisciplinary Collaborations in Parties Production of Climate-Fiction Films’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bangor University, 2021), p. 19.

responsible for generating this kind of approach) and the small budget independent approach appropriate for Malta being the correct approach to the screenwriting orthodoxy.²⁰⁷

Small-nation screen practitioners are accustomed to doing ‘more with less’ with the ‘less’ imposing constraints that transmute into various types of value: aesthetic, political, or cultural.

Creative labour in Anglocentric mainstream screenwriting cultures is the subject of Bridget Conor’s *Screenwriting Creative Labor and Professional Practice*. Conor investigates the historical dynamics of the profession while underscoring some of the commercial and creative tensions in the industry—mainly in the USA and the UK—that often challenge the screenwriters’ professional autonomy and claims to authorship in their work.²⁰⁸ Similarly, the present research investigates the Maltese professional screenwriters’ autonomy and claims to authorship, which do not differ from the Anglophone environment. It is important to note that Malta does not have a professional screenwriting union, such as a Writers Guild, for instance, because as a small scale nation, Malta thrives on networks and Malta-specific ubiquitous forms of patronage and nepotism that are responsible for creating ‘club-like’ professional relationships (discussed in 6.3 Contemporary Screenwriting Practice in Malta).²⁰⁹ The professional autonomy is also made dependent on the mentor if the project is funded by Screen Malta; until 2021, the mentor was assigned by Screen Malta itself. As it is phrased in the Malta Film Fund regulations of 2019, ‘successful applicants may benefit from a mentor as an integral part of the project to provide the right support every step of the way’, but for the first time, the regulation was accompanied by a footnote stating that ‘if you intend using a Malta Film Fund mentor please indicate accordingly. This may still need to be budgeted.’²¹⁰ As of 2020, the screenwriter has had the possibility of choosing their own mentor, one whose vision and sensitivity was close to screenwriter’s culture and sensibilities.²¹¹ This is significant because it allowed the screenwriter to have a creative control and cultural freedom over their work rather than having to work with an ‘assigned [...] mentor from the film commission’ and one who ‘would be tasked with assisting and overseeing benefiting projects’.²¹² In other words, all the beneficiaries were working with the same mentor (prior to 2020), relying on one vision and whose word would

²⁰⁷ Cassar, e-mail communication, 25 April 2018; Bonnici, discussion 30 January 2018; Damato, discussion 21 December 2020.

²⁰⁸ Bridget Conor, *Screenwriting: Creative Labor*, pp. 2-3.

²⁰⁹ Henry Felix Srebrnik, ‘Small Island Nations and Democratic Values’, *World Development*, 32.2 (2004), 329-341, (p. 331) <doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2003.08.005> and Saviour Chircop, in discussion with the researcher, 29 January 2018.

²¹⁰ Malta Film Fund Regulations 2019, p. 5 <<https://maltafilmcommission.com/screen-malta/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Malta-Film-Fund-Guidelines-GENERAL.pdf>> [accessed 10 May 2022].

²¹¹ Screen Malta Support Scheme, 2020, p. 13 and p. 18 <https://maltafilmcommission.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Screen-Malta-Regulations-2020-09-07-2020.pdf> [accessed 20 February 2020].

²¹² Daniel Mizzi, ‘Film Fund to Focus on “Quality Not Quantity” – Manuel Mallia’, *Maltatoday*, 3 April 2014

<https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/arts/film/37632/film_fund_to_focus_on_quality_not_quantity_manuel_mallia#.YrHGj3ZBy3A> [accessed 15 June 2022] (para. 11 of 12).

supersede the screenwriter's creativity. Of course, another variable that Malta shares with the countries under study by Conor is the invisibility of the screenwriters and their inability to support themselves financially from screenwriting as a professional practice.²¹³

A penultimate strand of the scholarly investigation that has been of particular concern to the present study is ethics. There is a tendency to think about ethics in screenwriting mainly in case studies or particular texts.²¹⁴ Screenwriting is about ethics at its very core, however, because screenwriters and writer-directors are making choices in social, and many times, political situations,²¹⁵ and screenwriting represents human dilemmas, struggle and judgement.²¹⁶ Ethical issues present themselves through characterisation, narrative, history, politics, society, culture, visual representation, which the act of screenwriting unavoidably engages in.²¹⁷ These are the ethical issues that this thesis also faces, particularly the material referring to the themes of conformism, mediocrity, bird hunting, illegal immigration, construction, Catholicism, Maltese language, racism, identity, and internalised forms of self-censorship, but most of all the assassination of Caruana Galizia.

A seminal publication on ethics in screenwriting is Steven Maras' edited collection *Ethics in Screenwriting: New Perspectives* (2016). Contemporary screenwriting ethics go beyond the Hays Code²¹⁸ and is attempting to 'critically reflect on normative questions, focus on the "in", look at the specific links between screenwriting practice and ethical considerations, and ask what forms of responsibility arises from those links.'²¹⁹ In her contribution to the book, Redvall examines ethics within a specific framework of the 'public service storytelling' and discusses the implications for screenwriting practices when considerations of the ethical implications and impact of narratives are an established part of the commissioning process from the earliest stages.²²⁰ The issue of the 'public service storytelling' in Malta is discussed in Chapter 4 in terms of the historical development of the television drama, and in Chapter 6 in terms of the Maltese Broadcasting Authority investigating the substandard storytelling quality of the local television drama in the hope of rectifying the situation through the education and training of writers and producers. Redvall, for

²¹³ Charles Stroud, Martin Bonnici, Paul Portelli, Jamie Vella, Stephanie Sant, Carlos Debattista.

²¹⁴ Steven Maras, 'Ethics, Representation and Judgement', in *Ethics in Screenwriting* ed. by Steven Maras (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 231-257 (p.234).

²¹⁵ Ian Macdonald, review of *Ethics in Screenwriting: New Perspectives*, 2016
<<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/978-1-137-54493-3#about-book-reviews>> [accessed 10 May 2022]

²¹⁶ Maras, 'Ethics, Representation', p. 231.

²¹⁷ Steven Price, review of *Ethics in Screenwriting: New Perspectives*, 2016
<<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/978-1-137-54493-3#about-book-reviews>> [accessed 10 May 2022]

²¹⁸ Steven Maras, 'Beyond the Code', in *Ethics in Screenwriting* ed. by Steven Maras (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 1-29 (p. 5).

²¹⁹ Steven Maras, 'Preface', in *Ethics in Screenwriting* ed. by Steven Maras (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. i-xvii (p. ix) (original ellipsis).

²²⁰ Maras, 'Preface', p. ix.

example, suggests that one way to explore ethics in television drama is to explore the various discourses that are linked to the ethical dimensions of practice and reflective decision-making while negotiating entertaining storytelling with the ethical and societal layers.²²¹ Redvall also discusses Ian Macdonald's 'Screen Ideas' and the existing productions and ideas of best practice in the domain of television drama.

Redvall's analysis of the concept of 'double storytelling' within this particular Screen Idea System illustrates how certain ideas of what characterizes 'good' public service television drama has the potential to educate but also to influence audience perceptions of national identity, national values, national heritage and the contemporary society.²²² Redvall's argument is clearly applicable to Malta since television drama in small nations helps construct and maintain a sense of national identity, as Ruth McElroy and Caitriona Noonan argue in 'Television Drama Production in Small Nations: Mobilities in a Changing Ecology' in their investigation of the Welsh television industry. McElroy and Noonan explain that the television industry functions on a number of interlinking levels constructing a sense of identity, contributing towards a democratic public sphere, and providing an important cultural and economic resource.²²³ Television drama is particularly important to these functions due to its ability to tell stories about and for a nation. All the arguments put forth by McElroy and Noonan are crucial to the main argument of the present thesis. Malta's smallness, less access to talent, fewer capital resources and a smaller market for advertising and license fee revenue can, and do, make it like other smaller nations dependent on importing global content—a situation often framed as threatening their economic potential and cultural identity.²²⁴

The last element of the present research is my engagement with the contemporary research field which overlaps with Craig Batty's discussion of practice-based approaches. I explore my own work, a produced screenplay of *The Maltese Fighter*, as part of a doctoral investigation. Batty in the 2017 publication of *Screen Production Research: Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry* addresses this relationship between a screen production and research at the tertiary level, highlighting the form and function of the creative practice methodology of the screenplay as a mode of enquiry.²²⁵ The present research applied the textual data as a research tool to explore the Maltese screenworks and to assess the 'Maltese condition'. The screen texts, therefore, become

²²¹ Eva Novrup Redvall, "The Concept of 'Double Storytelling' in Danish Public Service TV Drama Production", in *Ethics in Screenwriting* ed. by Steven Maras (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 33-54 (p. 34 and p.35).

²²² Redvall, 'The Concept of 'Double Storytelling'', p. 49 and p. 50.

²²³ Ruth McElroy and Caitriona Noonan, 'Television Drama Production in Small Nations: Mobilities in a Changing Ecology', *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 4.1 (2016) 109-127 (p. 109) <doi:10.1386/jptv.4.1.109_1>.

²²⁴ Ruth McElroy and Caitriona Noonan, 'Television Drama', p. 112.

²²⁵ Dallas J. Baker and others, 'Scriptwriting as a Research Practice: Expanding the Field', *Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, 29 (2015), 1–11 (p. 3) <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue29/Baker_Batty_Beattie&Davis.pdf> [accessed 28 February 2022].

research artefacts and part of a creative practice research methodology, allowing the ‘data’ to become ‘recognisable to its audience’, with the screen text using its inherent storytelling conventions such as, theme, world, structure, character, and dialogue to *tell* research.²²⁶

1.9 Production Studies

As a scholarly approach, production studies investigate specific aspects and cultures of media production as distinct interpretative communities, each with its own organizational structures, aims, professional practices, and power dynamics. Production studies also provide analyses of media makers’ experiences, observations, conversations, and interactions. They also illuminate academic understandings of production communities in terms of shifts in policy, economic imperatives, industrial organizations, national politics, globalization, and local dynamics.²²⁷ The organizational structures, professional practices, and power dynamics are discussed in Chapter 4.

Another variable that productions studies is film and television locations, discussed in Chapter 5, which have received negligible academic critical attention and theoretical and methodological approaches.²²⁸ In last twenty years, however, location studies have evolved from ‘a practical issue and a type of tacit knowledge’ to the appreciation of the values that locations bring, such as production, aesthetic, economic and political values’ for the industry and non-industry stakeholders.²²⁹ Today, location studies is the new strand of production studies. However, Hansen and Waade claim that the trend tends to be reflected nowadays through ‘democratic values regarding identity, cultural heritage and nation/region building, and to a lesser extent the economic and branding values’, an observation that is central to the argument of the present thesis.²³⁰

Screen texts studied in the present research reflect the local understanding of the media production culture, national politics, and local dynamics—of which an integral part is self-censorship. However, the study also illuminates the screenwriters’ and writer-directors’ similarities, their diversity, and their own internal contradictions, defined by Jonathan Corpus Ong as ‘creativity within constraints’ in ‘institutional ecologies and [self] regulatory conditions under which generic narratives are produced’.²³¹

²²⁶ Craig Batty and Dallas, J. Baker, ‘Screenwriting as a Mode of Research, and the Screenplay as a Research Artefact’, in *Screen Production Research: Creative Practice as A mode of Enquiry*, ed. by Craig Batty and Susan Kerrigan (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 67-84 (pp.74-5).

²²⁷ Miranda Banks and others, ‘Preface’, in *Production Studies, The Sequel!* ed. by Miranda Banks, Bridget Conor, and Vicki Mayer (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), pp. ix-xv (p. x).

²²⁸ Kim Toft Hansen and Anne Marit Waade, *Locating Nordic Noir from Beck to The Bridge* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 27.

²²⁹ Hansen and Waade, *Locating Nordic* p. 27.

²³⁰ Hansen and Waade, pp. 27-28.

²³¹ Ong, ‘Charity Appeal’, p. 90.

Daniel Biltreyst and Roel Vande Winkel outline three forms of censorship and distinctions between censorship systems (overall legal framework), censorship modalities (the tools of censorship), and censorship practices (applications of the modalities). In the censorship systems—or institutions—modalities that are available to censoring institutions, at least those allocated to them by the state, or some other powers procedures like age restrictions, cuts, bans, financial repercussions, and control over film criticism, are partly applicable to Malta’s production culture whereby the creative limitations are defined by self-censorship. These practices of self-censorship often remain invisible to the outsiders, but very visible to the insiders—the Maltese creative industry—and are an expression of the ‘Maltese condition’ phenomenon.²³² Artists in Malta do not want ‘to bite the hand that feeds them’ since most of the artists are funded by government institutions. This cultural phenomenon generates a profound (political) executive dominance in the government-screen industry relationship.²³³ In my discussions with screenwriters and industry practitioners, there is a common consensus that Malta has a significant number of meaningful narratives to tell, touching upon political or social issues, but very few think they included them in the narratives; but they actually did, hence the motivation for this study. Nonetheless, creative limitations define Malta’s cinematic output and so does self-censorship, which not necessarily a negative endeavour. Screenplays and screen texts such as *Gaġġa/The Cage* (1971), *F’Baħar Wieħed/In One Sea* (1976), *Kont Diġà /I Was There Already* (2009), *Laqgħa ma’ Mara Morbi/Meeting with Mara Morbi* (2014), *The Maltese Fighter* (2014), *Dritt għall-punt/ Straight to the Point* (2017), *Arcadia* (2017), *Žiemel/Horse* (2017), *Ħallini Ħanini/Let Me Be, Dear* (2020) comment on Malta’s contemporary ailments using subtext and metaphors, whereas there are also a number of productions that address Malta’s issues directly without subtext or sophistication: *Katarin/Catherine* (1977), *Anġli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie* (2005), *Maltageddon* (2009), *Carmelo* (2018), *Simshar* (2014), *Do Re Mi Fa* (2016) *Is-Sriep Reggħu Saru Velenużi/The Vipers’ Pit* (2019), *Il-Miraklu/Holy Mary!* (2018-2019), and *Luzzu* (2020).

1.10 Small Nation Storytelling in Television and Film

Ib Bondebjerg and Eva Novrup Redvall in *European Cinema and Television: Cultural Policy and Everyday Life* raise the questions about Europe that the present research raises about Malta: ‘Who are the Europeans? How do they perceive themselves? What constitutes a European culture and

²³² Biltreyst and Vande Winkel, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

²³³ Wouter Veenendaal, ‘How Smallness Fosters Clientelism: A Case Study of Malta’, *Political Studies* 67.4 (2019), 1034-52, (p.1035).

identity?’²³⁴ For the purposes of the present thesis we can substitute the word ‘Maltese’ for ‘European’. Bondebjerg and Redvall concede that providing the answers is not straightforward, since the ‘feeling of a national culture and identity comes in many forms and it is not always a very strong, coherent or expressive ideology’. Quite often these collective identities lack the homogenous element or possess either competing or parallel identities.²³⁵ The present research encounters similar concerns and reveals that the cinematic construct of the Maltese imaginary is not yet fully formed simply because Malta, as a united nation, is younger than the European Union by one decade. Both, however, are still undergoing the cultural, social, economic, and political processes of integration.²³⁶

Malta remains Europe’s most densely populated nation-state as well as the European Union’s smallest member state, with its creatives conditioned by continuous external forces. At the same time, Malta has adapted to and exploited external influences and challenges, transforming itself into a democratic, sovereign, and independent micro-state nation, anchored within the European and international fold. Even though Maltese indigenous film and television and cinema remain peripheral, lacking a critical discourse, it still attempts to locate itself within a broader context. However, within the emerging Maltese audio-visual expressions, the recent developments permit enquiry into who are the Maltese screenwriters and writer-directors and whether they represent Malta’s cinematic culture and identity. This representation of the nation in screen productions has been an important issue, not only as regards the way in which a nation can be represented on-screen in aesthetic and narrative features, but also as to the fundamental rationale for public funding and production of screen narratives within a nation which is discussed more in detail in Chapter 5.²³⁷

Small-nation cinemas fall into one or more of the following categories: having populations too small to sustain a domestic commercial industry; having a language that is not widely understood outside the country; having small domestic markets; having culturally, linguistically, or ethnically fragmented domestic markets; being former colonies, and having their domestic exhibition dominated not only by Hollywood films but also by Hollywood productions becoming normative models of cinematic storytelling.²³⁸ Investigations into audio-visual industries in small

²³⁴ Ib Bondebjerg and Eva Novrup Redvall, ‘Introduction: Mediated Cultural Encounters in Europe’, in *European Cinema and Television: Cultural Policy and Everyday Life*, ed. by Ib Bondebjerg and others (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), pp. 1-22 (p. 6).

²³⁵ Bondebjerg and Redvall, p. 6.

²³⁶ Bondebjerg and Redvall, p. 7.

²³⁷ Steven Peacock, ‘Crossing the Line: *Millennium* and *Wallander* On Screen and the Global Stage’, in *Stieg Larsson’s Millennium Trilogy: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Nordic Noir on Page and Screen*, ed. Steven Peacock (Basingstoke and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 98-117 (p.100).

²³⁸ Mette Hjort, *The Cinema of Small Nations*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2007), p.3

nations have been conducted by Redvall in relation to television writing and producing, and Mette Hjort in relation to film writing. Redvall, in her seminal work, *Writing and Producing Television Drama in Denmark: From The Kingdom to The Killing*, offers an insight into the ‘small-nation production culture’ and the analysis of the domestic public services broadcasters. Additionally, Redvall provides knowledge about the structures and strategies in order to attract international interest.²³⁹ Redvall proposes fifteen ‘dogmas’ that were formulated to illuminate ‘the tacit knowledge’ to create successful television narratives. The dogmas establish the four key concepts of ‘one vision’, ‘double storytelling’, ‘producer’s choice’ and ‘crossover’ crucial to the understanding of how to produce a successful television drama.²⁴⁰

The concept of ‘one vision’, the first dogma, is based on original ideas that scriptwriters ‘are placed at the centre of the production process from the early stages of development until the final cut.’ Redvall explains that the premise of ‘one vision’ shares many similarities with the function of the showrunner in the American television industry. Redvall explains that Danish internationally successful crime television series *Borgen* and *The Killing*, Adam Price, writer, and Søren Sveistrup, creator/writer, can be looked at as the showrunners with the creative control of the series as a whole and overseeing the writing of scripts with other writers and other aspects related to production.²⁴¹

The concept of ‘double storytelling’, the second dogma, defines what kinds of stories a public service broadcaster should offer to national audiences. This refers to always telling stories that are not only entertaining, but which also contain ‘larger ethical and social connotations.’²⁴² The ‘double storytelling’ has been referred to as ‘the philosophical layer’ or ‘the public service layer’.²⁴³ Redvall admits that any ‘good story’ would contain several narrative layers situating the story in a larger context.²⁴⁴ Two other important elements Redvall discusses are the ‘cross-over’ and ‘producer’s choice’. Although not directly connected to the act of writing of the scriptwriters, knowledge of both dogmas is beneficial in a larger context. Crossover relates to the exchange of creatives between the film and television industries to create a strong visual identity perspective aiming to give their series an international ‘look’, which has helped benefit their export potential. Lastly, Redvall explains the concept of ‘producer’s choice’, which is linked to the concept of ‘crossover of talent’, permitting producers ‘to hire specific crews for each production’ to introduce

²³⁹ Eva Novrup Redvall, *Writing and Producing Television Drama in Denmark: From the Kingdom to The Killing*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 2-4.

²⁴⁰ Redvall, p.16.

²⁴¹ Redvall, pp.107-10.

²⁴² Eva Novrup Redvall, ‘Dogmas for Television Drama: The Ideas of ‘one vision’, ‘double storytelling’, ‘crossover’ and ‘producer’s choice’ in Drama Series from the Danish Public Service Broadcaster DR’, *Journal of Popular Television*, 1. 2 (2013), 227-34 (p. 229) <http://doi: 10.1386/jptv.1.2.227_1>

²⁴³ Redvall, ‘Dogmas for Television Drama’, p. 230.

²⁴⁴ Redvall, *Writing and Producing Television Drama*, p. 68.

fresh perspective and creative input, helping ensure that ‘each series finds its own voice and the right people to bring alive the vision of the writer.’²⁴⁵

Mette Hjort, on the other hand, discusses the concept of ‘small nation cinema’ in four seminal works: *The New Danish Cinema* (2005), a comparative analysis of small cinemas in terms of the effects of globalization within the culture and economy of a small nation, and *The Cinema of Small Nations* (2008), the first major analysis of small national cinemas from around the world. Hjort additionally penned three works on the challenges that small-nation film professionals must face, *The Danish Directors* (2000). Hjort argues that ‘small filmmaking nations clearly do tend to confront certain types of problem and have to have recourse to certain types of solutions, depending on the particular form of small nationhood in question’.²⁴⁶

Hjort further endeavours to provide a definition of ‘small nation’ within the study of film, which heretofore has been defined mostly by other disciplines. The scholar feels that a film industry in small countries tends to be perceived as a ‘general intuition’, rather than a clearly defined ‘analytic tool’.²⁴⁷ In *The Danish Directors: Dialogues on a Contemporary National Cinema* published in 2001, Hjort puts forth three conditions that must be met for a small nation: The size of its population is too small to sustain a commercially based, indigenous film industry.

1. The language spoken by the nation in question, Danish, is understood primarily by Danes, making it difficult to expand the market for Danish film through export and international distribution.
2. A key problem for the indigenous film industry is the ongoing influx and dominant presence of American films.²⁴⁸

Additionally, a distinction must be made between the concepts of a small country that produces films, as opposed to a country that produces a small number of films.²⁴⁹

It may appear at first glance that the three conditions are applicable to Malta, thereby assisting a successful emergence of professional screenwriters and writer-directors within a coherent national scriptwriting practice. Working from a premise that the term is appropriate when the films

²⁴⁵ Redvall, ‘Dogmas for Television Drama’, pp. 231-32.

²⁴⁶ Mette Hjort, *The Cinema of Small Nations*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2007), p.2.

²⁴⁷ Hjort, *The Cinema of Small Nations*, p.3.

²⁴⁸ Ib Bondebjerg and Mette Hjort, *The Danish Directors: Dialogues on a Contemporary National Cinema* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2001), p. 20.

²⁴⁹ Hjort, *The Cinema of Small Nations*, p.3.

produced by a small nation cinema provide evidence of a variety of cinematic expressions, secure a reasonable share of the domestic box office, secure numerous prizes on the international festivals, achieve some measure of international distribution, attract financial support from various public and private sector sources at the national and international levels, and provide a platform for screenwriters, directors, cinematographers and other professionals not only to further their careers but also to support themselves professionally within and outside the national film industry on a regular basis.²⁵⁰

1.11 Structure of the Thesis

The present, introductory Chapter 1 outlines the aims, scope, limitations and methodology of the thesis. The primary aim is to present the first extensive critical study of screenwriting and storytelling in Maltese television and film, focusing on two pivotal periods in Malta's modern history—post-Independence and post-EU accession—and the different ideologies that each period represents. The primary argument is that, unlike in many other small-nation film industries, Malta has shied away from a close engagement with the dominant political and cultural concerns of the time. This was due largely to the political, cultural and logistical complexities and contradictions that gave rise to the previously mentioned phenomenon called the 'Maltese condition', and more specifically to the stifling and enduring effects on screenwriting and cinema of patronage and internalised forms of self-censorship. The chapter explains the challenges posed by the paucity of secondary materials and the selection of primary texts. Additional resources include the author's original interviews with Maltese screenwriters, writer-directors, and film practitioners, and the author's own experiences in developing two scripts within the Maltese industry. Although the research methods are largely empirical, the methodology will also include situating the Maltese industry within the context of small-nation cinema, primarily via the work by Redvall in relation to television writing and producing, and Mette Hjort in relation to film writing. This chapter also looks briefly at the development of the screenwriting and production studies.

Each of the following four chapters (Chapters 2-6) focuses on one or more of the Malta-specific contexts that contribute to screenwriting in the country taking the forms that it does. In particular, these chapters explore the extent to which these conditions help to explain why Maltese screenwriters and writer-directors have generally avoided engaging directly with contemporary social and political concerns, in contrast to their peers in other film and television industries in Europe and the Americas. Chapter 2 examines the concept of the 'Maltese condition', including

²⁵⁰ Hjort, *The Danish Directors* p.26.

aspects of mediocrity and the tall poppy syndrome, the self-perception of uniqueness, and the pervasive system of patronage and political allegiances, all of which can be seen to contribute to pervasive self-censorship among screenwriters. The chapter also notes the contrast between the political reticence of screenwriters and filmmakers on the one hand, on the other hand, the confidently socio-political local satire in cartoon artistry, is seemingly the only safe way to circumvent socio-political self-censorship in Malta. It examines the significance of Catholicism and the Church in Malta, as both political power and religious responsibility. It explores the Maltese language and the ever-present historical discourse of the language problem, which is an inherent part of the ‘Maltese condition’. Another aspect of the language that is examined is contemporary racism, which is historically encapsulated in the Maltese language. Screen texts examined in this chapter are: *Kont Diġà/I was, Already* (2009), *Maltageddon* (2009), *20, 000 Reasons* (2016), *Do Re Mi Fa* (2016), *Il-Miraklu/Holy Mary!* (2018-2019), *Is-Sriep Reġġhu Saru Velenużi/The Vipers’ Pit* (2019), *Orrajt/Alright* (2020).

Chapter 3 explores the more explicitly political ways in which this diffidence has been maintained. It looks more in detail at the Maltese context of people looking at each other’s business; of living on a protected, insulated island; of over-development and corruption; of being afraid to be different; oppressive island culture; disconnectedness from the mainland; the rural against the urban; not being too different; not being too great; the rural to the coastal; and the very tightly populated urban landscape which suddenly becomes dramatically coastal. It examines the debilitating influence of the political parties, the political division the parties are responsible for, and the ways in which political patronage tends to stifle oppositional forces. The second half of the chapter examines how Maltese writers have nevertheless addressed some of the contemporary, Malta-specific concerns that confront the nation: the political influences that shaped such matters as bird hunting and bird trapping, the questions posed by illegal immigration in a small island situated between Africa and Europe, the ruination of the island by land development and property construction, and the event that has become synonymous with Maltese political corruption: the assassination in 2017 of the journalist Caruana Galizia. Screen texts examined in this chapter are: *Gaġġa/The Cage* (1971), *Kont Diġà/I was, Already* (2009), *Laqgħa ma’ Mara Morbi/Meeting with Mara Morbi* (2014), *Simshar* (2014), *Dritt għall-punt/ Straight to the Point* (2017), *Arcadia* (2017), *Żiemel/Horse* (2017), *Is-Sriep Reġġhu Saru Velenużi/The Vipers’ Pit* (2019), *Luzzu* (2020), *Hallini Hanini/Let Me Be, Dear* (2020).

Chapter 4 examines how the scriptwriting orthodoxy for television and film has historically developed in Malta. It begins by suggesting that the education of scriptwriters in Malta is indebted to radio drama and to the pioneering work of three key figures: Kelinu Vella Haber, Wistin Born, and Cecil Satariano. It then turns to television and film writing in the 1970s, arguing that this was in

part shaped by a neo-realist sensibility inherited from the aforementioned pioneers and from other literary figures in Malta. The chapter then proceeds to argue that there was a marked decline in the standard of Maltese scriptwriting from the 1980s through to the 2010s, occasioned in part by political changes that resulted in a greater emphasis being placed on advertising, commercial opportunities and tourism, which are visible in many of the screenplays, teleplays and screen texts of this period that is discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 assesses Malta's location used by the screenwriters and writer-directors as part of the narrative or exploited by the Government as a marketing ploy. Screen texts examined in this chapter are: *I'm Furious-Red!* (1970), *Gagġa/The Cage* (1971), *F'Baħar Wieħed/In One Sea* (1976), *Katarin/Catherine* (1977), *Il-Madonna ta-Ċoqqa/Madonna of the Hood* (1978-1979), *Anġli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie* (2005), *Kont Diġà /I Was There Already* (2009), *Maltageddon* (2009), *Strada Stretta/Strait Street* (2015-2017), *Carmelo* (2018), *Il-Miraklu/Holy Mary!* (2018-2019). Additionally, the chapter includes two radio dramas: *L-Għaniqa ta' Wiżu/Louis' Goat* (1947) and *Haddem Rasek u Imla Bwietek/Be Sharp and Get Rich* (1972).

Chapter 6 looks at the screenwriting practices and education provided by the educational institutions and offers a critical reflection on screenwriting practices and doxa. It discusses the shortcomings of the predominant arrangement whereby an individual author will write an entire television series and contrasts this with the collaborative systems of other countries. It then surveys the limited educational opportunities for prospective screenwriters in Malta, including the initiatives of Screen Malta, the National Book Council, Poetry on Film, and Kultura TV. The chapter incorporates reactions from practitioners in the Maltese film industry.

Chapter 7 provides a critical reflection on my own work as a form of primary research: a means whereby the current processes of script development and funding in Malta are made visible and explicit. The one case studies discussed in this chapter are *The Maltese Fighter* (2014), a produced short film. The text reflects and explores the socio-political and cultural environment in post-Independence Malta. Additionally, Chapter 7 examines the reason why some of my Maltese screenwriting students find telling Maltese stories counterintuitive. The chapter includes feedback from these students to justify their line of thinking.

The Conclusion summarises the extent to which the thesis has achieved its initial objectives, before assessing what the future holds of screenwriting and film-making in Malta, including a consideration of how the country can benefit from educational and funding opportunities made possible through its membership of the EU.

1.12 Synopses of the Texts

The primary research for this thesis draws on the scripts for twenty-four Maltese films, which are discussed in detail in the following chapters. As the reader is likely to be unfamiliar with these texts, brief details of each are provided below, in chronological order. The synopses does not include two radio drama scripts *L-Għaniqa ta' Wiżu/Louis' Goat* (1947) and *Haddem Rasek u Imla Bwietek/Be Sharp and Get Rich* (1972) since they do not discuss the 'Maltese condition', but they do feature in Chapter 4 contributing to the discussion about the Maltese doxa.

1. *I'm Furious-Red!* (1970) written and directed by Cecil Satariano. The first Maltese short. It contains no dialogue. A serio-comic study about voyeurism inspired by the Swedish erotic drama *I'm Curious (Yellow)* (1967) by Vilgot Sjöman.

Synopsis. *I'm Furious-Red!* shot in the immediate post-independent Malta tells a story about the adventures and mishaps of a Peeping Tom (disguised as a bird watcher) spying on sun-bathing women or making out couple in a park. When two young and beautiful women stop to offer him a lift in their car, Peeping Tom is unable to respond. They drive off leaving him there humiliated. His day and his adventure come to end with a climactic scene when he is caught stalking a necking couple in a car.

2. *Gaġġa/The Cage* (1971) is a cinematic adaptation of Francis Sammut's titular novel *Il-Gaġġa /The Cage* (1971) directed by Mario Philip Azzopardi.²⁵¹ *Gaġġa/The Cage* is the first Maltese feature film. The narrative takes place in Malta in 1964, just before its Independence from the British empire, and centres around Catholic rule and the emerging first political parties formed that dominate Maltese politics to this day, the Labour Party and the Nationalist Party that are remarkably polarized. It is a story which emphasizes that instead of bringing inspiration, religion brings oppression.²⁵²

Synopsis. A love story between a male protagonist, Fredu Gambin (early 20s), from a family supporting the Nationalist Party, and Roża (early 20s) whose family supports the Labour Party. Both families live in the same village. Fredu and Roża plan to marry, but when they are seen together by Fredu's father, Fredu is pressured by his mother (deeply religious) to take a decision: he either leaves Roża—because of her family's political association—or moves out of the house. Fredu chooses the former. After his parents' death, Fredu relocates to Sliema and begins a new life with his sister and her husband. Sliema is a modern city offering a completely different lifestyle. Fredu starts a new life here but begins

²⁵¹ The novel's title is *il-Gaġġa*, whereas the adaptation's title is just *Gaġġa*.

²⁵² Mario Philip Azzopardi director's commentary < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_J52o68t8uE>

to feel an internal crisis and questions his identity. He also realises that he needs to migrate overseas to find personal freedom, which is what he decides to do.

3. *F'Baħar Wiehed/In One Sea* (1976) written by Lino Grech and directed for television by Lino Farrugia. It is the first Maltese television series.

Synopsis. A story is full of adventures and misconceptions between two families coming from two different social classes: the affluent family of John, a magistrate's son, and John's love interest Mary, and a daughter of a pastry-maker. The television series is a dramedy that comments on the social class differences in the immediate post-Independence, revealing social inequalities and social manipulation with comic effect.²⁵³

4. *Katarin/Catherine* (1977), a 40 min. feature written by John Phillips and directed by Cecil Satariano.

Synopsis. The simple village life in the post-Independent Malta is contrasted with the decadent lifestyle of the rich (male) Maltese of the upper class. The story narrates an erotic fantasy of men older than the Lolita-like character Katarin is made to symbolize.²⁵⁴ Katarin is presented as an innocent yet seductive, intrigued yet disapproving, inquisitive yet distant, virginal yet very willing female protagonist. The official synopsis summarizes the film as 'the story of a sensuous Mediterranean girl Katarin, and the seductions and sexual harassments she endures'.²⁵⁵ The story, in other words, is a story of sexual awakening of a 15-year-old country girl and the contrasts between the simplicity and innocence of rural life and the 'modern' world of that time.²⁵⁶

5. *Il-Madonna ta-Ċoqqa/Madonna of the Hood* (1978-1979) a television series written by a novelist Ġuzé Diacono, adapted and directed by Albert Marshall.

Synopsis. The series recounts the story of a widely respected Karmnu ta' Randu, a farmer, a fanatic of the local feast at a village named Hal-Mirdum. Karmnu is the main organiser behind all the preparations for the traditional feast every summer, putting up the decorations in the village streets and inside the church, and also being one of the statue bearers during the procession. Karmnu ta' Randu had worked the fields throughout all his life, fields which are the property of the church, and his only source of income. But a little incident during the

²⁵³ Lino Farrugia in discussion with researcher, 25 September 2018.

²⁵⁴ Sarah Chircop, 'The Cinema of Cecil Satariano', *The Treasures of Malta*, 72, 24.3, (2018), p.26.

²⁵⁵ Cecil Amato Gauci, *Iċ-Ċinematografija ta' Cecil Satariano* 28 August (circa 1990).

²⁵⁶ Alfred Stagno Navarra 'An Evening with Cecil Satariano', *Malta Independent* 14 June 2009 <http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2009-06-14/news/an-evening-with-cecil-satariano-226256/> [accessed 7 May 2018].

preparations for the village's big day proves to change his entire life and his family's as well. He nearly comes to blows with a young man, whose father is very influential with the Church authorities. The young man swears vengeance and the land Karmnu had cultivated for years is taken away from him. The fields that proved to be bread-winning for his family are speculated. Moreover, to turn the villagers against Karmnu, the land is built on, and the profit is donated to decorate the statue of the Madonna with gold.

6. *Anġli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie* (2005), a full feature film written by Pierre Portelli, and directed by Mario Busietta.

Synopsis. The story revolves around two elite police investigators, Angel Caruana and Gabriel Mifsud, battling crime with the help of German Interpol Agent Mike Möller. An experimental state-of-the-art drugs scanner (DIS - Drug Interceptive Scanner) is being tested at Malta International Airport, but during the first very check, a man trying to smuggle drugs into Malta in his stomach blows up. An imminent World Conference is to be held in Malta with ambassadors who will vote on the introduction of the experimental full-body scanner. Angel and Gabriel are enlisted to help protect the new equipment against a local drug lord, Harry Liberty, who intends to prevent the scanner from being introduced.²⁵⁷

7. *Kont Diġà /I Was There Already* (2009), a full feature written by Mark Dingli and Sasha Sammut and directed by Mark Dingli.

Synopsis. The film tells the story of a 30-year-old Karl, an artist, who returns to Malta after many years abroad, seeking a connection to his roots. Through childhood friends and old haunts, shared memories and former love, he realizes he is no longer the person he once was and wonders whether he can truly return to the place he once called home. He needs not only to reconnect with his roots but particularly with himself. Reliving old habits with friends and memories from his childhood, this journey leads him to re-visit his past with his ex-girlfriend; however, this does not work out. He later meets Anna, an unfamiliar face in a familiar land, and a new bond is forged through which Karl re-visits his old home in Gozo, now a neglected house full of memories. The friendship gives Karl the freedom to see both Malta and himself from a fresh perspective with renewed hope, and a possible future begins to unfold. Through her presence in his life, Anna is the springboard for self-reflection and the concrete reason for trying to start afresh in Malta where Karl has been before, but now is

²⁵⁷ Angela Peel, 'Anġli: The Movie', in *Malta on the Silver Screen. Feature Films Shot in Malta* (self-published, 2014), p. 217.

seeing with different eyes. It is a ‘coming-of-age [drama], which at times feels quite ethnographic.’²⁵⁸

8. *Maltageddon* (2009), a full feature comedy inspired by Michael Bay’s *Armageddon* (1998), written by Alan Cassar and Keith Gatt, directed by Alan Cassar.

Synopsis. The world is threatened by a comet. The Vatican asks Malta to recruit and train twelve (laymen) astronauts to save the world. The film is full of historical and political innuendos.

9. *The Maltese Fighter* (2014) is a short film written by Monika Maslowska and Arev Manoukian, directed by Arev Manoukian.

Synopsis. The short tells is a fictional story based on a father-son relationship caught in political violence in 1970s Malta. The protagonist, Carmelo, a single father, a shipyard worker and a boxer, is forced to join a corrupt underworld when the shipyard is shut down and hundreds of workers are laid off, unable to find alternative employment. Carmelo tries to provide for his 9-year-old son, Giuseppe, in a corrupted and post-independent Malta. The political aspect provides a backdrop to Carmelo’s downfall in Malta during the times when Labour Party was in power, beginning the road towards a permanent political polarisation, sometimes in a violent manner, silencing its opponents.

10. *Laqgħa ma' Mara Morbi/Meeting with Mara Morbi* (2014), a short film adapted for the screen and directed by Martin Bonnici, is based on Immanuel Mifsud’s story of the same title.

Synopsis. The short takes the audience on a journey through the mind of a forty-year-old man reflecting on his life during one random morning. The narrative incorporates Maltese historical facts as well as a number of contemporary points of reference, rendering the narrative authentic and relatable. The Freedom Day Monument marks a historic moment in Malta’s nation formation - the day when British military forces left Malta. *Maltatoday* is a real-life Malta an English language newspaper published in Malta. A real-life reporter “Matthew Vella” that works for Maltatoday. A real-life leading Maltese photographer Pippa Zammit Cutajar. *Moviment Graffiti*” [Graffiti Movement] a real-life Maltese pressure group promoting an amalgamation of leftist socio-political ideas, mainly human rights, equality, environmentalism and anti-fascism.

²⁵⁸ Mark Dingli, e-mail communication, 19 June 2018.

11. *Simshar* (2014), a full feature film, written by Rebecca Cremona and David Grech, directed by Rebecca Cremona.

Synopsis *Simshar* is based on a real-life tragedy that took place in 2008, about a fishing family from the Mediterranean island of Malta that become stranded at sea after their boat, *Simshar*, sinks. The film exposes Malta's ambiguous attitude and hypocrisy towards illegal immigrants and the price that a fisherman and a father must pay when he loses his young son and his crew at sea. The movie culminates in tragedy when the fishermen are spotted but not rescued, being mistaken for African boat people.

12. *Strada Stretta/Strait Street* (2015-2017), a television series written by Audrey Brincat Dalli, directed by Justin Farrugia, Steven Dalli, Vanessa Vella.

Synopsis. The television series has two timelines, showing some of the realities of 1957, with a plot based on the incidents recorded on a diary that was found in 2015 during refurbishing works on a pub in the eponymous street in Valletta. The street was formerly infamous for being the city's red-light district, its reputation also stemming from its sharp contrast with the Catholic Malta that encased it, with its drunkenness, rowdiness and prostitution. In the first timeline Sylvana, a young businesswoman in 2015, is refurbishing an old bar in *Strada Stretta*. During the renovations, a personal diary that belonged to Lydia in 1957 (second timeline) is found. Lydia's diary transports the series' viewers back to 1957 when she takes the decision to leave her gilded cage and controlling mother in search of a better life with her lover, leaving a life of luxury behind her for the freedom she yearns for. However, when she finds herself stranded and abandoned in Valletta, she befriends Lilly, a young barmaid who works and lives in the street, who hosts her in return for giving her reading and writing lessons.

13. *Do Re Mi Fa* (2016), a full feature film written and directed by Chris Zarb.

Synopsis. An ensemble set in Malta that focuses on four characters: Bozo, a children's party clown who is a closet paedophile; Claudia, a stage actress who is paralyzed with feelings of insignificance and is driven to do the extreme; Kyle, a family man with a deaf son who finds it increasingly difficult to cope with challenges at home and at work; and DJ Trim, a talk radio show presenter who advocates for the rights of illegal immigrants and finds himself at the centre of a firestorm when he speaks out for immigrant rights.

14. *20,000 Reasons* (2016), a full feature comedy written by Malcolm Galea and directed by Jameson Cucciardi.

Synopsis. Sophie Bellizzi is a hard-working perfectionist who is obsessed with getting her company off the ground. She has a strained relationship with her younger sister Juliana, and an even more difficult one with her grandmother who is obsessed with seeing her only grandchildren married so as to protect the family's wealth. When Sophie breaks it off with her unfaithful boyfriend, she is abruptly faced with her grandmother's cunning plan to pass her substantial inheritance onto her sister, unless she marries before her thirtieth birthday, which is in three months' time. Sophie has to act fast.

15. *Dritt għall-punt/ Straight to the Point* (2017), an animated short adaptation of Joe Friggieri's titular short story written in 2016; adapted and directed by Charles Stroud and Matthew Stroud.

Synopsis. The short is narrated through interrogation and evolves only through dialogue. A novelist, Adamov, is brought in for questioning. It is suggested by the interrogating officer that Adamov wants to challenge the government. The story is about censorship of ideas, censoring literature and destroying knowledge. How does one preserve one's identity, freedom of speech and one's opinion in a regime that controls independent thought?

16. *Żiemel/Horse* (2017), a short film written and directed by Samira Damato.

Synopsis. The short follows one weekend in the life of a teenage boy, Justin, whose nickname is Żiemel, the Maltese word. After a troubled night out, Żiemel is forced to spend time with his emotionally distant father on a bird-trapping night during the 'off season'. They nearly get caught by the police—one of the police officers is Żiemel's older brother—but Żiemel leads his father to safety, and an emotional reconnection is suggested.

17. *Arcadia* (2017), a short written and directed by Jamie Vella.

Synopsis. The story narrates a 'tragic and helpless' local scenario of Malta's natural landscape, as a destructive mixture of 'corruption and capitalism' spills over into the life of the protagonist, Philip, who yearns to keep the unspoilt land he owns away from the developers.²⁵⁹ In the property that Philip buys, he plans to bring up his young son, but the ever-powerful land developers quickly set their sights on Philip's land, which Philip does lose.

²⁵⁹ Jamie Vella, survey, 26 March 2019.

18. *Il-Miraklu/Holy Mary!* (2018-2019), a television mini-series written by Carlos Debattista and Abigail Mallia.
- Synopsis.** *Miraklu* is a mini-series that tells the story of Joe ‘il-Paps’ Bonavia, mid-30s, a single father of five, who returns from prison to a life in ruins—penniless, jobless, and facing eviction. Il-Paps resorts to fraud by burying the statue of the Holy Mary in his garden with his younger children claiming to the vision of the Holy Mary, permitting him to profit from the donations.
19. *Carmelo* (2018), a television mini-series adapted for the television by Charles Stroud and directed by Adam Bonello. *Carmelo* is based on a literary work of Lawrence Mizzi, *Għal Holma ta' Ħajtu/ For His Life's Dream*. Carmelo Borg Pisani was a Maltese-born artist and Italian Fascist who, on being discovered during an espionage mission in Malta, was found guilty by a British war tribunal and executed for treason. The two-part television series narrates the last ten years of Carmelo's life until he was caught and hung by the British at the age of 28.
20. *Is-Sriep Reġġhu Saru Velenużi/The Vipers' Pit* (2019), a cinematic adaptation of Alex Vella Gera's titular novel published in 2012. Written by Teo Reljić and Martin Bonnici, directed by Martin Bonnici.
- Synopsis.** The story revolves around a fictionalised plot to assassinate the former Prime Minister of Malta, Dom Mintoff.²⁶⁰ It revisits ‘Malta's politically turbulent 1980s and explores the way it can still haunt present-day realities: the corruption, the political allegiances, the language question, the identity and culture, the Catholic education, all of which are an integral part of the Maltese identity’.²⁶¹ The protagonist, Noel Sammut Petri, lives in contemporary Malta, but the narrative also takes the audience to Malta of the 1980s. Noel Sammut Petri is suffering now because he does not know what happened in the 1980s to his own family.
21. *L-Għarusa /The Bride*, 2019-2020, written by Audrey Brincat Dalli, directed by Justin Farrugia and Steven Dalli.
- Synopsis.** The narrative is built on two timelines: 2018 and 1931.

²⁶⁰ Martin Bonnici in discussion with the researcher, 30 January 2018.

²⁶¹ Martin Bonnici in an interview by Raphael Vassallo ‘Malta's film industry needs to prove itself’ *Maltatoday*, 27 July 2021

<https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/interview/111111/maltas_film_industry_needs_to_prove_itselfmartin_bonnici [accessed 22 July 2021] (para. 2, 17, 29 of 53).

The story begins in 2018 with the purchase of a vintage 1931 wedding dress. The bride, Bettina, who wore it, was tragically murdered on the day of her wedding, just before the ceremony would have taken place. Liz, a young student working for museum owners Manuel and his son Alan, is intrigued to know if this is in fact just a legend or if there is more to this story. In 1931, after a mysterious fire at a circus camp, the aristocratic family decides to take in a number of gypsy circus performers who are left homeless. Bettina, their only daughter who is soon to be married, is suddenly exposed to more of the outside world than she ever could have imagined. After the murder, Inspector Fenech Lauri is determined to find whoever is responsible for Bettina's death.

22. *Hallini Hanini/Let Me Be, Dear* (2020), a short written and directed by Samira Damato.

Synopsis. Malta, 1964. The protagonist's family's, Mariella, 8, is thrown into financial and emotional turmoil as the British Crown starts to withdraw from Malta. To protect her mother from her father's temper, Mariella plots to get rid of him. The short reveals the fears and the uncertainly felt by some Maltese about becoming an independent nation.

23. *Orrajt/Alright* (2020), a short written and directed by Jeremy Vella.

Synopsis. The protagonist, George, sees a girl he likes sitting at the bar. Unsure which language she speaks—whether she is a Maltese-speaking Maltese or an English-speaking Maltese—George finds himself in the middle of the 'Language Question', which in Malta is not just a communication issue but an ideological and political one.

24. *Luzzu* (2020), a full feature film written and directed by Alex Camilleri.

Synopsis. Jesmark, the protagonist, mid-30s is a fisherman but it is a dying trade. Jesmark risks everything to provide for his wife and new-born son by entering Malta's black-market fishing industry. The film also refers to social class distinction, with Jesmark being a fisherman while his wife comes from an affluent family.

CHAPTER 2 - The Maltese Condition

2.1 Introduction

One of the principal contentions of the present thesis is that Maltese screenwriters and filmmakers are unusual in the extent to which they have historically tended to avoid engaging directly with contemporary social and political concerns, in contrast to their peers in other film and television industries in Europe and the Americas. Nevertheless, related concerns can be detected more obliquely in the ‘double storytelling’ technique examined in this chapter: of personal stories embedded in the screenwriters’ careful expressions of their thematic concerns of mediocrity, conformity, patronage, Catholicism, language, racism, and identity formation. In addition, this chapter discusses the work of the Maltese cartoonists who express these concerns directly. Chapter 3 will examine screen texts that reflect both the thematic concerns and double storytelling structure, whereas the present Chapter situates this reticence in the broader context of what has been termed the ‘Maltese condition’, a set of Malta-specific concerns such as its geographical situation, historical and ongoing forms of patronage, the influence of the Catholic church, and the linguistic inheritance.

2.2 Mediocrity, the ‘Tall Poppy Syndrome’ and the ‘Island Phenomenon’

One term that frequently surfaced to summarize Malta in my research is ‘mediocrity’. In the interviews I and others have conducted with Maltese academics— Marie Briguglio, Albert Gatt, Alfred Sant, Saviour Chircop, Vince Briffa—a persistent theme is that the Maltese celebrate mediocrity as if to keep themselves in check: to remind ourselves that ‘we are not to be too special, not to raise our head above the others’, as Marie Briguglio, a behavioural economist, suggests.¹ It is an idea encapsulated in Steve Bonello’s cartoon ‘Medjokri u Kburi. Pretty much sums it up’ (Fig. 1).²

¹ Marie Briguglio, discussion with the researcher, 22 March 2016.

² Steve Bonello, Twitter post, 24 December 2017.



Figure 1: *Mediocre and Proud* by Steve Bonello
Source: Artist's Twitter post, 24 December 2017

The attitude is reflected in the screenplay extract below from *Is-Sriep Reggħu Saru Velenuži/The Viper's Pit* (2019) in which one of the main characters, a businessman Roger Sr Tabone, wants to open an art gallery to exhibit his daughter's painting. In the conversation, Tabone directly addresses the issue of mediocrity and the perception of the standard by the Maltese.

INT. TABONE RESIDENCE – FRANCES' STUDIO – NIGHT (2012)

ROGER SR

A Solidair gallery. Don't look at me like that, that's not what we'll call it. You can choose the name. And no, before you say anything-it won't be a vanity project. You can exhibit your work and that of anyone you think is good. Set your own standards. You're always telling me how mediocre Malta is on these things.³

Mediocrity, as Albert Gatt, a Maltese linguist and translator, sees it, is part of 'conformity' which 'is not necessarily negative, but it can be a general malaise in any small country'; it is not

³ *Is-Sriep Reggħu Saru Velenuži/The Viper's Pit*, shooting script, pp. 106-107.

specifically restricted to the cultural sector, just pressure that arises from being a member of a community without being excessively different, in the interests of retaining social stability.⁴

Saviour Chircop, media and communications professor, deems mediocrity to be a necessity since historically Malta, a subjugated nation, quite often offered no formal education nor training to its people; therefore, mediocrity can be thought of as a ‘hobby that gets things done’.⁵ Malta is indeed an island of survivors which over the last millennium had to adjust and adopt to successive waves of colonisers. To Alfred Sant, author and former Prime Minister of Malta, mediocrity is simply being human—a character trait which the Maltese are not always willing to share with outsiders, for it is in their nature to hide behind the ‘soft, accommodating temperament’ in order to avoid displeasing outsiders, afraid to stir and open themselves to judgments of the people.⁶

Mediocrity and self-censorship may be seen as an extension of the ‘tall poppy syndrome’, a socio-culturally specific term defined as the ‘habit of denigrating’ or ‘cutting down’ those who are successful or who are high achievers’.⁷ The tall poppy syndrome found its soil in Malta due to the oppressive island culture, being afraid to stand out in a small country disconnected from mainland Europe.⁸ Malta is a very small island. This is particularly significant since the historical and cultural contexts strongly suggest that Malta is an island of survivors still struggling to become ‘an integrated wholeness’.⁹ Over the years, there has been a steadily declining interest in traditional values, such as family and religious practice, among the Maltese, especially among young people, with gender equality becoming remarkably strong. If European trends are anything to go by, the tendency is likely to be in an opposite direction—a marked departure from ‘the colonial nation shrouded in symbolic wishful thinking to justify control and aspiration’.¹⁰

As this remark by Henry Frenco suggests, however, it is undoubtedly the case that Malta’s geographical reality is defined by its isolation, and that this has left an indelible effect on the Maltese national identity. The ironic self-awareness of this insular identity is perceptible throughout

⁴ Albert Gatt, in discussion with the researcher, 2 March 2018.

⁵ Saviour Chircop, discussion with the researcher, 29 January 2018.

⁶ Alfred Sant, ‘Dissatisfaction: A Sermon’ in *Ferment*, 1 (Malta: Society for the Promotion of Independent Expression the Students’ Union, 1966), p. 6.

⁷ Scott Pierce, and others, ‘Tall Poppy Syndrome: Perceptions and Experiences of Elite New Zealand Athletes’, *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 15.4 (2017), 351-369 (pp.351-52) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2017.1280834>>

⁸ Marie Briguglio, discussion with the researcher, 13 February 2018.

⁹ Abraham Maslow, ‘A Theory of Human Motivation’, *Psychological Review*, 50. 4 (1943), 370-96 (p. 370) <<https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>>.

¹⁰ Henry Frenco, ‘Pressures on Assumed Identity at the Border: Malta in Europe, Empire and Mediterranean’, in *L’Europe méditerranéenne / Mediterranean Europe (L’Europe et les Europes (19e et 20e siècles)* (English and French Edition), ed. by Marta Pietricioli (Brussels: P.I.E-Peter Lang S.A., Éditions Scientifiques Internationales; Bilingual edition, 2008), p. 224 <<https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/7319>> [accessed 14 April 2017].

Maltese writing, as for example in this extract from Mark Dingli's screenplay for *Kont Digà/ I Was There, Already* (2009):

EXT. STAIRS LEADING TO A BEACH – NIGHT

Marie, Karl and a group of friends make their way to the beach for a night swim. Carefree summer happiness fills the air.

KARL
(to Marie)
This is fantastic.

MARIE
Come on, you sound like a tourist.
(beat)
Is the landscape of the Maltese islands
so overwhelming?

KARL
Yes, it's the people, the atmosphere, the
landscape.¹¹

As the extract suggests, the Maltese identity is marked by the self-perception of uniqueness: an island reaching out for trade and, simultaneously, an outpost vulnerable to successive invasions; an island nation somewhere halfway between Europe and Africa, on the front line of Latin Christianity in proximity to Islamic Northern Africa, continually trying to prove that the people of Malta are European. In turn, it unconsciously compensates for the persistence of its Semitic language with the greatest concern for accepting the changing world—a world of 'us' and the unknown, 'the other', the colonizer,¹² realizing very quickly that they are 'unlike the other',¹³ internalizing common traits while simultaneously becoming a nation proudly Christian, deeply embedded in a centuries-old Roman Catholic church contributing to the development of Maltese identity. The tall poppy syndrome is therefore a celebration of conformity that is ironically juxtaposed with a singularity, that of the 'island phenomenon': a paradoxical, insular condition whereby one keeps his or her head low partly in order to give the insular community a sense of being unique.

¹¹ *Kont Digà / I Was There, Already*, dir. by Mark Dingli (Sekwenza, 2009), screen text, 00:15:43-00:16:14.

¹² Jon P. Mitchell, 'An Island in Between: Malta, Identity and Anthropology', *South European Society and Politics* 3.1 (2007), 142-149 (p. 143) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13608740308539529>>

¹³ Henry Frendo, 'National Identity', in *Malta: Culture and Identity*, ed. by Henry Frendo and Oliver Friggieri (Malta: The Ministry of Youth and Arts, 1994), pp. 1-21 (p. 3).

2.3 Patronage

There is a body of creative and critical writers and thinkers who wish to publish their works but do not do so for fear of retribution. Vince Briffa, an artist and academic, believes that the reason for this is the feeling of ‘comfort’ derived from patronage.¹⁴ Artists in Malta do not want ‘to bite the hand that feeds them’ since most of the artists are funded by government institutions such as the Arts Council Malta. After all, artists, for their livelihood, depend on being commissioned. In all its nuances, surviving in Malta, or any other small community, is laden with obstacles. Christopher Gruppetta, a Maltese publisher and editor, confirms this observation. Many writers and authors are critical thinkers and ‘go for the truth’, wishing to engage with contemporary realities in their texts, but they feel they need to apply self-censorship for fear of retribution and repercussions, which usually consist of failing to secure patronage or funds. This cultural phenomenon, or tradition perhaps, is also referred to as ‘pervasive clientelism’, contributing to profound executive dominance.¹⁵ In my discussions with screenwriters and industry practitioners, there was a common consensus that Malta has a solid number of meaningful narratives to tell, touching upon political or social issues, but very few include them in the narratives.

Historically, patronage, well established in the Middle Ages, flourished in Malta into a characteristic social institution from the time of the Knights onwards.¹⁶ Mark Anthony Falzon, an anthropologist and academic, believes that this ‘comfort’ or the ‘potential for loss of patronage’ as Gruppetta suggests, could be due to Malta’s limited availability of resources throughout history. When the Knights of St John arrived in Malta, apart from the harbour area, not many natural assets were available on the island, and instead licensed piracy, also referred to as corsairing, provided a significant economic driving force into eighteenth-century Malta. Corsairs would work under the Knights but would in return benefit from tax cuts. Corsairing was on the fringes of legality, but it was still legal. There is an expression in Maltese that reinforces Malta’s historically ambivalent position: *Malta qatt ma rrifjutat qamħ*, which translates as ‘Malta has never refused grain’.¹⁷ This refers to the island’s position of having limited resources and being surrounded by hostile people. This has become part of the Maltese character, the previously mentioned saying ‘Let’s not bite the hand that feeds us’.¹⁸

¹⁴ Vince Briffa, in discussion with the researcher, 26 January 2018.

¹⁵ Wouter Veenendaal, ‘How Smallness Fosters Clientelism: A Case Study of Malta’, *Political Studies* 67.4 (2019), 1034-52, (p.1035).

¹⁶ Edward L. Zammit, *A Colonial Inheritance: Maltese Perceptions of Work, Power and Class Structure with Reference to the Labour Movement* (Malta: Malta University Press, 1984), p. 9.

¹⁷ Mark Anthony Falzon, ‘Anthropology Professor Answers the Unanswerable: Who are the Maltese?’ *Guide me Malta*, 23 August 2020 <<https://www.guidememalta.com/en/anthropology-professor-answers-the-unanswerable-who-are-the-maltese>> [accessed 15 September 2020] (para.8 of 13).

¹⁸ Falzon, ‘Anthropology’, para. 9 of 13.

The potential loss of patronage—which in today’s understanding of the term, means not only failing to secure funding but also being left out of future endeavours and projects—tends to hinder screenwriters and writer-directors from engaging with contemporary political or social themes that carry the potential for controversy, such as those considered in Chapter 3 (political corruption, bird hunting, illegal immigration, nature and land destruction). Their desire to express, confront or even question these realities is further impeded by self-censorship,¹⁹ and the only safe way to circumvent socio-political self-censorship in Malta is through satire (Fig.2). If perhaps not a direct cause of corruption, clientelism and patronage certainly constitute an important explanation of ‘the culture of impunity vis-à-vis corrupt officials’.²⁰ By increasing ‘citizens’ social and economic dependence on the politicians in power, clientelism diminishes their ability and willingness to hold politicians accountable’.²¹ It might therefore be the case that the Maltese condone corruption as long as it does not impact their personal position, or actually improves their situation.²²

Briffa provides an example of this peculiarity by referring to an article in the *Times of Malta* in which real estate developers were instructed by the Planning Authority (a government agency responsible for land use and planning) to make a contribution of €50,000—as a form of penalty for doubling the height of the previously approved plans—towards an artistic fund administered by Malta Arts Council.²³

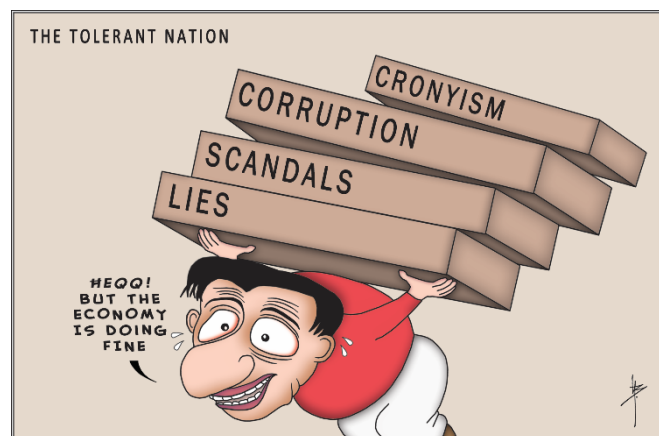


Figure 2: *The Tolerant Nation* by Steve Bonello
Source: *The Times of Malta*, 8 May 2016

¹⁹ David Mamet, *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp.57-58.

²⁰ Keith Mercieca, ‘The Cat and the Rat Sleep Together: An In-Depth Analysis of the Factors that Influence Corruption in Malta’, *Public Life in Malta: Essays on Governance, Politics, and Public Affairs in the EU’s Smallest Member State*, ed. by Mario Vassallo (Malta: University of Malta, 2012), pp.107–33, (p.120).

²¹ Wouter Veenendaal, ‘How Smallness Fosters Clientelism: A Case Study of Malta’, *Political Studies* 67.4 (2019), 1034-52, (p.1046).

²² Veenendaal, ‘How Smallness Fosters’, p.1046.

²³ Briffa, 26 January 2018. Briffa refers to the article by Philip Leone Ganado, ‘PA Agrees to Double the Size of New Paceville Tower’, *Times of Malta*, 25 January 2018 <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/pa-double-the-size-of-new-paceville-tower.668840>> [accessed 26 January 2018] (para.1 and 4 of 28).

Funds provided by such a distinctive patronage procure an obligation whereby an artist's expression is regulated from the outset, as Godfrey Baldacchino explains: 'among themselves, the Maltese develop an intricate knowledge of the partisan affiliations and loyalties of friends, family, and acquaintances, effectively mapping a network of potential influence, patronage, and obligation'.²⁴ Another Maltese academic, John Baldacchino of University of Wisconsin-Madison, observes that:

Malta has managed to inhabit and sustain a curious history which makes the island what it is today—a strange land where we still build and decorate mock-Baroque churches, where villagers still feud over their patron saints, where a prevalent moral imaginary is determined by personal gain, where patriarchy reigns supreme notwithstanding radical changes in civil liberties, and where politics boils down to a system of patronage and tribal loyalty.²⁵

2.4 Catholicism

The effect of directly political forms of patronage will be discussed more fully in the following chapter, but as Baldacchino's comments suggest, these have historically been largely inseparable from religious patronage. Although the Maltese Labour Party has historically been opposed to the entrenched power of the Catholic Church, religion permeates almost every aspect of Maltese identity. Many Maltese see themselves as devout Roman Catholics who embrace the popular belief (irrespective of its historicity) that Christianity was brought to Malta by apostle Paul, who was shipwrecked in Malta in 60 AD, and whose encounter with a viper was pivotal in the acceptance of the Roman Catholic faith as described in the Acts of the Apostles:

Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, "This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, the goddess Justice has not allowed him to live. But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead; but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god."²⁶

²⁴ Godfrey Baldacchino, 'A Nationless State? Malta, National Identity and the EU', *West European Politics*, 25.4 (2002), 191–206 (p. 198) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/713601632>>.

²⁵ John Baldacchino 'Where Modernity Has Never Been Times of Malta', *Times of Malta* [online] 21 September 2018 <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/where-modernity-has-never-been.689660>> [accessed 20 January 2020] (para. 9 of 18).

²⁶ *The Holy Bible*, The Acts of the Apostles, 28:3-6.

According to behavioural economist Marie Briguglio, religion has replaced the need to think because ‘it has given Malta a codebook instead, that is, the Holy Bible’.²⁷

For many years ‘Religio et Patria’ was the statement of values of the pro-clerical Nationalist Party. ‘Religio’ represented the party’s Christian Democrat root, while ‘Patria’ was a call for Malta to fight for its freedom from the British Crown and to determine its own fate.²⁸ The concept of Religio et Patria (religion and the fatherland, or its alternative translation: religion and nation) brought to Malta by the Italian Risorgimento exiles (Francesco Crispi, Francesco De Sanctis, Nicola Poerio, etc.) whose revolutionary romanticism influenced some Maltese intellectuals (Giovanni Antonio Vassallo, Richard Taylor, Ġuże, Muscat Azzopardi, Manwel Dimech, etc.) with ideals of freedom, fraternity, nationalism, equality and all those values associated with it.²⁹ The intersection between religion and politics is inescapable, seen for example in the following scene from Bonnici and Reljić’s *Is-Sriep Reġġhu Saru Velenużi/The Viper’s Pit* (2020). The characters of Roger and Richard, who are both Nationalists, are celebrating the imminent (fictional) assassination in 1984 of the Labour leader Dom Mintoff—hence the toast:

INT. MARSA POTATO SHED - ROOM - 1984 - NIGHT

SPITERI lifts up his glass. ROGER follows suit. RICHARD, too, though he's hardly in a celebratory mood. They make a toast.

SPITERI
Religio et Patria!

RICHARD drinks deep.³⁰

The same film also refers to the aforementioned shipwreck of St Paul, a pivotal part of the Maltese identity formation, but at the same time introducing the ubiquitous and powerful influence of Catholic faith and religion in Malta.

²⁷ Briguglio, discussion, 13 February 2018.

²⁸ John Dalli, ‘The Nationalist Party: Will “Religio et Patria” Be Replaced?’ <<https://eucivis.com/malta/opposition/nationalist-party-to-replace-religio-et-patria/>> [accessed 31 August 2021] (para 7 of 14).

²⁹ Arnold Cassola, ‘Maltese Romantic Poetry and the Yearning For Self-Governance and Independence’, *Dialoghi Mediterranei*, 1 July 2020 <<https://www.istitutoeuroarabo.it/DM/maltese-romantic-poetry-and-the-yearning-for-self-governance-and-independence/>> [accessed 30 October 2020] (para. 4, 5, 12, 21, 44 and 52 of 73).

³⁰ *Is-Sriep Reġġhu Saru Velenużi/The Vipers’ Pit*, p. 61.

EXT. GHAJN TUFFIEHA CAMPING SITE - 1984 - EVENING

MAUREEN crouches down, looks NOEL in the eye.

MAUREEN
Snakes can't hurt you.

NOEL
That's not true! They have poison!

MAUREEN
Not in Malta, they don't. St Paul took
the poison away.

NOEL
What?

MAUREEN
Ms Edwina hasn't taught you this yet?
St Paul was travelling to Rome but he
got shipwrecked in Malta.

NOEL
When?

MAUREEN
Oh, many many years go. So long ago
you can't even imagine it. But it's
written down, in the Bible. When St
Paul and his friends set up camp -
like we're doing now - they we
attacked by a snake!

NOEL
Like I was!

MAUREEN
Let's not exaggerate. St Paul grabbed
the snake, bit into it-

NOEL
Yikes!

MAUREEN
and he spat the poison out!³¹

The events above are set in 1984 still being under the influence of the Biblical narratives.

³¹ *Is-Sriep Reggħu Saru Velenuži/The Vipers' Pit*, p. 29.

Twenty-five years later, Mark Dingli's *Kont Diġà /I Was There Already* (2009) questions the ubiquitous influence of religion, and thus the importance of the Church.

EXT. RED SAND BEACH - GOZO - DAY

Karl, Anna, Paul, Bullu, Joanna, and Katya (mid-20s) the only Spanish among the Maltese, chill out on the beach. Light conversation jokes on a mid-summer afternoon.

KATYA

Can I ask you something?

A collective nod.

KATYA

Is it normal to have a statute like this on the beach?

Behind Katya emerges a WHITE STATUE OF THE HOLY MARY erected on an imposing pedestal right in the middle of the beach.

A murmur of 'yeses' and 'nos'.

JOANNA

Yes.

ANNA

Not on the beach.

Paul looks amused at Anna and interjects.

PAUL

Yes, come on! We were brought up with them! They used to teach us everything about them. I mean, God is everywhere! Literally!

Paul laughs at the silliness of the idea.

JOANNA

God is in the skies, on Earth--

Unnamed female friend mouths Joanna's words then finishes off Joanna's thought.

UNNAMED FRIEND

(teasing)

God is everywhere!³²

³² *Kont Diġà /I Was There Already*, screenwork, 01:01:21-01:01:40.

The tone of the conversation is different. There is doubt and irony in the voices. Religion is no longer as important in Malta as it once was. Since its accession, Malta has embraced the European Union, becoming less insular, more secular, more progressive in its thinking. Combined with developments in technology and travel, the experience has opened up Malta as never before. One of the advantages was the accessibility to Maltese students of the Erasmus exchange programmes, which grew by almost 80% between 2007 and 2013.³³

However, Briffa still claims that he has never found an artist in Malta who questioned Catholic belief apart from himself, and continues to maintain that there is an almost complete absence on the local art scene of works that can provoke, confuse, elate and even shock Maltese audiences.³⁴ It must be pointed out, though, that there are some artists who deliberately try to provoke, like Ryan Falzon, a Maltese visual artist who believes that ‘every society is based on politics and religion – but Malta is very, very particular. The way religion is used, our *festas*, hunting culture, the fact that politics is very accessible to everyone. It’s a mix of sacred and profane’.³⁵

Back in 2017, I did receive sceptic comments that all the display of violence in the paintings, that it was just misogyny on display and triumph to the patriarchy, that the social commentary was all made-up tales [...] But this truly is a period in which a series of car bombs and execution-style murders between hardened criminals ensued, possibly a drug-related turf war.³⁶

The potential for filmmakers and screenwriters to explore these themes in contemporary Malta is analysed in Chapter 3.

³³ Jessica Abrahams ‘The EU has opened Malta up to a new, progressive identity’, *The Guardian*, 1 June 2016 < <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/01/eu-malta-european-union> > [accessed 26 October 2021] (para.1 and 11 of 12).

³⁴ Sandro Debono interview, ‘Do Maltese People Care About Art?’, *Lovin’ Malta*, 28 September 2016, <<https://lovinmalta.com/opinion/do-maltese-people-care-about-art/>> [accessed 25 September 2021] (para. 14 of 21).

³⁵ Sam Vassallo, ‘Blood, Guns And Jesus: This Provocative Maltese Painter Just Made His Berlin Solo Debut’, *Lovin’ Malta*, 20 October 2020 < <https://lovinmalta.com/lifestyle/art/blood-guns-and-jesus-this-provocative-maltese-painter-just-made-his-berlin-solo-debut/> > [accessed 30 September 2021] (para. 4 and 11 of 15).

³⁶ Vassallo, ‘Blood, Guns And Jesus’, para. 12 of 15.

2.5 Language, Literature, and Oral Storytelling

Maltese literature (the written texts) is a comparatively modern development, covering little more than two centuries.³⁷ The literary history of Malta shows that it has certain limitations imposed by size; nevertheless, it still makes an important contribution to European culture. The populist Maltese narrative has always placed Malta at the frontier of the Western world, and hence on the edge of civilization. Again, it is a position characterised by duality—a reaching out for trade on the one hand, and an outpost vulnerable to the aggressive attention of plundering aggressors on the other.³⁸

A possible explanation for the comparatively impoverished storytelling traditions of Malta is that the island lacks the kind of foundational mythology of an *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, *Faerie Queene*, *Orlando Furioso* or *Kalevala*. It does, however, offer instead a rich and varied folklore.³⁹ It is here, in this meeting place of East and West, where the rich colour and imagery of Orient blends with Mediterranean culture and Catholic traditions where we find Ġaħan, Malta's most iconic character, a 'light-headed' fool brimming with sagacity, slyness, guile who cheats and deceits. Ġaħan, despite indulging in seemingly anti-social behaviour, takes the role of a social critic and as well as that of a mediator for the injured and the insulted. He is a dramatic vehicle to express folk wisdom, often wearing the fool's cap. He is a character that is not perceived as threatening but the epitome of Maltese verbal wisdom and humour. The subjective and definite colouring of Ġaħan's anecdotes is imbued with the Mediterranean storytelling of negative, rather self-deprecatory, humour. But it is a tendency that springs from the inclination and will to laugh at oneself and the world at large, an ironical bent toward contradiction and demystification.⁴⁰

The Ġaħan character is used in *Maltageddon*, in which it is the President of Malta who embodies the character. In the scene below, an EU Official briefs the President about the imminent comet crashing into planet Earth and how Malta is the only country that can save the world:

PRESIDENT
Yes, I understand, so let me finish...
(a nervous tick)
this one first in both languages.
Mela, xi fit ġimġhat oħra...

(CONTINUED)

³⁷ Arthur John Arberry, *A Maltese Anthology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p. xi.

³⁸ Michael Angelo Fenech, 'A New Rupture for Contemporary Art in Malta Context and Beyond' (unpublished master's dissertation, University of the Arts London, 2013), p. 13.

³⁹ Mercieca, 19 December 2019.

⁴⁰ George Mifsud-Chircop, 'A Wise Fool's Anecdotal Cycle in Malta: A Reappraisal', p.1 <<https://doi:10.7592/FEJF2008.38.mifsud>>.

PRESIDENT (CONT'D)

In a little week's time
 Kometa se tinzel fuq id-dinja...
 The comet will fall on the Earth
 (a nervous tick)
 U skond esperti
 (a nervous tick)
 and skond [according to] the experts
 M'hemmx çans li naħarbu minnha
 There is no chance, no fucking chance
 to run away from it.
 U lil gvern malti
 And to the Maltese government
 (whispers to the stuff behind him)
 Waħħaltulu [I screwed him].

Then looks back at the EU Official.

PRESIDENT

You gave us the honour to save humanity
 (a nervous tick)

EU OFFICIAL

You catch on pretty quick.

PRESIDENT

No, no, no, wait.
 If we save the world, what do we
 acquistate?

'Acquistate' that the President uses, derives from Italian 'acquistare' means to purchase a non-material item.

EU OFFICIAL

Well, how does survival sound?
 Other than that, Malta will be free
 from its debts one and for all.

PRESIDENT

How about more seats in EU Parliament?⁴¹

This suggests the nature of the politicians and the games they play, bringing in the Gahan element.

The twentieth century (pre-Independence) also witnessed the colonial legacy spilling over into a variety of contemporary patterns. The history of literature in Maltese pertains to the corpus integrating the sentiments and aspirations the Maltese expressed during British colonial rule, the

⁴¹ *Maltageddon*, dir. by Alan Cassar (Square Wheel Entertainment, 2009), 00:12:21-00:14:20.

first efforts in verse as simple narratives. There are also anecdotal narratives that the Maltese share only with other Maltese, yarns about how they would outsmart the Master, the Queen, and the EU for their economic gain without the knowledge of their ‘masters’. In other words, the Maltese excel at finding ‘ways and means of not upsetting the apple cart but still getting their way through’.⁴² Pre-Independence literature was mainly concerned with the search for a national identity. The publication of such novels about the exploits of Maltese heroes was intended to provide the Maltese with a sense of national identity and pride and therefore veered towards traditional elements.⁴³

Historically, the question of language was crucial in the formation of self-perception, which in turn contributed to the ‘Maltese condition’. Bilingualism (or multilingualism) was a socio-political necessity throughout Maltese history. The official language (that of the rulers) was always different from the language of the uneducated and always influenced by the dominant culture that the language brought.⁴⁴ The language dilemma in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the native Maltese, and English, the language of the colonizers, supplanting the language of the Maltese *intelligentsia*, Italian, as the official languages. This helped to promote the Anglicization of the Maltese at the expense of the notion of *Italia Irredenta*, but only after the Second World War did the Maltese language gain roots in the cultural sphere of Malta. Before the recognition of Maltese as the national language of Malta, during the British colonial period, the struggle between the *italianità* and anglophile sentiments was one of the main agendas of Maltese politics.⁴⁵

Up to the seventeenth century, Maltese was maintained only by word of mouth by the common people, and the early attempts to write it down (in the seventeenth century) were entirely arbitrary, despite the fact that there was a rich array of possible themes generated by history to capture, or perhaps to reflect, aspects of the popular imagination and mentality. The main reason for this was the cultural dominance of the Italian language.⁴⁶ The educated Maltese (the clergy, the intellectuals, the nobility, and the commercial and upper classes) wrote in Italian, well into the early part of the nineteenth century.⁴⁷ The political disability the Maltese language was placed under by the Church and the State is the main reason for the shortage of literature, as can be seen from the large output of books of poetry and prose that has subsequently been written in Maltese since its

⁴² Vince Briffa, discussion with the researcher, 26 January 2018.

⁴³ Patriotic novels in Maltese by Ġuże Muscat Azzopardi (1853-1927): *Toni Bajjada* (1921), *Cejlu Tonna* (1927) and *Ix-Xbejba tar-Rdum* (1927).

⁴⁴ Charles Briffa, ‘Introduction’ in *This Fair Lands: An Anthology of Maltese Literature* ed. by Charles Briffa (Francis Boutle Publishers, 2014), p.18 and p. 19.

⁴⁵ Mariella Cassar, ‘Creative Response to Maltese Culture and Identity: Case Study and Portfolio of Compositions’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College Falmouth, 2014), p. 32.

⁴⁶ Charles Briffa ‘The Linguistic Story of the Maltese Islands’, in *This Fair Land: Anthology of Maltese Literature*, ed. by Charles Briffa, (London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2014), p. 19.

⁴⁷ Briffa, p. 19.

political emancipation.⁴⁸ The historical mentality of the refined population—the local authority and the refined classes of society—fostered a negative attitude towards Maltese, which consequently was never seen in a rewarding light: historically, in fact, it was derogatorily called ‘the language of the kitchen’.⁴⁹

The oral tradition was therefore preserved by the illiterate Maltese only, without any assistance either from the foreign rulers or from the upper Maltese classes, who disregarded Maltese as a medium of literary expression.⁵⁰ Instead, Maltese became the language of popular forms: the illiterate Maltese used folktales, fairy-tales, legends, myths, folksongs, ballads, aphorisms, rhymed quatrains, proverbs, and riddles to explain the natural and spiritual phenomena which surrounded them; and in doing so, they succeeded in preserving some of the core of their society’s culture, their psychology, their worldview, their moral code, their self-perception and, at times, their self-criticism.⁵¹ The creators of contemporary audio-visual narratives tend to keep away from their historical legacy, but the process of linguistic enrichment of the Maltese language is very much appreciated and practised, despite its historical neglect.

Over the centuries, the local oral tradition became a synthesis of different processes of assimilation, adaptation, and cross-fertilization of Semitic and Romance spoken traditions.⁵² Maltese oral poetry consists mainly of old prayers and songs treating tragic and religious themes. In fact, folktales and ballads, in particular, represent the cross-fertilization of these two traditions. The Maltese folktale is strongly reminiscent of the Arab *haddutab*, with its characteristically luxuriant fantasy.⁵³ And so is *ghana* (from Arabic *ġinā*) a traditional, folk singing and a remnant of an aboriginal, folkloric past.⁵⁴ Maltese oral tradition, however, also depicts the darker, perhaps more honest side of the Maltese, not necessarily commendable, but simply human, an aspect, or perhaps, a character trait which the Maltese, and the rest of us, are not always willing to share with outsiders

⁴⁸ Joseph Aquilina, *Papers in Maltese Linguistics* (University of Malta: Gutenberg Press, 1994 [1959]), pp. 64-65.

⁴⁹ Charles Briffa, ‘Introduction’ in *This Fair Lands: An Anthology of Maltese Literature* ed. by Charles Briffa (Francis Boutle Publishers, 2014), p.20.

⁵⁰ Charles Briffa, ‘A Brief History of Maltese Literature’ in *Malta – Roots of a Nation: The Development of Malta from an Island People to an Island Nation* ed. by Kenneth Gambin (Malta: Midsea Books Ltd., 2004), p. 228.

⁵¹ Briffa, 2014, p.14.

⁵² Ġużè Cassar Pullicino *Folktales of Malta and Gozo: A Selection in English Translation* (Malta: Malta University Publishers, 2000), p. xvi-xvii.

⁵³ Pierre Cachia ‘Cultural Cross-Currents in Maltese Idioms’, *Journal of Maltese Studies*, 2 (1964), 223-37 (p. 226).

⁵⁴ Ranieri Fsadni, ‘The Wounding Song: Honour, Politics and Rhetoric in Maltese Ghana’, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 3.2, (1993), 335-353 (pp. 334-335).

for it is in their nature to hide behind the ‘soft, accommodating temperament’⁵⁵ in order to avoid displeasing outsiders, afraid to stir and open themselves to judgments of the people.⁵⁶

Clare Thake Vassallo, a translation and semiotics scholar, sees Malta as an island of ‘connections, of insertions and the granting of cultural effects’ that have created natural hybridity. Cultures have merged and new forms of language emerged over the thousand years of meetings at a converging point where the imperative of communication, commerce, and exchange have abrogated the principle of cultural and linguistic purity.⁵⁷ Indeed, the hybridity that is equally attested in the Maltese language consists of a modern form imbued with English code-switching.⁵⁸ This is humorously explored by Jeremy Vella in his short film *Orrajt/Alright* (2020), which is about the attitude to the Maltese and English languages, bilingualism, and code-switching. Vella also made use of a screenwriting trope by creating an animated character, Kux, who helps the audience understand the inner struggle of the protagonist. The word ‘kux’ is an abbreviation of the Maltese noun ‘kuxjenza’, which means ‘conscience’ in Maltese.

INT. BAR/CLUB - NIGHT

George is on his own with a beer, sitting on his shoulder is Kux.

[...]

GEORGE

Why do they have to be like that?
If they just put the effort,
they'll come to realize that
they're not too different
I mean, I had gotten along with all
of them no?

KUX

Heq you're just a nice guy, ux?
[Well, you're just a nice guy, aren't you?]⁵⁹

GEORGE

You know maybe it's not that,
maybe I just don't judge anyone

(CONTINUED)

⁵⁵ Alfred Sant, ‘Dissatisfaction: A Sermon’ in *Ferment* vol. 1 (Malta: Society for the Promotion of Independent Expression the Students’ Union, 1966), p. 6.

⁵⁶ Sant, p. 6.

⁵⁷ Clare Thake Vassallo, ‘Keep to the Local or Aim for the Global? Issues at the Borders of a Minority Language’, *Textus*, 26.3 (2013), 35-56 (pp. 36-37).

⁵⁸ Rachel Galea, ‘Translating the First Part of Act 1 of Francis Ebejer’s “Il-Ġaħan ta’ Bingemma”/A Wise-Fool of Bingemma’“(unpublished master’s thesis, University of Malta, 2011), pp.7-8.

⁵⁹ Trans. by the researcher.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
 for the language they speak
 because I don't want anyone to judge
 me for preferring to speak English.
 Seems as though it's too much to ask
 for everyone not to care.

George stands up.

GEORGE
 Maybe that's what we need to
 do, be honest with ourselves
 (beat)
 Yes, I'm Maltese, but that doesn't
 mean I should fear speaking one
 language over another. If I
 want to be honest with myself,
 I have to speak English,
 and that's not cause I'm
 unpatriotic, or because I feel
 superior to anyone, it's just
 because I happen to find
 it easier to express myself.
 And if someone feels the same
 with Maltese then they shouldn't
 feel insecure about it.⁶⁰

KUX
 Imma forsi ghax ma jaghfux
 ghala int iddecidejt
 titkellel bl-Ingliis?
 [Maybe it's because they don't know why you
 decided to speak English?]⁶¹

GEORGE
 Well, I don't owe anyone an
 explanation, it's none of
 their business. Choosing to
 speak English isn't killing
 Maltese, but giving people
 sh*t for not speaking it;
 will make people hate our
 language.⁶²

George finds himself in the middle of the historical issue of the language question, but all he wants is to get along with everyone irrespective of whether they use Maltese or English to communicate.

⁶⁰ *Orrajt/Alright*, 2020, written by Jeremy Vella, shooting script, p. 10.

⁶¹ Trans. by the researcher.

⁶² *Orrajt/Alright*, p.11.

The difficulty here is not the language itself but a discourse laden with ideology and the exploration of the socio-political tensions between cultures and expectations. During a recent online talk with the film-maker ‘CineXjenza: Orrajt — Maltish or Engtese’ hosted by ‘Science in the City’ (Malta’s national Science & Arts Festival and part of the Europe initiative for your people),⁶³ a number of young Maltese adults (mostly in their early 20s) admitted that they could relate to the protagonist’s difficulty. They would encounter the problem of being judged, ostracized, or simply bullied when speaking English in a Maltese-speaking environment, and when speaking Maltese in an English-speaking environment.⁶⁴ The filmmaker dramatized this issue when George sees a girl he likes but is unsure which language he should use to avoid putting himself in a precarious situation. If he speaks to her in English, he will be perceived as a class elitist; if he speaks to her in Maltese, he will come across as a simpleton:

KUX
 Bro, se tkellimha? Jew le?
 [Bro, are you going to speak to her? Yes or no?]

George remains quiet and nervously doesn’t respond.

KUX
 Tighdliex, you’re going to
 do that thing fejn se tibza’
 tkellem lil wahda, because
 you don’t know what language
 she prefers.
 [Don’t tell me, you’re going to do that thing where you’re
 afraid to speak to a girl because you don’t know what
 language she prefers.]⁶⁵

KUX
 Imma forsi ghax ma jaghfux
 ghala int iddecidejt
 titkellem bl-Ingliis?
 [Maybe it’s because they don’t know why you
 decided to speak English?]⁶⁶

GEORGE
 Well, I don't owe anyone an
 explanation, it's none of

(CONTINUED)

⁶³ Science in the City <https://scienceinthecity.org.mt/about/> [accessed 26 October 2021] (para.1 of 10).

⁶⁴ ‘CineXjenza: Orrajt-Maltish or Engtese’, online video recording, 16 September 2021
 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=10650273342567231065027334256723>
 [accessed 26 October 2021].

⁶⁵ *Orrajt/Alright*, shooting script, p.1. Trans. by the researcher.

⁶⁶ Trans. by the researcher.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
 their business. Choosing to
 speak English isn't killing
 Maltese, but giving people
 shit for not speaking it;
 will make people hate our
 language.⁶⁷

The language issue is also referenced in Martin Bonnici's *Is-Sriep Reġġhu Saru Velenuži/The Vipers' Pit* (2019) and in Malcolm Galea's *20, 000 Reasons* (2016), but the first excerpt discussed is *Is-Sriep Reġġhu Saru Velenuži/The Vipers' Pit*. The following scene takes place in Malta 2012 after the protagonist, Noel, returns to Malta after having worked as a translator in Brussels for some time, meeting up with old friends of his (Roger Jr, Anna Marie and Frances) to discuss the freedom of the language choice without being judged. The dialogue is in English as per screenplay and film:

ROGER JR
 Listen, what's with the Maltese?

NOEL
 The fuck are you saying?

ROGER JR
 I always remember you being English
 Speaking... why do you insist on
 talking in Maltese?

NOEL
 Sorry Rog, what's wrong with speaking
 in your own language--

ROGER JR
 No, no nothing it's just...I'm
 curious that's all.

NOEL
 I guess living... and working abroad
 changes your perspective on things.
 You start to appreciate things like
 our heritage, your identity--

⁶⁷ *Orrajt/Alright*, p.11.

Noel refers to the previously mentioned freedom that Malta has benefitted from since accessing the European Union, becoming thus less insular and more progressive in its thinking, but which ironically makes one appreciate one's heritage and legacy.

ANNE MARIE

You know what I think? People just speak whatever language they feel comfortable speaking in. What's wrong with that? Don't make me feel bad for speaking English and I won't make you feel bad for speaking Maltese. Common sense, no?

NOEL

It's not that simple, Anne Marie.

Noel refers with 'It's not that simple' to the Language Question discussed in Chapter 2.

FRANCES

You know I have a theory about that?

ROGER JR

Oh, I have NO doubt you've got a theory, sis!

NOEL

About what?

FRANCES

The language thing, Maltese versus English, bla bla. I think it's another colonial trick.

NOEL

In what sense?

FRANCES

So instead of resisting them, instead of like, making the language something to rally under, we fight amongst ourselves.

NOEL

Divide and conquer.

FRANCES
Exactly.⁶⁸

A scene from a rom-com *20,000 Reasons* (2016) shows an interaction between an employee, Ramon, and Ramon's very well-off employer, Alfred, using codeswitching. What we have here is another clash, albeit an amicable one, between two different worlds and perspectives, besides, of course, the difference between social classes:

EXT. BELLIZZI VILLA (POOL AREA) - DAY

A door opens into a large courtyard beside a swimming pool and Alfred pops his head out.

ALFRED
Ramon?... Ramon?

RAMON (a handsome handyman in work clothes, 20s) emerges from a small pump room beside the pool.

RAMON
Għidlu.
[Tell me.]⁶⁹

ALFRED
Hu paċenzja.
[Just bear with me.]⁷⁰
Can you stop for now?

Ramon nods and goes back into the pump room.⁷¹

Alfred and Ramon are very comfortable with each other mixing Maltese and English. Due to their social positions, Albert comes from an English-speaking background, while Ramon is from a Maltese-speaking environment. The ease and comfort that Albert and Ramon share when communicating with each other are what George of *Orrajt/Alright* (2020) wishes for. However, another scene from *20,000 Reasons* (2016) taps into the discord and subtextual negative evaluation between Ramon and Sophie, who is Alfred's daughter.

⁶⁸ *Is-Sriep Reggħu Saru Velenuzi/The Vipers' Pit*, pp. 54-55.

⁶⁹ Trans. by the researcher.

⁷⁰ Trans. by the researcher.

⁷¹ *20,000 Reasons*, shooting script (2016), p. 4.

INT. MARSA - WORKMAN'S DINER - DAY

A surly-looking Waitress comes along with a large Maltese sandwich and a small bottle of water.

WAITRESS
Mela: wiehed sparkling?
[So, one sparkling?]⁷²

SOPHIE
Thanks.

WAITRESS
U hobza bajd u bacon.
[Bread with fried eggs and bacon].⁷³

The Waitress places the water in front of Sophie and the sandwich in front of Ramon.

WAITRESS (CONT'D)
Di'l-gharusa Ramon? Minn fejn
sibtha?
[Is she your fiancée? Where did you find?]⁷⁴

RAMON
Le, habiba biss.
[She's only a friend.]⁷⁵

WAITRESS
(to Sophie)
Ittendilu l'dan. Haxixu.
[Be careful. He is a son of a gun.]⁷⁶

RAMON
She said I'm a really great guy.

SOPHIE
I speak Maltese.

RAMON
I knew that.⁷⁷

⁷² Trans. by the researcher.

⁷³ Trans. by the researcher.

⁷⁴ Trans. by the researcher.

⁷⁵ Trans. by the researcher.

⁷⁶ Trans. by the researcher.

⁷⁷ *20,000 Reasons*, pp. 30-31

Unlike the previous interaction between Ramon and Alfred, the power dynamics in this scene are quite hostile and uncomfortable for anyone, each almost lying in waiting to be judged by the other—a battle of wits. The scene captures a profound cultural animosity between the different social strata. In fact, the linguistic encapsulation of the Maltese social system is what Charlie Cauchi refers to when discussing Maltese sayings and proverbs that reflect the Maltese social system. Cauchi offers examples of this in her own research: *Aħjar ħobż xott f'darek milli frisk għand haddieħor* [it is better to have stale bread in your own home than fresh bread at somebody else's], or *aħjar jikluk il-klieb mill tiġi bzon in-nies* [it is better to be eaten by dogs than to need other people's help], *ħadd ma jaħsillek wiċċek biex tkun aħjar minnu* [nobody washes your face for you in order for you to appear better than they do].⁷⁸

These examples of linguistic expression suggest that they are a reflection of what it means to be Maltese: a nation with a rich language, long history and palimpsestic culture, still suffering from the postcolonial residue, whose engagement with its past is a difficult endeavour. It also means that over the centuries, the Maltese have learnt to overcome obstacles, and have become driven, passionate, pioneering, efficient, and self-reliant in experimenting with cinematic expressions of their cultural identity that are encapsulated in their language.⁷⁹ Contemporary Maltese is a much softer version of Arabic, with easily discernible Italian words and English phrases. To many Maltese, however, the Maltese language embodies cultural and political identity, and remains 'the strongest signifier of national pride'.⁸⁰ To others, the English-speaking Maltese, the Maltese language still represents 'an unusual formula'⁸¹ resulting in an 'incidental aberration',⁸² hence the profound cultural animosity between the different social strata in Malta. For this reason, *Orrajt/Alright* (2020) was an important commentary on the language issue that the film-maker makes:

GEORGE

Well, I don't owe anyone an explanation, it's of their business. Choosing to speak English isn't killing Maltese, but giving people

⁷⁸ Charlie Cauchi, 'Mapping Film Education and Training on the Island of Malta', *The Education of a Filmmaker in Europe, Australia and Asia*, ed. Mette Hjort (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.48.

⁷⁹ Charlie Cauchi, 'Maltese Cinema? Politics and Identity on Screen from Independence to EU Accession', in *European Visions: Small Cinemas in Transition*, eds. Janelle Blanenship and Tobias Nagl (Transcript-Verlag, 2012), pp. 65-83 (p.65).

⁸⁰ Thake Vassallo, p. 37.

⁸¹ Joseph Brincat, 'Maltese – an unusual formula' MED Magazine, 27 February 2005, <<http://www.macmillandictionaries.com/MED-Magazine/February2005/27-LI-Maltese.htm>> [accessed 19 July 2017] (para.8 of 21).

⁸² William Zammit, in discussion with the researcher, 17 July 2017.

shit for not none speaking it;
will make people hate our
language.⁸³

The use of the Maltese language is part of the Maltese identity, which is part of the self-representation in which non-Maltese audiences are much more interested. To some degree so is the code-switching, because this is how the Maltese communicate, even though this is not a popular approach among Maltese scriptwriters and writer-directors because code-switching does not resonate well with part of the Maltese-speaking audience. Irrespective of the code-switching, the issue of language always posed a great dilemma for local screenwriters: do we shoot in English, or do we shoot in Maltese? David Serge, one of the most successful filmmakers in Malta, insightfully notes:

There is a bit of a language barrier which affects this [local screenwriting and, by extension, film production]; producing a movie in Maltese is very limited in terms of the market and I believe that shooting movies which are not in Maltese somewhat defeats the purpose of kick-starting an indigenous industry. What's the point in producing a movie in English if you're trying to stand out as Maltese?⁸⁴

The cultural support and diversity by Eurimages since 2008⁸⁵ and the ever-growing awareness of diversity makes space for the non-English productions, or 'exotic' productions as Angus Finney labels it. A number of European films 'avoided falling face first into an art-house ghetto' while still succeeding in producing 'culturally specific stories that have universal value and offer intrinsic interest to audiences far beyond their borders'. Europe with its cultural richness and different languages offers stories which on screen so much more powerful, intimate and resonant and authentic.⁸⁶

⁸³ *Orrajt*, p.11.

⁸⁴ Albert Galea, "'The Maltese Studio that Worked on 'Grey's Anatomy', 'The Walking Dead' and 'I Medici'", *Malta Independent* 12 November 2018

<<http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2018-11-12/local-news/The-Maltese-studio-that-worked-on-Grey-s-Anatomy-The-Walking-Dead-and-I-Medici-6736199220>> [accessed 15 November 2018] (para. 22o f 30).

⁸⁵ Eurimages, <<https://www.coe.int/en/web/eurimages/about>> [accessed 26 October 2021].

⁸⁶ Angus Finney, *The State of European Cinema: A New Dose of Reality*, 2nd ed (London: Cassell, 2016) p. ix and p. 145.

2.6 Language and Racism

A darker side to Malta's geographical position, its linguistic inheritance, and its attempts to assert Maltese uniqueness can be heard in linguistic traces that reveal a history of pro-European, anti-Islamic and anti-Arab sensibilities, Sandro Debono, a curator, art historian and academic, argues that, over the years, a Maltese identity was being constructed, whose DNA, though mythological, was a necessary requisite to assert Malta's Europeanism and to reinforce Maltese 'belonging-ness' and 'otherness', an assertive statement of belonging to the European (implying 'civilized' Western world) and different from those 'of the South', that is, the Maghreb (the Arabs).⁸⁷

This is very clear in the linguistic echo of the Islamic era in the history of Malta, fraught with unconscious fears and hates of the imaginary to this day, of which foreign visitors to Malta are unaware. Part of the 'Maltese condition' is to harbour a conscious antipathy towards the Arabs and the Arabic language, which makes the very word 'Arab' [Għarbi] a term of abuse and insult. Linguistic examples of the externalization of these sentiments are encapsulated in Maltese idioms and expressions, demonizing the Arabs.⁸⁸ However, in the collective understanding of a Moor, a Muslim, or an Arab as a Turk [a Muslim infidel or anyone who is not Christian or not baptized]⁸⁹ is referred to as a 'Turk'.⁹⁰ The proverb *it-Torok imorru fejn seħet Alla* [the Turks go (presumably after death) to a place cursed by God]; *Iswed Turk*. [as dark-skinned as a Turk] and *dak il-bniedem qisu Għarbi* [That person is silly]. The literal translation: 'that man is like an Arab'. The implication here is that when an Arab national wears a turban, the turban makes the head look like a bandaged head or a head tied with bandages. Related to this, is another Maltese expression of '*rasu marbuta*' [a literal translation: 'his head is tied' (with bandages)] which suggests a narrow-minded or fanatic person.⁹¹ All these expressions suggest a superiority complex that the Maltese feel over the dark-skinned nationals, reflecting the inherent racism as encapsulated in those expressions as the result of Maltese antipathy towards Arabs and the Arabic language developed through Malta's historical events. Alan Cassar refers to this fear encapsulated in the Maltese in one of the scenes in *Maltageddon* (2009):

EXT. TRAINING GROUNDS – MALTA – DAY

The crew surrounds Williz in a circle like rugby players.

⁸⁷ Fenech, Michael Angelo, 'A New Rupture for Contemporary Art in Mala Context and Beyond' (unpublished master's thesis, University of the Arts London, 2013), pp. 13-14.

⁸⁸ Geoffrey Hull, *The Malta Language Question: A Case History in Cultural Imperialism* (Valletta: Said International, 1993), pp. 336-38.

⁸⁹ William Zammit, in discussion with the researcher, 19 July 2017.

⁹⁰ Joseph Aquilina, *A Comparative Dictionary of Maltese Proverbs* (Malta: University of Malta, 1972), p. 103.

⁹¹ Translations and cultural contexts provided by Prof Charles Briffa, University of Malta.

WILLIZ
 Listen to me carefully. There are no
 labour no nationalists here. We are all
 Maltese.

Williz directs his gaze at Sam Cook, a dark-skinned crew member from Africa.

WILLIZ
 Even you.

SAM COOK
 Mela jien iswed?⁹²
 [Well, what am I: black?]⁹³

The phrase suggests that the person who is left out is facing an unfair and undeserved treatment. *Il-Miraklu/Holy Mary!* (2018-2019), *Simshar* (2014) and *Do Re Mi Fa* (2016) reflect the inherent racism too. African migrants rank the lowest in our perception of foreigners: we say little to nothing about legal workers from the East of Europe or Asia because we accept them as valid candidates for jobs the Maltese no longer seem available to do – such as in nursing or caring, or in catering and hospitality among many others; Middle Eastern workers hailed for their construction skills also seem to be in good stead, even though the far-right goes nuts when it sees an expression of Muslim worship. It is black migrants who have it worse, and that's because they are starting from a position of illegality: not all of them qualify for asylum, which makes a sizeable portion of migrants technically 'unwanted' and legally speaking, slated for removal from the country (even though this does not happen).⁹⁴

Abigail Mallia, the director of the television series *Il-Miraklu/Holy Mary!* (2018-2019). is very much aware that Malta faces an immigration problem and sees audiences that are usually afraid of the other. However, being able to feel and relate to and engage with the friendship that develops between the highly racist protagonist Il-Paps and the female character Princess is inspiring:

IL-PAPS
 Who are you calling stupid?
 You fucking monkey!

PRINCESS
 Do you think I want to come to

⁹² *Maltageddon*, 00: 44:06-00:44:31.

⁹³ Trans. by the researcher.

⁹⁴ Vella, para.7 and 8 of 53.

your house to help you clean like a
slave?

(to the Priest)

I prefer that they send me back then I
stay to clean this idiot's shit.⁹⁵

As Mallia insightfully notes, 'one can take that extra step in comedy, you are allowed to do it. I could explore the subject with more freedom, such profound subjects [of racism and xenophobia] in a light-hearted way.'⁹⁶

EXT. POLICE STATION. DAY

Jethro exists the police station. He almost bumps into an African immigrant.

JETHRO

(under his breath)

Look at that, huh?
We're surrounded by filth.

INT. CAR (STATIONARY) - DAY

Paps, Jethro's father, sharing his thoughts with Lippu.

PAPS

In prison you'd thing you're in
Africa.

LIPPU

Because outside it's different? At least
now, if they don't have all their
documents, they are sending them back

PAPS

Screw the documents.
If it were for me, I'd put them all on a
boat, and tell them 'here my friend,
Africa that way'!

Jethro jumps into the car and closes the door behind him.⁹⁷

Indeed, Malta is still a racist country that still harbours a conscious antipathy towards Arabs and dark-skinned immigrants. In a recent vox-pop of March 2021, respondents were asked about

⁹⁵ *Il-Miraklu/Holy Mary!* shooting script, p. 29.

⁹⁶ Abigail Serie series.

⁹⁷ *Il-Miraklu/Holy Mary!* shooting script, p. 29.

racial discrimination and many respondents expressed concern that besides xenophobic comments, racial injustice could also be reflected in the way the country's institutions, such as Parliament and the courts, were represented. The perception is that the judicial system and law enforcement discriminate 'through racial profiling by the police, especially towards people who are foreign or black asylum seekers and refugees are brought to court tied to each other with cable ties'.⁹⁸ It transpired from the vox-pop that racism in Malta has 'many faces' but also can be seen in daily comments which carry racist undertones, such as 'she's pretty for a black girl' or 'Mela jien iswed?' (What am I, black?). Another said that it is the public's social duty to speak out against any form of racism or xenophobia. The overall concern was that racial discrimination is 'on an alarming rise and it is our responsibility to act on this, racial equality and justice for Lassana Cisse from Ivory Coast, who was murdered in an allegedly racial motivated drive-by shooting in 2019.'⁹⁹

A scene from *Do Re Mi Fa* written and directed by Chris Zarb also includes racism in his full feature screenplay echoing the opinions of many Maltese:

INT. DJ TRIM'S STUDIO. EVENING

DJ TRIM

Good evening Julian. So, let's dive right in here, do you think the charges against Harry Spiteri are justified?

JULIAN

Well, I would have done the same thing. I think that illegal immigrants deserve it. It's his fault. If he would have just stayed away and not messed with Maltese citizens.

DJ TRIM

Not messed with Maltese citizens? Julian, if you come to Malta, you're going to meet a lot of Maltese people, aren't you? What's he supposed to do?

⁹⁸ Giulia Magri, 'Racism in Malta Has Many Faces- Youths Speak Up on Racial Injustices', *Times of Malta*, 21 March 2021 <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/racism-in-malta-has-many-faces-youths-speak-up-on-racial-injustices.859459> [accessed 7 October 2021] (para. 5 of 16).

⁹⁹ Magri, (para. 8 and 9 of 16).

JULIAN
 What I meant was, he should not
 have dated Spiteri's daughter in
 the first place?

DJ TRIM
 Why not?

JULIAN
 Because he's not like us.

DJ TRIM
 Not like us?

JULIAN
 He's not Maltese.

[...]

JULIAN
 We already have more than enough
 illegal immigrants in this country.
 They are already in our bad books.

DJ TRIM
 Maybe for you, Julian.

JULIAN
 Excuse me?

DJ TRIM
 I'm saying, they're in your bad
 books, not mine.¹⁰⁰

DJ Trim is a lone voice in the anti-racist stance. Clearly, Zarb is saying that not all Maltese are racists, but the majority are.

2.7 Identity Formation

Raisa Galea, a Russian thinker and researcher based in Malta, understands that the Maltese exist in a few social bubbles whose membership is defined by family background, ties to a political party, attendance at a particular school, and belonging to a particular subculture. Clearly, the Maltese did not see each other as equals; as Galea says, 'I also learned that foreigners like me could enjoy an

¹⁰⁰ Chris Zarb, *Do Re Mi Fa*, shooting script, pp. 27-28.

access to the upper-middle-class artsy circles quicker than could ordinary Maltese (if they wished to).'¹⁰¹

To some, like Raphael Vella, an artist, curator and academic, defining Malteseness is part of self-perception and self-representation, but Vella does not see it as straightforward, instead preferring to think of it in terms of overlapping 'Wittgensteinian family resemblances'; however, 'there are many different allegiances within what is considered "to belong" to a place to call yourself Maltese [...] being who you are requires different allegiances that we consider to belong to a particular place'.¹⁰² Critics of the claims to Maltese uniqueness maintain that to call oneself 'unique and rearrange the rest of the world around your own little place is to try to survive as a different entity amongst other entities that are not so different'. Sameness can seem like a catastrophe to those who have always thought that they were so different from others; it 'comes as a nasty revelation to those 'idiots of space and shape' who claim uniqueness at the cost of the exclusion of theirs'.¹⁰³ The self-perception of uniqueness is referred in the discussion in 2014 on the regulation of broadcasting in Malta, whereby the Malta Broadcasting Authority also aims to ensure that all broadcasting services consist of 'public, private and community broadcasts' and offer diverse programming: 'the Broadcasting Authority's stated aim is to help the Maltese public better understand how its values and diversity shape our *unique personality* by regulating local broadcasting services in open flexible ways fostering creativity and better programming'.¹⁰⁴

Samira Damato, daughter of a German mother and a Maltese father, spent her first twelve years on the island, but her adult life was spent overseas, allowing her to have an outsider's perspective accompanied by the sense of displacement that Dingli refers to in *Kont Digà / I Was There Already* (2009); a contemporary displacement faced by young Maltese working in Brussels for the European Union. Paul shares his feelings and experiences, commuting in his personal and professional life between Malta and Brussels, and feeling the displacement many Maltese share:

INT. JOANNA'S HOUSE - GOZO - NIGHT (2009)

PAUL
Sometimes it's great, you start

(CONTINUED)

¹⁰¹ Raisa Galea, 'How I Have Become a Local in Malta on Local Foreigners and Foreign Locals', *Isles of the Left*, 26 November 2017
< <http://www.islesoftheleft.org/how-i-have-become-a-local-in-malta/>> [accessed 18 February 2018] (para. 5 of 20).

¹⁰² Vella, 27 June 2017.

¹⁰³ John Baldacchino, p.182 and p.185.

¹⁰⁴ Petra Caruana Dingli and Clare Vassallo, *Confronting The Challenge: Innovation in the Regulation of Broadcasting in Malta*, 52 (Malta: The Today Public Policy Institute, 2014), p. 18 (emphasis added)

PAUL (CONT'D)
 settling in.
 (beat)
 Then time passes and I start missing
 Malta so I decide to come for a couple of
 weeks but when I come 2 weeks is all I
 can handle!
 (beat)
 It gets way too claustrophobic for me
 Once I go back, I meet my friend there
 I realize I barely know them.
 There I feel like a tourist.
 (becomes agitated)
 Concerts, exhibitions... so many events to
 go to. It's all relaxed there... then I
 have the house here, another one there
 My clothes and things are everywhere...
 This goes on constantly in my head.
 Constantly!¹⁰⁵

It might be that Europe will be looking soon for its identity to Malta, as Henry Frendo frames the thought in his short paper on 'Being Maltese', written in 2008:

There are many identities which can also co-exist but what I refer to in particular here is the affinity with community, the sense of belonging to a nation, or not. In other words, not just the family, or the locality, or the church, or the language, but with some or all of those together, and much more, in a recognizably "Eurovision-like" collective sense, as a recognizable, intelligible national self-identity with a loyalty, "pre" and "post" colonial, "pre" and "post" EU, "pre" and "post" mass legal and illegal immigration from all over the place, not just Europe or the Mediterranean, with arrivals possessing languages, religions, mind-sets, lifestyles and histories all their own. All in the pot. Hold it, what pot?¹⁰⁶

Is-Sriep Regġħu Saru Velenużi / The Viper's Pit (2020), a screen adaptation of Alex Vella Gera's novel, the same name published in 2012 refers to this pivotal part of the Maltese identity formation. Bonnici refers to the politicization of religion on a number of occasions in *Is-Sriep Regġħu Saru Velenużi / The Viper's Pit*. Bonnici sees the novel that the screen text was adapted from as a 'modern classic' that revisits 'Malta's politically turbulent 1980s and explores the way it

¹⁰⁵ *Kont Diġà/I Was There, Already*, dir. by Mark Dingli (Sekwenza, 2009), 00:50:35-00:51:12.

¹⁰⁶ Henry Frendo, 'On Being Maltese', *Times of Malta*, 28 June 2008

<<https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20080628/opinion/on-being-maltese.214453>> [accessed 14 April 2017] (para.10 of 15).

can still haunt present-day realities: the corruption, the political allegiances, the language question, the identity and culture, the Catholic education, all of which are an integral part of the Maltese identity':¹⁰⁷

INT. MARSA POTATO SHED - 1984 - NIGHT

SPITERI smiles.

SPITERI

Now they're after Church Schools. They think they can stop our kids from having a proper Catholic education. And we have to send them to lessons in secret, like it's the kids who have committed a crime.

SPITERI shakes his head. The other men join in their silent chorus of assent. RICHARD can't help but nod along too.

[...]

SPITERI

For the glory of Christ. For the glory of this sweet land of ours. May it no longer be sick. May we have the honour of cleansing it.

They clink their glasses together and chug. RICHARD takes a sip first and, wincing, gulps down the rest.¹⁰⁸

Bonnici was intrigued by the idea of Noel Sammut Petri's complete ignorance of his family's past, which is also part of the national identity building:

I felt that it [the novel] spoke to me as a Maltese citizen, like many of my contemporaries, I still have no idea of what really happened in Malta post-independence. We have all had to make do with the little information available and

¹⁰⁷ Martin Bonnici in an interview by Raphael Vassallo 'Malta's film industry needs to prove itself' *Maltatoday*, 27 July 2021

<https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/interview/111111/maltas_film_industry_needs_to_prove_itselfmartin_bonnici [accessed 22 July 2021] (para. 2, 17, 29 of 53).

¹⁰⁸ *Is-Sriep Regghu Saru Velenuzi/The Viper's Pit*, pp. 22-23.

stories we have been told, and just like Noel, we keep suffering from lack of knowledge.¹⁰⁹

The ‘religious bias, socio-political attitudes, and cultural tendencies’ of the different colonizers, and their systems, ‘all conditioned the way the Maltese perceive their world and themselves’.¹¹⁰ In the artistic and storytelling context, it means that the scriptwriters, and other storytelling artists, need to negotiate and navigate the effects of the ‘Maltese condition’ in their creative output, that is, they have to confront the temptation towards self-censorship. Mark Dingli refers to the sense of patriotism rooted in irony.

INT. ANNA’S CAR (MOVING) – GOZO – DAY

Anna’s behind the wheel. Rock music in the background (radio)
Bullu holding a road atlas trying to understand where they are.

BULLU

We should be ashamed of ourselves.
Lost in Gozo! Imagine us in Tokyo!

KARL

Well, you come here just to party.
When was the last time you partied
here?

BULLU

God only knows!

KARL

The Maltese make a complete mess
when in Gozo.

ANNA

Listen to him being all patriotic!

KARL

This is the promised land.

¹⁰⁹ Martin Bonnici, interview, *Is-Sriep Reggħu Saru Velenuzi / The Viper’s Pit— the book and the film*, *Times of Malta*, 27 June 2021 < <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/is-sriep-regghu-saru-velenuzi-the-book-and-the-film.882247>> [accessed 10 July 2021] (para. 5 of 15).

¹¹⁰ Charles Briffa. A talk delivered on 13 October 2015, for the official launching of *This Fair Land* in London.

event refers to the name of the space shuttle situating in Malta's history and the self-perception of uniqueness. The name of the space shuttle *Siege 3 (Assedju 3)* alludes to the two historical sieges of Malta: The Great Siege of 1565 and The Siege of Malta of 1942.

Scene 1:

INT. ASSEDJU 3 (MOVING) - OUTER SPACE - DAY (2009)

A commotion. All the crew in red and blue jumpsuits but the pilot RITA BRONSON, in BLUE jumpsuit, rush to the controls. Bronson flicks on the mic.

BRONSON

Austin! Austin! Do you read me?

No reply from the two astronauts.

JONES

I am not in position to tell you what is happening.

SULTANA

They have died! That's why they aren't answering!

WILLIZ

So? we continue without them.

THE CREW

Without them?

Protests screams and tears ensue.

WILLIZ

Okay, okay! One Nationalist died and one Labourite died. It's a draw.

Williz silences the crew like a school headmaster silencing a rowdy class.

WILLIZ (CONT'D)

Come on, now, let's get back to work.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ *Maltageddon*, 01:06:20-01:06:40.

There is a visual clue in the scene—the colours of the jumpsuits. The Nationalist Party’s representative colour is blue, while the colour of the Malta Labour Party is red (orange in the screenwork); the screenplay was produced in 2008 when the Malta Labour Party was in power but both parties played a major role in achieving Malta’s independence, which the screenwork alludes to.¹¹⁶

The second scene below refers not only to the historical sieges of Malta but also to national pride and self-representation mediated through slapstick comedy:

INT. HILTON HOTEL - CONFERENCE HALL - DAY (2009)

The President of Malta behind the podium addressing the media. His male Aide stands right next to the President.

PRESIDENT OF MALTA
Like our forefathers when our
enemies wanted to destroy us during
the Great Siege in—

The President’s male Aide quickly whispers something into the President’s ear. The President nods relieved.

PRESIDENT OF MALTA (CONT’D)
1565 and...

Intercut with images and reactions from MASA (Maltese Aeronautics and Space Administration).

PRESIDENT OF MALTA (CONT’D)
Also, during the other Siege of the
Second World War when the enemy

PRESIDENT OF MALTA (CONT’D)
aeroplanes bombarded our homes in 19...

The President cannot recall (or doesn’t know), his male Aide whispers again hurriedly into the President’s ear.

PRESIDENT OF MALTA (CONT’D)
In 194...

The President is stuck again. The Aide whispers again.

PRESIDENT OF MALTA (CONT’D)
In 1943!

¹¹⁶ Alan Cassar, email communication, 16 July 2022.

The President looks at his Aide to check if he got the year right. The Aide returns the look with a nod of approval and reverence.

PRESIDENT OF MALTA (CONT'D)
And now the third Siege we find behind
our doors! And again, it is up to us,
the Maltese, to face this Siege.

Intercut with images and intense reaction from MASA.

PRESIDENT OF MALTA (CONT'D)
Lose no heart. Make courage, Maltese
brothers!

Intercut with Maltese astronauts in RED and BLUE jumpsuits about to board the space shuttle Assejdu 3.

PRESIDENT OF MALTA (CONT'D)
Courage! Have faith!

A barrage of press photographers documenting this historic moment.

PRESIDENT OF MALTA (CONT'D)
And see that when we are united,
we can win! Thank you.¹¹⁷

Maltageddon thereby positions Maltese identity as conditioned by the historical experience of siege and colonial domination. Charlie Cauchi, a British born Maltese visual artist, film-maker and researcher, is similarly very much aware that her Maltese identity is the result of 'the continuous domination by outsiders and still seems to manifest itself culturally, as colonialism, which is ingrained in the Maltese psyche to this day'.¹¹⁸ Her artistic expressions provide a commentary on the difficulty of navigating this complexity in the documentary of the Maltese diaspora in the US, and finds out that the Maltese immigrants 'religiously protected their identities and origins enshrining traditional Maltese idiosyncrasies [the Maltese cross as jewellery, the lace head-veil] and elevating them to a near-sacred status'.¹¹⁹

Rebecca Anastasi, Maltese-British academic, screenwriter and producer, agrees with Cauchi while reflecting upon her own experience of being Maltese:

¹¹⁷ *Maltageddon*, 00:55:07- 00:56:42.

¹¹⁸ Charlie Cauchi, 'Mapping Film Education and Training on the Island of Malta', in *The Education of the Filmmaker in Europe, Australia, and Asia*, ed. by Mette Hjort (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 45-65 (p. 48).

¹¹⁹ Ann Dingli, 'Chasing Malteseness', *Malta Independent*, 18 November 2017
<<https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2017-11-18/local-news/FIRST-Chasing-Malteseness-6736181452>> [accessed 20 November 2017] (para. 7, 8 of 22).

We grew up in a British enclave on the island. I used to believe that this meant I was an outsider here. Now, I know that we're all outsiders. The Maltese person is an in-between, still struggling to discover themselves. Since nothing about Malta fits neatly into a box prescribed by someone else, we still—I believe—haven't figured it out. My notion of being Maltese is being a hybrid, a mix of histories and cultures. I'm hyper aware of this 'reality'.¹²⁰

Damato shares with Anastasi the same experience of being 'the other'. Damato's childhood years spent in Malta are reflected in the short screenplays she writes and directs. Damato confides:

I've always been treated as a foreigner by my friends, even though I'd have known them since I was 12 but I was always 'the other'. Only now I have been given a Maltese status because now I have an impressive position at work and now, I am the girl from Birżebbuġa [a seaside town in the southern region of Malta] who has this job.¹²¹

2.8 Conclusion

The purpose of this Chapter has been to demonstrate that there is enough stories and themes to create double storytelling reflecting the external forces, or perhaps, the formative pressures revealing a strong insight what it means to be storytellers in Malta and how the external forces inform, and at times, hinder, their televisual and cinematic output. Identity, especially as a national generalizing attribute is always a complex, problematic concept, for it invariably brings into play a number of emotions related to self-perception and self-representation that this Chapter has examined from the perspective of different Maltese contributors as writers, as artists, and as academics highlighting their concerns with mediocrity, conformity, patronage, Catholicism, language, and racism.¹²²

¹²⁰ Rebecca Anastasi, email interview, 9 April 2018.

¹²¹ Samira Damato, in discussion with the researcher, Zoom, 9 December 2020.

¹²² John Baldacchino, 'Salvaging What "We" Never Lost: Art, Site and the Virtual in the Maltese Imaginary', in *Cross-Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta*, ed. by Raphael Vella (Malta: Allied Publications, 2008), pp. 178-247 (p.182 and p.185).

CHAPTER 3 - Politics and the ‘Maltese Condition’

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explored the historical, linguistic and cultural conditions that have informed the ‘Maltese condition’ that lies at the core of Maltese identity, and how this in turn helps to explain the diffidence of Maltese writers in addressing contemporary social and political concerns. The present chapter will explore double storytelling with explicitly political ways in which this diffidence has been maintained. In the second half of the chapter I turn to how Maltese writers have nevertheless addressed some of the contemporary, Malta-specific concerns that confront the nation: the political influences that shape such matters as bird hunting and bird trapping, the questions posed by illegal immigration in a small island situated between Africa and Europe, the ruination of the island by land development and property construction, and the event that has become synonymous with Maltese political corruption: the assassination in 2017 of the journalist Caruana Galizia. The present chapter also attempts to identify the protracted and difficult development of the national television and film industry, which is directly connected to the fact that Malta, since early 1960s, has had a very strong film servicing industry that remains robust to this day and generates a significant profit. The chapter also contextualises the continuous and ongoing cultural domination of Malta by foreign powers. Indeed, the post-colonial syndrome converges with the domestic belief in ‘my own survival even to the detriment of my own country’.¹

3.2 Artistic Form and Political Satire

What has been described as the ‘Maltese condition’ results from the island’s historico-political tensions between insularity and openness, uniqueness and hybridity, identity and otherness, isolation and shelter, peripherality and universality. These dichotomies affect the self-perception and self-representation of the Maltese and the narratives they tell. Godfrey Baldacchino, a Maltese social and Small Islands scientist, refers to Malta as ‘a mediated society’, resulting in an interesting blend of socio-economic variables and a market-oriented economy, whereby cultural variables relate to a dependency historically engrained by colonialism.² Baldacchino explains:

¹ Vince Briffa, in discussion with the researcher, 26 January 2018 and Saviour Chircop, in discussion with the researcher, 29 January 2018.

² Godfrey Baldacchino, *Worker Cooperatives with Particular Reference to Malta: An Educationist’s Theory and Practice* (The Hague: Institute of Social Studies, 1990), p. 67.

the Maltese are largely individualistic, competitive and wary of taking risks [...] are prone to resort more to individual manipulation than to collective or cooperative action to improve their social position and to defend or promote their interests. This dominant cultural pattern, fuelled by the long historical rigours of colonialism for strategic interests [...] reinforced by Catholic imagery, the islands' scarce resources and high population density, it is a powerful force, influencing any attempt at cooperative organization.³

The Maltese context is one of norms: of people looking at each other's business; of living on a protected, insulated island; of over-development and corruption; of being afraid to be different; oppressive island culture; disconnectedness because one is not on the mainland; the rural against the urban; not being too different; not being too great; the rural to the coastal; the very tightly populated urban which suddenly becomes dramatically coastal, and beyond the cliffs is the rest of the world.

Surviving and thriving in complex historical and political circumstances, Malta is built on a culture of profit-driven economy and allegiances - not on critical thinking, social values, or merits.⁴ It is, therefore, no surprise that Malta derives its identity from its economic power rather than its cultural power. This affects the Maltese way of life, and by extension, its cinematic identity, to its very core. Identifying epochal shifts (with their ramifications) may help in understanding Malta's take on its culture and why Malta uses culture as a promotional tool, a commodification for tourists, rather than recognizing its social value, for example in its filming and screenwriting practices. In other countries one might expect the national film industry to fall under the portfolio of the Ministry for Culture, but in Malta, because of the primary importance of the film servicing industry, it falls under the Ministry for Tourism and Consumer Protection.⁵ Maltese scriptwriting and artistic practices and discourses are therefore shaped by a shared experience of living on a tiny archipelago with a rich history, but in an environment in which the predominant mentality is that culture 'sells'.

Different media, however, offer different storytelling possibilities in Malta. Theatre and particularly socio-political comic strips show a greater confidence than television and film narratives in accommodating the country's political and social ailments: immigration, tax fraud, corruption, land destruction, hunting, and so forth. The Maltese dimensions of corruption gravitate around a number of key issues, imbuing the local setting with its own innate characteristics, which

³ Baldacchino, *Worker Cooperatives with Particular Reference to Malta*, pp. 79-80.

⁴ Chircop, discussion 29 January 2018, Briffa, discussion 26 January 2018, Marie Briguglio in discussion with the researcher, 13 February 2018.

⁵ Ministry for Tourism and Consumer Protection

<<https://tourism.gov.mt/en/Pages/MinistryforTourismandConsumerProtection.aspx>> [accessed 11 June 2021].

political cartooning captures through satire telling a narrative based not on emotion but on fact, and as Philip Leone-Ganado, a theatre director, quips: ‘we used to laugh at comedians and listen to politicians, now we listen to comedians and laugh at politicians.’⁶

The Maltese artist and academic Vince Briffa laments that political work does not even exist in Malta other than in political cartoon strips. Accordingly, I have chosen to illustrate many of the arguments in this chapter with examples of these cartoons, for two reasons: they offer a striking critical insight into some of the conformist aspects of the Maltese sensibility, and their satirical thrust illuminates by contrast the political timidity of most Maltese screenwriting. The most common critical distinction between different forms of satire derives from the styles of two Roman poets: Juvenal and Horace. Juvenalian satire is full of rage, seeking to provoke indignation in society through scorn and ridicule, and is close to tragedy; while Horatian satire is the more mellow form, offering a humorous commentary on socio-political ills by not attacking so much as criticizing the follies of humankind, and borders on comedy.⁷ The socio-political cartooning in Malta tends to be more Juvenalian than Horatian, but there are exceptions. The comic strip *Žepp* by the comic artist and cartoonist Ġoġ Mallia is Horatian, representing a softer side of Maltese life. Mallia has a number of recurrent characters—*Žepp* is one of them—purposefully created to reflect the COVID-19 situation in Malta with the intention to ‘poke fun at the “new normal” for most people, socially distant and very much alone’, in a humorous take at one such person (Fig. 3).⁸



Figure 3: *Žepp* by Ġoġ Mallia
Source: *The Times of Malta*, 3 July 2021 (screen capture)

⁶ Philip Leone-Ganado, ‘Carnival: Satire is Back’, *Times of Malta*, 7 February 2016 <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/return-of-our-satirical-traditions.601497>> [accessed 1 April 2021] (para. 38 of 54).

⁷ Leonard Freedman, *Offensive Art: The Political Satire and its Censorship Around the World From Beerbohm to Borat* (West Port: CT, Praeger, 2008), p. 2 and Heather L. LaMarre, and others, ‘Humor Works in Funny Ways: Examining Satirical Tone as a Key Determinant in Political Humor Message Processing’, *Mass Communication and Society*, 17. 3 (2014), 400-23 (p. 403) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2014.891137>>.

⁸ Ġoġ Mallia <<http://www.gorgmallia.com/comic-strips.html>> [accessed 14 August 2021].

As previously mentioned, a self-administered censorship, conscious or unconscious, is built into Malta's social structures, offering narratives that tend to stay away from political themes. Cartoonists in Malta, on the other hand, expose what other artists are reluctant to address, offering insights into self-representation and self-perception without self-censorship or fear. There is a fragility to Malta's supposed democratic republic, with the lack of checks and balances allowing the country to degenerate to such an extent.⁹ The undisputed loyalty in belonging to a party is also symptomatic of a Malta built on a culture of profit-driven economy and allegiances—not on critical thinking, social values, or merits, as the cartoons in Figures 4 and 5 suggest.¹⁰

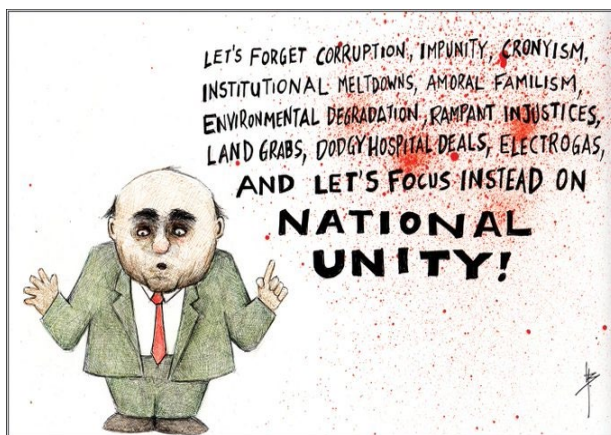


Figure 4: *National Unity* by Steve Bonello
Source: Artist's Twitter post, 14 February 2021

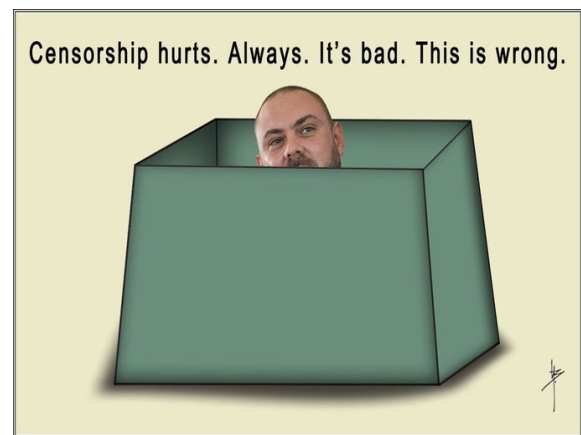


Figure 5: *Censorship* by Steve Bonello
Source: Artist's Twitter post, 19 September 2018

Modern and contemporary artists have not engaged very openly with politics, partly due to the small size of Malta and the potential loss of patronage. This is why Briffa struggles to get his students to give their works a political tone, even at master's level. When he asked them to produce a commentary on the assassination of Caruana Galizia, Briffa responded that the students' work was disappointing. However, although Malta does not accommodate well fictional narratives or works of art commenting on political issues,¹¹ there are some recent exceptions that do refer to some of Malta's contemporary ailments. A good example is *Arcadia*—the only short film that directly addresses the ongoing destruction of Malta by property development, including this

⁹ 'Decade of Satire to Savour: Our Cartoonists' pick', *Sunday Times of Malta*, 5 January 2020 <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/decade-of-satire-to-savour-our-cartoonists-pick.761124>> [accessed 20 September 2021] (para.1 of 9).

¹⁰ Chircop, discussion, 29 January 2018, Briffa, discussion, 26 January 2018, Briguglio, discussion, 13 February 2018.

¹¹ Briffa, 26 January 2018.

comment in the film: ‘Malta is no longer a country... Malta is business.’¹² Other films that refer directly to the corruption in Malta are Alex Camilleri’s drama feature *Luzzu*, Alan Cassar’s comedy feature *Maltageddon* (2009) and the television dramedy *Il-Miraklu//Holy Mary!* (2018) by Carlos Debattista and Abigail Mallia. There is another concern here—the loss of potential patronage since Malta runs on extensive client-patron networks.¹³ Some of the historical roots of these networks of patronage were examined in the previous chapter; here, we shall be concentrating largely on those connected to the political party system.

3.3 Political Parties and Patronage

Mario Phillip Azzopardi also questions the act of preservation of one’s identity when the freedom of speech and one’s opinion are hindered by the pervasive interrelation of religion and politics. In the self-funded adaptation of Francis Sammut’s novel *Il-Ġagġa /The Cage* (1971) Azzopardi describes the political mood in on the eve of Malta’s Independence. The scene below depicts not only the power of the ecclesiastical authority, but also conformity by the majority and a quite clear suggestion of political favouritism and allegiances that are still quite powerful in contemporary Malta. The protagonist, Fredu Gambin, comes from a family that supports the Nationalist Party, whereas the girl he is dating, Roza, comes from a family that sides with the Labour Party. Trouble begins when Fredu’s mother discovers this but Fredu since there is no anonymity in Malta due to the island’s smallness:

INT. FREDU’S PARENTS’ HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

MOTHER

Malta is a small place and everybody knows everybody, my son.

[...]

MOTHER

They are evil, my son.
Do you really want to marry into such a family?

[...]

MOTHER

What colour are they?

¹² *Arcadia*, dir. by Jamie Vella (2017), 00:11:29-00:11:33 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OM69K-pZ6Xc>> [accessed 2 October] (original ellipsis).

¹³ Jean Claude Cachia and André P. DeBattista, 1-26 (p. 2).

What is being asked here is whether Fredu is aware of their political beliefs. Are they blue or are they red? Do they belong to the Nationalist Party or the Labour Party?

MOTHER (CONT'D)

They are all enemies of the Church
They have rebelled against God!¹⁴

The Father returns home.

FATHER (O.S.)

Have you heard?

The Father takes off his coat and sits at the table.

FATHER

Do you know what they did?

MOTHER (O.S.)

What happened, John?

FATHER

Some youngsters attacked the Parish
Priest. Most probably Censu, the son of
Marozz.
They even tried to run him over with
their car.

MOTHER (O.S.)

This is what we have to come to!

Mother walks in with tea.

MOTHER

But God will prevail.
Christus Vincit!
That's what the Parish Priest
always says. We are facing
persecution like Christ!¹⁵

The narrative moves to a band club where again, religion and politics come to the forefront of a political game. Band clubs are an integral part of Maltese culture, and with time, they have earned a

¹⁴ *Gagga /The Cage*, dir. by Mario Phillip Azzopardi (Tar-Royal University Student Cine Association, 1971), 00:13:36-00:14:12.

¹⁵ *Gagga /The Cage*, 00:14:29-00:14:58.

special place in every village and town. These bands aim to promote Malta's local music, spread Maltese culture, teach music, and provide a place for community meetings.¹⁶

INT. BAND CLUB - MALTA - DAY (1961)

Statue of a saint. Walls adorned with pictures of various saints.
Five middle-aged men, among them John Mary and Peter, play cards around a table.

JOHN MARY

In my opinion, the Parish Priest
shouldn't interfere in politics.

John Mary throws a card on the table with anger.

MAN#2

I tell you one thing... the Parish Priest
can only give you good advice.

MAN#3

If you keep ignoring his advice, you'll
be damned.

JOHN MARY

I'm against such talk in this band club.
Here, we have members belonging to
different parties.

PETER

He's right--

Another male voice interjects.

ANOTHER VOICE (O.S.)

Nobody will tell you
what to do..

The men turn around and see the Band Club's President, approaching their table.

BAND CLUB PRESIDENT

but in this club, we
should be a tight-knit family of
friends. We are here to help each
other.

¹⁶ Malta Uncovered, <<https://www.maltauncovered.com/culture/malta-band-clubs-and-band-marches/>> [accessed 26 October 2021] (para.1, 4 and 6 of 8).

MAN#2

You are right Mr President,
 but when we are in government,
 (throws a card on the table)
 you will all come to us for favours.
 (sarcastic)
 You're quite right... we all need each
 other!

MR. PRESIDENT

Let's all calm down, my friends,
 and respect each other's opinions,
 am I right?

But emotions are escalating.

JOHN MARY

Talk is cheap! But facts are different.
 You and the Parish Priest are all out on
 favour of Dr Spadaru, the lawyer!
 (pointing at the President)
 It's blatant electioneering!

MR. PRESIDENT

(alarmed)
 What electioneering? Who can accuse us of
 forcing anyone to lobby for the lawyer?
 Go on! Tell me!

The other four men show no reaction.

MR. PRESIDENT

(appeasingly)
 Listen, my friends, God willing these
 last few days are soon over. It's better
 if we stay united.

A murmur of consent except from John Mary.

JOHN MARY

Well, have it your way!

John Mary gets up abruptly.

JOHN MARY (CONT'D)

It's incredible what freedom of
 expression we have here...
 especially with the meddling
 of our Parish Priest. I'm leaving!¹⁷

¹⁷*Gağga/The Cage*, 00:06:33-00:08:23.

Azzopardi's *Gaġġa /The Cage* (1971) also refers to the political division, but Azzopardi goes to the roots of the political polarity in the opening scene in the screenplay (a montage between two scenes: 1st scene with Freddie and Roża, 2nd scene two men affixing electoral posters to a wall):

EXT. MALTA - FIELD - DAY (1971)

FREDDIE, 20s, ROŽA, 20s, two lovers playing 'catch me if you can' as they progressively get closer to us.

EXT. MALTA - URBAN - DAY (1971)

A WALL plastered with George Borg Olivier, a Nationalist Party leader.

EXT. MALTA - FIELD - DAY (1971)

Freddie and Roża are now much closer to us.

EXT. MALTA - URBAN - DAY (1971)

Two men approach the poster wall.

EXT. MALTA - FIELD - DAY (1971)

Freddie and Roża walk embraced through the field.

EXT. MALTA - URBAN - DAY (1971)

Two men rip off the posters of George Borg Olivier.¹⁸

EXT. MALTA - FIELD - DAY (1971)

Freddie and Roża kiss.

EXT. MALTA - URBAN - DAY (1971)

Two men put up Dom Mintoff's posters on the wall.¹⁹

¹⁸ George Borg Olivier was a leader of the opposition Party, that is, the Nationalist Party.

¹⁹ *Gaġġa /The Cage*, 00:03:12-00:04:39.

Gagga /The Cage tells a story of Malta in the making, almost on the eve of gaining its independence from the British Crown, making way for the post-EU Malta where future political allegiances and xenophobia are a way of life, as Alex Camilleri's *Luzzu* (2020) captures it in a short but poignant scene:

EXT. JETTY - DAY

Uday, Indian, hands Jesmark a jablo box.

UDAY

Be careful.

JESMARK

You called me for a box of fish?

UDAY

You will thank me, brother. This is an opportunity. The boss needs to pay off some politicians but they don't like brown guys especially with their cash in my hands.

Jesmark opens the box. Frozen seabreams. Right there under the fish, three piles of banknotes wrapped in plastic bags.²⁰

As the Maltese novelist and poet Emmanuel Mifsud explains, Malta has two political parties that have invaded the lives of the Maltese and have no intention of leaving:

Until they continue occupying' our lives [...] the two are monsters [...] running the show [...] the result— a system of patronage where the political parties have even infiltrated even student council elections. It is reflected in the way people choose to remain silent even when there is ample to protest about.²¹

Charles Stroud, a director, producer, and screenwriter, adapted a short animation script text (Matthew Stroud as animator) from the short story 'Dritt għall-punt'/'Straight to the Point' (2016),

²⁰ *Luzzu*, dir. Alex Camilleri, 2020, screenwork.

²¹ Immanuel Mifsud interview with Herman Grech, 'Shut Down Political Party Media, It's Malta's Only Hope', *Times of Malta*, 7 November 2018 <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/watch-shut-down-political-party-media-its-maltas-only-hope.693681>> [accessed 1 June 2019] (para. 2 and 3 of 13).

written by one of the most important Maltese playwrights, philosophers, and scholars, Joe Friggieri. In the short story, Friggieri explores, like Ray Bradbury in his *Fahrenheit 451*, a polarity between two political ideologies, suggesting a symbolic representation of the two main Maltese political parties: the ruling Labour Party and the opposition Nationalist Party. The narrative centres around the issue of the censorship of ideas and the destruction of knowledge, making a strong statement about the possible repercussions:²²

INT. OFFICE - NIGHT

The officer picks up a copy of the book. It is full of yellow stickies and looks well read.

OFFICER (CONT'D)

Let's come to your novel.
Here too we can start from the title.
In this case we feel you're being
even more explicit.
Because even if for a moment we could
accept your argument where poetry is
concerned, it definitely couldn't apply
to prose.

He turns the front of the book towards Adamov.

OFFICER (CONT'D)

By choosing the title Before a
New Dawn, you're not only giving the
impression that our country is going
through a period of total darkness, but
you're also saying that this is only a
transitory phase and that things will
soon change.²³

Most people are cautious in what they do and say in Malta because of the repercussions such as losing professional opportunities, sponsorship or funds, which is historically connected to the patronage system. Therefore, a political or social commentary is still the exception rather than the rule, Gruppetta explains. The reason Maltese artists do not engage with Malta's reality is due to the fact that 'their full-time employment censors them since any authors are teachers or work in the education sector', and as such, their professional conduct 'outside of their professional capacity as a teacher and educator, should not be too political. There will be repercussions, otherwise, in that

²² Charles Stroud, in discussion with researcher, 26 August 2021.

²³ *Dritt għall Punt /Straight to the Point*, dir. by Charles Stroud (2017), shooting script, p.9.

these persons will not be presented with opportunities, or the patronage, to continue their creative output.²⁴

Lara Calleja, a writer and activist, confirms Gruppetta's claim. In her fiction narratives Calleja writes about Malta's contemporary ailments such as overdevelopment, and she believes that Maltese authors tend to avoid challenging subject matter. Steve Bonello's cartoon in Fig. 6 captures this perception:



Figure 6: *Ways of Seeing* by Steve Bonello
Source: Artist's collection

In Calleja's analysis:

Literature must be a safe space, like all forms of art are, and the author should never be in a position where they have to dance around issues such as sex, drugs and other not-entirely-pleasant aspects of our society which are also, however, undeniably a part of our national character. We also need to be more political in our outlook, and less concerned about any reputational fallout that may result as a result of our writing.²⁵

Raphael Vella, an artist, curator and educator, similarly agrees. Modern and contemporary art does not engage very openly with Malta's modern realities, due to the small size of Malta and potential for loss of patronage, resulting in a stultifying conformity as Pierre Ellul, a producer and film-maker, confirms. Ellul is also quite disheartened with the fact the Maltese 'artistic

²⁴ Gruppetta, discussion, 29 May 2020.

²⁵ Lara Calleja, interview by Teo Reljić, 'Singing Through the Wreckage', *Maltatoday*, 13 May 2020. <https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/arts/books/102254/singing_through_the_wreckage_lara_calleja> [accessed 20 June 2020] (para17 of 22).

community’—the film-maker uses the term as an umbrella term for all the art forms including cinematic artistic expressions—does not engage with what is going on in the socio-political environment in Malta:

We are scared to engage because you never know where your next job is going to come from. I believe we have a duty to engage because it is our country, and it ties in with documentary because docs are there to expose.²⁶

Immanuel Mifsud refers to this lack of engagement in his short story *Laqgħa ma' Mara Morbi/Meeting with Mara Morbi* (2014), which was adapted into a short film by Martin Bonnici. Mifsud too finds it ‘ironic that politicians often highlight people’s intelligence and sovereignty yet persist in transmitting their propaganda through their media day and night, and the result is a system of patronage’,²⁷ while most Maltese choose not to react to the system, and in fact ‘they choose to remain silent even when there is ample to protest about’.²⁸

In *Laqgħa ma' Mara Morbi/Meeting with Mara Morbi* (2014) Mifsud and Bonnici take the audience on a journey of a Maltese national—named the Man—doing something about it, but it appears the deed is quite accidental; one might say it was the case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time and despite of himself, the Man becomes a hero. The narrative incorporates Maltese historical facts as well as a number of real-life, contemporary people and other points of reference, producing an overtly socio-political and self-reflexive commentary of a kind that does not emerge frequently in Maltese screenwriting. The extent to which this is the case will become clear from the following series of extracts:

EXT. FREEDOM DAY MONUMENT - LATE MORNING

A small crowd of people stand behind barriers around the Freedom Day Monument. Military officers in ceremonial uniforms stand in line.²⁹

Amongst the crowd there’s a group of teenagers and the Man stands amongst them, next to Pia.

²⁶ Pierre Ellul in discussion with the researcher, 20 September 2016.

²⁷ Immanuel Mifsud, interview with Herman Grech, ‘Shut Down Political Party Media, It's Malta's Only Hope’, *Times of Malta*, 7 November 2018 < <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/watch-shut-down-political-party-media-its-maltas-only-hope.693681> > [accessed 28 September 2021] (para. 3 of 13) (ellipsis original).

²⁸ Mifsud (para. 3 of 13).

²⁹ The Freedom Day Monument marks the withdrawal of the last British troops and the Royal Navy from Malta, in 1979. Carmel Cassar, *A Concise History of Malta*, (Malta: Mireva Publications, 2000), p. 245.

MAN (V.O.)
 When he finally arrived, a flood of people surged
 towards his car.

The teenagers run towards the President's car.

MAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 I tried to grab her from her shirt so
 she wouldn't get hurt, and anyway look
 what happened..

Police grab the children and the Man.

Man at police station surrounded by happy teen protestors.

Transition to *MaltaToday* headline:

"DAD LEADS YOUNGSTERS IN POLITICAL PROTEST: Matthew Vella
 reports."

Maltatoday is a real English language newspaper published in Malta, and 'Matthew Vella' is an actual *Maltatoday* reporter; indeed, even the research for my own PhD thesis includes articles written by Vella. Pippa Zammit Cutajar, meanwhile, is one of the leading Maltese photographers. *Moviment Graffiti* [Graffiti Movement] is a Maltese pressure group promoting an amalgamation of leftist socio-political ideas, mainly human rights, equality, environmentalism and anti-fascism.

MAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 They wanted to put me before a
 disciplinary board at work.

The disciplinary board is form of retribution for being too political even in such an indirect manner.

Below the headline, a photo of the man trying to hold on to his daughter with police giving chase. Right beneath the photo there's written:

"DAD'S ARMY! Photography by Pippa Zammit Cutajar"

MAN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 At least *Moviment Graffiti* made me an
 honorary hero.³⁰

³⁰ *Laqgħa ma' Mara Morbi/Meeting with Mara*, dir. by Martin Bonnici (2016) shooting script, pp. 6-7.

Overall, *Laqgħa ma' Mara Morbi/Meeting with Mara Morbi* is an encapsulation of Mifsud's commentary on Malta: 'we joined the EU and nothing changed, we changed a government after 25 years and nothing changed. Tribalism and hate speech have persisted while conformity is expected'.³¹

3.4 Political Conformity and Critical Thinking

The conformity to which Mifsud refers is deeply rooted in Maltese society. Historically, there has been a widespread conformity in Malta or, at least, compliance with 'colonial paternalist policies', based on the deeply ingrained conviction of 'powerlessness and dependence'.³²

The cartoon shown in Figure 5 comments on this wilful powerlessness and conformity, pivoting on René Descartes' celebrated dictum *je pense donc je suis*—'I think therefore I am'—or perhaps closer to Descartes meaning: 'I am thinking, therefore I exist'.

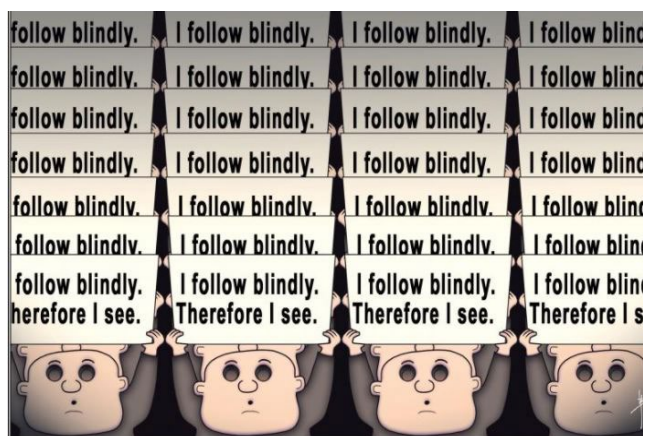


Figure 7: *I Follow Blindly, Therefore I See* by Steven Bonello
Source: Artist's Twitter post, 25 March 2018

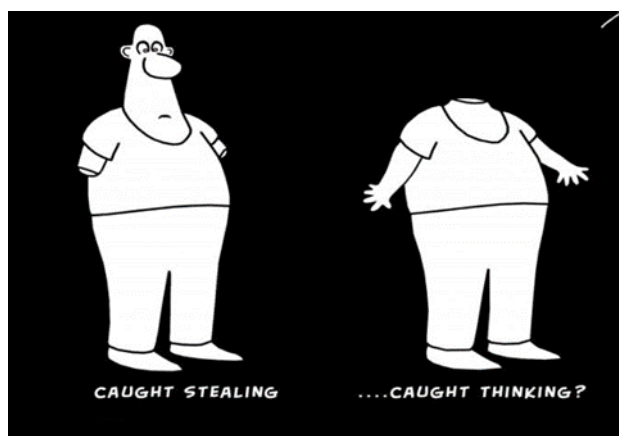


Figure 8: *Freedom of Thought* by Steve Bonello
Source: Cartoon Movement 25 April 2016

Seeking the truth and pushing doubt as far as it can go is quite the opposite of what is happening in Malta.³³ The cartoons in Figures 7 and 8 reinforce the message of wilful powerlessness and conformity, but Figure 8 requires some clarification because it seems to suggest a historical legacy and an implicitly racist representation of the Arabs by the Maltese. This understanding of the

³¹ Mifsud (para. 8 of 13).

³² Edward L. Zammit, p. 33.

³³ John Cottingham, 'Descartes, *The Great Philosophers: From Socrates to Turing*, in ed. by Ray Monk and Frederic Raphael (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), pp. 93-134 (p. 107).

cartoon is particularly plausible when one keeps on mind the Arab conquest of Malta in 870-1090 and may suggest that is it a historical legacy of the Sharia law. The contemporary context in which the cartoon was published, however, suggests that its meaning is more nuanced and ambiguous. The cartoon was created as the artist's reaction to the statement of Imam Mohamed El Sadi, the Muslim leader in Malta in 2009, that the 'chopping off the hands of thieves is a deserving punishment'.³⁴ According to the artist, the statement caused controversy and did not go down well with the local Maltese population. The cartoon compares the Imam's statement to 'the idea of people in authority (metaphorically) cutting off your head (metaphorically the mind) in an attempt to censor you or suppress and/or discourage thinking',³⁵ and suggests that vocal objections to Sharia law need to be contrasted with the silence surrounding the repression of political dissent in Malta.



Figure 9: *Not Afraid* by Steve Bonello
Source: Artist's Twitter post, 15 April 2018

Charles Stroud, in his previously mentioned script for *Dritt għall Punt /Straight to the Point*, depicts a moment when conformist thinking is challenged by the protagonist, Adamov (which significantly is not a Maltese surname). Adamov, a writer, is interrogated by an Officer about his intentions in the two books he has published. The sensibility expressed in the following excerpt has much in common with that of the cartoon in Fig. 9 above:

³⁴ Christian Peregrin, 'What's Wrong With Chopping Off Thieves' Hands, Imam Asks', *Times of Malta*, 19 November 2009
<<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/whats-wrong-with-chopping-off-thieves-hands-imam-asks.282341>> [accessed 2 February 2022] (para.1 of 20)

³⁵ Steve Bonello, e-mail communication, 2 February 2022.

INT. OFFICE - NIGHT

ADAMOV

The bureaucratic machine crushes the individual: it suffocates him, rendering him incapable of thought. A writer can never be satisfied with the society he lives in or with things as he finds them.

(beat)

This is why my characters are, as you describe them, rebellious, unsettled and always looking for trouble, because they want things to change. Society needs new ideas. Without new ideas society would die. And I personally have no intention of living in a dead society. Quite the opposite - I want to do my utmost to see it develop and change.³⁶

The Officer represents an amalgam of the colonizing consecutive powers, continued by political polarization. Although the overall feel of the short film is that it engages with dictatorial censorship, Stroud himself agrees that the narrative does also reflect self-censorship.³⁷ The prevalence of these attitudes is the result of Malta being a young country which is still learning how to be a united and cohesive nation, and whose citizens are trying to find how to put their socio-political differences aside and work towards a more unified sense of nationhood.

It means that the Maltese are still discovering themselves as a united nation, a situation that affects all the arts, even the cinematic arts.³⁸ The identity of a people that has only been a nation for fifty years needs to be examined in terms of the socio-historical effects of the various subjugations to which it was party, as well as to the coping and survivalist approach that informs it.³⁹ A cursory look at Malta's history will reveal a history of violence and the ability of its people to adapt.⁴⁰ The dynamics and tensions between the two elements shed light on their impact on contemporary scriptwriting and their self-perception and self-representation. The Maltese have gone through the process of achieving independence as a nation, which has been represented by Maltese scriptwriters and writer-directors through different approaches and different genres. Azzopardi in *The Cage* sets a 'Romeo and Juliet love story' against the political background of

³⁶ *Dritt għall punt/Straight to the Point*, p. 11

³⁷ Charles Stroud in discussion with researcher, 26 August 2021.

³⁸ Vella, 26 June 2017.

³⁹ Fenech, p. 8.

⁴⁰ Azzopardi, 15 December 2020.

Malta's imminent independence;⁴¹ *The Maltese Fighter* presented a personal story between a father and his son, while a short script text *Hallini Hanini / Let it Be, Dear* (2019) by Samira Damato exemplifies the conformity that the colonial system expected but also how the Maltese have adapted to it:

INT. ENGLISH BUTCHER, MALTA - MORNING (1960s)

A clean, white-tiled, butcher shop.

The BUTCHER stands behind the counter, serving a queue of women.

Ġuża (30s) stands at the back nervously holding Mariella's hand (8) folding and unfolding the cuff of her sleeve.

[...]

A young, blonde English BOY enters the butcher and walks past the queue of women. He's wearing a pair of fine, lightly coloured shorts, and a tucked in white shirt with short sleeves. As he stands at the counter he is immediately served.

BOY

Afternoon!

MARIELLA

(in Maltese)

That's not fair! Mum--

The women queueing in front of Ġuża look back and throw scornful looks.

ĠUŻA

(in Maltese)

Shhh.

Mariella looks up at her mother, noting her embarrassment she looks down at her feet.

The boy leaves the butcher shop, the butcher stands with a broad smile.

BUTCHER

(in Maltese)

Don't worry! I keep
the best for us!⁴²

⁴¹ Azzopardi, 15 December 2020.

⁴² *Hallini Hanini/ Let it Be, Dear*, dir. by Samira Damato (2018), shooting script, p.3.

So far in this chapter we have looked at how some of the underlying political structures in Malta, especially the party system and its tendency to encourage conformism, have inhibited artistic engagement with contemporary social and political concerns. The remainder of this chapter, however, will show that Maltese filmmakers have nevertheless begun in recent years to explore some of the Malta-specific socio-political phenomena that impact on the life of the island: bird hunting and bird trapping, illegal immigration, property development and property construction, and the watershed moment in modern Maltese politics: the 2017 assassination of the journalist Caruana Galizia.

3.5 Bird Hunting and Bird Trapping

Part of Malta's contemporary discourse is that the island is the only EU country that allows recreational spring hunting. Neither of the main political parties declares its formal position in fear of losing this influential political constituency.⁴³ Malta has around 11,000 licensed hunters. With thirty-five hunters per square kilometre of land area, Malta is the world leader—almost 5% of the male population hunt.⁴⁴ Bird hunters and bird trappers and their families amount to over 30,000 voters, enough to make a difference in Maltese elections which can be won or lost by a few hundred votes (Fig. 11).⁴⁵ Not surprisingly, they therefore have also held a prominent role in Maltese politics since the mid-1990s in swaying national elections.⁴⁶ The cartoon in Figure 10 depicts two respective party leaders: on the left Dr Alfred Sant of the Labour Party and to the right Eddie Fenech Adami of the Nationalist Party, while a hunter holds them at gunpoint.⁴⁷ With elections in Malta often so close, politicians face considerable pressures to address and alleviate voters' concerns.

⁴³ Michael Briguglio, 'Ten Years of Malta's EU Membership - the Impact on Maltese Environmental NGOs'. *Reflections of a Decade of EU Membership: Expectations, Achievements, Disappointments and the Future Occasional Papers*, 7 (2015), 1-22 (p. 15).

⁴⁴ 'Bird shooting in Malta', <<https://www.komitee.de/en/campaigns-and-operations/malta/bird-shooting-in-malta/>> [accessed 14 August 2021] (para.1 of 4).

⁴⁵ Carmel Farrugia, 'Hunter's Vote', *Times of Malta*, 25 March 2008 <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/hunters-vote.201477>> [accessed 10 September 2021] (para. 2, 3 of 6).

⁴⁶ Michael Briguglio, 'The Bird Hunting Referendum in Malta, Environmental Politics', *Environmental Politics*, 24. 5 (2015), 835-839, (p. 836) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2015.1055880>>.

⁴⁷ Maurice Tanti Burló, *Blame it on Dom!* (Valletta: Progress Press, 2002), p. 60.



Figure 10: *Bird Hunting and Vote Swaying* by Maurice Tanti Burlò
Original source: *The Times*, 17 August 1998

The smallness of Malta thus creates powerful incentives for ‘clientelistic exchanges’, which form the basis of most interactions between citizens and politicians.⁴⁸ Due to the smallness of Malta, in all its nuances, survival can be laden with obstacles. Mark Anthony Falzon, a Maltese social anthropologist, comments:

Malta’s small size also influences the psyche of the Maltese. There’s a sensitivity which stems from an anxiety here, particularly when communicating with foreigners [...] this anxiety results in an assertiveness to prove that we are not small minded. The reality is that the Maltese are no smaller minded than people living in small towns within large countries [...] all the same, the Maltese tend to repeat this notion - we are small. I believe this close proximity is what gives people meaning to their lives. It’s not parochial, but rather what makes up part of a rich existence [...] of the Maltese is that on one hand they can be quite nation deprecating and on the other, they think that Malta is the centre of the universe.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Veenendaal (para. 5 of 14).

⁴⁹ Lisa Borain, ‘Anthropology Professor Answers the Unanswerable: Who Are the Maltese?’ *Guide me Malta*, 30 April 2018. <<https://www.guidememalta.com/en/anthropology-professor-answers-the-unanswerable-who-are-the-maltese>> [accessed 18 October 2019] (para10, 11, 12 of 13).



Figure 11: Ġorġ Mallia <Ġorġ Mallia Visuals - Home | Facebook> screen capture

Samira's Damato's first short script *Żiemel/Horse* (2017) concerns bird hunting and bird trapping, and encapsulates this aspect of the Maltese socio-cultural identity, for there is nothing more ingrained in the Maltese identity and culture than these activities. Both are a national pastime for almost fourteen thousand licensed hunters and trappers.⁵⁰ Damato begins the script with a scene with caged finches and ends it with the bird trappers being chased by the police. But there is more. While Justin, the protagonist, nicknamed *Żiemel*, traps birds with his father, his older brother, Luke, is a police officer whose responsibility is to apprehend hunters who hunt during the non-hunting season. The script has a book-end structure. The opening scene begins as follows:

EXT. BIRZEBBUĠA HOUSE, ROOF - LATE AFTERNOON⁵¹

Birżebbuġa sea front, a small house. ŻIEMEL(Justin) (16), a rough Birżebbuġa kid, stands on the roof of his house. Against the wall behind him is a large bird cage filled with various finches. He retrieves a pack of cigarettes hidden beneath the bird cage

The BIRDS CHIRP and the WAVES CRASH. He lights a cigarette and turns to face the Sea. He smokes the cigarette a while.⁵²

⁵⁰ '12,161 Licences For Hunters and Trappers in Malta', *Malta Independent*, 15 April 2019. <<http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2019-04-15/local-news/12-161-licenses-for-hunters-and-trappers-in-Malta-6736206716#:~:text=Data%20tabled%20in%20parliament%20showed,the%20Wild%20Birds%20Regulation%20Unit>> [accessed 20 December 2020] (para. 1 of 7).

⁵¹ Birżebbuġa once a finishing village in the south of Malta today is a popular holiday resort spoiled with the view at Malta's Freeport Terminal and the gasoline odour.

⁵² *Ziemel/Horse*, dir. by Samira Damato, shooting script, p. 1.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to delve into the history of bird hunting and bird trapping in Malta in more detail, but it not uncommon for the hunters to practice both shooting and trapping, although the two activities are distinct in a number of ways. Most of the birds trapped are finches which are kept, exchanged or sold as pets and songbirds.⁵³ The final scene:

EXT. FIELD - MORNING

The two hunters, and his [Žiemel/Justin]Father make their way into the shed. The hunter's shack overlooks the trap laid out on the field.

They sit in silence, tentatively watching the small, caged bird in the centre of the field. ŽIEMEL is playing on his phone.

A car drives down the road, approaching the hunters.

[...]

The car stops next to their field. Two police officers get out of the car. Luke is one of the police officers. They climb over one of the stone walls and begin to make their way towards the hunters. ŽIEMEL is standing pointing towards them. The hunters look on at the caged bird.

[...]

The hunters look up. They quickly grab their belongings and run out of the stone shack. Hunter 1 leads, followed by ŽIEMEL and his father, whilst Hunter 2 lags behind.

The police officers begin to run after them.⁵⁴

What the script emphasizes is the smallness of an island and the complex relations it entails.

3.6 Illegal Immigration and Political Refugees

While the prevalence of these activities on the island is bound up with patterns of bird migration, another kind of migration has pushed its way to the forefront of Maltese social and political life. As

⁵³ Mark Anthony Falzon, 'Flights of Passion: Hunting, Ecology and Politics in Malta and the Mediterranean', *Anthropology Today* 24.1 (2008), 15-20 (p. 15) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20179892>> [accessed 20 January 2020].

⁵⁴ Samira Damato, pp. 10-11.

the cartoon below shows, the routes of birds and illegal immigrants (the boat people) coincide (Fig. 12):

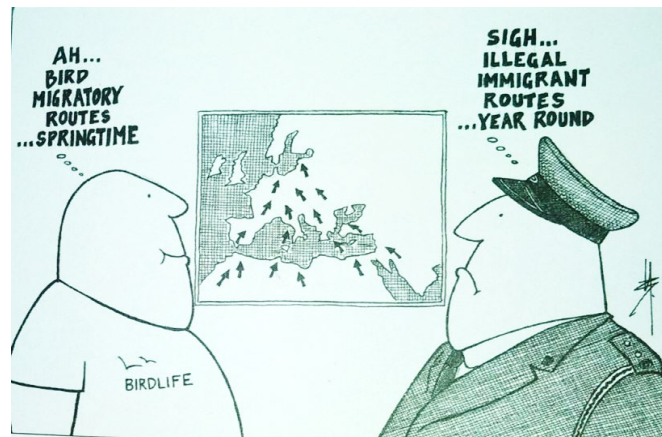


Figure 12: *Construction* by Steve Bonello
Source: *No Man's Land*, p. 117

Birds are killed by shooting and trapping; boat people are killed by letting them drown. Figs. 13 and 14 refer to the illegal immigrants who perish at sea, in contrast to foreigners who have the means to apply for the Citizen Scheme ‘the citizenship-by-investment program’⁵⁵ otherwise known as the ‘golden passports’ that has resulted in the sale of Maltese (and therefore EU) passports (Fig.15):⁵⁶

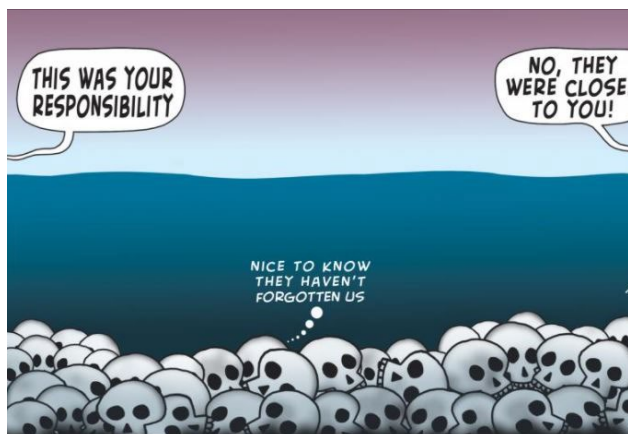


Figure 13: *Illegal Migrants Lost at Sea* by Steve Bonello
Source: Artist's Twitter post, 11 June 2018

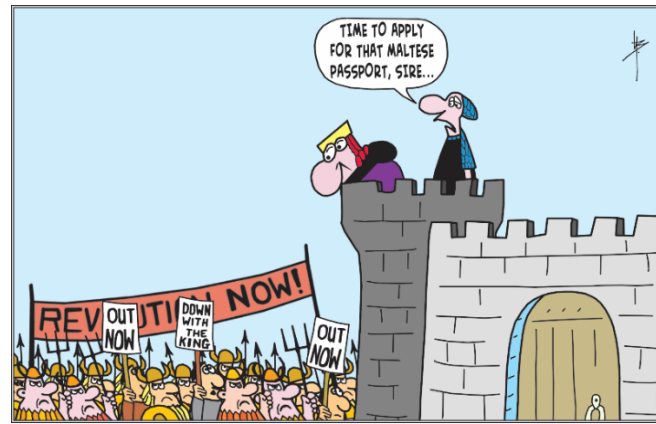


Figure 14: *Illegal migrants vs holders of the Golden Passports* by Gorğ Mallia
Source: Sen Source: Artist's collection

⁵⁵ 'Malta Citizenship by Investment Program 2021: The Ultimate Guide', 7 October 2021. < <https://getgoldenvisa.com/malta-citizenship-by-investment> > [accessed 8 October 2021].

⁵⁶ Christopher Giles, 'Malta's "Golden Passports": Why Do the Super-Rich Want Them?', *BBC*, 4 December 2019 < <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50633820> > [accessed 14 August 2021] (para. 14 ,15 of 28).

Owning a Maltese passport gives the new citizens the right to visa-free travel to 186 countries, including the US, and to live and move their money around anywhere in the European Union.⁵⁷



(with apologies to Johnny Hart)

Figure 15: *Time to Apply for That Maltese Passport* by Steve Bonello

Source: Artist's collection

Rebecca Cremona referred to the tragedy of the boat people in her full feature film *Simshar* (2014), which was based on a real-life tragedy that took place in 2008, exposing Malta's ambiguous attitude to towards illegal immigrants and their treatment once they do get to Malta safely:

INT. DETENTION CENTER, TENT VILLAGE – MORNING

A destitute REFUGEE CAMP bakes under the hot morning sun. The tents are worn and dusty, with clothes hanging from the ropes which hold them down.

AFRICAN CHILDREN play amidst litter, as AFRICAN MEN play cards on the floor, and AFRICAN WOMEN cook coffee in tins and wash their belongings in dredges of water contained in plastic tubs.

Alex, in DETENTION SERVICES MEDICAL GEAR is cleaning a child's congested eye gently with a cotton bud.

The camp is enclosed in a forbidding FENCE, and clearly labelled by a BILINGUAL SIGN (Maltese and English) – REPUBLIC OF MALTA, IMMIGRATION DETENTION CENTER.

An Armed Forces crest and other signs make it clear that these are MILITARY GROUNDS.

⁵⁷ Malta Citizenship by Investment.

A GROUP OF TEN PEOPLE are marching outside the fence with placards reading: 'A BLACK DANGEROUS Malta!', 'Less Jobs, More Taxes', 'Blacks go Back' etc.⁵⁸

The on-going situation with the boat people has resulted in many human tragedies. It is no different for the protagonist of *Simshar*, Simon, whose story is based on real events and real characters: Simon Bugeja, a Maltese fisherman, his 11-year-old son Theo, and his crew, which consisted of Theo's grand-father Carmelo known as it-Tabakku, 61, an employee Noel 'Murdoch' Carabott, 33, and 21-year-old Somali Abdulrahman Abdala Gedi. The *Simshar* left Malta on 7 July, never to return.⁵⁹

The narrative of *Simshar* hinges on three characters: Theo, his dad, and Abdulrahman (named Moussa in the cinematic adaptation). The story culminates in tragedy when the boat of Simon, Theo and Moussa is spotted in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea by a Libyan trawler but not rescued, because its occupants are mistaken for African boat people. The crew and Theo perish. The only survivor is Simon, who lives to tell the tale:

INT./EXT. BURJ AL-FATAH TRAWLER, BRIDGE - DAY, CONTINUOUS

MEHDI (45) - a rugged man with kind eyes - can see the stranded fishing party through his binoculars.

Moussa is in full view, and a TANNED Theo obscures most of his equally tanned father.

MEHDI
(in Libyan) sic
Captain! There's a child with
this group.

CAPTAIN BILEL (57) - a weathered, stout man - looks preoccupied. He takes the binoculars and sees for himself.

EXT. OPEN SEA - DAY, CONTINUOUS

Moussa and Simon are still waving frantically in the ROUGH WATERS.

[...]

⁵⁸ Rebecca Cremona, *Simshar*, shooting script (2014), p. 11.

⁵⁹ 'The Simshar Tragedy: Last hope', *Maltatoday*, 22 July 2008

<<https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2008-07-22/news/the-simshar-tragedy-last-hope-210735/>> [accessed 7 October] (para. 4, 5 of 19).

INT./EXT. BURJ AL-FATAH TRAWLER, BRIDGE - DAY, CONTINUOUS

[...]

MEHDI

Shall we pull up the nets and
kill the engines?

CAPTAIN BILEL

(in Libyan) sic

And end up like the *Leca*? We need
to protect our catch, and our
jobs.⁶⁰

Captain Bilel refers to a cargo vessel *Leca* which few days earlier rescued about forty immigrants from the Mediterranean Sea. The vessel was refused entry into Italian waters by the Italian authorities, who insisted that the migrants should be brought to Malta, which is responsible for the search and rescue region. Malta, however, insisted that under the terms of the international conventions to which it is signatory the migrants must land at the nearest safe port, which in this case is Lampedusa. The diplomatic battle lasted for a few days until the immigrants were allowed to disembark in Lampedusa. The diplomatic stand-off took its toll on everyone, particularly on the vessel's crew, hence Captain Bilel's refusal to assist *Simshar* believing in error that on the boat were more immigrants than a handful of Maltese fishermen.⁶¹

Salim gathers what's going on and interjects-

SALIM

Captain??

MEHDI

So we pull the nets up and leave?

The Captain nods gravely. Mehdi goes to ring the bell giving the instruction.

The Captain turns to Salim-

⁶⁰ *Simshar*, pp. 81-82.

⁶¹ 'Stand-off Ends in Malta: Illegal Migrants Force Disembarkment by Threatening the Crew. All Four Boats Carrying 425 Illegal Immigrants to Dock in Malta', *V4 Report*, 8 June 2020 <<https://v4report.com/stand-off-ends-in-malta-illegal-migrants-force-disembarkment-by-threatening-the-crew-all-four-boats-carrying-425-illegal-immigrants-to-dock-in-malta/>> [accessed 8 October 2021] (para. 1 and 2 of 13).

CAPTAIN BILEL
 (unconvincingly)
 If we were to save all the immigrants, we
 come across we'd be coast guards not
 fishermen.⁶²

The final image from *Simshar* stays away from the cinematic rendition of the story and includes information and the actual footage of Simon's rescue and return to Malta. The final scene also pays tribute to all those who perished at sea seeking a better life.

TITLES

Theo's body was never found.

FADE IN:

In Memory of Theo,

FADE IN:

The victims of the *Simshar*, and the thousands of men, women and children who perished during their attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

NOTE - OVER CREDIT ROLL, NEWS FOOTAGE OF THE REAL SIMON ARRIVING IN THE RESCUE HELICOPTER AND TAKEN TO HOSPITAL, WHERE A DISTRAUGHT SHARIN⁶³ IS WAITING FOR HIM.⁶⁴

Mark Dingli in a feature *Kont Diġà / I Was There Already* (2009) examines the issue of illegal immigrants from the perspective of the regular Maltese, or perhaps provides more of a reflection between two Maltese nationals:

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Karl drains pasta in the sink. In the background, a voice of a female broadcaster in Maltese.

⁶² *Simshar*, pp. 81-82.

⁶³ Sharin was Theo's mother.

⁶⁴ *Simshar*, pp. 88-89.

NEWS (V.O.)

This afternoon the Armed Forces of Malta
Once again intercepted another boatful of
illegal immigrants about 12km offshore
from Delimara.

(beat)

Initial estimates indicate about 30
immigrants on their way to Italy found
themselves in Maltese waters. Pregnant
women were also present upon their
arrival in Malta. They were given medical
assistance and although under shock none
were in critical condition.

MIKE

Pass the salt.

NEWS (V.O.)

The head of the Armed Forces declared
that since last April around 900
immigrants had arrived in Malta and
expects this number to increase by the
end of the summer.

MIKE

It's always the same.

KARL

What do you mean?

MIKE

Every summer it's the same story.
With the summer weather, a bit of wind
they start coming in.

KARL

But why come here?

MIKE

Nothing much. They try to escape wars,
poverty, difficult situations, you know,
everyone is looking for a better place.
Everyone wants a better life.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Mark Dingli, *Kont Digà / I Was There, Already* (2009), film, 08:18-09:53.

3.7 Ecology, Land Development and Property Construction

What both scenes reveal is ‘compulsive constructions and demolition, the obsession with cement and suspicion of nature’.⁶⁶ Marie Briguglio explains the situation in more detail:

Malta’s relation with the environment recalls the economic parable of the tragedy of the commons, in which a common resource is over-exploited because it was in everyone’s individual interest to do so. But when everyone claims their slice, nothing is left for everyone: our commonwealth becomes private, is fragmented and is destroyed.⁶⁷

Malta is an island of survivors, and an approach through the lens of Maslow’s ‘hierarchy of needs’ may explain why Malta still find itself at the primary need for safety and survival, and the prevalence of self-preserving behaviour at the detriment of self-actualization.⁶⁸ This attitude that is tied to the issue of ‘the inability to separate the idea of art as a commodity, and art as a resource’.⁶⁹

A general lack of appreciation of the seriousness of environmental degradation, as well as the causes thereof, and the means already available to reduce or counter such degradation... A strong tendency to build lifestyles around the accumulation of material wealth. A high population density and the limitations of space on the island. An over-dependency on the construction industry and the heavy investment in immovable property.⁷⁰

Vella in his self-funded short *Arcadia* (2017) describes the struggle of a father, Philip, whose self-actualization process of keeping the unspoilt land he owns away from the developers. His plan, though, is destroyed by someone whose is still at the bottom of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. *Arcadia* thus depicts a ‘tragic and helpless’ state of Malta’s land as ‘a toxic cocktail of corruption and capitalism’ spills into Philip’s life.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Marie Briguglio, *No Man’s Land: People, Place & Pollution* (Malta: Kite Group, 2018), p. 16.

⁶⁷ Marie Briguglio interviewed by John Paul Cordina, *Newsbook*, 22 June 2021, <<https://newsbook.com.mt/en/watch-overdevelopment-maltas-tragedy-of-the-commons/>> [accessed 5 August 2021] (para. 4 and 5 of 21).

⁶⁸ Maslow, p. 370.

⁶⁹ Sandro Debono interview, ‘Do Maltese People Care About Art?’, *Lovin’ Malta*, 28 September 2016, <<https://lovinmalta.com/opinion/do-maltese-people-care-about-art/>> [accessed 25 September 2021] (para. 14 of 21).

⁷⁰ Rudolf Ragonesi, and others, ‘Towards Sustainable Europe Sustainable Malta’, Malta: Moviment għall-Ambjent - Friends of the Earth (Malta). 1997 (original ellipsis).

⁷¹ Jamie Vella, survey, 26 March 2019.

An establishing shot of Malta—construction cranes fill the frame.

Insert: Mediterranean Island of Malta, 1990.

The camera pans to the left revealing unspoilt Maltese landscape. A stark contrast with the establishing shot.⁷²

[...]

Philip Briffa, 40s, explores his land. It's beautiful. Unspoilt wilderness. Centuries-old trees. A field of swaying golden wheat.

PHILIP (V.O.)

William...

(beat)

It is here, in our small piece of paradise, far off from man's hatred and evil, you will learn to love the riddles and mysteries of nature. You are going to learn to be like a tree, which always grows and reaches for the light.⁷³

Once Philip purchases the land with a farmhouse and settles in, he receives a court summons contesting his right to the land and the property. A number of court sittings lead to nowhere. The power and the network of connections of the land developers is too strong for Briffa and his lawyer, Jude Saliba. Eventually, seeing the hopelessness of the situation his client finds himself, Saliba gives an impassioned plea to give up the land and take the offer of the developers:

JUDE SALIBA

Forget about nature, the trees and the fields! They have given you a good offer to give up the land and this circus in court will end. Don't let this beauty kill you. Right now, in Malta, they are building on any piece of virgin land they can get their hands on! And these construction developers have power, Philip. This is no longer the country of our father's time. Things have changed. Construction is everything for Malta now Malta is no longer a country... Malta is business!⁷⁴

⁷² *Arcadia*, dir. by Jamie Vella (2017), 00:00:31-00:00:36.

⁷³ Vella, 00:03:30-00:03:58.

⁷⁴ Vella, 00:11:03-00:11:36 (original ellipsis).

This happens because the economic needs must be addressed first—before perceived less urgent needs, including the requirement for self-actualization.⁷⁵ Ġorġ Mallia comments about this side of the Maltese in the cartoon (Fig. 16), the English translation of which would be ‘Because I am Maltese, and so I don’t have another God other than you’:



Figure 16: Ġorġ Mallia <Ġorġ Mallia Visuals - Home Facebook> screen capture

Martin Bonnici also addresses this issue in *Is-Sriep Reġġhu Saru Velenużi / The Viper’s Pit* when one of the characters, Roger Junior Tabone, son of an affluent Nationalist businessman Roger Senior Tabone, pitches building of a nightclub on a pristine land to a group of investors:

INT. SOLIDAIR OFFICES - BOARD ROOM - MORNING

ROGER JR

Now, for the real fun stuff!

Click. A NIGHTCLUB, in a rural area. The designs on the slide make this very clear.

ROGER JR

Yes, yes this will be on ODZ,⁷⁶ but borders can be redrawn! Usher in a small revolution with this one, I must

(CONTINUED)

⁷⁵ Saviour Chircop, in discussion with researcher, 29 January 2018.

⁷⁶ ODZ - Outside Development Zone. The zone remains one of the most contentious aspects of Malta’s built environment. A trend whereby the number of development permits in ODZ increases significantly during election periods has led to some authors condemning ODZ development as a means of fulfilling election promises <<https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/71023>> [accessed 10 August].

ROGER JR (CONT'D)
 say. Classy clubbing! High net worth
 clientele, only the best booze and
 prestigious DJs.⁷⁷

Is-Sriep Reggħu Saru Velenuži/The Viper's Pit, a screen adaptation of Alex Vella Gera's titular novel published in 2012, revolves around a fictionalised plot to assassinate the former Prime Minister of Malta, Dom Mintoff.⁷⁸ The protagonist, Noel Sammut Petri, lives in contemporary Malta, but the narrative also takes the audience to the Malta of the 1980s. Noel Sammut Petri is suffering now because he does not know what happened in the 1980s to his own family. Martin Bonnici together with Teo Reljić, the screenwriter, refers to the nepotism connected to the construction industry, which emerges from a conversation between the protagonist, Noel, and his colleague, Claudia, both working in Brussels as interpreters:

NOEL
 Yeah... okay. I get how that sounds.
 But the corruption isn't gonna go away,
 the relentless, dumbfuck so
 I'll delight in Franco Debono's antics.

Franco Debono was a criminal lawyer by profession. Noel refers to Debono's time as a Nationalist MP under the Nationalist administration, when he was a continuous source of trouble for the Nationalist administration, led by Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi, and effectively voted against the Government to bring it down in 2012.⁷⁹

CLAUDIA
 Construction? Aren't you
 family friends with the Tabones?

NOEL
 Shut up.

CLAUDIA
 The Tabones of Solidair fame.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ *Is-Sriep Reggħu Saru Velenuži / The Viper's Pit*, p. 108.

⁷⁸ Martin Bonnici, in discussion with the researcher, 30 January 2018

⁷⁹ 'Malta Government Falls After PM Gonzi Loses Majority'
BBC News, 10 December 2012 < <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20672774> > [accessed 7 October 2021] (para. 2, 3 of 10).

⁸⁰ *Is-Sriep Reggħu Saru Velenuži /The Viper's Pit*, p.9.

The Tabones of Solidair fame will be read by the Maltese spectator as a reference to any one of the successful construction companies that altered the traditional townscapes and landscapes forever becoming very affluent in the process, and allowing those loyal to them to become affluent too.

NOEL

So? Everyone's friends with everyone
back home. Just 'cos my father knew
daddy Tabone back in the day doesn't

NOEL (CONT'D)

mean I endorse every single fucking
monstrosity they build.⁸¹

The Maltese do exceedingly well at acquiring and looking after their private property and interests: 'to each, his own. And we do own quite a lot [...] we own first and second homes at rates higher than other Europeans. And we own cars at rates that few countries in the world can compete with'.⁸² Maltese cartoons also reveal and reference the same tale of compulsive construction and demolition, the obsession with cement and suspicion of nature, the obliteration of community space, the love affair with cars, the incessant noise and the prolific generation of litter and waste (Figs. 17 and 18):



Figure 17: *Construction* by Steve Bonello
Source: *No Man's Land*, p. 91

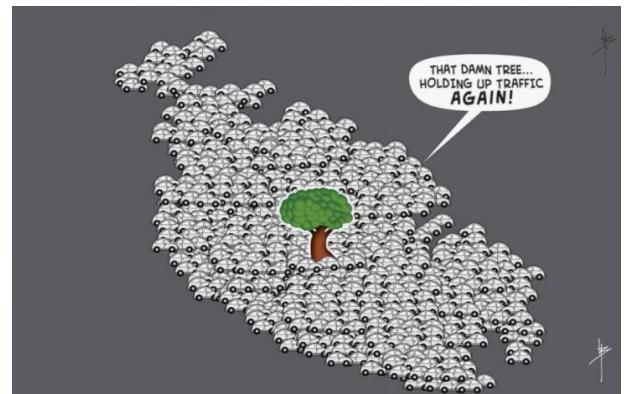


Figure 18: *Environment* by Steve Bonello
Source: Artist's Twitter post 24 June 2018

The cartoon in Fig. 16 shows the shape of Malta dotted with cars with the last tree remaining. According to the National Statistics Office bulletin, the stock of licensed vehicles stood

⁸¹ *Is-Sriep Reġġhu Saru Velenużi /The Viper's Pit*, p.10.

⁸² Briguglio, p. 33.

at 402,427 as at the end of December 2020. This compares to a population of a little over 500,000.⁸³ The present infrastructure, with the ongoing urbanisation and obsessive tree culling, is heavily geared towards private cars, with hardly any incentives to promote a green lifestyle.⁸⁴ Unfortunately, but noticeably, none of the screenplays in Malta incorporate this problem into their narratives.

3.8 The Assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia

By contrast, perhaps the most important and much darker reason for the emergence of meaningful Maltese productions was the nationwide awaking in the aftermath of Daphne Caruana Galizia's assassination in 2017. Caruana Galizia was active for over thirty years as a journalist in Malta, as a reporter, editor, columnist and blogger. She was an outspoken investigative journalist and commentator who wrote extensively on corruption in Maltese politics, as well as exposing suspect business deals and organized crime connections in Malta.⁸⁵ It was on her blog where her investigative skills as a journalist were honed and brought to the fore.

On 16 October 2017 she was assassinated by the triggering of an explosive device planted under her car seat outside her home in Bidnija.⁸⁶ This was a watershed moment in Malta.⁸⁷ Figures 17-20 comment on the aftermath of her assassination and the difficult quest for justice, which initiated protest demonstrations calling for democracy, justice and freedom (Figs. 19 and 20).⁸⁸

⁸³ National Statistics Office, 23 February 2021, p. 2

<https://nso.gov.mt/en/News_Releases/Documents/2021/02/News2021_034.pdf> [accessed 7 October 2021].

⁸⁴ Briguglio, p. 37.

⁸⁵ Hamish Boland-Rudder, 'Malta Responsible for Assassination of the Journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, inquiry finds', *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists*, 30 July 2021

<<https://www.icij.org/investigations/panama-papers/malta-responsible-for-assassination-of-journalist-daphne-caruana-galizia-inquiry-finds/>> [accessed 29 October] (para.8 of 22).

⁸⁶ <<https://www.daphne.foundation/en/about/daphne/>> [accessed 29 October] (para.1 of 25).

⁸⁷ Briguglio, p.16.

⁸⁸ Helena Grech, 'Daphne's Murder: Second Protest in Sliema - Freedom, Democracy Should Not Be Taken for Granted', *The Malta Independent*, 29 October 2017

<<http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2017-10-29/local-news/Daphne-s-murder-Second-justice-protest-in-Sliema-6736180829>> [accessed 13 August 2021] (para.1 of 37).

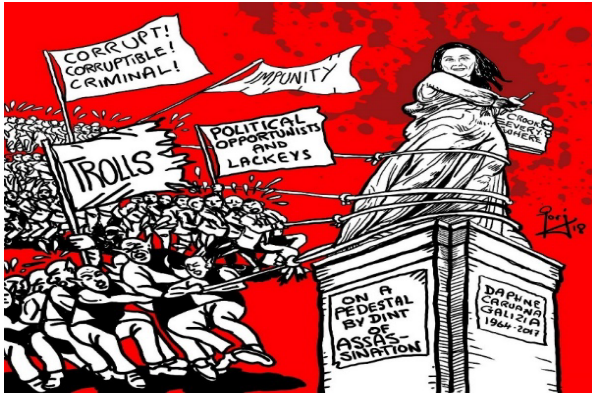


Figure 19: *Corruption and Trolls* by Gorg Mallia
Source: Artist's collection



Figure 20: *Murder* by Gorg Mallia
Source: Artist's collection

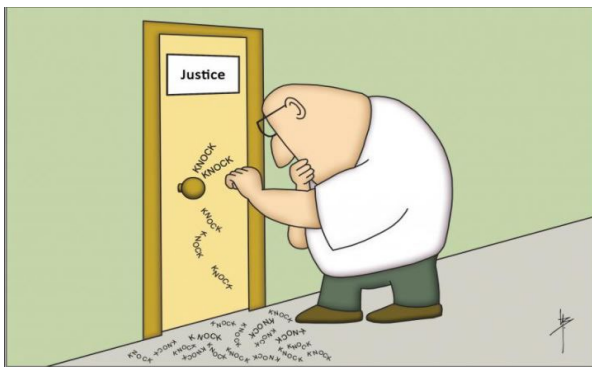


Figure 21: *Justice* by Steve Bonello
Source: Artist's Twitter post, 28 February 2021



Figure 22: *In memory of Galizia* by Steve Bonello
Source: Artist's Twitter post, 28 February 2021

These cartoons reflect the general outrage felt by many Maltese and the very difficult investigation, particularly during the initial stage, whereby justice was called in question numerous times (Figs. 21 and 22).

According to Herman Grech, online editor of *The Times of Malta*, Caruana Galizia's death revealed Malta's 'lack of critical thinking especially where it comes to political discourse [...] We simply refuse to listen to arguments that do not tally with our narrative.'⁸⁹ Alex Attard, editor of *Il-Mument /The Moment* suggests that 'fallout from this crime has contributed to this current climate of fear and uncertainty'.⁹⁰ Sylvana DeBono, editor-in-chief of the Beacon Media Group, encapsulates best the fear and the awakening of the Maltese screenwriters and writer-directors and the political ideology that permeates Malta's fabric:

⁸⁹ 'How Has Malta Changed After Daphne's murder?' *Malta Independent*, 14 October 2018 <<https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2018-10-13/local-news/How-has-Malta-changed-after-Daphne-s-murder-the-editors-view-6736197735>> [accessed 15 March 2021] (para. 2, 3 of 30).

⁹⁰ 'How has Malta changed' (para. 12 of 30).

In many ways, the bomb that killed Daphne blew off the mask of pseudo-civilization, even Christianity with which the Maltese had veneered themselves over decades. I feel that the years of gradual build up to become a member of the European confraternity of countries was, for Malta, too little to go deeply. We are, essentially, a ruthless population, kneaded by an environment which has been thrifty with the resources granted to us and an enviable geopolitical position which, for centuries left us servile. We now are free, independent and masters of our fate.⁹¹

However, it is yet to be seen if the historic moment ushered a new mentality, allowing safe space for the scriptwriters and writer-directors to create cinematic narratives integrating elements which comment on the dangers of complacency.

The previously mentioned animated short film by Stroud refers to self-censorship, but little did the film director know that only one year later Malta would struggle with coming to terms with the murder of Caruana Galizia and the revelation of the Government's allegiances and network of corruption. Adamov's struggles are the struggles of Caruana Galizia's, who as a journalist seeking out facts and evidence was eventually silenced.

ADAMOV

Fear and despair, illusion and delusion are as much part of life as hope and trust. The writer cannot ignore them or pretend they don't exist.

[...]

OFFICER

Let's deal with the last point, the most important one. In your novel the protagonist is a rebel, unsettled and always looking for trouble. He's always ready to criticise the government and undermine it to the extent of starting a movement to topple it. You know full well, Mr Adamov, that in the present situation these are very dangerous ideas which could cause our country great harm.

[...]

⁹¹ 'How has Malta changed' (para. 18 of 30).

ADAMOV

Society needs people like me
to make it think and reflect.
That's the writer's prime duty-
to stimulate thought and raise
awareness.⁹²

What Adamov is saying is that people in Malta need ‘beacons’—writers, screenwriters, directors, journalists engaged in exploring, commenting on, or questioning Malta’s contemporary socio-political environment. Society needs individuals like Caruana Galizia.

In March 2021 a theatre play was staged at St. James Cavalier in Valletta titled *They Blew Her Up*, about the circumstances of Caruana Galizia’s death and the history, and possible origin, of Maltese political and social hatred.⁹³ The playwright (and editor) Herman Grech explains that ‘*They Blew Her Up* is not intended to sway the case in any way; nor does it attempt to shed light on who really blew the journalist up’. Nevertheless, in Grech’s view the play ‘strikes right at the core of Maltese society — politics, corruption, nepotism and a crime that will forever haunt us.’⁹⁴

Mario Philip Azzopardi, a theatre and film writer/ director and a former Valletta18 artistic director, wished to produce two satirical plays about Daphne Caruana Galizia: ‘Min qatel lil Daphne Caruana Galizia?’/ ‘Who Killed Daphne Caruana Galizia?’ 2016, and ‘Ix-Xiħa’/The Witch’, 2019.⁹⁵ Both plays were banned by the board of Malta’s national theatre, but after the play of ‘They Blew Her Up’, Mario Philip Azzopardi was given the go-ahead for the production of ‘Ix-Xiħa’/ ‘The Witch’. However, Azzopardi contends that both plays were inspired by foreign works and were intended ‘to show how politics had totally taken over people’s lives.’⁹⁶ In a separate article Azzopardi explains his storytelling intention:

Min qatel lil Daphne Caruana Galizia? (Who killed Daphne Caruana Galizia?) was never, repeat, never, written. It was a play I had commissioned (no, I was not the intended author) inspired by the book *How I Killed Margaret Thatcher* by Anthony Cartwright, written during Thatcher’s premiership. (The UK government tried

⁹² *Dritt għall-Punt/Straight to the Point*, 2017, pp. 9-11.

⁹³ Lara Zammit and Joseph Agius, ‘When They Blew Up Daphne Caruana Galizia: The Biggest of Malta’s Crimes Takes Centre Stage’, *Times of Malta*, 7 March 2021 <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/what-they-blew-up.856375>> [accessed 21 March] (para. 2 of 29).

⁹⁴ Fiona Galea Debono, ‘First Daphne Caruana Galizia Murder Play “Strikes Right at the Core” of Malta’, *Times of Malta*, 9 February 2021 <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/first-daphne-caruana-galizia-murder-play-strikes-right-at-the-core-of.849887>> [accessed 22 March 2021] (para. 2 of 41).

⁹⁵ The literal translation is ‘The Old Woman’, however, in this context, it is ‘The Witch’.

⁹⁶ Edwina Brincat, ‘Producer Says Satirical ‘Daphne’ Plays Had Been Inspired By Foreign Works’, *Times of Malta*, 8 July 2020. <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/producer-says-satirical-daphne-plays-had-been-inspired-by-foreign.803727>> [accessed 22 March 2021] (para 1 of 17).

unsuccessfully to ban it). ‘Min Qatel lil Daphne Caruana Galizia’ was satire, where the infamous blogger was to be found dead followed by a hilarious whirlwind investigation. Both parties come under suspicion until the curtain falls on the revelation that she had choked on her own bile. That was the plot to be.⁹⁷

To this day neither of the plays has been produced, nor is Azzopardi revealing their narratives in more detail.

3.9 The Carnavalesque

Azzopardi claims there is no logical reason why Malta should exist. In his own words:

It is a mystery of mysteries how this small island can actually live in this delusion of nationhood. And yet, it survives. It is a mystery that you, academics, will be writing about for a long long time, but I have absolutely no idea how it survives.⁹⁸

In all its nuances, Marie Briguglio believes that the survival must be seen for ‘whatever it stands for in its demeanour for the sublime and the ridiculous.’ Briguglio continues that ‘living on an island, or in any other small community, one is watched all the time; one is marked by his or her birthplace and not the place they live in.’⁹⁹

And yet the signs of political rejuvenation visible in the texts discussed in this chapter can be seen as part of a new-found confidence in political engagement and satire that have their roots in the socio-political cartoons which are still very much relevant in today’s Malta, providing constructive critical self-representation to deliver a commentary about Malta’s reality, social and political issues. The satire is not only limited to the cartoon but also a recent resurgence in 2016 in the Maltese carnival tradition, creating an alternative social space, characterised by freedom, equality and abundance.¹⁰⁰ These forms of political engagement have much in common with Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the ‘carnavalesque’. Bakhtin portrays carnival as an expression of a

⁹⁷ Mario Philip Azzopardi, ‘About those rejected plays ...’, *Times of Malta*, 5 July 2020. <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/about-those-rejected-plays.803016>> [accessed 22 March 2021] (para 3 of 10).

⁹⁸ Mario Philip Azzopardi, in discussion with researcher, 15 December 2020.

⁹⁹ Briguglio, 13 February 2018.

¹⁰⁰ Philip Leone-Ganado, ‘Carnival: Satire is Back’, *Times of Malta*, 7 February 2016 <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/return-of-our-satirical-traditions.601497>> [accessed 1 April 2021] (para. 14 of 54).

‘second life’ of the people, against their subsumption in the dominant ideology.¹⁰¹ It replaces the false unity of the dominant system with a lived unity in contingency. It creates a zone in which new birth or emergence becomes possible, against the sterility of dominant norms.¹⁰²

Vicki Ann Cremona, a theatre studies professor and carnival researcher, claims that the return of such satirical traditions has been extremely beneficial not solely for carnival itself, but ‘for Maltese culture as a whole [...] the act of objectifying something for humour means you can perceive it without feeling directly involved, as you might when you’re reading about different scandals’.¹⁰³ In Malta, however, within the mainstream and on television, satire tends to be too sanitised to have an impact. Censorship and the gatekeepers fear offending the politicians and the decision makers through satire. Wayne Flask, a Maltese blogger, believes that:

there’s the permanent menace of libel suits and there’s the Broadcasting Authority and its fetish for impartiality, not to mention the fact that nobody will finance even a five-minute satirical show for fear of stepping onto the wrong toes [...] Maltese audiences, generally, lack maturity [...] we’re a nation of prude self-important brats in a constant search for the moral high ground. We’re all right with having a few laughs as long as it’s somebody else, some sort of enemy we’re laughing at, not ourselves.¹⁰⁴

This ‘fetish for impartiality’ needs to be put in context. The Constitution of Malta demands that the Broadcasting Authority ensures ‘due impartiality’ with regard to matters of political or industrial controversy or those relating to current public policy. The Constitution also lays down that this function ‘shall be without prejudice to such other functions and duties as may be conferred upon it by any law for the time being in force in Malta:

119. (1) It shall be the function of the Broadcasting Authority to ensure that, so far as possible, in such sound and television broadcasting services as may be provided in Malta, due impartiality is preserved in respect of matters of political or industrial controversy or relating to current public policy and that broadcasting facilities and time are fairly apportioned between persons belonging to different political parties.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 9.

¹⁰² Bakhtin, pp. 9-10.

¹⁰³ Leone-Ganado (para. 14 of 54).

¹⁰⁴ Wayne Flask, ‘Carnival: Satire is Back’, *Times of Malta*, 7 February 2016, <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/return-of-our-satirical-traditions.601497>> [accessed 1 April 2021] (para. 19, 20, 25 of 54).

¹⁰⁵ The Constitution of Malta <<https://legislation.mt/eli/const/eng/pdf>> [accessed 14 August 2021] p. 82

(2) The function of the Broadcasting Authority referred to in sub-article (1) of this article shall be without prejudice to such other functions and duties as may be conferred upon it by any law for the time being in force in Malta.¹⁰⁶

The self-perception and self-representation were further strengthened by narratives which informed ‘its identity as an “island-fortress” finding their presence in the world accompanied by obsessive patriotism’.¹⁰⁷

However, this is not always the case. In a television miniseries *Miraklu / Holy Mary!* (2018-2019), the creators present a different picture through the use of self-deprecating humour. The series tells the story of Joe ‘il-Paps’ Bonavia, a widower and father of five, who returns from prison to a life in ruins—penniless, jobless, and facing eviction.¹⁰⁸

INT. HAL SAFLIENI BAND CLUB COURTYARD. NIGHT

A drunken crowd dances to pounding techno music. Paps and his best friend Lippu (Il-Living) (32) stand at the crowded bar admiring the rhythmically bouncing breasts of a scantily dressed teenage girl

[...]

Paps seems lost in thought.

LIPPU

Look at the Maltese, Paps! The Brits leave and look at us!
We get wasted and fucked up, then we complain that everything’s gone to shit.¹⁰⁹

In this excerpt, the writers Carlos Debattista and Abigail Mallia present a different construct of Malta. The series examines gender issues, socio-cultural issues, sexual politics and psychoanalytic issues, partly because the comedy often reflects the mores and norms of contemporary Maltese society at a crossroads between Europe and Africa.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ The Constitution of Malta, p. 82.

¹⁰⁷ Vella, 26 June 2017. and Sandro Debono, ‘Visualisations of Identity. The Malta National Collection of Painting and Sculptures in the Making (1903-1974)’, (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University College London, 2018), p. 112.

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.taketwo.mt/holy-mary>.

¹⁰⁹ *Il-Miraklu / Holy Mary*, shooting script, episode 1, p. 5.

¹¹⁰ 5 minutes avec ... Abigail Mallia, *Série Series 2019*, Le Groupe 25images, <<https://vimeo.com/435664647?fbclid=IwAR1NE39fb14xJR7GzI2HP5tNDmfQ0s9IKasnh595hO-RyxIQypOtVrachk>> [accessed 14 September 2020].

This mode is very much in the vein of the forms of Maltese self-representation explored by Raphael Vella and Bettina Hutschek, a German artist, who curated a complex installation themed ‘Maltese Man’ at the Venice Biennale in 2017 titled *Homo Melitensis: An Incomplete Inventory in 19 Chapters*. The exhibition pivots on the concept of a national identity as well as the national imaginaries constructed around issues such as Malteseness, memory, territory, religion and language. While Vella admits that there is an attempt to rediscover Malta as a nation governed by autonomous people, the *Homo Melitensis* installation was a provocation, a deconstruction of the Maltese identity rather than its construction:

Our quest sets into motion an elaborate journey that travels simultaneously into different directions, taking in specimen of natural history, a national genome, an ancient shipwreck, migration, cartography, ritualistic objects, transgender characters, and other artifacts that playfully combine fact and fiction, identity construction and deconstruction [...] we try to decipher the web of relations that is established in the complex world of inhabitants and ghosts of a small archipelago of islands we call Malta.¹¹¹

Azzopardi believes that Malta must continue creating its cinematic culture with more commitment and accountability: ‘we must defend our national interest instead of lapping of every foreign power that ever came to Malta’, and ‘start retaining Malta’s soul in the cinematic context.’¹¹² The ongoing political corruption and environmental destruction, and as of 2017, the assassination of Caruana Galizia, all offer a wealth of storytelling opportunities to Maltese screenwriters and writer-directors.

3.10 Conclusion

The purpose of this Chapter is two-fold. First to broaden context of what has been termed the ‘Maltese condition’, a set of Malta-specific concerns such as its geographical situation, historical and ongoing forms of patronage, the influence of the Catholic church, the government, and the linguistic inheritance. Second to explore some of the more specifically political reasons for this, including the effects of the two-party system, while suggesting that the situation is beginning to change, as evidenced by the detailed engagement in a range of recent screen texts with such Malta-specific political concerns as bird hunting and bird trapping, the questions posed by illegal immigration in a small island situated between Africa and Europe, the ruination of the island by

¹¹¹ Raphael Vella, ‘Introduction’ in *Homo Melitensis: An Incomplete Inventory in 19 Chapters*, ed. by Raphael Vella and Betting Hutschek (Malta: Mousse Publishing, 2017), pp. 3-4 (p.3).

¹¹² Azzopardi in discussion with the researcher, 15 December 2020.

land development and property construction, and the event that has become synonymous with Maltese political corruption: the assassination in 2017 of the journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia. As we shall see in Chapter 4, some of the screenwriters and film practitioners and scholars are very much aware of Malta's historical legacies impacting the island contemporary reality and the seeming impossibility of change

CHAPTER 4 - Film and Television Storytelling in Malta

4.1 Introduction: Maltese Scriptwriting Doxa

Scriptwriting orthodoxy for television and short film and the education of the scriptwriters in Malta is indebted to three key figures: Kelinu Vella Haber (1913-2014), Wistin Born (1910-1986),¹ and Cecil Satariano (1930-1996). Vella Haber is perceived primarily as a pioneer and the father of the Maltese radio play, while Born was a practitioner besides being a prolific writer.² Cecil Satariano, on the other hand, is widely considered to be not only a pioneer but also an educator in film-making. The three pioneers contributed to the Maltese screenwriting ‘doxa’, a term introduced into screenwriting studies by Ian Macdonald (following Pierre Bourdieu) to refer to a discourse of ‘accepted, widespread knowledge’.³

Macdonald explains that the doxa is defined as ‘received wisdom’ or everything that ‘the field suggests is the right (or wrong) way to do things’.⁴ The screenwriting orthodoxy—what has been previously termed the screenwriting convention—is extracted from the doxa and is codified (and clarified) in screenwriting manuals. The doxa refers to the conventions which eventually become the paradigm for mainstream storytelling; that is, the way ‘things must be done’.⁵ The discourse of screenwriting is thus defined in relation to that shared sense of knowing what is right in a given situation, without necessarily knowing why. The individual sense of the way things are done has been internalized, accepted, and is now unquestioned. The doxa is what disposes the community to make certain judgements and create myths.⁶ Macdonald thereby contributes to screenwriting studies by presenting a synthetic and unified view of the mainstream orthodoxy of the screenwriting approach, by examining how screenwriting works, how to understand, study and research screenwriting and screen narrative production.⁷ What follows in the present chapter is an explanation of how the Maltese screenwriting doxa came into being.

Historically, scriptwriting practices in Malta can be traced to radio broadcasts by Radio Distribution (Malta) Ltd, which began in 1932⁸ despite the fact that the priority for Malta, a British

¹ Birth name was Harry Born but changed his name to Wistin (Winston/Augustine/Austin variations) once ordained.

² Paul P. Borg, *Kelinu Vella Haber: Hidmieta u l-Moviment tal-Malti* [His Work and Maltese Movement], trans. by Romario Sciberras (Malta: Union Print Co. Ltd, 2003), p. 345 and Toni Sant, *Rediffusion in Malta. A history Without Future* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2016), pp.107-08.

³ Ian W. Macdonald, *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.10.

⁴ Macdonald, p. 10.

⁵ Macdonald, p. 10 and p.58.

⁶ Macdonald, p. 24.

⁷ Macdonald, p. 58.

⁸ Sant, p. 4.

colony at the time, had been to meet Britain's military and commercial needs above anything else.⁹ It would be another forty years before Malta could discuss scriptwriting for television, and an additional forty years before it could begin a discourse of writing for the big screen.¹⁰ The new radio technology, however, generated not only a widespread interest in the audience but also an opportunity for Maltese writers to experiment with the new medium.

4.2 Kelinu Vella Haber

The development of radio scriptwriting education is indebted to Kelinu Vella Haber and Father Wistin Born. Although both figures contributed to the writing of radio drama, it is from this new medium that cinematic and televisual scriptwriting practices in Malta emerged. At its beginning, the Rediffusion radio drama consisted of translations of the BBC's radio plays and of the recorded theatre performances. The early radio play dramatists were pioneers rather than practitioners. They were discovering the new medium's specificity, and therefore worked from the perspective that presenting the radio audience with relayed stage plays was at this time the most appropriate approach. These pioneers were playwrights, novelists, poets, linguists, folklorists, lexicographers, and translators with different degrees of craftsmanship and success in writing for the microphone. It would therefore be fair to state that at this time Malta did not have a screenwriting doxa. The unifying factor, however, was the pioneers' deep appreciation of the Maltese language and attempts to elevate it to a literary status along the lines previously considered in Chapter 2. The new mass medium technology seemed like an appropriate tool to do so. The purpose of the many radio-play competitions, which ensued some years later, was to identify those great storytellers irrespective of their diverse backgrounds and political allegiances.¹¹

The contribution of Vella Haber in the late-1940s and Born in the 1950s and early 1960s was pivotal in establishing the screenwriting practices and the doxa, but also in developing the education of radio scriptwriters. Both were ahead of their times, leaving indelible marks on the formation of the Maltese radio narratives, Malta's sense of collective identity, and of course, its language and culture. According to Paul P. Borg, Kelinu Vella Haber's biographer, Vella Haber was the first practitioner to understand the impact that new technology had on the storytelling form and its consumption by listeners. He became immediately aware of the power of radio as a

⁹ Roger Ellul-Micallef, *Zammit of Malta. His Times, Life and Achievements*, 1 vols. (Malta: Allied Publications Ltd, 2013), pp. 3-7 (p. 3).

¹⁰ Monika Maslowska, 'Whose Stories Do They Tell?', in *Screenwriting & Directing Audio-Visual Media at the 7th International Screenwriting Research Network Conference*, Film University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf, Potsdam, October 16-19, 2014.

¹¹ Sant, pp.79-80.

technological wonder and a medium of cultural significance, which he was intent on using it to its fullest potential.¹² He realized that the technique of writing radio drama is very different from writing for the stage. He understood the accessibility and the advantage the medium has in ‘transporting a listener into the world of dreams and imagination [...] without being in front of a stage’.¹³ In Val Gielgud’s words, in *British Radio Drama 1922-1956*:

One of the greatest advantages open to the radio play was its capacity to create illusion: not the illusion of the stage play, depending upon the acceptance of a number of definite and traditional conventions, but an illusion as near absolute as made no matter. The radio play came to the listener [...] in the simplest domestic circumstances, told by voices unadorned.¹⁴

Vella Haber and Born embraced the magic and the illusion the radio play offered, and—being very conscious of their native language, Maltese—created an outlet for the infant Moviment tal-Malti [Maltese Language Movement] through the broadcast in Maltese of radio plays, and quiz programmes with an educational and historical approach to the history of Malta.

Vella Haber’s desire to explore writing for the radio derived from two sources: Val Gielgud’s seminal work *The Right Way to Radio Playwriting*, and Vella Haber’s own experiences when writing for the B Network of the Radio Rediffusion (Malta), which offered light entertainment in English and Maltese.¹⁵ Rediffusion began targeting more specific local audiences with in-house productions creating local content.¹⁶ In 1946-1947 Vella Haber would listen to the BBC radio drama and would frequently hear the name of Gielgud, assuming it was Sir John Gielgud. In 1948, Vella Haber wrote to Sir John Gielgud at the BBC in London asking him for a copy of *The Right Way to Radio Playwriting*, unaware that he had contacted the wrong brother. Sir John, however, passed on the letter to Val, the playwright and head of BBC sound drama, who in the end sent a copy of the book to Vella Haber.¹⁷ Arguably this initiated the first stage in the establishment of the Maltese doxa for dramatic writing.

Gielgud emphasized in the book the importance of the knowledge of the plot (narrative spine), structure, narrative, characters (cast), script length and script presentation and formatting.¹⁸

¹² Donald McWhinnie *The Art of Radio* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), p. 37.

¹³ Borg, p. 349.

¹⁴ Val Gielgud, *British Radio Drama 1922-1956* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1957), p. 39.

¹⁵ Toni Sant, *Rediffusion in Malta. A history Without Future* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2016), pp.107-108.

¹⁶ Sant, pp. 79-80.

¹⁷ Borg, p. 345.

¹⁸ Val Gielgud, *The Right Way to Radio Playwriting* (Kingswood, Surrey: Right Way Books, 1954), pp. 15-16 and pp. 20-22.

Additionally, Gielgud elucidated that every scene should have an introduction whether by dialogue, sound effects, music, silence, and acoustic spaces.¹⁹ Gielgud's book was not so much a revelatory one—Vella Haber's understanding the specificity of radio drama came from his own pioneering experiences writing dramatic literature for the B Network—but Gielgud's book was to serve as a confirmation of Vella Haber's self-taught doxa.²⁰ Furthermore, the period of Vella Haber's contribution ushered a discussion about the education of the Maltese radio drama scriptwriters, but it was limited to a small group of young writers of the Maltese Language Movement. Despite the fact he offered the screenwriting education to a small group, Vella Haber understood that education and collaboration are at the root of any success. With that in mind, Vella Haber organized the first-ever training programmes²¹ for members of the Movement the strongly believing that the success of a united nation rests on the knowledge of its own language and literature.²² Vella Haber's focused vision spearheaded the value of a nation becoming deeply conscious of its identity and its native language, with the radio storytelling slowly consolidating that consciousness. As Paul P. Borg puts it, 'He had in his mind this idea he called 'Malta' which, although stemming from a strictly socio-political, hence highly patriotic urge, he spread generously on all aspects of the discourse of Maltese life and the changes taking place'.²³

Vella Haber's first radio play was an adaptation of a short story by Temi Zammit, 'L-Gideb Għomru Qasir'/'Lies are Short-Lived', and was the first experience of the Maltese listening to their own literature in a technological setting, serving as a critique and simultaneously as a reflection of society.²⁴ Vella Haber was drawn to Zammit's short story because Zammit himself had endeavoured to document the Maltese traditional way of life: the distinct social structures, language, and livelihood of Malta at the turn of the twentieth century.²⁵ Zammit's short story inspired Vella Haber to adapt it for radio, giving it a new title of *L-Għaniqa ta' Wiżu/Louis' Goat* (1943). The radio play represents two seminal points: the beginning of a shared national experience and consciousness in Malta, and *Louis' Goat* being the first radio play ever written and broadcast in the Maltese language. This combination thereby ushered in a new era in Maltese storytelling.²⁶

The radio play itself is a straightforward narrative with five characters: Louis, farmer/goat herder (illiterate and uneducated); Grace, Louis' wife; Felix, a goat herder; Wiżu's son (nameless), and a village Police Sergeant. In brief, one day Louis' son, while herding his father's four goats,

¹⁹ Gielgud, *British Radio*, p. 36.

²⁰ Sant, p. 67 and p. 108.

²¹ Tony Carmelo Cutajar, *L-Istorja tal-radju drammi f'Malta/The History of the Radio Drama in Malta*, (Malta: Edizzjoni Studia, 1999), pp. 1-2.

²² Borg, p. 345.

²³ Paul P. Borg, email communication, 10 August 2018.

²⁴ Borg, p. 346.

²⁵ Borg, 10 August 2018.

²⁶ Borg, p. 346.

comes back home with one goat missing. Grace, Louis' wife, encourages Louis to report the theft to the police. Hesitant at first, Louis agrees and reports the theft. Once at the police station, Louis has trouble in communicating with the Police Sergeant because the latter uses farmers' jargon to describe the stolen goat, which the Police Sergeant is unable to understand as he is from the city. The play points to the distinct social structures and livelihoods at the time by placing the protagonist Louis, who is not only a goat-herder and farmer but illiterate and uneducated, at lowest rank in the social scale:

LOUIS -- It was beautiful young goat, one year old, tall and ruddy brown.

SERGEANT -- Slowly because I have to write it. Did you say brown?

LOUIS -- It's reddish-brown colour.

SERGEANT -- Then say red so that I can understand you.

LOUIS -- Because we are goat-herders, and this is how we understand it.

The exchange between Louis and the Police Sergeant reveals a clash of two worlds that pivots on the distinguishing attributes of the missing goat—the particular colour of the goat's coat 'xaqrija' [reddish brown], 'fartasa' [a doeling, young goat with no horns] and 'mejxa' [a goat with small ears], which only the goat-herders would be familiar with. The Police Sergeant, however, does not really attempt to enter the world of the goat-herders, instead diminishing its value by allocating less distinguishable features of the missing goat in the report:

SERGEANT -- Okay, I wrote a ruddy and red goat. What more?

LOUIS -- It has a small head.. it is a doeling and..

SERGEANT -- I'm losing my patience with you! Use words that I understand what you want to say.

LOUIS -- We are goat-herders, this is how we call it. Doeling because her head has no horns. It has small ears like children.

SERGEANT -- Christ. Okay, what more?²⁷

Once the report is written, the Police Sergeant asks Louis for his full name, his father's name, and his home address. It transpires that Louis does not know the name of his street and can only explain the whereabouts of his farmhouse. This is not unusual though, because farmers would orient themselves by referring to the topography and any visual landmarks:

SERGEANT -- tell me where you live.

LOUIS -- (quickly) past the reservoir, Sergeant... at the end of a square... under the niche!

SERGEANT -- (upset) You rascal! Why didn't you just say Reservoir Street? You had to come up with the reservoir and the niche instead!

LOUIS -- (stammering) Yes, yes... you are right, Sergeant, Re... ser... what did you say the name of my street was? I do not know how to write it, Sergeant!²⁸

Louis may be perceived as a simple person, but he is certainly not a fool. He is logical and succinct, clearly able to think on his two feet. This becomes clearer in the way he apprehends the thief of his goat:

LOUIS -- Just a minute, Felix! You have a ruddy there in the middle of the herd. Where did you get it? I didn't know you had this ruddy goat!

FELIX -- (thinks and stammers) that red goat you're talking about? I really can't remember. All have been mine for some time.

LOUIS -- (sternly) I tell you that that ruddy goat you didn't have a long time!

FELIX -- Don't talk nonsense. What are you on about?

²⁷ Borg, p. 359 and Temi Zammit 'L-Gideb Ghomru Qasir'/'Lies are Short-Lived', in *The Collected Short Stories of Sir Temi Zammit*, trans. by Godwin Ellul (Malta: Polidano Press, 1995), p. 20.

²⁸ Borg, p. 359-60, trans. by Romario Sciberras.

LOUIS -- I tell you, Felix! You don't even know what this goat looks like. I'll prove to you that you never inspected that goat thoroughly. Bring her here so that I cover her eyes.

FELIX -- Oh, come on! What is this all about?

LOUIS -- Pay attention. I covered her eyes. Are you looking?

FELIX -- So you covered the goat's eyes. So what?

LOUIS -- So now, tell me from which eye is the goat blind. Come on, tell me!

FELIX -- (unsure and confused) in the left eye.

LOUIS -- (sniggering) You guessed wrong, Felix.

FELIX -- How come, isn't it blind in the right eye?

LOUIS -- You said the left one!

FELIX -- (stammers) I don't know. I wanted to say right because I still remember the trouble it gave me to cure it!

LOUIS -- (sighs) is that right, Felix? As much as it troubled you to steal it from my son? This can actually see well from both eyes! Carry on going to work because that goat is mine!
(calling the goat)
Come ruddy, come.²⁹

And thus, Louis recovers his goat using his own intelligence despite being uneducated and illiterate.

The significance of the script is two-fold: its reliance on the screenwriting orthodoxy codified in Gielgud's book builds on the 'shared sense of knowing [...] without necessarily knowing why, nor without questioning it';³⁰ and this in turn permitted Vella Haber to construct a narrative that the new medium that demanded.

²⁹ Borg, pp. 360-61 and Zammit, pp. 22-23.

³⁰ Macdonald, p.10 and p. 58.

4.3 Wistin Born

In the 1950s, scriptwriting practices had taken a clearer direction and with clearer expectations from the radio playwrights. One of the key figures who contributed to the drafting of these rules was Father Wistin Born. Born continued the work of Vella Haber but unlike Vella Haber, Born wanted to entertain his audiences with light-hearted and sophisticated narratives, while targeting much wider circles—the general public.

Born was one of the most prolific radio drama series writers in the 1950s and 1960s. His radio drama was largely of highly patriotic but entertaining nature, bearing witness to his lively imagination, inspiring him to write about 1,200 episodes of his serials that were broadcast on Rediffusion. Born wrote *Il-Familja Maltija/A Maltese Life* in 1953, the first radio serial that made his reputation.³¹ He exhibited an ability for creating characters and placing them in compelling and often unusual, and sometimes humorous, situations. He had an exceptional talent for weaving some useful point or another in each of the episodes so that he could teach while entertaining. An example is the scene below, the opening scene from a later, unproduced script *Haddem Rasek u Imla Bwietek/Be Sharp and Get Rich* (1972).³² The scene reveals something of Malta's situation post-war and pre-Independence, which witnessed the great exodus of migrants in the late 1940s and early 1950s looking for better prospects in Australia and Canada:³³

(Occasional S.E. during this sequence: Upper Baracca atmosphere;³⁴ chattering of people. Children playing at some distance, hoots from ship or launch.)

Paul: Good Lord! What a fright you gave me, Fred. My shoulders dropped down with the jolt you gave me.

Fred: (laughing) I saw you lost in thoughts staring at the harbour and thought I'd give you a jolt.

Paul: And you did really jolt me. Don't do it again. Once is more than enough.

Fred: If only at least once I met you without you complaining. I bet that you were complaining to yourself before I even got near you.

³¹ Joseph Aquilina, 'Fr. Austin Born (1910-)', *The Times*, 1 August 1979, p. 5.

³² Mark Montebello, 'Ix-Xoghlijiet Mux Ippublikati ta' Born' [Unpublished Works of Born], in *Il-Kappillan ta' Malta/The Kappillan of Malta*, ed. by Mark Montebello, (Sliema, Malta: Il-Patrijiet Dumnikani Tas-Sliema, 2018), pp. 71-79, (p. 72).

³³ Russell King, 'Post-War Migration Pattern and Policies in Malta with Special Reference to Return Migration', in *European Demographic Information Bulletin*, 10. 3 (1979), 108-28, (p.113).

³⁴ A family-oriented atmosphere. Upper Baracca is a public garden located high on a bastion overlooking the Grand Harbour.

The four paragraphs reveal Born's ability for not only creating intriguing characters but placing them in seemingly mundane situations, which would reveal deeper meanings. The excerpt also reveals that Fred and Paul know each other very well, and that Paul is a thinker while Fred is a joker:

Paul: I was mulling things over not complaining to myself. I was looking at the harbour and asking myself why the people who grew up with me in the same house and share the same blood with me, once they exit this harbour and leave Malta, only once in a while they remember you by unloading their headaches and preoccupations on you.

Born was particularly aware of social issues and the intricate kinds of behaviour that reveal motives within one's personal experiences that encourage self-reflection. Within, or perhaps between the personal experience and self-reflection, Born plants important information.³⁵ For instance, the dialogue line 'once they exit this harbour and leave Malta' reveals emigration as a difficult moment in the post-war Malta:

Fred: Your words are too clever for me to understand them. I really don't know what you are trying to say.

Paul: Do you recall my brother, Eddie?

Fred: I do. We went to the same school. He moved to Australia many years ago.

Paul: Right after the war. He rarely contacts me but once a year. And now, all the sudden I am on his mind.

Fred: Don't tell me that he hit your sore point and asked you for money?

Paul: Are you trying to be funny? I must say, that was really a hurtful thing to say.

Fred: And that's why I said it. I know you really hate this kind of joke.

³⁵ Michael J. Schiavone and Louis J. Scerri, *Maltese Biographies of the Twentieth Century* (Malta: Publikazzjonijiet Indipendenza, 1997), p. 90.

[...]

Paul: Why don't we sit down on that bench over there
 and I will tell you why I am so upset?³⁶

The excerpt reveals an architecture of characters and action contained in a realistic setting. The Upper Barrakka (contemporary spelling) was very popular with Maltese families in 1970s. The scene located at the public garden with the panoramic view of the Grand Harbour and happy families contradicts the inner turmoil that Paul is going through. This is not only because Eddie, Paul's brother, seems to be taking advantage of Paul, but because Eddie emigrated to Australia and quite possibly Eddie was part of the child migration in line with the British policy and practice.³⁷ This renders Paul's revelation of 'he moved to Australia many years ago' and 'he rarely contacts me but once a year' more tragic, and one that many Maltese can relate to even today, making the narrative much more profound.

Born was a scriptwriter, but he was first and foremost an artist. He conceded that a scriptwriter has elements of commercial and business motives, but as an artist a scriptwriter must first and foremost satisfy himself: 'the greatest masterpieces are seldom [...] the expression of imposed ideas upon the artist, but the offspring of his individual mind'.³⁸ Like Vella Haber, he contributed to the education of radio scriptwriters by publishing in *The Critic* (a contemporary English-language arts magazine published in Malta) a series of short monthly instalments between 1956-1958 under the general title *The Art of the Radioplay*.³⁹ Born gave advice on scriptwriting practices, including story development, original plot creation, subject matter choices, character creations, drama location and dialogue. He made the average listener aware of the levels of difficulty the 'radioplay writer has before him [...] this fact escapes even some of the writers themselves. It is not easy at all to write a good worthwhile radioplay'.⁴⁰ Born also noted that writing radio drama was the process of 'finding the balance between craft and creativity'.⁴¹

Although he was quite clear that he favoured the 'natural born-writers', that is, the ones who possessed 'an inner disposition to writing morally and spiritually sound works', he recommended that scriptwriters stay away from 'religious colour' in their work. He believed that

³⁶ Wistin Born, *Haddem rasek u Imla Bwietek/Be Sharp and Get Rich*, radio script, trans. by Ivana Camilleri, pp. 1-2.

³⁷ David H. Plowman, 'A Fragment of the Maltese Exodus: Child Migration to Australia 1953-1965', *Journal of Maltese History*, 2.1 (2010), 1-20 (p. 19)

<<https://www.um.edu.mt/arts/history/jmh/docs/2010/backup-of-maltese-child-migration-to-australia-1953-1965-3.pdf>> [accessed 3 March 2019] and King, p. 113.

³⁸ Born, 3.1-3.3, p. 6.

³⁹ Sant, p.112.

⁴⁰ Born, 1.12, p. 9.

⁴¹ Born, 1.12, p. 9

any writer with mass audience reception in mind has a responsibility to stay unbiased⁴² and sincere in the storytelling.⁴³ The source of sincerity was two-fold: one that emerged from the message (the theme), and another that emerged from the characters' actions and behaviour in the story.⁴⁴ He pushed for an original idea, a novel idea, a fresh angle on a subject. He also touched upon writer's block and provided a reassuring thought: 'very often, the right inspiration takes a long time to shoot out. Even people gifted with a most prolific imagination, sometimes, must wait long days, weeks and even months for an inspiration which can be considered good enough to be developed into a play'.⁴⁵

Born insisted that part of a scriptwriter's education and training is reading and listening to as many good radio plays as possible. He claimed that reading 'the works of others, one will assimilate the formatting while reading a play, one can always study at leisure the disposition of words, lines, italics, punctuation, etc'.⁴⁶ Additionally, Born did his best to enlighten the scriptwriter that the art of dialogue is an art of artful deception. 'If dialogue is weak, the entire play falls flat and has to be declared unbroadcastable'.⁴⁷ Dialogue in the radio drama falls into the category of the spoken word and needs to learn by listening to radio plays.⁴⁸ With it comes the realization that dialogue is the key ingredient; Born warned that although the story, characterization, and sound effects on cue were very important, they were not enough. Training and refining one's skill in creating dialogue for a radio play speech, as much as for film dialogue, is an artful deception.⁴⁹ In a radio play 'the writer has to rely on his dialogue to bring out the character of each person appearing in the play [...] it can reveal much more than personal traits, it can also reveal the world, that is, dialogue plays an important part in the descriptive part'.⁵⁰

Born noted over sixty years ago that 'ideas give birth to ideas', and so scriptwriters must know the subject matter of the narratives they write, cultivate the need to know and learn continuously, never stop learning how to think, and write visually in order to master their verbal dexterity and find their voice: complex skills which allow one to tell a story in the most effective way, eliciting emotional and intellectual participation from the audience.⁵¹ Born had not forgotten about the audience. A writer sometimes must make an effort to find out what the general public wants. He admitted, however, that sometimes that was quite hard to discern. Again, even if the

⁴² Born, 1.12, p. 9.

⁴³ Born, 2.1, pp.12-13 (p.12).

⁴⁴ Born, 2.1, p.12.

⁴⁵ Born, 2.10-2.12, p. 5.

⁴⁶ Born, 2.5-2.6, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Born, 2.5, p. 6.

⁴⁸ Born, 2.5, p. 6.

⁴⁹ Born, 2.5-2.6, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Born, 2.7-2.8, p. 6.

⁵¹ Born, 2.2, p. 6.

audience knows what it wants, it may not be right. He believed that it strongly depended ‘on the culture of the public, especially in periods of what we might call artistic transitions’.⁵² In the very first instalment Born noted that, as with any craft, some writers have a talent and show potential, others have not. It is with these budding scriptwriters that Born wished to share his experiences of writing the radio drama. His advice was generic but insightful: a writer must think of himself, his public, the subject’s originality.⁵³

4.4 Cecil Satariano

Lastly, Cecil Satariano made a conscious effort in 1970s to share his film-making experiences with potential screenwriters and writer-directors, contributing thereby to the screenwriting doxa and film-making education. Satariano was first Maltese (amateur) film practitioner to gain international recognition in the 1960s and early 1970s.⁵⁴ His direction was good enough to earn him several awards in foreign film festivals for his short works such as *I’m Furious-Red!* (1971), *Giuseppi/Joseph* (1972), *The Beach* (1973), *Ilona* (1973), and *Katarin/Catherine* (1977). The films reveal a deep understanding of visual storytelling, and for this reason Satariano was urged by Cecil Turner (a book publisher) to commit his film-making experiences to paper, which Satariano eventually did in 1973 by writing *Canon Fire! The Art of Making Award-Winning Amateur Movies*.⁵⁵ In this book, Satariano shares with the reader the creative and practical processes in film-making. In the book’s introduction Tony Rose, the editor of *Movie Maker*, clarifies that Satariano’s work is not a text-book but an insight into ‘how a film-maker’s mind works and how through his treatment of the subject his selection of camera view-points, his way of handling actors and his editing, he seeks to guide the thoughts of his audience’.⁵⁶

Despite Rose’s observation, Satariano’s reflections on ‘selecting a subject’. His immediate advice is to look for a story that is simple and uncomplicated, one that lends itself to ‘purely visual terms’.⁵⁷ Satariano also suggests that the story should incorporate universal themes, which the audience can instantly recognize and relate. The film-maker gives the example of his first short film about a male voyeur, *I’m Furious-Red!* (1970) but also the theme of voyeurism which—according

⁵² Born, 3.4, p. 7.

⁵³ Born, 1.10, pp. 11-12.

⁵⁴ Malta had to wait forty years more before Maltese short film productions won a number of international awards: *The Maltese Fighter* (2014) and *Head* (2017).

⁵⁵ Cecil Satariano, *Canon Fire! The Art of Making Award-Winning Amateur Movies* (London: Bachman & Turner, 1973), p. 12.

⁵⁶ Tony Rose, ‘Introduction’, in *Canon Fire! The Art of Making Award-Winning Amateur Movies* (London: Bachman & Turner, 1973), pp. 9-10 (p. 10).

⁵⁷ Satariano, pp. 13-15.

to Satariano—is a theme ‘everybody understands and one that can be told visually.’⁵⁸ The short is a visual comedy, as Satariano refers to it, and although all Satariano’s shorts were shot in Malta, the films are ethnographic but with a universal appeal. He relied on film language to break linguistic barriers, and to allow his work to travel overseas. Indeed, Satariano never had a Maltese audience in mind, nor did he perceive his films as Maltese films. On the contrary, he wanted to break into the international market. He believed that Maltese talent exists but wanted international recognition. Hence, most of his short narratives contained no dialogue, except for *Katarin /Catherine* (1977)—discussed in the next section—which was immediately dubbed into English, erasing any linguistic nuances in the process.⁵⁹ The following scene is an extract from *I’m Furious-Red! Representing an ethnographic treatment of the narrative*:

EXT. MALTA - PARK - AFTERNOON (1970)

Our Man, mid 30s, dark sunglasses, a cap, green sweater, binoculars disguise of a birdwatcher) walks briskly through a park looking around. Frustration and impatience on his face.

Suddenly, our Man spots a young couple on the grass kissing.

Our Man stops abruptly. Focused sadness on his face. Takes a deep breath, fixes his cap and walks away briskly. Now a silhouetted figure against a sun.

Moments later, something catches his attention. He slows down.

Our Man’s POV

Another Peeping Tom eyeing from behind a tree the kissing couple.

Our Man seems to feel discomfort, as if he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. Our Man sighs and walks away.

Moments later, spots something else. He becomes alert. His body tenses. Ducks down and hides behind a tree. Takes off his sunglasses. Intense focus on his face.

Our MAN’S POV

A pair of women’s naked legs (mid-thigh down) protrude from the grass.

⁵⁸ Satariano, p. 15.

⁵⁹ Charlie Cauchi, ‘Katarin’, in *World Film Locations Malta*, ed. by Jean Pierre Borg and Charlie Cauchi (Intellect Books: Bristol, 2015), pp.98-99 (p. 98).

Our Man crouches down quickly. Increasing tension and excitement on his face. Licks his lips.

Suddenly the girl sits up. It startles Our Man.

The girl smiles at someone we cannot see. She is not alone.

Our Man panics. Tries to make himself invisible behind the tree.

At first chance, Our Man tiptoes hurriedly away.⁶⁰

The visual language that Satariano was referring to brings out the protagonist's loneliness; a man shy of women who thinks they are unattainable to him. In order to establish this psychological deficiency, Satariano devised an ironic situation in a park with a voyeur disguised as a bird watcher to narrate in purely visual terms a universal human fear. In fact, Satariano has successfully elicited a feeling of empathy that requires no words to be understood.

Satariano also used elements of traditional Maltese culture, lifestyle, and folklore as the backdrop to his short films; elements such as social class differences coded by the visual representations of the *festas*, the Maltese physiognomy, the folklore song *ghana*, the rural and urban landscapes, and the traditional headdress, *faldetta*, worn by some of his female characters. This is particularly evident in *Katarin*. In today's world and with today's sense of gender equality, *Katarin* is a difficult film to watch. The official synopsis summarizes the short as "the story of a sensuous Mediterranean girl, Katarin, and the seductions and sexual harassments she endures".⁶¹ The story, in other words, is a story of sexual awakening of a 15-year-old country girl and the contrasts between the simplicity and innocence of rural life and the "modern" world of that time.⁶² In today's world, however, the reception of the short would be quite different. The story narrates an erotic fantasy of men older than the Lolita-like character Katarin is made to symbolize.⁶³ She is presented as an innocent yet seductive, intrigued yet disapproving, inquisitive yet distant, virginal yet willing female character.

Katarin /Catherine (1977), on the other hand, while bearing narrative similarities to *I'm Furious-Red* (especially the element of stalking with sexual intent), does contain dialogue:

⁶⁰ *I'm Furious-Red*, dir. Cecil Satariano (1970), MODS Collective Meet Cecil Satariano, St James Cavalier Cinema, 15 April 2018.

⁶¹ Cecil Amato Gauci, *Iċ-Ċinematografija ta' Cecil Satariano* 28 August (circa 1990).

⁶² Alfred Stagno Navarra 'An Evening with Cecil Satariano', *Malta Independent* 14 June 2009 <http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2009-06-14/news/an-evening-with-cecil-satariano-226256/> [accessed 7 May 2018].

⁶³ Sarah Chircop, 'The Cinema of Cecil Satariano', *The Treasures of Malta*, 72, 24.3, (2018), p.26.

EXT. VILLAGE - MALTA - DAY (1970s)

A girl sings a lullaby.

Kelinu, a hunting gun flung over the shoulder, 40s, listens to the lullaby intently. A small cigar hangs from his mouth. He grins as he begins his walk towards the lullaby.

[...]

EXT. ROOF - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Kelinu rest his head against a wall. Takes along drag, arranges his cap. A slight grin at his thoughts. He is clearly looking at something he likes him.

KELINU'S POV:

A young woman, still singing, her back to us, long brown hair, hanging laundry on the washing line, unaware she is no longer alone.

KELINU
You look lovely, Katarin.

Katarin turns around. She's surprised but not displeased. Her see-through dress reveals her young breasts. Kelinu inches his way towards Katarin.

KATARIN
Did you catch anything today?

Katarin smiles sweetly but somewhat seductively. Kelinu grins.

KELINU
Nothing so far.

Hope in his voice as he scans Katarin's body. Still not done hunting. Katarin giggles.

Kelinu looks again at her breasts and suddenly lunges forward.

But Katarin is faster. Dodges him.

KATARIN
(now all serious)
Now don't you start, Kelinu.

Her discomfort suddenly turns into laughter as she retreats inside a room.

Kelinu runs after her. Katarin slams the door in his face laughing. It seems it is s a game they played before.⁶⁴

The above excerpts show how Satariano understands cinematic storytelling practice that shifts from using images only to partly relying on the dialogue. Here Satariano ushers a different take on visual storytelling contributing further to a doxa that then becomes predominant in 1970s film-making.

4.5 Film and Television Writing in Malta in the 1970s: An Overview

The pioneering work of Vella Haber, Born and Satariano helped to create a Maltese screenwriting doxa that influenced subsequent writing for film and television. For the reasons discussed below, very few Maltese feature films were produced prior to the early 2000s; writing for television, on the other hand, started to develop significantly in the 1960s, and in the 1970s the creative output produced by the early television writers was of a high standard. Indeed, it is notable that television writing in this period exhibited a generally superior storytelling quality to that subsequently produced in the succeeding decades, from the 1980s through to the 2010s.

There are two main reasons for this. The first is that in the 1960s there was an important shift in Malta's cultural history, as the Maltese started to diversify their economy from a military basis to a service- and market-oriented paradigm. The nineteenth-century witnessed the presence in Malta of the Italian Risorgimento exiles who spread the ideals of nationalism and romanticism among Maltese writers, politicians and intellectuals. With their ideas on freedom from foreign dominion, on fraternity, nationalism, equality and all those values associated with the concept of 'Religio et Patria' that was discussed earlier in Chapter 2 of the present thesis,⁶⁵ these exiles helped to ingrain this romantic sensibility within Maltese culture. During the 1960s, however, Malta's traditional hierarchical and paternalistic paradigms—the patronage system inherited from the Order of the Knights St John of Jerusalem and continued by the British Crown—and the associated classical and romantic literary approaches were largely abandoned.

Malta's proclamation of political independence from Britain in 1964 ushered in new concepts for the democratization of culture, mirroring developments in other countries. Since Malta was no longer a colony but a country, its political independence became a precondition for the

⁶⁴ *Katarin /Catherine* (1977), dir. Cecil Satariano, online video recording, YouTube, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqILSPsvaWg>> [accessed 20 August 2020] (00:01:10-00:02:05).

⁶⁵ Cassola, (para.12 of 73).

development of a national identity.⁶⁶ Within such a context, cultural heritage emerged as a crucially important asset in developing the formation of this new identity. Cultural policy finally gained its own profile when a Minister for Education, Culture and Tourism was appointed after the first elections in 1966; this was accompanied by a significant shift towards local production on television and radio.⁶⁷ Despite the fact that the television practitioners were trained in scriptwriting by the BBC, they were not fully fledged courses (running for a maximum of three months).⁶⁸ Most of what happened in Malta was due to the talent, ingenuity and fascination with the new medium by the Maltese television pioneers such as Albert Marshall, Mario Azzopardi—not to be confused with the film-maker Mario Philip Azzopardi—and Lino Farrugia.⁶⁹

In the period around Malta's Independence from the British Crown, then, Malta underwent a cultural renewal led by a new generation of writers and intellectuals who had been well aware of their country's entrapment: that is, of the population's difficulty in accepting itself as a Mediterranean people, as much culturally Christian European as North African or Semitic, with its own local language and ethnology. During the late 1960s and early 70s, the *Moviment Qawmien Letterarju/ The Literary Awakening* (set up in 1967)—a broad and eclectic group of Maltese writers—took the first energetic steps towards overcoming the profound identity crisis that had quickly set in following the advent of self-government. This initial *épanouissement* or 'flowering' was double-edged: not only did authors such as Mario Azzopardi, Victor Fenech, Albert Marshall and Frans Sammut seek to break away from colonialism in their writing, but they were a lot more concerned with leaving behind the late Romantic period, steeped in gratuitous Catholic patriotism and anti-Moslem sentiment, and created their own discourse.⁷⁰ The newly found independence, therefore, witnessed a shift away from romanticism and a dive into a new reality, affording the creation of daring and risqué narratives, hence the cinematic expression of this newly found freedom mediated through *F'Baħar Wieħed/ In the Same Sea* (1977), *Madonna ta-Ċoqqa/Madonna of the Hood* (1978-1979), and *Gagġa/The Cage* (1971).⁷¹

In my interview with Albert Marshall, he refers to the new generation of writers and intellectuals (Albert Marshall, Mario Azzopardi, and Lino Farrugia) as 'cultural practitioners'. Their aim was to introduce to the Maltese television audience the world's classics, such as *The Judge* (1967) by John Mortimer, *Crime on Goat Island* (1946) by Ugo Betti, and *Hedda Gabler* (1891) by

⁶⁶ Peter Serracino Inglott, 'Maltese Literature in the Sixties', *Hyphen*, 1.3 (1978), 44-49 (p. 44) <<https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/20153/1/Maltese%20Literature%20in%20the%20Sixties.pdf>> [accessed 10 August 2021].

⁶⁷ The Council of Europe/ERICarts "Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe, 9th edition", 2008 <<http://miris.eurac.edu/mugs2/do/blob.html?type=html&serial=1223974778670>>

⁶⁸ Charles Stroud 19 April 2018, Lino Farrugia 28 September 2018, Albert Marshall, 18 July 2018.

⁶⁹ Rachel Vella in discussion with researcher, 18 July 2018.

⁷⁰ Antoine Cassar, 'Malta's Jonah Complex', *Transcript*, 38, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 2009.

⁷¹ Mario Philip Azzopardi, in discussion with researcher, 15 December 2020.

Henrik Ibsen.⁷² (Unfortunately, due to the fact that the archives at the Public Broadcasting Services have been undergoing a digitization process since 2014, none of the works cited by Marshall are available for me to cross-reference.)

The cultural paradigm shift described above leads us to the second reason for the superiority of the early television storytelling in the post-Independent Malta of the 1960s and 1970s, which is that the television writers' knowledge was grounded in literature and theatre. These 'cultural practitioners' have become pioneer audio-visual writers while drawing inspiration also from published Maltese literary classics by Ġuże Diacono (author of *Madonna ta-Ċoqqa/Madonna of the Hood*), Ġuże Chetcuti, Oreste Calleja, Alfred Sant, Francis Sammut (author of *Il-Ġagġa*) and Francis Ebejer.⁷³ It allowed them to create neo-realist narratives, which reflected the shared national consciousness and ongoing identity formation. They created quality narratives while providing a clear picture of the Maltese society affected by the political-religious conflict, scrutinizing the fundamental elements that constitute the Maltese fabric: the Church, the Political Parties and the Family, and the implications of these social institutions for an individual in post-Independent Malta.

These concerns are strongly evident in three screen texts written in the 1970s: the television series *F'Baħar Wieħed/ In the Same Sea* (1977), which appears to be a family drama, but in reality comments on social class differences; another television series *Madonna ta-Ċoqqa/Madonna of the Hood* (1978-1979), which describes the Church's ideology as one of greed and power opposed to the individual; and finally the first Maltese feature film *Gaġġa/The Cage* (1971), which offers a study of the political and religious fanaticism in Malta in the 1960s.

F'Baħar Wieħed/In One Sea (1977) narrates a story about two families coming from two different social classes. In the foreground, the series focuses on a love story between John (a law student and a magistrate's son) and Mary (a teacher and a pastry maker's daughter). In the background, the narrative reveals social inequalities and social manipulation in the post-Independent Malta.⁷⁴ In the scene below, John is queried by his parents, Lewis and Dora and his Aunt Lina, about his romantic plans concerning Mary:

INT. MAGISTRATE'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY (1971)

DORA
(to John)
What did you say? Her father is

(CONTINUED)

⁷² Albert Marshall, in discussion with researcher, 18 July 2018.

⁷³ Rachel Vella, 2013, p.251 and Marshall, 18 July 2018.

⁷⁴ Lino Farrugia in discussion with researcher, 25 September 2018.

DORA (CONT'D)
 a pastry maker? Have you lost
 your mind?

The class antagonism is quite pronounced here: Dora is implying that the pastry maker will bring shame and dishonour on Dora's family.

LINA
 (interjects)
 Don't you dare bring her here!

Lina looks at her husband, Lewis.

LINA (CONT'D)
 Aren't you going to say anything?

LEWIS
 You are perfectly right...

JOHN
 (interjects)
 Didn't I hear you, dad
 say many times that we are
 the same in this world? That we
 are all in the same boat?

John inherited his father's logic, but the father is not allowed to voice his opinion. For Dora and Lina, money and status are much more important than love:

LEWIS
 Yes, you did, and you are right.

LINA
 But it doesn't mean that you
 have to get involved
 with a pastry maker's daughter!

DORA
 God only knows how she much she
 reeks of cheese and anchovies!

JOHN
 Funny coming from you.
 Isn't it the first thing that eat
 at a wedding or a party?!

While John has managed to put aside the closed mentality of his parents and aunt, he is trying to establish relationships beyond those of social class. The chasm between the high and low classes is difficult to bridge. The possibility of social mobility is ill perceived in the post-Independent Maltese society, since the long tradition of the Knights could not be eradicated overnight. John, on the other hand, sees this as an opportunity for reconciliation of the classes. The scene continues:

LINA
(appeasing)
John, can't you wait a little longer before meeting Mary's parents and before inviting them over? Who knows, perhaps you'll change your mind and break it off.

[...]

LINA
Try to understand what position you have put us in in society. Don't be selfish and think of yourself only!

DORA
Such a disgrace! I never expected it!

Lino Farrugia, a theatre and television director, in his conversation with me, confides that in Malta 'you are defined by our birthplace and not the place we live in. I realized I was born a villager and a villager I still was.'⁷⁵ One might argue that this statement represents almost a synopsis of *F'Baħar Wieħed/In One Sea*:

LINA
We are not really against Mary, you know. More or less she knows her place in society so I don't think she will embarrass us, but her mother and father on the other hand...⁷⁶

The scene summarizes the self-perception of the Maltese society of the time, simultaneously revealing the still present social restrictions, reinforced class division, and individual struggles in

⁷⁵ Farrugia, p. 9.

⁷⁶ Lino Grech, *F'Baħar Wieħed / In One Sea*, episode 1 season 1, 1976, shooting script, pp. 5-6.

Malta in the 1970s,⁷⁷ which Mintoff fought against in the post-Independent Malta by narrowing the economic gaps between the upper and working classes.⁷⁸

Madonna ta-Ċoqqa/Madonna of the Hood (1978-79) portrays a traditional community where the Church is represented as a body that neglects the needs of the community and as not meeting those of the Church itself. The television drama offers a study of the religious fanaticism in Malta in the 1960s and provides a social commentary on the Church's double standards and greed, an audacious cinematic expression due its direct criticism of the Church in the post-Independent Malta when the political power of the Church was still significant. The television series is also quite notorious for a very suggestive scene between a young woman, Rita and a priest, Fr Marjanu, that resulted in the director, Albert Marshall and his wife, Jane Marshall, who played Rita, having to leave Malta because of the perceived audacity and blasphemy that the scene suggested. They did not return until 1997.⁷⁹

There are two interconnected reasons for this reaction on the part of audiences. Firstly, media literacy in the general population in Malta in 1970s was underdeveloped, and the naïve inability of the audience to discern fictionalized events and characters from real-life happenings led them to believe that Jane Marshall, as a real-life person (not an actor), did commit a sin with a priest.⁸⁰ But the naïveté of this perception is inseparable from the second, broader point that the Maltese screen texts of this period had a strong reality effect in the ways in which it presented contemporary social concerns. *Madonna ta-Ċoqqa/Madonna of the Hood* dramatises a transitional confrontation between traditional Church values and social realism, especially in the comparatively daring and risqué narratives involving sexuality that Marshall wanted to share with a Maltese audience that unfortunately was not yet ready for such material in this transitional phase.

Marshall seems to have been seeing an educational role for realistic television drama comparable to that previously seen in other countries, for example in the British director Ken Loach's films such as *Cathy Come Home* (1966). As for the previously mentioned social commentary, the scene below dramatizes the greed of Father Rafel and the justification he presents for taking over a field (church property) from an underprivileged farmer, Randu, a devout Catholic, who has been working the field and paying rent for it for many years. Father Rafel's plan is to rent the field to someone who can generate a bigger profit for the Church:

⁷⁷ Rachel Vella, pp. 113-15.

⁷⁸ 'Malta: History and Background', (para. 3 of 8).

⁷⁹ Albert Marshall, in discussion with researcher, 20 July 2018

⁸⁰ Jane Marshall, interview, *Teledrammi: Nostalgija u Tifkiriet/Teledramas: Nostalgia and Memories*, documentary, DVD, 2019.

INT. CHURCH - DAY (1978)

In the church. FR RAFEL and FR MARJANU are doing the necessary jobs in the church and quarrelling at the same time.

[...]

FR RAFEL

And aren't there people who need our help? Isn't there always something to attend to? And we don't have any money!

FR MARJANU

(exasperated)

And is that right? We don't have any money and so the Randu family must pay?

FR MARJANU realizes that there is no hope that he and FR RAFEL will ever agree on this one. Silence.

FR RAFEL

Then there is Our Lady.

The camera zooms on the statue of Our Lady of Sorrows in its niche, at the moment draped with a velvet cloak.

FR RAFEL

I've been promising her beautiful cloak for ages-as she deserves.

His eyes lit up as he stops doing what he was doing and turns to look at Our Lady.

FR MARJANU

Our Lady needs nothing for Herself!

FR RAFEL

Our Lady needs nothing for Herself
But that doesn't mean we shouldn't give Her what She deserves.
When I realized that the lease of his ground rent was going to expire-when I realized it-
I promised Our Lady that I will drape Her with a beautiful cloak made of brocade and a golden crown decorated with jewels.

He looks at Her ecstatically.

FR MARJANU

But do you really believe that
Our Lady expects gold and silver
from you?

[...]

FR RAFEL

They got what they wanted from it. [the farmer]
Now, we've got someone who is ready
to pay thousands for it.

The field was the only source of income for the farmer and the screen text condemns the extravagant wealth of the Church as contrasted with the poverty of its congregation; this is what renders the narrative powerful and significant. The two characters of Fr Marjanu and Fr Rafel represent different ideologies, the progressive and liberal thinking of Fr Marjanu clashing with the traditional and outdated thinking of Rafel.⁸¹

FR MARJANU does not react, he repeats.

FR RAFEL (CONT'D)

Thousands!

He waits in vain for FR MARJANU to react. He continues.

FR RAFEL (CONT'D)

Can we refuse all that money?!
Don't you realize how much good
we can do with it?

FR MARJANU

(ironically)

A cloak for the statue.⁸²

The two television dramas, written in the style of neo-realism, reflected the difference between the social classes, the difference in morality in the formation of national consciousness offering a reflection on Maltese self-representation and the way, sometimes, the audience would react to this.

Although this section has so far discussed television drama, it is important to mention *Gaġġa /The Cage* (1971)—a full feature film—since the three directors (Lino Farrugia, Albert Marshall, and Mario Philip Azzopardi) not only worked together, but were the products of the same

⁸¹ Vella, pp. 153 and 212-15.

⁸² *Madonna ta-Ċoqqa/Madonna of the Hood*, screenwork.

socio-political environment in the newly found era of independence. The three directors sought to create avant-garde narratives in a nascent television industry and a non-existent film industry. The newly found freedom, as Marshall explains, included everything that the ‘Maltese condition’ reflected, particularly the cultural aspect:

it [the culture] seeps into your identity, your writing, your opus because essentially, we are cultural products, not necessarily articulation of branch of art, but also as citizens, and as citizens we need to rely heavily on our indigenous culture. Of course, we are a mixed race, colonialism exposed us to British influences in all aspects of life and joining the EU, whether we like to admit or not, also impacted on the cultivation of a national identity particularly in spite of all that for the tiny island like Malta we still survived culturally and terms of national and cultural identities that’s because our hybridity is a plus not a minus. Stuart Hall makes is clear that hybrids are much better off than pure breeds.⁸³

Discussing *Gagga/The Cage* here is important since the story pivots on the conflict between Dom Mintoff (Prime Minister of Malta at them time, 1955-1958) and the British Government in the 1950s, and the political-religious question that ensued: who should govern in Malta—the Government elected by the people, or the Catholic hierarchy?⁸⁴ The film, therefore, portrays life in the 1960s before independence, when Malta was blinded by both religious and political fanaticism. It is a story which proposes that instead of bringing inspiration, religion brings oppression; but the screenwork also portrays social, political and class divisions.⁸⁵

EXT. STREET - DAY

A car full of young men, one of them waving a labourite flag, drive through the streets chanting ‘Malta Labour Party’
The Parish Priest walks immersed in a discussion with two young men.

The car pulls over right next the Parish Priest.

CENSU

We heard you’ve become a political candidate, Reverend Father, is that so?

The Parish Priest keeps on walking unperturbed.

⁸³ Marshall, 18 July 2018.

⁸⁴ Stephanie Farrugia, ‘A Translation of Frans Sammut’s “Il-Gagga”’ (unpublished master thesis, University of Malta, 2014), p. 5.

⁸⁵ Mario Philip Azzopardi director’s commentary < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_J52o68t8uE>

CENSU
 (mocking)
 Vote number 1 for the Parish Priest!
 He'll increase the pocket money for widows,
 old people and holy masses.

The Parish Priest reacts to this comment. Turns around and walks to Censu.

CENSU
 Shall we ever see you as Prime Minister,
 Father? Turn will come and don't forget
 to add something to enrich your pockets.

The Parish Priest looks at them sternly. Unimpressed Censu drives off chanting 'Malta Labour Party'.⁸⁶

The directors of these three screenworks represented the experimental narratives very much in the vein of Italian neorealism, combined with Ingmar Bergman's restrictive and minimalist aesthetic.⁸⁷ The three narratives, particularly *Madonna ta-Ċoqqa/Madonna of the Hood* and *Gagġa/The Cage*, dealt with the dominant socio-political concerns of the period, reflecting Mintoff's opposition to the Roman Catholic Church and the policies he initiated to restrict the Church's role and curtail its influence, while setting up a network of social protection and fairer opportunities.

4.6 The Decline of Maltese Television Screenwriting

Although most of the attention of the Literary Movement of the 1960s in Malta was dedicated to the theatre, it did contribute to the quality of the early television drama, including the involvement of the 'cultural practitioners'.⁸⁸ With the closure of the drama department at the TVM experimental storytelling ceased,⁸⁹ and in its place, the audience witnessed the emergence of soap operas in the 1980s. The deregulation of the media in the 1990s ushered in an era that relied heavily on advertising and welcoming anyone who thought they could write.⁹⁰ The closure of the drama department at the Broadcasting Authority was caused by a number of converging factors, but the most important ones were that the drama producers (Albert Marshall, Charles Stroud, Lino

⁸⁶ Mario Philip Azzopardi, *Gagġa /The Cage*, feature film, 00:10:27-00:11:11.

⁸⁷ Marshall, 18 July 2018.

⁸⁸ Marshall, 18 July 2018.

⁸⁹ Lino Farrugia, discussion with the researcher 25 September 2018 and Marshall.

⁹⁰ Vella, 2013, 252-53.

Farrugia) moved on to other opportunities and that the disagreements between the Nationalist Party and the Labour Party adversely affected the Authority. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Maltese public service broadcaster struggled to widen its market share because its main revenue was derived from advertising and not through Government funds or licence fees.⁹¹ According to Joyce Grech, this new situation is responsible for creating additional pressure on television stations to create content that is interesting to advertisers, not the audience. Grech claims that stakeholders would be of opinion that culture is a niche market and not interesting to the advertisers.⁹²

As discussed in Chapter 6, this had a terrible effect on the quality of the content, and of course, on the writing itself. Franco Rizzo, a Maltese film critic and videographer based in Seoul, in 2014 shared his thoughts on the quality of the television drama on his personal blog (now defunct): ‘Television storytelling has regressed to, and not progressed from, the overly melodramatic and the highly ludicrous. Maltese television drama painfully lags behind Maltese music, literature, and theatre’⁹³. Mark Doneo, a Maltese scriptwriter and writer/director, shares that:

the poor basic storytelling that still plagues local productions [...] that when it comes to, creativity and technical excellence, we’ve turned the clock backwards yet again [...] if I strip everything away and convince myself that everything is being done properly, I still can’t fathom or accept why so many dramas take ages to say whatever they have to say. You watch an entire episode, and you learn nothing of the story. It’s either just exposition or filling up time.⁹⁴

Antonella Axisa, a television and film actor, agrees with Doneo:

we still lack good TV writers who can weave a good thick plot in the style of foreign TV series. Our TV drama is relatively young when compared to other countries [...] and I don’t think it has reached the levels of American, British or even Italian dramas (to give a geographically closer comparison). The comparison might not be a fair one given that local writers do keep in mind their production limitations when they write because most times they are also the producers - and these limitations can be financial, lack of locations (this is a real problem in daily soap operas because they use their own houses or friends’ homes to film).⁹⁵

⁹¹ Spiteri, p. 102.

⁹² Joyce Grech, discussion with the researcher, 1 June 2018.

⁹³ Mark Doneo, interview with Teodor Reljić ‘I can’t stomach more than five minutes of Maltese TV’, *Maltatoday*, 11 November 2014

<https://www.maltatoday.com/mt/lifestyle/television/45992/i_cant_stomach_more_than_five_minutes_of_maltese_tv#.YRPSxPLivIU> [accessed 1 March 2016] (para.15 and 16 of 30).

⁹⁴ Doneo (para.15 and 16 of 30).

⁹⁵ Antonella Axisa, email communication 16 October 2017.

The Broadcasting Authority is aware of these shortcomings in writing and training. In 2008, the Authority issued a circular to the local television stations reflecting on the poor quality of the screenplays, referring to them as ‘amateurish’ and ‘mediocre’, abounding with contradictions and superficial narratives.⁹⁶

In 2019, almost ten years later, the problems still persist. The 2019 Advisory Committee report lists ten recommendations, but I shall examine (in Chapter 6) only those recommendations that are relevant to this research, namely the quality of the screenplays, the education of the screenwriters, and the funding available to the production houses.

4.7 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter is to examine the screenwriting orthodoxy for television and film and its historical development in Malta, beginning with the key figures how took it upon themselves to understand new medium that was introduced to the Maltese audiences in 1947 and 1960s.

The chapter also looked at the training and education of screenwriters in Malta which is indebted to radio drama and to the pioneering work of three key figures: Kelinu Vella Haber, Wistin Born, and Cecil Satariano. It then turns to television and film writing in the 1970s, arguing that this was in part shaped by a neo-realist sensibility inherited from the aforementioned pioneers and from other literary figures in Malta. The chapter then proceeds to argue that there was a marked decline in the standard of Maltese scriptwriting from the 1980s through to the 2010s, occasioned in part by political changes that resulted in a greater emphasis being placed on advertising, commercial opportunities and tourism, which are visible in many of the screenplays, teleplays and screen texts of this period that is discussed in Chapter 5.

⁹⁶ Broadcasting Authority Annual Report 2008 < <https://parlament.mt/media/64464/3548.pdf> > [accessed 20 September 2021].

CHAPTER 5 – Location as Part of Storytelling and Location Marketing

5.1 Introduction

Landscapes, whether real or imagined, play an important role in cinematic storytelling and screen productions. Academic research into film and television drama locations and settings can be based on textual elements, but they can also reveal the aesthetic and economic values of the production. The general aim in the locations is that off-screen factors influence and inform the way location features are displayed and received. Off-screen factors include aspects of: (1) production facilities, studios and local professionals; (2) local funding systems and screen industry strategies; (3) the actual places used, including their historical and physical character; and (4) the extent to which the places and film locations are known and promoted as tourist destinations. The on-screen features encompass various categories of setting: from urban/rural places, architecture and design, and climate and weather conditions, to shore/island/inland settings and infrastructure.¹

The use of locations in the industry has adopted a two-pronged approach: from the location as a place in which the actual story takes place and is filmed, to location placements, in which cities, nations, islands, destinations, and companies use to brand themselves and ‘target their core markets’.² While the former includes ‘local colour’—landscapes, climate, mood, and lighting—the latter refers to the branding and marketing strategies by the stakeholders, that is, the companies, governments, and nations.³

Susanne Eichner and Anne Marit Waade argue local colour can be located at three different levels: (1) on the level of representation as part of an overall narrative and aesthetic strategy that produces structures of appeal for the audiences; (2) local colour can be located within the frame of production, regulations policy that stages the general precondition of cultural products; (3) locality is regarded as commodity and cultural consumption (e.g. branding, tourism, investments).⁴ In the case of the Maltese landscape, Malta-specific visual articulation is mediated through the island’s characteristic cliffs, beaches, climate, natural harbours, forts, fortifications, palaces,

¹ Kim Toft Hansen and Anne Marit Waade, *Locating Nordic Noir from Beck to The Bridge* (Cham: Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 10.

² Sue Beeton *Aspects of Tourism: Film-Induced Tourism* (Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto: Channel View Publications 2005), p. 8.

³ Hansen and Waade, *Locating Nordic*, p. 32.

⁴ Susanne Eichner and Anne Marit Waade, ‘Local Colour in German and Danish Television Drama: Tatort and Bron// Broen’, *Global Media Journal* (German Edn) 5.1 (2015), 1-20 (p. 2) <https://www.db-thueringen.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/dbt_derivate_00031988/GMJ9_Eichner%20Waade_final.pdf> [accessed 12 May 2022]

temples, and churches that are applied in the discussed screenworks as an integral part of storytelling and location marketing.

This Chapter thus examines screen texts representing Malta as a place in which indigenous film and television narratives are told and situated, and Malta as *location placement*, that is, as branding, particularly of interest to screen tourism, which in 2019 attracted 2% of tourists, with 10.8% choosing Malta because of the island's culture.⁵ Just over one hundred years ago Malta's appearance on the screen was mainly influenced by its strategic geo-political position in the Mediterranean and its status as part of the British Crown. Malta thus featured in a number of screen productions which focused on the military operations, particularly those associated with the First World War and the Second World War.⁶

The thesis's main focus remains Malta's growing awareness of being cinematically present as a nation reflecting its identity, culture and cultural heritage, and language, whereby 'the people of a nation are reminded of their ties with one another and with the nation's history and traditions, and those people are invited to recognise themselves as national subjects, distinct from people of other nations'.⁷

5.2 Location as a Part of Storytelling and the Local Colour

Some narratives sometimes use locations that are described as characters, as if they were protagonists and individuals playing the role of the place in characterological terms. This does not include a fictional city like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), but real and actual cities such Rome, Lodon, Hong Kong, Rio De Janeiro, Baltimore in found in Roberto Rossellini's *Roma Città Aperta* (1945), Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), Patrick Keller's *London* (1994), Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000), Fernando Meirelles' *Cidade de Deus* (2002), *The Wire* (2002-2008) the 'city as character'⁸—to emphasise that the locations are far more than pure backdrops and settings for a story, but rather contribute in essential ways to the narrative itself such as the imageries, the sounds and plots of the narrative, and the urban landscape.⁹ The 'city as character' in Maltese productions is Valletta, the capital of Malta, which is also one of Malta's cinematic

⁵ Malta Tourism Authority <<https://www.mta.com.mt/en/file.aspx?f=34248>> [accessed 30 October 2020], p. 12 and p. 13.

⁶ Jean Pierre Borg and Charlie Cauchi, 'Introduction', in *World Film Location: Malta*, ed. by Jean Pierre Borg and Charlie Cauchi (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2015), p. 5 (p. 5).

⁷ Andrew Higson, *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking Since the 1990s* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), p. 89.

⁸ Todd, Sodano, 'It was TV: Teaching HBO's *The Wire* as a Television Series, in *The Wire in the College Classroom: Pedagogical Approaches in the Humanities*, ed. by Karen Dillon and Naomi Crummey (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004), pp. 7–31 (p. 22).

⁹ Sodano, 'It was TV', p.29.

landmarks. Audrey Brincat Dalli in the television series *Strada Stretta/Strait Street* (2015-2017) effectively integrates the urban landscapes of Valletta into the narrative as ‘an aesthetic textual strategy’ to frame the television drama’s place and space by locating the main plot in an iconic street in Valletta, Strait Street:

EXT. VALLETTA - DAY

INSERT: 2014

We are in Strada Stretta, Valletta.
[...]

Old run-down doors, some pigeons, a cat taking a nap in a corner of the street, run down signs where once bars flourished, faint sounds in the background of a buzzing city close by but not close enough to disturb its present state.¹⁰

The scene is compared a later scene when we move from the contemporary Valletta to the post-war Valletta of 1957 examining its visual, sensory but also historical experience providing a visual archive of the location:

INT. VALLETTA - DAY - FLASHBACK

INSERT: Strada Stretta, Valletta, September 1957.

Still daylight, late afternoon, and Strada Stretta is already buzzing as the Mecca of culture, music, entertainment, and prostitution.

The street is filled with sailors, women, and musicians.¹¹

As noted previously, both excerpts reveal the street to be part an integral part of the story but also use it to communicate culture and heritage, while commenting and perhaps negotiating societal discourses. Another screen text that uses city as a character, that is my own screenplay for *The Maltese Fighter*, whereby a city of man-made cubic fortifications and walls is juxtaposed with

¹⁰ Audrey Brincat Dalli, *Strada Stretta/Strait Street*, shooting script, p. 1.

¹¹ *Strada Stretta/ Strait Street*, pp. 4-5.

vernacular buildings, forming an intricate composition of aesthetics and architecture.¹² *The Maltese Fighter* contributes to our understanding the city while at the same time addressing two interrelating key issues: the fascination with the city's sixteenth century Baroque architecture and an exploration of its unchanged spaces.

EXT. VALLETTA - AFTERNOON (1971)

Giuseppe runs through the streets of Valletta. Arms pumping. Mind focused. Legs steady.

From East Street up the steps of St. Lucy Street.

Sunset light cascading down the steps.

Hard left through St. Paul Street, hard right through St. John Street.

Children playing hopscotch.

Ploughing through the sea of people in Merchant Street.
Gliding through St. John Square.

Pigeons flapping into the air.

Up Republic Street. Another curve, another corner, another uphill.

Gasping for oxygen. Legs screaming for rest. Giuseppe arrives, almost in a haze of dust, atop a steep hill with a beaming face.¹³

The earliest use of the local colour and urban landscape was Cecil Satariano's opening scene in *Katarin / Catharine* presenting the audience with an iconographic image of Malta—the Maltese festa— which includes the atmosphere, the sounds, and the colours.

EXT. BIKIRKARRA, MALTA - DAY (1977)

Fireworks. Festa. The village orchestra plays. Confetti pour. Banners and flags adorn the main street and church square awash with crowds celebrating and dancing.

¹² Monika Maslowska, 'Textured Spaces in *The Maltese Fighter*', in *World Film Location: Malta*, ed. by Jean Pierre Borg and Charlie Cauchi (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2015), pp. 36-37 (p. 36).

¹³ *The Maltese Fighter*, shooting script, p. 2.

A statue of the village patron-saint on a pedestal is carried by people. Bells begin to peel.

A nun looks down at the commotion from a window.

Katarin stays motionless amidst the chaos.

[...]

Suddenly, an explosion of petards. The feast is reaching its climax. The crows cheers. More fireworks.¹⁴

Satariano describes a typical village scene in Malta during summer of 1977 a religious tradition that every village celebrates with different patron saint or two, depending on the number of churches in the village. The use of the Maltese festa is used quite often in the screenwork Carlos Debattista *Il-Miraklu /Holy Mary!*, which presents the village feast, a religious celebration, within a picturesque urban landscape, giving a different but more contemporary tinge of local colour. Stijn Reijnders argues that sequences like this create ‘the viewer’s tourist gaze by emphasising particular landscapes, buildings and areas that are recognisable to an international audience’, because ‘the decor [...] is not chosen at random, but made up of well-known icons of local identity’:¹⁵

EXT. HAL SAFLIENI VILLAGE STREETS AND SQUARE. DAY

Jethro is making his way through crowded streets beer in hand.

[...]

All around him the village feast rages.

Street decorations embracing life-size papier-maché statues, flags and multi-coloured banners, huge banners stretching across the streets.

Balconies and rooftops with lit up coloured festoons - blue, red, green.

Flags are also hoisted on public places and private residences as a sign of participation.

¹⁴ Satariano, *Katarin /Catherine*, screenwork, 00:01:58-00:02:53

¹⁵ Stijn Reijnders, ‘Watching the Detectives. Inside the Guilty Landscapes of Inspector Morse, Baantjer and Wallander’, *European Journal of Communication*, 24.2 (2009), 165–181 (p. 173).

In the midst of it, the statue of the holy Mary bobs up and down over the heads of the crowd as she is borne aloft.¹⁶

The tourist gaze that Reijnders refers to is not chosen at random, as in Satariano's silent short screenwork *I'm Furious-Red!* (1970) that captures Maltese seascape:

EXT. TOP OF THE CLIFF - DAY

An arid landscape swept by sun.

A car drives towards the cliffs.

A sparkling blue sea and the small barren island come into our vision.¹⁷

[...]

The DRIVER, 30s, descends from one rock to another with agility.

The sea glistens below. He stops at the top of the cliff facing the blue sea.¹⁸

Charles Stroud also uses *Carmelo* also uses this technique, although its genre is quite different from *L-Gharusa/The Bride*. *Carmelo* tells the story of Carmelo Borg Pisani, a Maltese-born Italian Fascist who, on being found out during an espionage mission in Malta, was found guilty by a war tribunal and executed for treason in 1942. The final scene is a symbolic moment encapsulating the nationhood in the making and the perceived betrayal.¹⁹ To many, Borg Pisani was a traitor, to others he was a martyr; but he refused to consider himself a British subject, declaring his allegiances to Italy, with which he felt a cultural and national affinity (like many other Maltese).²⁰

¹⁶ Abigail Mallia and Carlos Debattista, *Il-Miraklu /Holy Mary!*, shooting script, E1S1, p. 3.

¹⁷ *I'm Furious-Red!* screenwork (1970), 00:21:25-00:21:40

¹⁸ *I'm Furious-Red!* 00:22:38-00:21:4

¹⁹ Arts and Culture <https://artsandculture.google.com/entity/carmelo-bor%C4%A1-pisani/m04kjj1?hl=en> [accessed 28 October 2021]

²⁰ Peter Vassallo, 'Italian Culture versus British Pragmatics: The Maltese Scenario', in *Performing National Identity: Anglo-Italian Cultural Transactions*, ed. by Manfred Pfister and Ralf Hertel (Rodopi: Amsterdam and New York, 2008), pp. 171-78 (pp. 175-76).

INT. PRISON CELL - AFTERNOON (1942)

Gradually, Carmelo gets lost in his imagination listening to Nabucco. He lifts his fingers in the air to conduct the music. Right in front of him, as he moves his fingers, a painting begins to appear on the wall. A painting of a Maltese landscape.

Slowly, the walls recede, and Carmelo finds himself surrounded by the panorama of the most beautiful Maltese countryside: terraced fields and country paths over the garrigue plateaux gradually descending into undulating areas of globigerina overlooking the blue Mediterranean.²¹

The above scene also represents 'cinematic landscapes' that activate audiences' sense of place and the protagonist's emotional attachment to the place, for example, terrifying places such as crime scenes, which sometimes develop a distinct metaphorical layer.²²

Similarly, Mark Dingli uses scenery, not necessarily as a marketing ploy, but to present a Maltese cinematic identity as represented by the landscape integrated with the feeling of the 'nation' as part of its iconography.²³ The fictional narrative exhibits snippets of an ethnographic narrative whereby the storyteller unfurls a portrait of Malta at the peak of summer which, with its lumbering but the undeniably idyllic pace, serves as a perfect correlative to the protagonist's own existential crises. The opening scene and the closing scene, both accompanied by a female voiceover, narrates a poem about Delimara Bay by the Maltese poet Daniel Massa. Dingli returns to the roots of the Mediterranean, and this Maltese literature which gives paramount importance to the natural environment and identifies its transcendental significance.²⁴ In a way, this is how the narrative is told, in an almost ethnographic perspective. A cinematic poem which offers rich imagery creates a narrative, more often hinted than clearly stated, about the deep love felt by both the poet and the writer-director, the latter choosing this particular poem to open and close the narrative and express the need to share it with the outer world:

EXT. MEDITERRANEAN SEA (MALTA) - DAY

The vast Mediterranean sea before us. Its gentle waves lapping lazily.

²¹ Charles Stroud, *Carmelo*, shooting script, p. 125.

²² Hansen and Waade, pp.33-34.

²³ Henry Frendo, 'National Identity', in *Malta: Culture and Identity*, ed. by Henry Frendo and Oliver Friggieri (Malta: The Ministry of Youth and Arts, 1994), pp. 1-21 (p.1).

²⁴ Oliver Friggieri, 'Environmental Elements in Maltese Literature', *Neohelicon* XXVIII/1, 2001, pp. 261-269, p. 261. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1011977811344>

KARL (early 30s) swims towards us. His movements laid back as the sea's. A female's voice supplants the image.

V.O.

Burly fishermen hurl their nets
 In parabolas uncurl their white jablite floats
 In the wake of the drifts nest
 I slid head first from my mother's womb
 Gliding over algae into the sea
 For I heard the lure of the sirens
 Search the rock-pools for their rock-crabs.²⁵

This exploitation of their unique or unusual landscapes has historically been one way in which small-nation cinemas have been able to establish a commercial foothold; as Bordwell and Thompson note, 'the strategies of using national subject matter and exploiting picturesque local landscapes have remained in countries with limited production to the present day'.²⁶ Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie in their 'Introduction' to *Cinema of Small Nations* similarly observe concepts and traits that are common to both films made in the silent era and those made in smaller contemporary film-producing countries.²⁷ Again, an example of this exploitation of the Maltese landscape is seen in *Kont Diġà / I Was, Already*:

EXT. BEACH - DAY

Bullu, Anna and Karl are chilling in the sun. Bullu stares into the distance at Comino²⁸ when--

BULLU

Wow, what a nice cliff!

ANNA

You know what we call it?

(off Bullu's reaction)

Elephant's head.

BULLU

Why?

Anna traces an elephant's head in the air.

²⁵ *Kont Diġà/I Was, Already*, 00:00:00-00:01:47.

²⁶ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film History: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), p. 79.

²⁷ Mette and Petrie, pp. 1-19 (p. 3).

²⁸ Another island that belongs to the Maltese archipelago.

POV of the cliffs and indeed there is a pareidolic elephant's head jutting out of the cliff rockface.²⁹

The rock formation is popular with tourists when taking a boat trip around the islands of Gozo and Comino. (Fig.23).



Figure 23: Elephant's Head, *Kont Diga / I was, Already*, screen capture

Given the governmental organisation of Maltese film-making within the economic and commercial sectors, it is not surprising that Maltese scriptwriters take the opportunity to represent Maltese culture and tradition within their storytelling

Bordwell and Thompson identify the inclusion of landscapes in contemporary cinematic storytelling with traits in silent cinema:

First, many films were shot on location [...] filmmakers made a virtue of necessity, exploiting distinctive natural landscapes and local historical buildings for interesting mise-en-scène. [...] Second, filmmakers frequently sought to differentiate their low-budget films from the more polished imported works by using national literature and history as source for their stories. In many cases, such local appeal worked since audiences wanted at least occasionally to see films that reflected their own culture.³⁰

The screen narratives are ideologically consistent with then-emerging trends of post-independent thought; as a body of work they express the often worldview of the old middle class and small-

²⁹ *Kont Diga / I Was, Already*, 00:59:09-01:00:11.

³⁰ Bordwell and Thompson, p. 78.

communities confronted with an era of large-scale manufacturing and monopoly audio-visual capital.

The above excerpts are comparable for example to the landscape exploitation in *Trapped* (RVK Studios 2015-present), an Icelandic ten-part television crime drama. Set in a remote port town surrounded by mountains in Iceland, *Trapped* tells the story of a murder investigation, revealing a network of political and corporate corruption and personal tragedy. The aim of Baltasar Kormákur, writer/ director, was to set out to create an internationally co-produced television drama in order to produce a screen text with international appeal that would embrace the island's inspiration and feel. As the narrative progressed, the political element of the plot looked at how the 'Icelandic nation thinks' and how it has been 'short-sighted' and 'greedy' in the years leading up to the financial crash that hit Iceland in 2008 as part of the global economic recession; but an essential and unforgettable ingredient of the series' success lay in the representation of the bleak and unforgiving, but also unique and therefore exotic, Icelandic landscapes.³¹

5.3 Post-EU Accession Malta and Marketing Malta

Parallel to the use of a location or setting as part of storytelling, screen location can be used as a tool, as 'location placement', allowing Malta to market itself as a film location and a screen tourist destination to bring in additional revenue from the film servicing industry. The Maltese authorities created a tourist board in 1958 and this has continued to grow and develop to become the present Malta Tourism Authority (henceforth MTA). The MTA has taken up the marketing and branding of Malta as a tourist destination as it continues to gauge developments within the global industry.³² The MTA allows Malta to create diverse albeit niche sectors, from cultural heritage to sports and medical tourism, eco-tourism, yachting, and screen tourism. The MTA has created and consolidated the narrative of a Mediterranean island with a mild sunny climate, using its geographical location as an integral part of Malta's filmic identity that is particularly promoted in the foreign production whereby Malta is a stand-in location, rather than Malta as Malta. The National Film Policy differentiates between (1) Specific Sites—sites which become popular destinations due to their appearance on film and television screens; (2) Film-Themed Attractions—attractions with a connection to film; (3) Film Itineraries—initiatives such as the MTA's Screen Locations series of podcasts whereby tourists are guided to discover Malta's prime film sites; (4) Film Festivals and

³¹ Rosamund Davies, 'Trapped: A Case Study of International Co-Production', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Screen Production*, eds. by Craig Batty and others (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) pp. 281-304 (p. 282).

³² George Cassar, 'Tourism and Malta: a Narrative of Resilience, Pragmatism And Survival', in *Tourism and the Maltese Islands* (Malta: Kite, 2020), pp.1-20 (p. 11 and p. 12).

Conferences; (5) Filming Underway—this refers to visiting a location where filming is taking place, which is a popular form of screen tourism; (6) Celebrity promotion via media channels and social networking sites.³³ It needs to be noted that the Valletta Film Festival 2015-2020 was not only a highly successful festival but one that fostered and encouraged Malta's cinematic talent. During the five years of the festival's existence, the local productions not only competed with foreign productions, but screenwriting workshops and masterclasses were also organized with accomplished screenwriters and writer-directors—Roland Joffe, Peter Greenaway, Alan Parker, Agnieszka Holland, Liliana Cavani and Bela Tarr, Jayro Bustamante—and film producers to teach filmmaking, funding, production, marketing, cinematography and design.³⁴ The festival attracted around 50,000 patrons and screened over 500 feature and short films. The festival exhibited various local films and supported local filmmakers at other key festivals and markets such as Berlinale, International Film Festival, Festival du Court-Métrage de Clermont-Ferrand and Sunny Side of the Doc in France.³⁵ Unfortunately, the COVID-19 crisis and a shortfall in support through public funding have led to the cancellation of the Valletta Film Festival.³⁶

The trade off, however, of relying on the picturesque to represent Malta can detract from narrative and, at its worst, become fused with marketing and product placement as it is evident in post-EU accession film *Angli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie* (2005), which is little more than a mere marketing ploy. The story revolves around two elite police investigators, Angel Caruana and Gabriel Mifsud, battling crime with the help of German Interpol Agent Mike Möller. An experimental state-of-the-art drugs scanner (DIS - Drug Interceptive Scanner) is being tested at Malta International Airport, but during the first very check, a man trying to smuggle drugs into Malta in his stomach blows up. An imminent World Conference is to be held in Malta with ambassadors who will vote on the introduction of the experimental full body scanner. Angel and Gabriel are enlisted to help protect the new equipment against a local drug lord, Harry Liberty, who intends to prevent the scanner from being introduced.³⁷

The film, produced just one year after Malta's accession to the EU, was advertised as 'an action-packed production',³⁸ but in reality it is a narrative built around product and service placements. In fact, the screen text contains over twenty advertisements of products and services

³³ National Film Policy, p. 12.

³⁴ Valletta Film Festival <https://www.vallettafilmfestival.com/vallettafilmlab/#> [accessed 1 June 2022].

³⁵ <https://www.vallettafilmfestival.com/statement-by-film-grain-foundation-about-cinema-city/>

³⁶ 'Festivals: Valletta Film Festival Cancelled', *Film New Europe*, 7 April 2020

<<https://www.filmneweurope.com/news/malta-news/item/119802-festivals-valletta-film-festival-cancelled> [accessed 1 June 2022].

³⁷ Angela Peel, 'Angli: The Movie', in *Malta on the Silver Screen. Feature Films Shot in Malta* (self-published, 2014), p. 217.

³⁸ 'Angli on the big screen', *Times of Malta*, 1 May 2005

<<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/angli-on-the-big-screen.91749> > [accessed 19 March 2019] (para. 1 of 9).

screenshots, ranging from cars and jewellery to laundry and pest control services, which render the narrative at times illogical, distracting, and contrived. When Angel meets the Interpol Agent Möller at the Malta International Airport, the welcoming conversation between the two is a missed opportunity for exposition, particularly because the audience was promised ‘an action-pack production’:

EXT. MALTA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT - DAY (2005)

AGENT MIKE MÖLLER, 30s, emerges from the ARRIVALS door. Looks around. No-body to greet him. Looks at his watch to check the time. When suddenly--

ANGEL

Hi, Mr. Möller, I am really sorry
I am late. I got held up.

MIKE

No problem.

A friendly handshake.

ANGEL

You okay?

MIKE

Yes, I am fine.

ANGEL

Nice flight?

MIKE

Yes, it was really nice.

ANGEL

Shall we go?

MIKE

Yes³⁹.

The introductory scene of main characters ought to have created an emotional impact to ensure that characters come across as compelling and intriguing, allowing the audience to relate to them. It did not happen here.

INT. CAR (MOVING) - CONTINUOUS - DAY

³⁹ *Angli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie*, screenwork, 00:13:19-00:14:00.

Mike puts on his sunglasses. They drive in complete silence.⁴⁰

Filmic time is wasted here. There is nothing revelatory again about either of the characters other than that Mike just landed in Malta and Angel collected him from the airport. The scene lacks a conversation about the Scanner, about the on-going investigation, or anything that reminds the audience that Mike is indeed an agent sent by Interpol and Angel is an elite Maltese police officer whose responsibility is to solve a difficult case.

The next scene takes place at the Headquarters with the other police officer, Gabriel Mifsud, taking part in the damage-control meeting. The scene serves as the exposition of the plot's main conflict, which is the explosive effects of the scanner putting in jeopardy the upcoming international conference. And we are back with Angel and Mike stopping at a jewellery shop on the way to the Headquarters, who should have attended the meeting, but instead, they are—

INT. VICTOR AZZOPARDI JEWELLERY SHOP - DAY

The shop is filled with silver frames, jewellery, and expensive watches. Angel and Mike enter.

Angel walks straight to SALESMAN.

Victor Azzopardi Jewellers is an actual shop in Malta, and the salesman is a real salesman. The products advertised in this scene are two luxury Italian brands, Chimento jewellery (Fig. 24) for women and unisex Momo Design wrist watches:

⁴⁰ *Angli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie*, 00:13:19-00:14:00.



Figure 24: Chimento Product Placement, screen capture
Angli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie (2005)

ANGEL

Good morning, my friend.

SALESMAN

(mumbles)

Good morning, what can I do for you?

ANGEL

As usual, we came to see the watches.

Salesman points his finger at a GLASS cabinet.

SALESMAN

I think over there you might find something.

ANGEL

Thank you.

(to Mike)

Come on, Mikey.⁴¹

The product placement is not integrated well with the storyline, which makes the audience wonder what the story is really about, and how it relates to the meeting at the Headquarters, an important meeting that Mike and Angel should have attended. But Mike and Angel are back in the moving car:

INT. CAR (MOVING) - SAME - DAY

Mike, still sat at the back, admires Malta. The car

⁴¹ *Angli: The Movie*, :00:15:42-00:16:24.

drives through the different tourist locations, the super chic places, the yacht marinas, the old churches, the coast road weaving through the low hills - a postcard of Malta to the tune of a funky beat.

This is another example of the exploitation of Maltese landscapes for promoting tourism (Figs. 25 and 26).



Figure 25: Marina Yacht, screen capture from *Angli The Movie /Angels. The Movie* (2005)



Figure 26: The Drive, screen capture from *Angli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie* (2005)

Maltese Government ensure that Malta is marketed as a tourist base and enhancing the visibility internationally.

INT. SHOPPERS SUPERMARKET - CONTINUOUS - DAY

Italian spaghetti in full view. Then, CU of the TELEDEAL magazine on the shelf.

AISLE

Angels LEAFS through the Teledeal magazine.

Suddenly-

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Open the cash register!

Alerted, Angel slowly folds the magazine. A big poster hangs from the ceiling advertising petrol vouchers.⁴²

Teledéal is a Super Saver magazine and is prominently displayed on screen (Figs. 27 and 28):



Figure 27: 'Teledéal', screen capture from *Angli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie* (2005)



Figure 28: Angel reading 'Teledéal', screen capture from *Angli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie* (2005)

The framing and marketing of a location as a marketing ploy can provide thought several benefits. Locations and setting can be used by film and television producers to target their core audiences and attract attention using popular destinations as film locations or the television drama series as a significant and fascinating location for an international audience.⁴³ Film servicing industry is also responsible in creating employment for the local crew and encourage location-induced tourism as market strategy. In addition, the location-induced tourism, screen tourism, is a growing industry and also a well-established field of research in tourism studies, and draws on disciplines such as service management studies, marketing, geography, anthropology, and film studies.⁴⁴ In general, although tourism scholars approach screen tourism as being particularly interesting in terms of tourist experiences, and destination development and place branding potential.⁴⁵

5.4 Conclusion

This Chapter argued that the unique landscapes of Malta are among the indigenous qualities that would allow for the development of a more ambitious television and film industry, but Malta is

⁴² *Angli: The Movie/Angels: The Movie*, 00:16:57-00:19:35

⁴³ Higson, *Film England*, p.68.

⁴⁴ Beeton, p. 28.

⁴⁵ Rodanthi Tzanelli, *The Cinematic Tourist: Explorations in Globalisation, Culture and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2007), p.

unlike other small-nation cinemas in lacking a professional structure for the development of screenwriting talent and individual projects. Part of the problem was educational, as discussed in the following section, but there was also an absence of the necessary collaborative systems that would allow for quality television drama to be developed at scale. The Chapter also discussed ‘local colour’, which Susanne Eichner and Anne Marit Waade located at three different levels: the level of representation, frame of production, regulations policy, and commodity and cultural consumption. Using the landscapes of screen texts of *Strada Stretta / Strait Street*, *The Maltese Fighter*, *Carmelo*, *Kont Diġa / I was, Already*, *Anġli: The Movie*, the Chapter also discusses the important role of locations in the screen productions and industry’s dual approach to location: representing Malta as a place in which indigenous film and television narratives are told and situated; and Malta as *location placement*, that is, as a marketing tool to promote Malta as a tourist destination and as a screen location used by stakeholders to brand themselves and ‘target their core markets’.⁴⁶ This is particularly of interest to screen tourism, which has grown exponentially with Malta’s appearance on the screen as part of the British Empire.

⁴⁶ Sue Beeton *Aspects of Tourism: Film-Induced Tourism* (Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto: Channel View Publications 2005), p. 8.

CHAPTER 6 Screenwriting Education, Funding, and National Film Policy

6.1 Introduction

The Maltese television and film industry is necessarily still a work in progress. That is, it is constantly adapting to social, political, and economic conditions in the search for a sustainable model or growth. Since the creation of a production support system in 2008 by the Malta Film Commission, the industry has been in a prolonged search for itself. Screenwriting and film-making today—what was perceived as either an amateurish or a minor activity—are witnessing broader participation and better funding opportunities.

The statistics also bear out the point made in earlier chapters: that the focus of funding and investment in Malta has been in establishing the island as a service provider for overseas companies, rather than in developing a sustainable home-grown production industry. Between 1932 and 2021, 130 foreign film productions were shot in Malta, whereas during the same timeframe, only about forty indigenous full feature films were produced.¹ The situation is a little rosier on the television side: about 220 indigenous television drama productions and sitcoms were produced in 1966-2021. (It is symptomatic of the low status of these industries compared to those in many other nations that the above information has been compiled from my own personal archive and from information supplied by Charles Stroud and Tony Parnis (two Maltese veteran television and film directors) since comprehensive archival data does not exist.) As argued in the previous chapter, while early television productions were well written, the late 1980s screenplays witnessed a decline in the writing quality and the story content.²

Chapter 6 also looks at the screenwriting education available to the Maltese students in Malta, the available funding programmes such as *Kultura TV* (within the Arts Council Malta), which supports the development of cultural and creative content on private broadcasting stations to improve the quality of television programming, the National Book Council, which supports cinematic adaptations of Maltese literature into short and full feature films, Screen Malta, which funds production for screen or television, including drama and documentaries, *Poetry on Film* funded by *Inizjamed* which supports cinematic adaptations of Maltese poems into short films. This Chapter also looks at the National Film Policy (2016-2020), so far, the only National Film Policy drafted in Malta.

¹ Peel, *Malta on the Silver Screen*, pp. vi-viii and xi; Charles Stroud's and Tony Parnis' personal archive.

² Rachel Vella, Mario Philip Azzopardi, Charles Stroud, Albert Marshall.

6.2 The 2019 Advisory Committee Report

The decline in the quality of writing in Maltese television, noted in Chapter 4, has not gone unobserved by the country's Broadcasting Authority. In 2008, the Authority issued a circular to the local television stations reflecting on the poor quality of the screenplays, referring to them as 'amateurish' and 'mediocre', abounding with contradictions and superficial narratives.³ However in 2019, almost ten years later, the problems still persist, as the 2019 Advisory Committee notes.

The report is drawn on a yearly basis and is commissioned by the Broadcasting Authority with the aim to assess and audit the quality of the radio and television programmes. While the Broadcasting Authority commissions the audit on a yearly basis, the assessment of the television scriptwriting quality, the education and training of the scriptwriters, and the availability of public funds to the television stations (public and private) is not regular. In the 2019 Advisory Committee report the Chairman of the Broadcasting Authority states that 'from time to time' a more detailed assessment is commissioned,⁴ which includes assessment of the 'drama'.

The 2019 Advisory Committee found that the sample of the examined television drama, with a few exceptions (*Il-Miraklu/Holy Mary!*, 2018 and *L-Gharusa /The Bride*, 2019-2020), reveals that television broadcasting in Malta suffers from a serious quality problem from scriptwriting to execution and from filming to editing. The Advisory Committee reports that there are two problems that affect quality of the television drama. Firstly, it is linked to the insufficient production funds; secondly, the commercial aspect supersedes the quality aspect.⁵ The report lists ten recommendations, with the three that are relevant to the present research focusing on scriptwriting, the education and training of the scriptwriters, and the availability of production funds). Among other recommendations, the report also proposes significant changes in broadcasting legislation: setting up minimum national standards in broadcasting, an increase in public funds to help productions, and the establishment of a Quality Monitoring Unit for each broadcasting station.⁶

The overall recommendation is to improve the quality of the television product, starting with substantial improvement in scripting drama. The Advisory Committee also notes that the screenplays are increasingly using mixed dialogue: Maltese and English, or Maltese and Italian. While the Committee appreciates this effort, because bilingualism provides authenticity to the narratives, it recommends that parameters should be set to monitor the extent of bilingualism in television drama.⁷ The report also suggests creating a broadcasting academy under the auspices of

³ Broadcasting Authority Report, 2008
<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/9oxo9v3ohs3tov0/AAClMs3g1_sgxbdNK4LIIXSwa/B.A.%20Annual%20Reports?dl=0&subfolder_nav_tracking=1> [accessed 30 October 2018].

⁴ Martin Micallef, Chairman Broadcasting Authority, Advisory Committee, p. 1.

⁵ Advisory Committee Report, *Broadcasting Authority*, 2019, p. 35.

⁶ Advisory Committee Report, p. 37.

⁷ Advisory Committee Report, 2019, p. 21.

the Broadcasting Authority, which would provide training to the producers and anyone else interested in starting a career in broadcasting.⁸ Additionally, training should be provided for screenwriters, by accessing the European funds aimed at covering costs related to employee training.⁹ Furthermore, an initiative should be taken to outreach with the University, MCAST and the Department of Education in order to synchronize media, journalism and broadcasting training with the current needs in the industry. A collective effort should be made to keep students who have been trained in this field to continue their careers. In addition, broadcasting stations and production houses should further open their doors to students to give them an opportunity to gain first-hand experience during their studies.¹⁰

When I contacted the Broadcasting Authority in September 2021 to enquire if the three changes recommended by the Advisory Committee were implemented, I received the following reply:

there has been no change in the broadcasting legislation on the matter. As you might understand such changes in legislation would take quite some time and there need to be a wider discussion for the Authority to come up with proposals on the minimum requirements in broadcasting which would address quality in broadcasting [...] With regards to MCAST courses, whenever the Authority is invited to provide information sessions to MCAST students, officials from the Authority are always willing to provide such information particularly information related to the function of the Authority and information on broadcasting legislation.¹¹

How much of the Advisory Committee recommendations will be implemented remains to be seen. However, Malta would definitely benefit from such a collaborating and writing process in its approach to creating its own television script texts, because this would help to address perhaps the most glaring weakness in current practice in writing for television in Malta: the over-reliance on the individual practitioner.

6.3 Contemporary Screenwriting Practice in Malta

Most screenwriters and writer-directors are self-taught practitioners with the exception of Rebecca Cremona, Alex Camilleri, Paul Portelli and Chris Zarb who received professional education at film schools and film academies, and have had different career paths. The unifying element, however,

⁸ Advisory Committee Report, 2019, p. 37.

⁹ Advisory Committee Report, 2019, p. 36.

¹⁰ Advisory Committee Report, 2019, p. 36.

¹¹ Joanna Spiteri, Chief Executive of the Broadcasting Authority, email communication, 3 September 2021.

remains the desire to tell Maltese stories.¹² The self-taught screenwriters and writer-directors do not necessarily see themselves as professional screenwriters and writer-directors, but more as creative professionals whose background and artistic career paths have eventually led them not only to write for the screen but exhibit different aesthetic styles. Samira Damato (*Žiemel/Horse*, 2017 and *Hallini Hanini /Let Me Be Dear* 2020) for instance, whose professional background is rooted in exhibition and concept development in the photojournalistic sector exhibits an artistic style in *Hallini Hanini /Let Me Be Dear*; Martin Bonnici (*Laqgħa ma' Mara Morbi/Meeting with Mara Morbi*, 2014 and *Is-Sriep Reġgħu Saru Velenuži/The Vipers' Pit*, 2019) whose career started in animations for web and television then directing commercials and short films and eventually a feature film has allowed Bonnici to be more of an observer, a 'fly on the wall' storyteller whose invisible omnipresence guides the viewer.¹³ Jeremy Vella (*Orrajt*, 2020), who studied tourism at the University of Malta, as a storyteller, discusses directly Malta's linguistic legacies in a direct and open manner whose style is entertaining and truthful. Charles Stroud (*Dritt għall-Punt /Straight to the Point*, 2017 and *Carmelo* 2018) is a romantic storyteller with a sophisticated and understated perspective in his cinematic storytelling.

In addition to this, contemporary screenwriters are aware of cultural differences when writing with screenwriters. Damato, for example, finds herself adopting a much softer and more careful approach, particularly when giving feedback to her Maltese team. In her international engagements, Damato frequently collaborates; she finds teamwork to be inspiring and exciting, a safe place for everyone to contribute ideas and concepts, and a place to take new perspectives into consideration. But not in Malta. The lack of experience with professional and serious feedback in Malta international education and more steady professional creative sector work needs to develop further.¹⁴ The demands of the industry are such that writing alone is not the only ability required of a screenwriter. In fact, it is the willingness to adapt the material while working with another writer, a director, or a producer in order to advance and refine the work.¹⁵ Of course, there are exceptions: Zarb is the sole writer and director who could never allow another director to film his screenplay, nor would he be willing to direct another person's work.¹⁶ The screenwriters believe that Malta needs more focused art education, and more genuine feedback and criticism toward the constructive development of a project. This is a serious obstacle in the production of qualitative work. Through the lack of formal education, experienced teachers and, of course, the deeper insecurity resulting

¹² Martin Bonnici in discussion with the researcher, 15 April 2018, Jeremy Vella, in discussion with the researcher, 4 July 2022, Jamie Vella, and Zarb, 8 July 2022.

¹³ Martin Bonnici 11 July 2022.

¹⁴ Samira Damato, email communication 10 July 2022.

¹⁵ Bonnici, 11 July 2022, Charles Stroud, email communication, 15 July 2022, Alan Cassar, email communication, 16 July 2022.

¹⁶ Zarb, 8 July 2022.

from colonialism, the Maltese cultural sector lacks basic creative tools—serious feedback is unwelcomed while development and research are not treated as a key professional aspect in learning the screenwriting craft.¹⁷

Unlike a number of countries in Europe, Malta does not have a professional screenwriting union, such as a Writers Guild. Malta thrives on small networks and Malta-specific forms of patronage and nepotism that are responsible for creating ‘club-like’ professional relationships. In Malta, people know each other and so the input of a professional association, or union, becomes their own output.¹⁸ The only existing associations are the Malta Producers’ Association (MPA) and the Malta Entertainment Industry and Arts association (MEIA). These are the only two ‘unions’ available in Malta. The MPA is a non-profit collective of private sector producers and personnel that work in the Maltese audio-visual industry advocating for improved transparency and accountability and appropriate governance and regulation of the local film/TV industry. The MPA focuses on film servicing and the indigenous film industries without the exclusion of either, being very much aware there is a lack of adequate resources and incentives attributed to the indigenous sector which should be in the foreground rather than background in the Government’s agenda.¹⁹ MEIA, on the other hand, represent all the professionals, semi-professionals as well as part-timers in the Maltese industry having different roles within the industry covering all sectors, namely: Music, Theatre, Film & TV, Visual Arts, Fashion, Dance, Entertainment Venues, Arts Education, Events, Technical Suppliers and Service Providers. The various roles represented by the MEIA include creators, performers, promoters, producers, suppliers and all technical people who work in the entertainment and arts industry, covering all different sectors.

As noted earlier, Malta’s size prevents the island from investing in a national television and film school to foster an indigenous screenwriting industry. This *status quo* reinforces the belief that anybody planning to become a professional screenwriter is utopian, as David Serge confides, screenwriting in Malta is ‘not an easy situation, but it does not mean it [Maltese narratives] cannot happen; it has happened in other small countries such as ours, but what we lack at the moment is education’, whether that be in writing for television or film.²⁰

¹⁷ Damato, 10 July 2022.

¹⁸ Chircop, 29 January 2018.

¹⁹ MPA, Policy <<https://www.maltaproducersassociation.org/blank-page-1>> [accessed 27 May 2022] (para.2, 3 and 4 of 5).

²⁰ Albert Galea, “The Maltese Studio that Worked on 'Grey’s Anatomy', 'The Walking Dead' and 'I Medici’”, *Malta Independent*, 12 November 2018 <<http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2018-11-12/local-news/The-Maltese-studio-that-worked-on-Grey-s-Anatomy-The-Walking-Dead-and-I-Medici-6736199220>> [accessed 15 November 2018] (para. 22 and 23 of 30).

Nonetheless, production culture and working process in Malta, since its inception in 1960s, relies predominantly on one screenwriter, without much training, who pitches an idea to the local television stations and, if successful, proceeds to write alone a substantial number of one-hour episodes. This number can fall between thirteen to thirty-nine episodes depending on the television station²¹ with the first drafts going immediately into production.²² Writing a Maltese television series, then, is a solitary ambition of one writer, who retains authorship of the work. In many instances, the screenwriter directs and produces the series on a shoe-string budget, relying heavily on advertising and sponsors.²³ This is a monumental endeavour, and not surprisingly the local television productions are very often harshly criticized by local critics who fail to factor in the hardship Maltese productions encounter. In addition, the television scriptwriters interviewed admit that they lack professional education as a scriptwriter, they are self-educated. They do feel however they had something to say, some just write to tell a story, other feel they have something to say to move the audience in the end. Their preference is to write alone. The production culture, particularly in the television drama, is to write alone. There are some exceptions such as the writers of *Il-Miraklu/Holy Mary!*, written by two writers.

Mark Doneo puts the financial aspect in perspective given the time, effort and finances that go into ‘actually greenlighting the project’, the television series traditionally becomes profitable after it garners some audience traction, after the first ten to twelve episodes. Doneo argues that ‘the argument becomes simpler, once the show takes off [...] advertisers and sponsors are more likely to put money during its commercial breaks [...] being the primary way that the station and producers can generate money from their projects’.²⁴ These make-or-beak financial consequences put an enormous commercial, as well as artistic, responsibility on the individual writer.

The television texts that the present research looks at are therefore mostly written by one writer, although a notable exception is *Il-Miraklu/Holy Mary!*, which was written by Carlos Debattista and Abigail Mallia. Most of the writers are self-taught, applying their own understanding of the Maltese ‘doxa’ (the received wisdom of a community) to their work, with a varying degree of success.²⁵ The local screenwriting doxa is that a screenwriter is also a director and a producer; wearing different professional hats is admirable but, in the end, counterproductive to the quality of the narrative, and as we shall see below, the approach seems amateurish when compared to practices of national television industries as diverse as those of the United States on the one hand and Denmark or Iceland on the other.

²¹ Mark Doneo and Carlos Debattista,

²² Carlos Debattista discussion with the researcher, 7 July 2018.

²³ Mark Doneo email communication, 13 September 2018

²⁴ Mark Doneo, 13 September 2018.

²⁵ Mark Doneo, Abigail Mallia, Carlos Debattista, Audrey Brincat Dalli, Charles Stroud, discussions with the researcher.

This is not to say that the Maltese approach can never be effective. Some of the finest television writing comes from a writer who is more instinctive than trained, namely Audrey Brincat Dalli, who wrote two of the best Maltese drama productions: *Strada Stretta/Strait Street* and *L-Għarusa/The Bride*. Brincat Dalli's works are not-foreign voiced narratives but Maltese. She admits that she never studied scriptwriting but:

I knew I wanted a career in media, so I graduated in Communications in 2007. I always loved writing but started scriptwriting in 2010 [...] by accident [...] I've learned scriptwriting through experience mostly and now I do just that [...] we are Mediterranean, passionate people, who take things at heart. We like confrontation but are also compassionate and romantic and my work, I guess, has to reflect that. What is certain is that current audiences have easy access to foreign series and locally we are just now trying to adapt to a very international formula whilst keeping true to our roots.²⁶

This is a commendable approach—adapting ‘to a very international formula whilst keeping true to our roots’—and the insight could be embraced by Maltese scriptwriters to write quality television drama reflecting Maltese culture.

Nevertheless, even Brincat concedes the importance of awareness of overseas television series and markets. Carlos Debattista, one of the most prolific and creative scriptwriters, at one point wanted to cease writing in Maltese and switch to English to place his work on an international platform. The fear is that localizing their product so much will limit them. Apart from that, they look mainly at foreign series for inspiration that is going to influence their work.

L-Għarusa for instance, its story is very local, but it has a Hollywood glamour to it, and this is what made the series stand above other local television drama. This is what got the audience's attention. Having done this with the local period costumes, where simplicity would have reined, it would not have been as attractive to the audience. In *L-Għarusa* they put an element of circus allowing *The Greatest Showman* to influence their story. The foreign influence is part and parcel of Maltese productions. I do not think we can separate the two. It is a reflection of what we are.²⁷

As this example shows, it is possible for the individualistic Maltese system to work effectively in combination with a shared awareness of current storytelling developments in other industries. The writer of *L-Għarusa/The Bride*, Audrey Brincat Dalli, did succeed in capturing the spirit of the American musical drama *The Greatest Showman* (2017) with the joy and passion of the circus

²⁶ Audrey Brincat Dalli, email communication 4 September 2018.

²⁷ Carlos Debattista, discussion with the researcher, 11 July 2018.

performers, even though *L-Għarusa* is significantly different generically, for while it is a drama it is also a murder mystery. The television narrative unfolds when museum owners purchase a very well preserved 1930s wedding dress to add to their collection. The owner of the dress, Bettina, was found dead, in her dress, on the morning of her wedding. The series showed in detail the complicated lives of the Maltese nobility when they still had a strong presence among society and it was customary for the elite families to arrange marriages for their children. Hence the engagement of Bettina to Bert, when a circus comes to town, and Bettina meets Diego, in an extract below that gives a flavour of the influence of *The Greatest Showman*:

EXT. CIRCUS GROUNDS - MALTA - DAY (1930s)

Circus people scurry about. Jugglers, fire-eaters, clowns.

A kaleidoscope of images and colours. The Ringmaster hailing someone off screen. Behind him a poster revealing the name of the circus ZAHARA from Italy.

A tent sprawls behind them. Elephants' cries in the background.

A stunning Gypsy dancer struts by. This is SEPTA. Beautiful and arrogant. A sparkling jewellery and a tiara adorn her porcelain skin.

BETTINA, a noblewoman, early 20s, looks in awe taking it all in for she has never seen anything quite like it - exotic world of the circus.²⁸

Contrary to demands of the Maltese audio-visual creatives, Malta does not only need to increase the annual screen production budget or invest in the education of the creatives, particularly in the education and training of the scriptwriters, it also needs to create contacts with international producers and create a networking strategy if Malta's screen productions are to be successful.²⁹ Overall, however, the Maltese screenwriter would benefit from the ability to work in a supportive environment alongside one's peers, as is routine in many other film-making countries where it is well understood that the development process and writing of television series is 'a highly complex and collaborative endeavour', as Redvall notes.³⁰ The previously mentioned Kormákur's narrative strategy is applicable to Malta's television drama, offering an original and distinctive 'local colour',

²⁸*L-Għarusa*, screen text, 00:03:00-00:04:05.

²⁹ Chris Zarb, in discussion with the researcher, 8 July 2022.

³⁰ Redvall, *Writing and Producing*, p. 1.

culture, and world view whereby a small-nation industry, like Malta's, can develop a collaborative model for the creation of indigenous television series.³¹

In the academic study of screenwriting, the narrative strategy is Ian Macdonald's 'Screen Idea System' framework and Redvall's four key concepts of 'one vision', 'double storytelling', 'producer's choice' and 'crossover' have proved helpful in understanding how other national industries have succeeded in producing successful television dramas that will resonate internationally.³² In Macdonald's analysis, screenwriting is almost unavoidably and necessarily a collaborative activity, because for a screenplay to be developed in the production context, the 'screen idea'—which Macdonald refers to as a 'simple notion [...] of a singular project that is shared and developed by different contributors' or 'being a central imaginary viewed from different perspectives'³³—will be developed by the Screen Idea Work Group, which is a group of individuals, each with a specific talent, skill, training and experience, allowing the idea to evolve, and focusing on 'quality, originality and appropriateness in the domain and the field'.³⁴

Using similar terminology, both Macdonald and Redvall analyse the writing and production of television series as a 'complex interplay between individuals, a domain and a field', terms Macdonald draws from Mihail Csikszentmihalyi's model of creativity.³⁵ His account of the three elements in this 'interplay' requires some elaboration:

1. The ideas of individuals, 'the creatives', are not attributed simply to the individual alone; instead, they are products of their socio-cultural influences. The socio-cultural model claims that ideas need to be both novel and appropriate in order to gain acceptance. This does not mean that an artist is expected to conform, but if a change needs to take place, it needs to be sanctioned by 'some group that is qualified'.³⁶
2. The 'domain' Macdonald defines as the 'culturally defined symbolic system', citing Robert Sternberg and Todd Lubart's definition that includes 'all the created products that have been accepted by the field in the past, and all the conventions that are shared by the members of the field: the languages, symbols and notations.'³⁷

³¹ Davies, p. 283 and p. 289.

³² Redvall, p. 16.

³³ Ian W. Macdonald, *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea* (Basingstoke Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 4 and p. 6.

³⁴ Redvall, p. 30.

³⁵ Redvall, p. 20.

³⁶ Redvall, pp.113-14.

³⁷ Macdonald, *Screenwriting Poetics*, p. 24.

3. The ‘field’ Macdonald views as the social aspect of creative work.

This creativity model envisages a circular flow of ideas moving from the individual, to the field, the domain and back to the individual, accommodating the creative process of developing the screen idea. The creative screen idea is one which significantly influences future work in the domain, and the creative individual is a person whose works exerts a significant effect upon the domain. The individual is informed by the domain and the judgements of the field (by the gatekeeper, as Redvall refers to it), expressed as the *doxa*, the received wisdom. The idea is then put forth to the field, which may accept it to the domain or reject it.³⁸ The Screen Idea System, pioneered by Macdonald, is a representation of how the industrialization of a cultural framework shapes the work of individuals, but singles out the importance of individuals in this process, arguing that ‘the writing and production of television drama starts and ends with a screen idea which does not come out of nowhere.’ The screen idea builds on, or subverts, notions of best screenwriting practice and the existing ‘tastes, trends and traditions’ within the culture.³⁹

As the account above indicates, the Maltese writing culture for television is nowhere near the Danish or Icelandic model. It is over-reliant on the individual; its domain is over-indebted to overseas models, particularly that of the US soap opera lacking a fully professionalised field.

It seems that all involved—from the screenwriters themselves to the Broadcasting Authority—are aware of it, but a professional framework is not in place. There are some scripts that are better written, and better produced, but no system for developing scripts within an integrated organisational structure. In addition to the above, there is an acute awareness among the Maltese film creatives that before a story, before a good product, what must come is the access to professional contacts and a marketing strategy, for it appear that most Maltese screenwriters and filmmakers equate the increase in budget with better success, which ironically stops them from succeeding at an artistic-narrative level. In fact, many of the creatives admit that would have been made aware of the fact that better finances do not guarantee better stories, and that having access to internal contacts and distribution is much more important.⁴⁰

³⁸ Macdonald, p. 114

³⁹ Redvall, p. 30.

⁴⁰ Zarb, 8 July 2022, Joshua Cassar Gaspar, in discussion with the researcher, 2 September 2021.

6.4 Screenwriting Education in Malta

The lack of vision in Malta is accompanied by a screenwriting pedagogy which currently faces two challenges: the lack of concerted efforts on the part of Malta's two main educational institutions, the University of Malta (UM) and the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), and the government's seeming lack of belief in the possibility of creating a Maltese national film and television industry of a standard equivalent to the creative cinematic output of comparable either with Denmark or Iceland. Malta currently offers programmes on a full-time basis only by two educational entities: University of Malta (henceforth UM) and the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (henceforth MCAST). But here, however, students are faced with limitations, for the screenwriting studies are not stand-alone programmes, but always part of media programmes. The scriptwriting course at MCAST is offered to students within the course of Creative Media. At UM two programmes are available: one at the undergraduate level, a comprehensive course in audio-visual writing for different production genres offered by the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences (henceforth MaKS); and the Master of Arts in Film Studies at postgraduate level, in the Faculty of Arts. The latter, however, offers only two modules in screenwriting and in the art of dramaturgy, and only via a short script.⁴¹

The approach of MCAST is less theoretical and more practical, admitting students at various ability levels after the age of sixteen. MCAST, which was in existence in the 1960s and 1970s but was phased out by 1977, was re-established in 2000 as a postsecondary training establishment, and became Malta's leading vocational education and training institution.⁴² Within the six institutes of MCAST, the Institute for the Creative Arts offers one study-unit module in the principles of scriptwriting, taught by Danjel Bugeja, a film editor by profession. Bugeja, however, is concerned that the scriptwriting module is compulsory. Since MCAST is an education institute, many students enrol:

for different reasons in their pursuit of media. They come here because they would like to work in television, a camera person, some people are interested in editing. Very few students have a passion for writing. I suspect it could be their writing skills leaves much to be desired. We are a vocational institute; this is not to say that they are lesser students. They are students that are differently inclined. Less academic, but more visual. They deal better with other forms of communication than writing. They think in image sequences rather than its narrative. Sometimes it is very hard to help them understand how the story works and how a narrative

⁴¹ University of Malta, MA Film Studies < <https://www.um.edu.mt/courses/studyunit/ATS5401> > [accessed 20 October 2019].

⁴² George Cassar, 'Education and Schooling: From Early Childhood to Old Age', in *Social Transitions in Maltese Society* (Malta: Agenda, 2009), 51-57 (p. 56).

should be structured. Some believe that this is not what they should be doing, and others perceive the media differently. Not everyone has the calling to be a writer.⁴³

The students are also offered another module, *Transmedia and Crossmedia*, which studies the expanding of the narrative across different platforms and adaptations from one medium to another. MCAST offers as well as a module *Narratives and Storytelling*, but here the students are not required to write a script but to understand how a script works in an existing work, for instance, a short, fiction and non-fiction film, which includes even a newscast. In semester one the students write the script, while in semester two they may direct it.⁴⁴ Shorts are between five to ten minutes. Sometimes their ideas cannot be compressed into that timeframe, so they are encouraged to consider instead writing either a webseries of five-minute episodes, or a pilot with an overview of the first season. The College's approach to teaching is a practical one aiming for doable screen productions. While there are students who specifically locate their narratives in Malta—these students speak in Maltese, and are aware of their local communities—most of them do not see the location as a primary story objective.⁴⁵ The content of the courses and their structures shows commitment, but to an outsider (a researcher) the information in the prospectus and the MCAST website is not easily available.

Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences offers two study-units *Scripting Video* and *Adaptation for Film and Television*. Both are elective study units providing a general overview of screenwriting dramaturgy for different screen production genres such as fiction full feature films, short films, documentaries, and television dramas and sitcoms, music videos, and commercials.⁴⁶ The pedagogical focus falls on the classic paradigm (Aristotle's three-act structure and its variations), keeping in mind alternative forms of storytelling. The *Adaptation for Film and Television* study-unit, on the other hand, introduces students to key issues and theories surrounding the analysis of adaptations and to interrogate alternative forms of source material, such as the short film, comic books, video games, music videos, photography, poetry, and other visual arts.⁴⁷ The Department of Media and Communication also offers intense short courses to the general public.

The M.A. in Film Studies programme offers three study units: *Screenwriting and the Art of Dramaturgy* (part 1 and part 2), and *The Practice of Filmmaking: From the Set to the Screen* (part 3). The programme provides students with the necessary techniques to successfully plan and shoot a

⁴³ Danjel Bugeja, in discussion with the researcher, 2 February 2018.

⁴⁴ Bugeja, 2 February 2018.

⁴⁵ Bugeja, 2 February 2018.

⁴⁶ University of Malta, Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences, <<https://www.um.edu.mt/courses/studyunit/MCS3200>> [accessed 20 October 2019]

⁴⁷ University of Malta, Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences, <<https://www.um.edu.mt/courses/studyunit/MCS3400U>> [accessed 20 October 2019].

short film only with some solid results, but the programme stays away from other genre productions.⁴⁸

There some new attempts at introducing film-making (which includes screenwriting) to young people is the Malta Film Foundation (a non-profit organization founded in 2010) which via *Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ* (The National Youth Agency). While *Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ* aims to provide empowerment programmes to young people with projects and activities in the visual arts, music, theatre, film, writing, and civic and political engagement at local and European level,⁴⁹ the Malta Film Foundation aims to support, promote and facilitate the dissemination of quality Maltese short films and ‘foster film appreciation and awareness among the general public about the local [film] industry’.⁵⁰ The Malta Film Foundation since its inception in had produced the Malta Short Film Festival in collaboration with PBS Ltd (Public Broadcasting Services Ltd.). In tandem with *Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ*, the Malta Film Foundation produces Malta Youth Film Festival, first edition in 2018, offering a creative outlet for the projects written and produced by the writer-directors aged between 18 and 26. The jury assesses the productions in terms of the storytelling quality, creativity and originality of concept, acting skills, technical direction, cinematography with the winning production becoming eligible to participate in the Nordic Youth Film Festival.⁵¹ The educational background of the writer-directors in screenwriting and film directing is quite varied. Some study screenwriting and filmmaking at the University of Malta, others at MCAST, and some are self-taught creatives, the throughline, however is the wish ‘to express themselves through film’.⁵²

MCAST, the MA in Film Studies, the Department of Media and Communications, and the Malta Film Foundation, however, focus on the short form of storytelling and not on the full feature, nor the television drama. It is only the undergraduate programme offered by Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences that covers writing for television in its two study-units on *Scripting Video* and *Adaptation for Film and Television*. But it still is not enough. The four programmes incorporate theory and practice-based study-units, but the aspiring television dramatists are still left to their own initiative to learn and hone their craft.

Additionally, the Ministry for Education through the Media Literacy Education programme created a media literacy education pilot project in 2017 introducing it formally as a taught subject in secondary schools in Malta and Gozo in 2018.⁵³ Media Literacy Education subject is an optional three-year programme for all students at the secondary level, regulated by MATSEC (Matriculation

⁴⁸ University of Malta, <https://www.um.edu.mt/courses/overview/PMAFLMPET5-2019-0-O> [accessed 20 October 2019]

⁴⁹ *Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ*, <<https://youth.gov.mt/our-agency/>> [accessed 30 August 2020]

⁵⁰ The Malta Film Foundation <<https://www.maltafilmfoundation.com/about>> [accessed 30 August 2020].

⁵¹ *Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ*, <<https://youth.gov.mt/our-agency/>> [accessed 30 August 2020].

⁵² Joyce Grech, discussion with the researcher, 1 June 2018.

⁵³ Clint Gerald Attard, discussion with the researcher, 27 April 2021.

and Secondary Education Certificate Examination Board).⁵⁴ Media Literacy Education is currently offered at the SEC and SEAC levels. SEC offers vocational concepts that are taught through theory followed by practice. SEC allows students to further their education at the academic and vocational higher institutions. SEAC applied concepts are taught through practice followed by basic theory. Education can be furthered only at vocational higher institutions. The programme offers three routes: SEC, a vocational approach based on theory followed by practice education; and two variations of SEAC: (1) an applied approach based on the practice followed by some theory; and (2) an applied approach studied individually by the student.⁵⁵

The Media Literacy Education module offers a three-year programme introducing students to a number of media-related topics such as the still and the moving image, print and websites, and writing and producing a short film, and focuses on ‘developing an idea for a moving image production’. During Unit 1 (13-year-olds and 14-year-olds) students are introduced to ‘The Media and “Me”’ module, during which they are taught how to capture ‘the world around them’ by understanding how the different media contexts impact media content, which includes cinematic storytelling (narratives and cinematography).⁵⁶ In Unit 2, 14-year-old and 15-year-old students are introduced to ‘Communication “Me”’, which is communicating with the world around the students. Here, the students are exposed mostly to print and graphic design, but more pertinent to the present study, the students are also introduced to the importance of the audience.⁵⁷ In Unit 3 (15-year-olds and 16-year-olds) students are introduced to ‘Creative and Collaborative “Me”’, creating a world around them through the moving image, media language, screenwriting and short film production.⁵⁸

A pivotal person driving the change is Clint Gerald Attard, Education Officer of Media Literacy Education, whose aim is to solidify the indigenous television and film industry not only to teach the students—Malta’s future audience—but also train and educate Media Education Literacy

⁵⁴ Maltese education system offers four levels: SEC (Secondary Education Certificate obtained at the age of 16), SEAC (Secondary Education Applied Certificate obtained at the age of 16), IM (Intermediate Matriculation obtained at the age of 18) and AM (Advanced Matriculation obtained at the age of 18). MATSEC, established in 1991 by the Senate and the Council of the University of Malta, was entrusted with the development of an examination system to replace the GCE Ordinary and Advanced levels <<https://www.um.edu.mt/matsec/aboutus2>> [accessed 13 August 2021] (para. 1 of 3).

⁵⁵ Media Literacy Education Syllabus, p. 10 and page 11.

https://www.um.edu.mt/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/355461/SEC41MediaLiteracyEducationSyllabus2021covid.pdf [accessed 15 June 2022].

⁵⁵ Media Literacy Education Syllabus, p. 15.

⁵⁵ Media Literacy Education Syllabus, p.20.

⁵⁵ *Agenzija Żgħażaġh* Screenwriting Boot Camp <<https://youth.gov.mt/news/>> [accessed 13 May 2022].

⁵⁵ Attard, discussion, 27 April 2021.⁵⁵ Attard, discussion, 27 April 2021.

⁵⁶ Media Literacy Education Syllabus, p. 10 and page 11.

https://www.um.edu.mt/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/355461/SEC41MediaLiteracyEducationSyllabus2021covid.pdf [accessed 15 June 2022].

⁵⁷ Media Literacy Education Syllabus, p. 15.

⁵⁸ Media Literacy Education Syllabus, p.20.

teachers. Attard also organized ‘Summer Bootcamps in Screenwriting’ with the assistance of *Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ*. I was contacted by Clint Gerald Attard, who attended one of my screenwriting courses, if I would be willing to teach the first ever screenwriting bootcamp created for the secondary students.⁵⁹ My reply was in the positive, of course.

The students can further their studies either at MCAST or at the University of Malta.⁶⁰ In addition, in August 2021, the Institute for Education—not related to UM or MCAST—issued a call Expression of Interest for the Development and Delivery of Media Literacy modules as part of the Bachelor of Education (Media Literacy). Planned modules are: Print and Digital Publishing, Photography: Skills and Techniques, Lighting Fundamentals (incl. Film and Photography), Sound Techniques (incl. Film and Photography), History of Film, Film Theory, Filming Techniques, Scriptwriting, and Film Production.⁶¹

Apart from the educational entities, sometimes the Government of Malta organizes training for scriptwriters and directors. In 2011 the Malta Film Commission and Culture and Audio-visual Unit of the Office of the Prime Minister organized the first training for local professional audio-visual practitioners, including scriptwriters. The AV Training Course, through an open call and headed by Lorianne Hall, a producer and acquisitions consultant, lasted over a period of six months; it provided training in storytelling for the screen, and concept creation, story development, screenplay appreciation, and pitching were discussed. After the AV Training in 2011, as part of the Valletta 2018 Foundation, a special screenwriting programme was launched in 2013: *Storyworks-The Craft of Weaving Great Stories*, which, through an open call, provided a series of workshops held bi-yearly for 5 years (2015-2018) with the aim of providing an opportunity for Maltese screenwriters and creative collaborators to develop their ideas on a professional level. *Storyworks* was organized in collaboration with the Malta Film Commission, Arts Council Malta, Spazju Kreattiv/Creative Space and with the participation of MCAST.⁶² The screenwriters were under the guidance of three screenplay consultants, namely David Howard, script development consultant and screenwriting pedagogist at the University of Southern California, Martin Daniel and Mary Kate O’Flanagan.⁶³ During one of the sessions, Malcolm Galea workshopped further his screenplay of *20,000 Reasons* with London Film Microwave International, which is a low-budget feature scheme for emerging talent.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ *Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ* Screenwriting Boot Camp <<https://youth.gov.mt/news/>> [accessed 13 May 2022].

⁶⁰ Attard, discussion, 27 April 2021.

⁶¹ Institute for Education, <<https://ife.portal.gov.mt/positions/apply?keywords=IfE+63%2F2021&fbclid=IwAR0W-Tulma8QQ7i8wVPjZWEPWR4aXwrVV8vOJiPiF5StoJGAiryYPZkOaq0>> [accessed 13 August 2021]

⁶² MCAST is a vocational education and training institution in Malta

⁶³ <https://valletta2018.org/cultural-programme/storyworks/> [accessed 21 September 2017].

⁶⁴ Microwave <<https://filmlondon.org.uk/microwave/>> [accessed 28 September] (para.1 of 6).

Another opportunity was created in August of 2019 by the Broadcasting Authority together with the Culture Directorate, the Arts Council and the Malta Film Commission aimed at all drama producers to attend a master class on scriptwriting for film and television (nine hours) given by John Collee.⁶⁵ The aim here is to show that rather than scripts being written, the government is trying to encourage training of the writers. The masterclass was very short, indeed, only nine hours, which did not contribute to any works emerging from this masterclass; and of course, even the eighteen hours of writing television drama and sitcom offered by the Department of Media and Communications at the University of Malta as part of the *Scripting Video* (four hours) and *Adaption for Film and Television* (fourteen hours) modules are not enough. Most writers who wish to continue educating themselves in writing television drama attend short course offered by ScreenSkills or by the National Film and Television School.⁶⁶

In my conversation with Mario Philip Azzopardi, it transpired that Azzopardi plans to set up an agency called Film Malta with aim to commission and produce indigenous productions. Azzopardi is against setting up a film school in Malta. He prefers providing students with scholarships permitting them to gain knowledge overseas.

6.5 National Film and Television Funding

In recent years, there has been an increase in the state support for culture and the arts (which includes film and television) along with the academic interest in producing writing practitioners. This new approach encouraged Malta to take up another challenge, and that is the setting of its national film industry and to regard it as part of the creative culture, and not only as a medium that generates an inward financial investment.

In 2008, the Malta Film Fund is established by the Malta Film Commission—in itself an unusual arrangement—to promote and foster an environment in which the Maltese audio-visual industry can develop and grow by apportioning an amount of funding for the development and production of audio-visual projects and to encourage training, networking and financing of Maltese scriptwriters, directors, and producers. Screen Malta remains to this day Malta's primary funding body.

Malta's capital city, Valletta, was named in 2012 as the European Capital of Culture for 2018, making a unique opportunity to transform the artistic Malta into a hub for creative audio-visual exchange and to raise awareness of improving modern and professional infrastructures. According to the Creative Economy Policy for the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI) created in

⁶⁵ 'Masterclass in Scriptwriting', Broadcasting Authority, 27 August 2019 <http://www.ba-malta.org/1919-masterclass-in-scriptwriting> [accessed 19 August 2019].

⁶⁶ Mark Doneo, Abigail Mallia, Carlos Debattista, Audrey Brincat Dalli interviews with researcher.

2012, the CCI prioritizes four key objectives: education and professional development, route to market, internationalization, and governance. In parallel to this initiative, the 2011 Budget announced seven new programmes to address the immediate needs of the CCIs in training and education, audience development and CCI financing mechanism to leverage private investment. The aim of the policy is consistent with the vision of Malta's new cultural policy in transforming the cultural and creative sector into the twenty-first century with the first national milestones before hosting of the European Capital of Culture in 2018. In addition, the new Malta Film Commissioner (2013) introduced a new clause in the guidelines of film development fund, which states:

The vision for the Fund is to foster a culture of scriptwriting and proper development of feature films (all genres)—to foster a culture of script writing- this is a historic moment for Malta with the hope that doors and horizons will open for the many talented screenwriters.⁶⁷

The National Film Policy 2016-2020 recognized the predominance of film servicing and calls for 'intelligent polices' for domestic film. Two funds were created to enhance the indigenous industry: the Malta Film Fund and the Malta Co-Production Fund. The Policy also reviewed the EU's activities in relation to what other countries are doing, assisting local film writers to access EU to other international funds but breaking out international has proven to be elusive. Malta's National Film launched in 2016 while the Maltese and the Film Commission Act is passed in 2005.

In 2021, the government launched Screen Malta through the Malta Film Commission and the Ministry for Tourism and Consumer Protection. Screen Malta increased the support and the major grants rose up to a combined € 350,000 to € 600,000.⁶⁸ Minister for Tourism and Consumer Protection, Clayton Bartolo, stated during the launch that:

the film industry in Malta is increasingly strengthening and being one of the most resilient sectors in Malta. We are investing in infrastructure whilst looking forward to build the first sound stages in Malta. We are also investing in our people through the Screen Malta scheme which is intended to give more opportunities to the Maltese film makers. The Government's commitment remains to attract new people to this industry to meet our vision in creating a world class film industry in Malta for the generations to come.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Malta Film Commission <<http://www.switchpg.com/malta-film-commission/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Malta-Film-Fund-2014-Development-Funds-Guidelines-06-08-2014.pdf>> [accessed 15 October 2015]

⁶⁸ <https://maltafilmcommission.com/screen-malta/grants/>

⁶⁹ <https://maltafilmcommission.com/press-coverage/launch-of-screen-malta-2021-scheme-for-local-film-producers/>

The increase, however, is not as substantial as it may suggest, since each project and company is granted a limited fund of €200,000 maximum spread over three years as per the *De Minimis* regulation.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, it is a step in the right direction since the objective of the Screen Malta is to nurture and back the development and production of Maltese films and scripts, creative documentaries, and high-quality international television drama, which in turn contributes towards building an indigenous film industry. The fund offers three funding strands, one for development (Writers' Grant and Development Grant) and one for production (Short Film Production for New Talent, Short Film Production, Production) and a third one for distribution, with a total budget allocation of €350,000. All projects need to promote Maltese storytelling, Maltese stories and Maltese cinema and by doing so improve the structure and ultimately create a self-sustained Maltese film industry. An independent evaluation panel of highly esteemed professionals including foreign experts from the film industry are brought together to assess and review applications and to administer awards. As administrators of the Screen Malta and other schemes, the Malta Film Commission are working towards an alignment and coordination of various film support measures that will help support Maltese film-making talent.⁷¹

With the current Film Commissioner, Johann Grech, the Malta Film Commission his initiative by the Malta Film Commission aims to create opportunities for individuals and service companies interested in working within the Malta film industry. The Screen Malta film fund has the following main objectives for 2021 which did not change from 2020 objectives and criteria:

1. Making a valid contribution to the expression of creativity and culture.
2. Strengthening aspects of the economy with the supply of cultural products.
3. Contributing towards the development of production capability skills in the audio-visual sector with the goal of maintaining and fostering employment in Malta in this sector.
4. Being processed to commercial release standards, for local and/or international distribution for theatrical release, festivals and broadcast/tecast (including VOD/SVOD platforms).⁷²

The actual implementation of the above conditions must also meet one of the following criteria:

1. Content and location of story is based completely or partially in Malta.
2. Language to be used is Maltese.

⁷⁰ The Malta Film Fund, <https://maltafilmcommission.com/screen-malta/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/MFF2019-Production-Grant-Sample-Contract.pdf>. 14

⁷¹ <https://maltafilmcommission.com/press-coverage/launch-of-screen-malta-2021-scheme-for-local-film-producers/>

⁷² <https://maltafilmcommission.com/screen-malta/grants/>

3. Location of the development, production and/or postproduction is Malta.⁷³

The objective of the Screen Malta 2021 is to ‘nurture and back the development and production of Maltese films and scripts, which includes feature films, short films (production only), creative documentaries, and high quality international tv series, which in turn contribute towards building an indigenous film industry’.⁷⁴ Malta Screen offers financial support with three funding strands: one for development (Writers’ Grant and Development Grant), one for production (Short Film Production for New Talent, Short Film Production, Production) and a third one for distribution, with a total budget allocation of €350,000.⁷⁵ Malta Screen’s aim is to accept applications for film and script projects in all genres, including animation. Applications are accepted from either upcoming or established filmmakers who aim to promote Maltese storytelling, Maltese stories and Maltese cinema. The aim is to improve the structure and ultimately create a self-sustained Maltese film industry. An independent evaluation panel, including foreign film practitioners, assesses and reviews applications. As administrators of the Screen Malta and other schemes, the Malta Film Commission are working towards an alignment and coordination of various film support measures that will help support Maltese film making talent. Film practitioners, however, are very much aware that producing Malta’s own projects presents its own challenges and modalities but the experience Malta has gained working on foreign productions has certainly made it possible be able to handle their own productions showcasing their culture and identity.⁷⁶

However, despite the development in funding schemes just mentioned, the situation could be much better, with foreign productions being currently favoured by the Malta Film Commission. In August of 2020 the *Variety* trade magazine announced that Universal Studios scaled down the planned shoot in Malta of their fifth instalment of *Jurassic World: Dominion*, following an outbreak of coronavirus in Malta.⁷⁷ Despite the pledges and promises many by the Malta Film Commission, the major concern remains unchanged—the national film policy needs to be re-structured to re-organize the framework that does not support enough the indigenous screen productions:

⁷³ SCREEN MALTA Support Schemes Regulations < <https://maltafilmcommission.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Screen-Malta-Regulations-2020-09-07-2020.pdf> > [accessed 20 February 2020], p. 7.

⁷⁴ Screen Malta < <https://maltafilmcommission.com/screen-malta/about-us/> > [accessed 28 December 2020]

⁷⁵ Screen Malta < [Support Schemes | Screen Malta \(maltafilmcommission.com\)](#) > [accessed 28 December 2020]

⁷⁶ Pierre Ellul, ‘If We Want to Tell Our Stories, We Have to Invest in Film’, *Times of Malta*, 27 October 2019 < <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/a-bittersweet-tale.745170> > [accessed 28 October 2019].

⁷⁷ Naman Ramachandran, ‘*Jurassic World: Dominion* Scales Back Malta Shoot After Coronavirus Outbreak’, *Variety*, 19 August 2020 < https://variety.com/2020/film/global/jurassic-park-malta-shoot-coronavirus1234739834/?fbclid=IwAR3rJooV9gsF5ItifDZ_1WEJB6GUsrlVduUCyxTjEETZOjfpfndHAAg_wE > [accessed 19 August 2020] (para. 1 of 4).

The situation has been appallingly unbalanced for the past 20 years or so with practically all Film Commissioners to date ignoring indigenous film [industry]. Servicing needs to be taken down a peg in the national film policy and as an industry refocus our efforts on minority and majority co-productions as well as 100% Maltese film.⁷⁸

Rebecca Anastasi, a film producer and a film and screenwriting scholar, agrees with Bonnici. She voices her discontent and disappointment in Malta investing in promoting the island as a film servicing industry while neglecting its national television and film industries; Malta needs a ‘shift in strategy, towards fostering local talent and getting Maltese stories out on the international.’⁷⁹ Anika Psaila Savona, a film producer, echoes the sentiment:

As it is, film is an afterthought or just the ‘excuse’ for boosting the tourism product. Is that why Film is under the Ministry for Tourism? [...] this is a plea to rethink the strategy. Let's use this time to focus on telling our own stories. Will this fall on deaf ears again? [...] there is a lot of wonderful talent in Malta, both crew and cast and there are so many fantastic stories to be told. It is about time that the focus is placed on telling these stories helping us build our own film legacy. We should not rely on foreign film productions to come and shoot here. We need to shed this colonial mindset.⁸⁰

Pierre Ellul, a film producer, believes that producing Malta’s own projects ‘presents its own challenges but the experience we have gained on foreign productions helps us to be able to handle our own productions’. Ellul believes that ‘film is a powerful medium to tell stories and [we need to] showcase our culture and identity’.⁸¹ It would be beneficial if the scriptwriters and filmmakers would open themselves up and discover different types of storytelling aesthetics—as argued before, the technique of double storytelling—of screen narratives from Denmark, Iceland, or Israel, just to mention few examples of non-American storytelling paradigms.

⁷⁸ Martin Bonnici, Facebook post, 19 August 2020
<<https://www.facebook.com/BumbleBex/posts/10158722296980030>> [accessed 10 September 2020].

⁷⁹ Rebecca Anastasi, Facebook post, 19 August 2020
<<https://www.facebook.com/BumbleBex/posts/10158722296980030>> [accessed 10 September 2020].

⁸⁰ Anika Psaila Savona, Facebook post, 19 August 2020
<https://www.facebook.com/anikaps?comment_id=Y29tbWVudDoxMDE1ODcyMjI5Njk4MDAzMF8xMDE1ODcyMjYxMDA4NTAzMA%3D%3D> [accessed 10 September 2020].

⁸¹ Pierre Ellul, ‘If we want to tell our stories, we have to invest in film’, *Times of Malta*, 27 October 2019 <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/a-bittersweet-tale.745170>> [accessed 28 October 2019].

Besides Screen Malta as a funding body, three further sources of funding have been developed in recent years. The first of these is the National Book Council, which supports cinematic adaptations of Maltese literature into short and full feature films. The objective of the National Book Council is to promote Maltese literary works by supporting the production of a feature film adaptation of a National Book Prize winning or shortlisted novel.⁸² The fund seeks to address all stages of development and production of one winning project with a maximum financial allocation of €200,000. The biennale fund is awarded according to the decision of an independent evaluation panel⁸³. The first call for applications opened in July 2019, and the beneficiary of Martin Bonnici's *Is-Sriep Regghu Saru Velenuzi / The Viper's Pit*, an adaptation of Alex Vera Gera's titular novel. The assessment criteria which the project had to meet are the following:

Adaptation: The script should remain faithful to the spirit of the original text and its themes. An adaptation of a novel into film does not need to follow the novel to the letter but must be an original interpretation of the novel by the filmmakers to fit within the new medium. Screenplays should be in the Maltese language or faithful to the language of the original novel. Film treatment and screenplay proposals will also be assessed on the potential to reach both a national and international audience.

Structure: The film script should make sure to adopt the right structure and elements to make it work on screen. The proposed screenplay excerpt will be treated as a blueprint and is there for the cast and crew to interpret and develop into the finished film.

*The submission of a film treatment is mandatory; a screenplay proposal is however optional.⁸⁴

The requirements are straightforward, ones that support not only Maltese literature, but also the local film industry.

A second source of funding that has emerged in recent years is *Poetry on Film*, funded by *Inizjamed* which supports cinematic adaptations of Maltese poems into short films.⁸⁵ *Poetry on Film* is a Valletta 2018 project in collaboration with *Inizjamed* which aims to develop the poetry film sector in Malta through training, the commissioning of short poetry films to be screened at the

⁸² John Grech, Applications for the Malta Literary Short Film Contest 2018 <<<https://ktieb.org.mt/the-nbc-film-adaptation-fund/>> [accessed 8 April 2020].

⁸³ The NBC Film Adaptation Fund, <https://ktieb.org.mt/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Guidelines_Film-Adaptation-Fund-2021_EN.pdf> [accessed 20 April 2020], pp. 5-6.

⁸⁴ The NBC Film Adaptation Fund, <https://ktieb.org.mt/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Guidelines_Film-Adaptation-Fund-2021_EN.pdf> [accessed 20 April 2020], pp. 5-6.

⁸⁵ <http://www.inizjamed.org/?fbclid=IwAR01Y1q_NJySzeQ1uU_LP_U2xg7FpE4wr1y3TvXK6PyOvW9NxPN5Hy4Tivw> [accessed 7 May 2018]

annual Malta Mediterranean Literature Festival, and the export of the commissioned films.⁸⁶ The fund is about €3,000, and the evaluation criteria looks for the screenwriter's engagement with the poem, the originality of the cinematic interpretation, and feasibility of the execution of the project.⁸⁷

Perhaps the most significant of the new funding sources, however, is the *Kultura TV* Fund. This was introduced in 2014 by the Arts Council Malta with the aim to incentivise the development of cultural and creative content on private broadcasting stations, in order to enhance the quality of television programming in Malta on arts and culture. Through this funding scheme, Arts Council Malta aims to support the creation of innovative and culturally significant storytelling relevant to contemporary media audiences with a specific focus on the creative sector. The scheme targets eligible productions on private television stations that require investment to develop works that often lack access to private funding. The scheme provides an incentive to independent audio-visual companies to produce quality-driven television programmes through international co-productions with a potential for international distribution. The scheme aims to support ambitious audio-visual creations and to encourage the production of original drama, innovative creative documentaries and culture programmes. The scheme also funds the translation of original Maltese literature and scripts to any other language, including subtitling/surtitling, transcription and captioning – for film, creative documentaries, plays, TV drama, animation, performance scripts.⁸⁸ The Arts Council specifies that grants will be allocated as follows:

1. Creative TV documentaries not exceeding EUR 40,000 or 60% of eligible costs whichever is the lower.
2. Culture programmes not exceeding EUR 25,000 or 60% of eligible costs whichever is the lower.⁸⁹

In 2016, the television series *il-Miraklu/Holy Mary!* benefitted from the *Kultura TV* funding scheme, which permitted the writer, Carlos Debattista, to focus on writing the television series over the period of six months.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ <http://www.inizjamed.org/?fbclid=IwAR01Y1q_NJySzEQ1uU_LP_U2xg7FpE4wr1y3TvXK6PyOvW9NxPN5Hy4Tivw> [accessed 7 May 2018].

⁸⁷ Valletta 2018 Foundation and Inizjamed <<https://artsdocbox.com/116167435-Movies/Application-guidelines.html>> [accessed 24 October 2021], pp. 3 and 4.

⁸⁸ *Kultura TV* <<https://www.artscouncilmalta.org/pages/funds-opportunities/restart-schemes-2021/kulturatv/>> [accessed 13 October 2021] (para. 8 of 8).

⁸⁹ *Kultura TV* funds <<https://www.artscouncilmalta.org/funds/kulturatv/>> [accessed 13 October 2021].

⁹⁰ Arts Council Malta, Scheme results <<https://www.artscouncilmalta.org/funds/kulturatv/main-strand/results-2016>> [accessed 13 October 2021] and Carlos Debattista, discussion with the researcher 7 July 2018/

With the introduction of the *Kultura TV* scheme, it has become possible for television drama content creators and producers to access some much needed government funds and finally mitigate their perpetual dependency on advertising revenue. Mark Doneo, one of the more successful television writers, puts the financial aspect in perspective:

given the time, effort and money that goes into actually greenlighting the project, the series traditionally starts making some profit after it garners some audience traction. And that would be after the first ten to twelve episodes [...] the argument becomes simpler, once the show takes off (hopefully with positive audience reception), advertisers and sponsors are more likely to put money during its commercial breaks [...] being the primary way that the station and producers can generate money from their projects.⁹¹

This is not to say that the scheme eliminates the need for television producers to pursue advertising money. It only means that producers are in a better position to think about elevating the quality of both the story ideas and storytelling. It means that television stations are more open to series with a shorter run since they know that the financial risk is much lower with the production cost carried by the producers. The stations would only charge the production for the agreed ‘airtime’ but this usually would either ‘be a one time fee’ or the station would opt for some of the series advertising airtime to sell for itself.⁹²

The results are slowly becoming tangible. Theatre and film actor Antonella Axisa agrees that in the past five to six years Maltese scriptwriters produced much improved television scripts, which:

saw a jump in the production values and general quality in the series *Strada Stretta* and this was evident in the elaborate hair and make-up, well-studied period costumes, extremely well-lit scenes, mostly naturalistic acting (which means choosing good actors and directing them well) and good editing. This might not have been a lucrative production for the producers considering local budgets, however audiences could immediately tell the difference and realized the effort and investment that was being done, and this was reflected in the number of viewers and feedback given.⁹³

⁹¹ Mark Doneo, email communication, 13 September 2018.

⁹² Mark Doneo, 13 September 2018.

⁹³ Antonella Axisa, email communication, 16 October 2017.

6.6 Malta National Film Policy and The Malta Academy Selection Committee

Malta's first policy focusing on the film industry, the National Film Policy 2016-2020 was launched in 2015. Although the policy mainly targeted the film servicing industry and screen industry, some consideration has been given to the national film industry. The policy claimed that it was introducing the Malta Co-Production Fund 'to support indigenous audio-visual industry'.⁹⁴

The policy admitted that film and media literacy programs have been undervalued in the Maltese context, with only some independent schools offering such an important subject as part of their curriculum. The policy appreciated the significance of film literacy programmes as either integrated into the national curriculum or as a complimentary activity needs to be highlighted.⁹⁵ Furthermore, the policy acknowledged existence of the Master of Arts in Film Studies offered by the University of Malta (Faculty of Arts) with the support of the Ministry for Tourism and the Malta Film Commission received the first intake in October 2015. The policy also acknowledged existence MCAST since the Malta Film Commission had signed a Memorandum of Understanding that saw both parties collaborate to raise the awareness of the film making industry in Malta and to provide MCAST students with further training opportunities. The policy unfortunately left out the scriptwriting courses. To this day, it is the only film policy Malta has had.

The end of 2021 ushered another important development: the setting up of the Malta Academy Selection Committee for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Awards, which announced an open call for local feature films released in 2021 to be submitted to participate in the 2022 Academy Awards, 94th edition of the Oscars under the section 'International Feature Film'. The Malta Academy Selection Committee, jointly spearheaded by the Malta Producers' Association (MPA) and the Malta Entertainment Industry and Arts association (MEIA), is made up of directors, critics, cinematographers, screenwriters, academics and acting professionals. Up until the end of 2021, the selection and the application process to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Awards, was previously handled by a Government entity, the Arts Council in conjunction with the Malta Film Commission, however it appears that the Academy much preferred that the committee is handled by the private sector so they encouraged to the local committee is jointly spearheaded by the Malta Producers' Association (MPA) and the Malta Entertainment Industry and Arts association (MEIA).⁹⁶ The selected films by the Malta Academy Selection Committee had to meet a number of requirements:

⁹⁴ National Film Policy

<<https://tourism.gov.mt/en/publicconsultations/Documents/National%20Film%20Policy.pdf>> [accessed 22 September 2018], p. 20.

⁹⁵ National Film Policy, p.24.

⁹⁶ Ben Borg Cardona, Maltese Academy Selection, email communication, 27 September 2021.

- (i) be intrinsically produced by Maltese creatives
- (ii) be over 40 minutes long,
- (iii) have a minimum of 50% of the dialogue in a non-English language and
- (iv) have been released in a commercial theatre (i.e., cinema, not TV) for at least 7 consecutive days in 2021, in order to be eligible.

Only one Maltese film may be submitted to the Academy Awards. A competitive process whereby eligible entries will be judged by a panel of film savvy professionals will follow the submission stage. A single nominee will be announced prior to the 1st November 2021. The selected candidate will then be able to participate in the 2022 Academy Awards.

The Malta Academy Selection Committee issued the following statement:

The MPA and MEIA wish to express their pride at being able to foster representation of local production in the highest echelons of international film festivals. Whilst the local producing sector is still in its infancy with only a handful of projects being released locally and internationally to date, one of the committee's hopes is that this will help to inspire a positive trend that will generate more production activity on a local level by local producers. Whilst much needed government funding is still not quite what it needs to be to kickstart the local industry in earnest, the ball has definitely started rolling and the MPA and MEIA hope to see positive developments and further confidence shown to this segment of the industry in Malta that is most certainly showing a strong keenness to grow and expand. It is only with adequate incentives that can help fuel a continued slate of local productions that the industry can be properly instituted and flourish to the point of sustainability.⁹⁷

6.7 Conclusion

Malta remains Europe's most densely populated nation-state as well as the European Union's smallest member state, with its creatives conditioned by external forces, or perhaps, the formative 'pressures', be they historical or social. At the same time, Malta has adapted to and exploited external influences and challenges, and transformed itself into a democratic, sovereign, and independent micro-state nation, anchored within the European and international fold. Despite the fact that Maltese literature remains peripheral, lacking both a wide readership and a critical discourse, it still attempts to locate itself within a broader context. Acute awareness of

⁹⁷ 'Submissions open for the 94th Oscars', *Times of Malta*, 14 September 2021 <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/submissions-open-for-the-94th-oscars.900176> [accessed 27 September] (para. 1 and 2 of 7).

peripherality gives rise to the sense of incomplete belonging that makes the Maltese ‘ambivalent Europeans’⁹⁸ and determines their relationship with the other, whether that other is the European co-citizen, or the non-European migrant. Within the Maltese literary scene, current developments can themselves be viewed in terms of a dialogue between what has emerged as ‘central’ or ‘canonical’, on the one hand, and what is novel and therefore still ‘peripheral’ on the other.⁹⁹ Malta, like any other small cinema is governmentally subsidized, if not entirely, at least to a large degree. In addition, the need and/or desire to affirm uniqueness within oppositional practice frames (facing Hollywood’s powerful system), as well as financial factors continue to support the national film industry mostly through traditional genres and mainstream narrative practices. Like in any small western nation, Malta negotiates between the multiple spaces of contemporary storytelling in both economic and cultural terms.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ John P. Mitchell *Ambivalent Europeans. Ritual, Memory and the Public Sphere in Malta*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. i.

⁹⁹ Marco Galea and Albert Gatt, ‘Charting the Centre of the Periphery: A Disclaimer’, *Transcript*, 38 (2009) < <https://www.lit-across-frontiers.org/transcript/charting-the-centre-of-the-periphery-a-disclaimer/> > [accessed 24 April 2014] (para. 2, 3, and 4 of 8).

¹⁰⁰ Ruth McElroy, ‘Television Production in Small Nations’, *Journal of Popular Television*, 4.1 (2016), 69-73 (p. 69) <<https://doi:10.1386/jptv/10697>>.

CHAPTER 7 – My Experience as a Screenwriter and Educator in Malta

7.1 Introduction

Chapter 7 provides a critical reflection on my own work as a form of the primary research case study discussed in this chapter is *The Maltese Fighter*, a produced short film. The text explores personal stories set in the socio-political and cultural environments in post-Independence Malta. The text also contributes to my arguments made in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 in which I discussed the screenworks that reflect contemporary Malta. At the time of writing the screenplay, I did not imagine that my undertaking the project would help me to explore the subjects discussed in the thesis. However, as work on it progressed my experiences prompted me to think about issues of the Maltese condition, particularly self-censorship. As mentioned previously, the aim is not to recommend writing political screenworks, but to advocate that screenwriters and writer-directors feel they can express socio-political beliefs and values while simultaneously questioning them. The role of film and television within society need not to be escapist, but instead significant enough to free screenworks from excessive romanticism while exploring personal stories and situations set against a wider socio-political context and, if possible, *zeitgeist* moments.

The Maltese Fighter [former title *Boxer*] (2014) explores a personal situation of a father and son set against a political reality in Malta in 1971 and 1987. One issue needs to be noted here: the Malta Labour Party came to power in 1971 led by Dom Mintoff, and the period from then until 2017—that is, the assassination of Caruana Galizia—was one in which the Malta Labour Party was most heavily criticized because of the violence and intimidation by criminal elements who associated with the Malta Labour Party.¹ *The Maltese Fighter* conflates 1971 and 1987 into one year, 1971—not only for dramatic purposes, but also out of safety concerns, and to prevent any repercussions of the kind that Pierre Ellul and Chris Gruppetta have talked about and which were discussed in the earlier chapters of this research. The decision to situate *The Maltese Fighter* in 1971 was taken by the producer, Joshua Cassar Gaspar, who is also the story’s creator.² Today though, seven years later after the production of *The Maltese Fighter*, the 1970s and 1980s are years that are now considered safe to write about.³

This chapter also includes a discussion about my experiences as a screenwriting pedagogist at the University of Malta. I look into students’ reluctance to situate their narratives in Malta (as

¹ Desmond Zammit Marmà, ‘90 years of Labour Existence’, *Times of Malta*, 6 October 2010 <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/90-years-of-labour-existence.330047>> [accessed 28 August 2021] (para. 6 of 9).

² Joshua Cassar Gaspar, MaltaFilm Ltd <<https://www.maltafilm.com.mt/>> [accessed 28 August 2021]

³ Gruppetta, discussion, 29 May 2020.

part of their coursework). As previously mentioned in Chapter 4, the key problem for the indigenous film industry is the ongoing influx and dominant presence of American films.⁴ A number of students from different cohorts taught by me were asked to contribute to this research by providing answers and motivations for their reluctance to locate their narratives in Malta since most of their stories are American-inflected, particularly the location. This section, therefore, includes their feedback.

7.2 Case Study: *The Maltese Fighter*

The Maltese Fighter benefitted from the Malta Film Fund production fund in 2013 and garnered a number of international awards.⁵ It is a short fictional narrative set in the corrupted post-Independence Malta of 1971 and tells the story of single father Carmelo, a shipyard welder and boxer, who is financially struggling to provide for his son and does so in ways that hurt others. My intention, besides exploring various human emotions, was to show that political violence has been always part of Malta's reality. While political violence is also hinted at in Azzopardi's *Gagga/The Cage* and Bonnici's *S-Sriep Regghu Saru Velenuzi/The Vipers' Pit*, *The Maltese Fighter* refers to the violence directly:

A montage.

Another house. A YOUNG MAN sits all bloodied on his sofa staring at Carmelo.

The Thugs burn anti-government pamphlets in the fireplace.

THUG 1
(to the wife)
Don't move!

Thugs beat the husband. Carmelo joins.

POLICEMAN 1
Who is the new guy?

THUG 1
He's with us.

THUG 2
He's the boxer, Carmelo.

⁴ Bondebjerg and Hjort, 2001, p. 20.

⁵ *The Maltese Fighter*, 2013, ZenMovie Distributor <<https://www.zenmovie.it/the-maltese-fighter>> [accessed 28 August 2021].

Next is a shop. The Thugs and Carmelo just burst in. A frightened shopkeeper runs away and cowers in a corner.

THUG 1

Where do you think you're going?

SHOP-KEEPER

I didn't do anything to you!

Another house. More victims. Carmelo restrains a man.

[...]

POLICEMAN 1

Look at my face carefully Carmelo.

You never saw my face do you understand?

Carmelo nods in silence.⁶

The intention behind this scene is to show that Carmelo is a survivor, but one who is not very good at negotiating Malta's difficult political realities. The story makes reference to Malta's geopolitical situation, as explored in Chapter 1 of this thesis: the lack of indigenous raw materials, a very small domestic market, and post-independence economic difficulties (heavily built on military spending, Malta's economy was negatively impacted by the closure of the British naval base in 1979).⁷ Therefore, Carmelo is not a simple thug, but a man who found himself in a vulnerable position—just like the protagonist of Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thieves* (1948)—when the shipyard is closed down, leaving all the workers without any employment prospects:

EXT. EXIT GATE - SHIPYARD - MORNING (1971)

Carmelo is pushed outside the shipyard gate. There are some police cars in the street. Mario with other workers, dirty overalls, is laid off from work.

Mario's standing on a makeshift podium (a box) addressing the workers.

MARIO

This will not end here!

We have the right to work!

A show of hands in solidarity with Mario. Some echo Mario's words

⁶ *The Maltese Fighter*, p. 9.

⁷ Chircop, 29 January 2018.

WORKER # 1
This will not end here!

WORKER # 2
We have the right to work!

The protest is watched ominously from outside by police officers.

WORKER # 3
Give us back our jobs!

Carmelo walks away defeated.

Down the street, Thug 1 and Thug 2 stand by the gate STARING at Carmelo. Carmelo feels their stare. Turns around. Locks his eye briefly with Thugs 2. Unnerved, Carmelo quickens his pace lowering his gaze.⁸

The above scene refers to the intimidation tactics used by the followers of the Malta Labour Party while foreshadowing the main conflict. I need to stress that it was not the Labour Party which orchestrated these attacks and intimidation, but the Party's staunch supporters. Since I was commissioned by the producer, Cassar Gaspar, to write the screenplay, writing a politically engaged narrative was a conscious decision in a conflict with the government. I took this approach for two reasons: firstly, it is part of Malta's contemporary reality, and secondly, as a storyteller, I believe in locating stories in our immediate time and space—one that offers a wealth of conflict.

Additionally, the original shooting script of *The Maltese Fighter* included scenes with religious motifs to address a clash of beliefs between the participatory politics of the Maltese and their religious reverence:

EXT. THE GOOD FRIDAY PROCESSION - VALLETTA - DAY (1971)

The Good Friday procession dresses the streets in red and black colours.

Red flower petals are thrown at the statue of Jesus as he is carefully carried through the streets of Valletta.

INT. EAST STREET APARTMENT - VALLETTA - DAY

Giuseppe throws punches in the air. More practice.
In the b.g. runs a BBC news broadcast in English.

⁸ *The Maltese Fighter*, p. 5.

NEWS BROADCAST

The victory of the new government in Malta has been announced.

EXT. THE GOOD FRIDAY PROCESSION - VALLETTA - DAY

Biblical characters. Roman soldiers. Ordinary people in chains, some barefoot.

INT. EAST STREET APARTMENT - VALLETTA - DAY

Giuseppe keeps throwing punches this time against an imaginary adversary.

NEWS BROADCAST

The unemployment rate is expected to rise.⁹

The last scene is more symbolic, alluding to Carmelo's internal change and foreshadowing of violence he will inflict on his victims:

EXT. THE GOOD FRIDAY PROCESSION - VALLETTA - DAY

Red flower petals fall to the ground as a black leather shoe tramples over them. Carmelo's shoe.¹⁰

Carmelo, though, is an active protagonist who immediately takes action. In fact, his next move is to go to the Labour Office to find alternative employment. The scene reveals the dire situation in which Carmelo finds himself, providing a logical motivation when he gives in to the corrupted elements of the police force:

EXT. LABOUR OFFICE, VALLETTA - NEXT DAY

Carmelo's eyes scan the posting board with job listings.

He steps back as he looks helplessly around. No jobs and a long queue of hopefuls.

A Labour Office clerk steps out.

[...]

⁹ *The Boxer/The Maltese Fighter*, 2012, p. 2.

¹⁰ *The Boxer/The Maltese Fighter*, p.3.

CLERK
 (addressing the crowd)
 I'm sorry, go home, there are no jobs!

A murmur of distress from the crowd. A look of concern from the clerk. He really feels for them.

CARMELO
 What do you mean no jobs?!

The clerk just shakes his head. There is nothing he can do. Carmelo looks dejected.¹¹

At the same time, Giuseppe runs to meet his dad, so that they walk home together, but on the way the overall mood is different because of the imminent national election that will end the ruling of the Nationalist Party:

EXT. VALLETTA STREETS - LATER

As Giuseppe runs through Valletta to meet his dad towards the harbour, he notices men putting up ELECTORAL POSTERS.¹²

Although the name of the political candidate of the Malta Labour Party is Leli Mifsud, the fictional political figure visually (Figs. 29 and 30) resembles Dom Mintoff, including the Malta Labour Party's colours of red and white. Unfortunately for *The Maltese Fighter*, the then Malta Film Commissioner, Engelbert Grech (2013-2017), had a personal connection to Mintoff—he was Grech's uncle, which itself is symptomatic of the processes of patronage and preferment. In the script, there is a reference to Mintoff through the electoral posters that are being put up. Coming to power, Mintoff began a campaign of denigration of the ex-colonial power, culminating in a decision to close the British military base in Malta. At once the Maltese economy began to decline, with unemployment reaching around 20%.¹³

¹¹ *The Maltese Fighter*, p. 6.

¹² *The Maltese Fighter*, p. 2.

¹³ Daphne Caruana Galizia, 'The Golden Years, When We Made the International News for the Wrong Reasons', *Running Commentary*, 16 February 2011 <<https://daphnecaruanaGalizia.com/2011/02/the-golden-years-when-we-made-the-international-news-for-the-wrong-reasons/>> [accessed 30 August 2021] (para.7 of 8).



Figure 29: Dom Mintoff

Source: Obituary, *Independent*, UK



Figure 30: Leli Mifsud

Source: *The Maltese Fighter*, screen capture

The image is reinforced when Giuseppe walks back home with Carmelo, but this time, the poster and politics are blended with the everyday life of the ordinary Maltese:

EXT. VALLETTA STREETS - THE WALK HOME - LATER

Carmelo and Giuseppe walk back home. Giuseppe's holding his dad's hand. He wants everybody to know that Carmelo is his father. They walk by:

- the new electoral posters.
- old women looking from their balconies down gossiping.
- two young boys racing out into the street.
- a young girl peeping out from behind her mother's skirt.
- old men sitting out on their stoops smoking cigarettes.¹⁴

The point of view in this scene belongs to Carmelo; however, Giuseppe's unawareness of the growing political tension heightens the discomfort that Carmelo and the audience feel—that there is something dark lurking beneath the seemingly happy father-son walk (Fig. 31):

¹⁴ *The Maltese Fighter*, p. 3.



Figure 31: Electoral Poster
Source: *The Maltese Fighter*, screen capture

Indeed, as the story unfolds, the stakes become higher, and now even Giuseppe feel there is something amiss when his teachers fail to come to school to teach. The scene below sets out to dramatize Mintoff's decisions to shut down Church schools. Mintoff ordered that there must be no fees charged for private education. The intention in this scene was, therefore, to address (and dramatize) political decisions on education, which was something that the previous Maltese productions had not really addressed at the time of writing the film.

EXT. VALLETTA STREETS - DAY

Giuseppe and Carmelo walk back home. The streets feel different. Some of the posters have been vandalized.

Carmelo makes an effort to talk to Giuseppe keeping it light.

CARMELO

The school was good today?

GIUSEPPE

Yes.

CARMELO

And did you practice boxing today?

GIUSEPPE

I did.

[...]

When unexpectedly--

GIUSEPPE

Dad, three teachers did not come to school today. Ms. Tanya, Ms. Rita and Mr. Freddie.

(beat)

Twanny said they were told not to come back to school anymore. He said they were dismissed.¹⁵

A number of protests and teaching redundancies ensued, both historically and in the film. As previously explained in Chapter 1, around the time of Malta's independence Mintoff replaced the Maltese educational system with a socialist vision of education, denouncing the British system as hierarchical and discriminatory.¹⁶

The political storytelling elements of *The Maltese Fighter* carried some risk. When Pierre Ellul, a Maltese producer and filmmaker, made a documentary about Mintoff titled *Dear Dom* (2012), staunch Labour supporters threatened Ellul and there were moments when he became afraid.¹⁷ Ellul recalls that the biggest obstacle in making the documentary about Mintoff was that:

people were afraid to be associated with the documentary [...] at every corner, at every stage they would pull out because of [...] the political and controversial subject [...] which in Malta [the subject of Mintoff] is extremely heart-felt [...] Mintoff as a politician divided our country and I thought Malta (I was naïve to think that) was mature enough to accept the documentary, but politicians have their legacy to protect. I was called so many insults; a liar, that I want to incite hatred.¹⁸

For the reasons above, during the first six years of my research, I consciously stayed away from any political undertones and themes. During the last six months, I underwent a significant personal change. I found my voice and have matured, and so did the perspective of my research. I can say, therefore, that the intention behind *The Maltese Fighter* was to show that the political aspect, however unpleasant it can be, is part of Malta's nation-building, national identity and distinctive historical experience, characterized by the practice and legacy of occupation and colonization with a history of dependence and inter-dependence. To understand Malta's history is to understand the history of Europe, with the question of national identity becoming a major preoccupation. The

¹⁵ *The Maltese Fighter*, p. 6.

¹⁶ 'Malta: History and Background,' <<https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/953/Malta-HISTORY-BACKGROUND.html>> [accessed 9 September 2021] (para. 3, 4 of 8).

¹⁷ Pierre Ellul, in discussion with researcher, 20 September 2016.

¹⁸ Ellul, 20 September 2016.

historical pervasiveness that characterises Maltese politics is linked to class, ideology, meritocracy and strong loyalties rooted in social and family background, as Carmel Cassar, a Maltese history scholar, notes: ‘people in Malta are often reminded that what matters is ‘not how much you know (meaning one's level of education, ability, or work experience) but who you know’ [‘mhux kemm taf, imma lil min taf’].¹⁹

7.3 Production Grants Allocation

This section intends to elucidate the manner in which two major film funding bodies are administered, which at times contributes to creating situations that emphasise their allegiances. A very recent example, from 2020, is *Blood on the Crown*, also titled *Just Noise* [Maltese translation *Storbju*], a full feature and historical drama written by Jean Pierre Magro about the 1919 *Sette Giugno* riots. The Malta Arts Council, chaired by Albert Marshal and Mario Philip Azzopardi, represent the government on the company’s board, and its funding allocation is riddled with oddities. €500,000 of public funds were being used for the production of *Blood on the Crown*, ‘raising eyebrows in the film industry about the way the deal has been struck between the government and private film producers’.²⁰ A former Malta Film Commissioner and film producer, Oliver Mallia, has shared a Facebook post about the fund allocation:

What they are [Arts Council Malta] not telling us is that since Malta is still a member state of the European Union the government is obliged to get any aid provided to cinema productions approved by the European Commission before agreements are even signed.²¹

Mallia’s point is that all film financial incentives available in Malta such as the Cash Rebate, Tax Credits, Co-Production and Co-Production Treaties need to be notified and approved by the Malta Film Commission before they are made available to producers, but no information was made public

¹⁹ Carmel Cassar, *A Concise History of Malta* (Malta: Mireva Publications, 2000), p. 252.

²⁰ Ivan Camilleri, ‘Public Funds Funnelled For Private Film Production’, *Times of Malta*, 13 October 2019 <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/public-funds-funnelled-for-private-film-production.741645>> [accessed 30 August 2021] (para.1, 2 and 3 of 18).

²¹ Jean Paul Azzopardi, ‘Arts Council Malta Comes Under Fire for Questionable Funding of Sette Giugno Blockbuster from Former Film Commissioner’, *Lovin’ Malta*, 26 June 2020. <<https://lovinmalta.com/news/arts-council-malta-comes-under-fire-for-questionable-funding-of-sette-giugno-blockbuster-from-former-film-commissioner/>> [accessed 30 August 2021] (para.12 of 14).

referring to the production funds made available to *Just Noise*.²² The project secured four times the amount any other film company in Malta could receive in 2019 from the Malta Film Fund for a single project. It is also more than the entire amount distributed by the same fund last year. The portion of the fund, €120,000, awarded to this film left only some €350,000 available to be shared amongst all other applicants to the production fund.²³ Mallia notes that ‘the Chairman of the Arts Council Malta [Albert Marshall] who is also a director of the company producing *Blood on the Crown* served as one of the “independent” evaluators of the fund. Conflict of interest? Market distortion? Unfair competition?’²⁴ Pierre Ellul also reacted to this fund, noting that ‘the Government, through the Film Commissioner, is refusing to give details on how the funds have been made available to private producers, without any form of competition, transparency and accountability’.²⁵

Additionally, Malta struggles with politically appointed Ministers and other high-profile political appointees whose lack of knowledge and appreciation of the arts and culture leads to misunderstandings and miscommunications. One such very example occurred in 2021 when the Culture Minister, José Herrera, in his comments to reporters said that ‘being an artist [including scriptwriters and filmmakers] is a vocation and while creatives are excellent at raising the quality of life, their IQ is not business-oriented’.²⁶ A strong reaction from Maltese creatives followed because the Minister suggested that ‘those in the creative arts lacked business acumen’, implying that artists in Malta are ‘hobbyists rather than [professionals] involved in a sector of the economy that contributed to 9% of GDP’.²⁷ The Minister defended himself by remarking that these words were uttered after the signing of a cooperation agreement between Arts Council Malta and Malta Enterprise.²⁸ He pointed out that ‘about 12,000 people are employed directly in the arts sector and

²² Malta Production Financial Incentives <<https://maltafilmcommission.com/financial-incentives/>> [accessed 28 September 2021].

²³ Jean Paul Azzopardi, ‘Arts Council Malta Comes Under Fire For Questionable Funding of *Sette Giugno* Blockbuster From Former Film Commissioner’, *Lovin’ Malta*, 26 June 2020 <<https://lovinmalta.com/news/arts-council-malta-comes-under-fire-for-questionable-funding-of-sette-giugno-blockbuster-from-former-film-commissioner/>> [accessed 30 July 2021] (para. 5, 6 of 13).

²⁴ Azzopardi (para.12 of 13)

²⁵ Ivan Camilleri, ‘Filmmaker Slams €500,000 ‘sweet gift’ to Select Producers’, *Times of Malta*, 29 October 2019 <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/film-maker-slams-500000-sweet-gift-to-select-producers.745593>> [accessed 30 July 2021] (para.6, 8 of 18).

²⁶ ‘Culture Minister's 'Artists Don't Have Business IQ' Comment Sparks Controversy’, *Times of Malta*, 27 April 2021

<[Culture minister's 'artists don't have business IQ' comment sparks controversy \(timesofmalta.com\)](https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/culture-minister-s-artists-don-t-have-business-iq-comment-sparks-controversy)> [accessed 27 April 2021] (para. 2 of 27).

²⁷ ‘Culture minister's 'artists’ (para. 8 of 27).

²⁸ Arts Council Malta is the national agency for development and investment in the cultural and creative sectors <<https://www.artscouncilmalta.org/>> [accessed 14 August 2021].

Malta Enterprise is an Economic Development Agency Tasked with Attracting New Foreign Direct Investment s Well As Facilitating the Growth of Existing Operations <<http://www.maltaenterprise.com/about-maltaenterprise>> [accessed 14 August 2021].

several thousand more worked on a part-time basis'.²⁹ What the Minister meant to say was that 'while creative artists in Malta are excellent in art and culture which improved to continue'.³⁰

The above exchange reveals the accumulated frustration from the creative and art sector, which includes the screenwriting and film industries. This frustration applies as well to the appointment of the current Malta Film Commissioner, Johann Grech (2017-). The official description of Johann Grech that can be found on the official website of the Malta Film Commission states that he is:

Johann Grech is a seasoned marketing communications professional, with over fifteen years' experience in audiovisual productions, branding, marketing, and political campaigns. Having developed and honed his skills in the freelance market and the agency business, he occupied the role of Head of Government Marketing within the Office of the Prime Minister between 2013 and 2017.³¹

The appointment of persons of trust, or political appointees, by cabinet ministers and parliamentary secretaries, has been a long-standing practice in Malta. Understandably, politicians in government want people whom they can trust to occupy certain positions, especially in their private secretariats. Regrettably, over time, this position has been increasingly abused: rather than to ensure the highest level of trust possible, such appointments are made to 'curry favours, give unjustified "promotions"—read handsome remuneration packages—to friends and, as more recent events have shown, even to serve as henchmen'.³² This is how Grech was given the position of the Malta Film Commissioner: he was not known for any special qualifications in the film industry, but since 2013 he had been in then Prime Minister Joseph Muscat's 'inner circle acting as the Office of the Prime Minister's marketing manager at Castille'.³³

The Malta Producers Association is demanding Grech's resignation after allegations emerged that the Malta Film Commission has been selectively endorsing certain local film production companies to international producers, to the exclusion of everyone else in the industry. The producers have requested the immediate return of the online directory listing all film personnel. The Association said that the Film Commission had, some years ago, removed the existing online

²⁹ 'Culture minister's 'artists' (para.7 of 27).

³⁰ 'Culture minister's 'artists' (para.6 of 27).

³¹ <https://maltafilmcommission.com/screen-malta/about-us/>

³² 'Shady 'Person of Trust' Appointments: Many Questions Remain About a System Which Needs Serious Reform', *Times of Malta*, 2 December 2020

<<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/shady-person-of-trust-appointments.835832>> [accessed 19 July 2021] (para.1, 2 of 14).

³³ 'Film Commissioner Johann Grech Spends €600,000 on Travel in 2 Years', *The Shift*, 13 October 2020 <<https://theshiftnews.com/2020/10/13/film-commissioner-johann-grech-spends-e600000-on-travel-in-2-years/>> [accessed 18 July 2021] (para.11, 13 of 15).

directory and replaced it with an ‘opaque system’ called ‘Opportunities For All’, and that it has not been uploaded.³⁴ The practical consequence for the film producers is that only a handful are contacted by foreign companies who are interested in choosing Malta as a shooting location.

7.4 My Experience as a Screenwriting Educator in Malta

When I began teaching screenwriting at the University of Malta in 2013, I realised immediately that students majoring in communication studies had little interest in telling Maltese stories.

Consciously or unconsciously, the students would subscribe to the pre-conceived post-colonial fallacy that the foreign is better than the indigenous. And when I would ask them ‘why not Malta?’, I would get a very standard reply that Malta (particularly contemporary Malta) has no stories, or that Malta is not really an interesting place to write about, or simply put, locating cinematic stories in Malta seems counter-intuitive. Attracting them to indigenous cinematic content, therefore, is one of the biggest challenges. Moreover, most EU films and television content providers face the same challenges, since we are all competing with the popular US streaming services which are dramatically changing screen content consumption.³⁵

It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that many Maltese students have the sense of being ‘postcolonial remnants’³⁶ because of living in a country that was a colonial outpost for many centuries, and that this has inculcated in them a state of ‘an exaggerated sense of awe before the foreign’.³⁷ This is rendered more acute by the global availability of the content generated by the streaming services. Another unhelpful aspect is that the students are at the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences exposed just to twenty-eight hours of screenwriting lectures as a part of the Media and Communications programme which offers a limited number of study units each offering twenty-eight hours of lectures: *Scripting Video 1* unit in semester one and, if they are interested, the second unit in second semester *Scripting Video 2* (re-adjusted and re-named in 2020 as *Adaptation For Film and Television*), which affords the students an additional twenty-eight hours of studying scriptwriting and screenwriting. *Scripting Video 1* offers analysis, discussion and scriptwriting for different audio-visual production genres with course work and a practice creative final assignment,

³⁴ Malta Film Commission <<https://maltafilmcommission.com/about-us/>> [accessed 19 July 2021].

³⁵ Cathrin Bengesser and others, ‘Researching Transnational Audiences In The Streaming Era: Designing, Piloting and Refining a Mixed Methods Approach’, *Participations: International Journal of Audience Research*, 19.1 (2022), 1-21 (p.2) <[https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/researching-transnational-audiences-in-the-streaming-era\(2dfe44ba-5b96-43d2-b7f1-2e9a617f277b\).html](https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/researching-transnational-audiences-in-the-streaming-era(2dfe44ba-5b96-43d2-b7f1-2e9a617f277b).html)> [accessed 16 May 2022].

³⁶ Raphael Vella, ‘Forward’ Cross-Currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta’, in *Cross-currents: Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta*, ed. by Raphael Vella (Malta: Allied Publications, 2008), p. 7.

³⁷ Kenneth Wain, ‘On Art, Spirituality, and the Search of the Inner Self: Reflections on Abstract Art in Malta from the 1960s to the 2000s’, in *Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta*, ed. by Raphael Vella (Malta: Allied Publications, 2008), p. 30.

while *Adaptation For Film and Television* offers, besides the theoretical aspect, a practice-based engagement with the original source text in form of a novel, short story, a poem, song lyrics, a photograph, and a painting. Despite these resources, there is a steady number of students whose engagement with the local stories is close to non-existent.

Therefore, as part of my research for this thesis I contacted those students to find out whether they still feel that Malta had no stories to tell and if, as an island, it is not really an interesting place to write about. Their answers were varied. Marco Portelli (cohort 2017-2018) admits that:

stating that Malta has no story to tell would say more about the person's lack of knowledge rather than the island itself [...] the more I researched about Malta's cultural concoction throughout the ages, the more I understood that cultures beget stories [...] I think as my knowledge grew in general, I saw more potential for stories through every faucet of society, Malta and abroad.³⁸

Sean Montebello (cohort 2020-2021) agrees with my observation that his initial instinct when working on scripts or projects is not to set them in Malta. He explains that his inspiration to write narratives is being pulled from the media he has seen and consumed—which is not really the local media. He believes that ‘if I were exposed to more local cinema on a constant basis, I might start subconsciously pulling from these sources for my own stories’, although he appreciates Malta and sees ‘the potential for some great drama stories here, given the unique blend of cultures. Religion, politics, fanaticism and the small-town culture blend into each other in such a way that is quite unseen in contemporary cinema’.³⁹

Clive Sciberras (cohort 2016-2017) supports both points that Sean makes: the lack of awareness of indigenous film and television productions by some Maltese, and the political situation in Malta. He further notes that the Maltese audience has been exposed to a certain set of types of screen texts that were shot in Malta. ‘For us Maltese, we grew up with everything but local cinematography, so we can never associate a good script with a Maltese setting [...] in summary, Malta is not worth writing about because we do not know how to write about it.’⁴⁰

Alice Battistino (cohort 2019-2020) thinks that Malta ‘has a culture which is very specific to us’, and so Maltese students tend to create ‘characters in a foreign country in order to appeal to a larger audience’.⁴¹ What makes a cinematic story travel is a universal story that is located in a specific

³⁸ Marco Portelli, questionnaire, 1 September 2021.

³⁹ Sean Montebello, questionnaire, 2 September 2021.

⁴⁰ Clive Sciberras, questionnaire, 3 September 2021.

⁴¹ Alice Battistino, questionnaire 15 September 2021.

world. Alice's reply, however, was indicative of the students' tendency to see the world beyond Malta as holding a greater attraction, and a widespread failure to see the potential for conflict in homegrown stories: 'if we [students] were to write about a college experience in Malta, it would not entail the exciting elements of moving to a different state, forced to share a dorm room with a stranger and all the other aspects and conflicts that make movies about student life appealing.'⁴² Again, to my mind this is a naïve perspective, revealing an attraction to the outside world and failing to see the potential for conflict in homegrown stories.

Kim Bezzina-Jones (cohort 2017-2018) admits that now that she lives overseas, it became 'easier to see the potential for stories to happen there [in Malta] as opposed to when you're living in the country'. Kim explains that when she used to live in Malta as a university student whose options seem limited—no money, limited life experiences— 'it came naturally [to her] to seek escapism from what is in practice a small, limited island.'⁴³ This is a valid point, but one that I would not have expected from a screenwriting student. The situation in Malta is what it is. There is no film school nor a screenwriting academy where potential screenwriters could professionalise their writing skills or alter their perception of their homeland to present it in a more favourable light. In order for this to happen, they need to further their studies at the postgraduate level overseas. Kim admits that she would forget that the world of the stories was an integral part of a screenplay and that her narratives 'happen in a sort of contextual vacuum, focusing on the people and the story without giving any importance to the weight that a named place (a country or a region) could have on the story or the characters'.⁴⁴

Another key reason why students may feel inhibited about addressing Maltese issues directly is the lack of a national cinema that could create a cultural reference point, and in its absence, students turn their gaze towards cinematic stories from other cultures. This absence of representation in the cinematic world also inhibits them from creating their own stories within a postcolonial nation that defines its cinematic culture through the Other. Stuart Hall alludes to the way that colonial powers helped to shape the colonised identity by 'a critical exercise of cultural power and normalisation';⁴⁵ or Edward Said's 'Orientalist' sense, the colonial powers 'had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as Other'.⁴⁶ The Other is a dominant discourse, but it is 'knowledge' that is internalised not only through imposition but also through a process of 'inner compulsion and subjective confirmation to the norm'.⁴⁷

⁴² Battistino, 15 September 2021.

⁴³ Kim Bezzina-Jones, questionnaire, 6 September 2021.

⁴⁴ Bezzina, 6 September 2021.

⁴⁵ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: a Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Chrisman (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp.222-237 (p. 225).

⁴⁶ Hall, Cultural Identity, p. 225-226.

⁴⁷ Hall, p. 226

Clive Sciberras is not involved in screenwriting at all. He is aware that the anger and frustration he felt as a student in his country, in 2021 the anger and frustration are more manageable now he is more mature:

I still think this is a very flawed country, with its conservative agencies still very much at large. Religion, politics, corruption, you name it. There will most likely be no hope for this country, but that is not my problem to solve. And when you go through that realization, you start focusing on what and how you can use this country for your own benefit. Focusing particularly on scriptwriting, this country has a lot to offer.⁴⁸

Karl Sciberras (cohort 2017-2018) similarly observes:

One could also write whole scripts about Malta's recent political history, most notably the tumultuous 1980s and how a journalist was blown to pieces while the whole country turned into a Mafia state and a washing machine for the filthy rich... But maybe like with our pirated (i.e. legalised pirates by the blessing of his holiness the Pope) history, we don't really want to talk about it.⁴⁹

The historical perspectives Karl raises here are very pertinent. The Maltese began taking to the sea as corsairs during the occupation of Malta by the Arabs in 870 AD, which continued throughout the successive domination of different rulers. They received encouragement and the patronage of the government of the day, for they helped materially to keep the Moslems away from Malta, at the same time 'contributing to the victualling [food supplying of] Malta'.⁵⁰ Karl also touches upon the salient point of self-censorship:

We censor ourselves. Omertà seems to be a Mediterranean thing and it definitely intensified in the last 8-9 years, financial crime is very hard to understand and hence, even mainstream Hollywood films about the Mafia prefer the narrative of drugs and violence because visually, it's much easier to narrate and intellectually requires less brain power to comprehend.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Clive Sciberras, questionnaire, 3 September 2021.

⁴⁹ Karl Sciberras, questionnaire, 3 September 2021.

⁵⁰ Paul Cassar, 'The Maltese Corsairs and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 46.2 (1960), 137-56 (p.138) < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25016674> > [accessed 11 June 2021].

⁵¹ Karl Sciberras, 3 September 2021.

Karl continues to say that ‘Maltese have never really been good critical thinkers’. He reminisces that when he studied abroad, ‘other students from all over the world constantly questioned our lecturers. Here, very few of us do. And I’ve noticed the same pattern at work in the multi-national company I work at’.⁵² This is sad but true. The students are very reticent to ask questions or initiate a discussion, due to the colonial legacy whereby people were not encouraged to ask questions. The *status quo* had to be preserved. Jeremy Boissevain explains:

when critical problems were formulated, they were passed on upwards. The foreign elite who monopolized the right and ability to ask and to answer questions handed down decisions. Asking questions might jeopardize the *status quo* and therefore questioning was curtailed. If the questioning of basic colonial premises took place, it was suppressed by the superior power of the colonial rulers.⁵³

The result is that the students are not encouraged to ask questions, and therefore as adults are reluctant to stand up and ask questions. They conform to and re-live the ‘tall poppy syndrome’ without questioning the ‘authority’ that is me, their teacher.

My experience with students who are instead majoring in theatre or English studies, and only minoring in communication studies, is much better. In this stream, the students display self-awareness and appreciation of their identity and culture and gladly situate their narratives in Malta. However, it is the other students, the non-believers, that I am intrigued by, and I remain with the hope that they realise that European and other non-Hollywood traditions are equally viable models of storytelling: each has its own dramaturgy and an organic system. Principles of dramaturgy allow writers to design unique stories reflecting the wonderful diversity of cultures. A point of departure in my own teaching is providing space for emotional and intellectual growth and development that will have a philosophy (situating in it the discovery of ‘why write this?’) and psychology (situating in it the question of ‘who am I?’) at its core and will draw on all the artforms in the context of understanding the unique techniques of cinematic storytelling to shape emotion and meaning, including via practice and feedback, learning to become a good writer and an even better editor of their own and others’ work in the context of scriptwriting and filmmaking disciplines. And for this reason, knowing who you are, being aware of one’s love and hate relationship with the island, the different attitudes towards the Maltese language, the rich history with pivotal historical moments, the unusual internal political situation, and the external political situation will generate many storytelling possibilities. The younger generation, born in 1999-2000, are freer from the historical

⁵² Sciberras, 3 September 2021.

⁵³ Jeremy Boissevain, ‘Changing Attitudes to Maltese Landscape’, *Etnofoor*, 19. 2 (2006), 87-111 (pp. 93-94) <www.jstor.org/stable/25758122> [accessed 7 August 2021].

baggage, particularly the linguistic one. The accessibility of American culture does not help, but that is fine; in fact, it is important to know the origins of mainstream industry practices in order to defend indigenous needs and practices.

7.5 Conclusion

I would like to say that the situation is changing in Malta, but I am not sure if it really is. Overall, Malta Screen has evolved into a more accountable entity, but they are not quite there yet.

In 2020, with the Screen Malta re-branding, the budget was increased to €600,000 per year.

However, the development is that TV series can now also apply for the production grant. Screen Malta also needs to have more of an ‘executive producer of world cinema’ approach to the projects that would reflect—as a cultural entity—something closer to a micro-budget film-making culture. This might nurture the industry better since they are currently looking at the national film industry almost entirely from the servicing perspective only.

CONCLUSION

Despite the efforts of most foreign rulers to stifle any sense of initiative and to uproot any feeling of belonging, the Maltese people have always maintained a deep awareness of their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity. They went on claiming to be a distinct ethnic group and forcefully resented any effort to integrate them with a larger country.⁵⁴ The history of Maltese culture may be said to reflect in various ways the history of the whole nation. Much more than in the case of larger countries, Malta could never do without foreign contacts, necessarily causative of a complex process of influences, adaptations and reactions,⁵⁵ which may be defined in terms of Macdonald's 'domain' and 'field'. The main objective of this research, therefore, was to investigate and evaluate Maltese film and television screenworks and their authors, and of the 'Maltese condition', its cinematic expressions and the issue of self-censorship.

This thesis has shown that despite previous shortcomings, there is now a steady emergence of Maltese films and television series whose authors may not necessarily have had a professional screenwriting education, but whose ambition and innate need to tell a story have succeeded in establishing a modest but growing body of cinematic work. While the topic of the thesis is Maltese screenwriting and storytelling embedded in the double storytelling structure, the main research question focused on why such writers were so diffident in addressing contemporary socio-political concerns. One of the major obstacles to this day was self-censorship which probably will remain with Malta for quite a long time. My research aimed to capture and understand how Malta's past and present have affected the writers in ways that would help to explain this and how it can possibly contribute to the emergence of a new generation of highly skilled film and television practitioners. I concluded that the effect of the 'Maltese condition' and the manner in which politics are inextricably linked with culture, religion, language and identity provided the formative conditions; and although these matters are sometimes nebulous and made this research quite difficult at times to reach clarity, taken in the round they help to contextualize what constitutes Maltese cinematic storytelling and why it has suffered from self-censorship and a lack of self-confidence. In addition, a lack of a national cinema created a lack of a cultural reference point, turning Malta's gaze outside towards cinematic stories originating in other cultures. This absence of representation in the cinematic world also inhibited the way Malta—as a postcolonial country wrote its stories—stuck somewhere between itself and 'the Other'.

⁵⁴ *Malta's Quest for Independence. Reflections of the Course of Maltese History* (review of 'Malta's Quest for Independence. Reflections of the Course of Maltese History' by Oliver Friggieri), *Canadian Review of Studies*, XX, 1-2 (1993), pp. 132-133.

⁵⁵ Oliver Friggieri, 'Linguistic and Thematic Cross-Currents in Early Maltese Literature', *Unimar*, 14.1 (1992), 133-151 (p.134).

My professional in-depth knowledge of Maltese screenwriting practice and production culture enabled me to probe deeper into the nature and context of Maltese screenplays. This first-pass exploration proved beneficial in many ways. The answer to the questions of who the Maltese cinematic storytellers and their thematic tendencies were given in Chapters 2 and 3. Elements that constitute Maltese cinematic identity were explained in Chapter 4, while the three Chapters also discussed the Maltese concept of self-representation and self-perception, and the issue of so deeply engrained, concept of self-censorship due to the patronage system.

Nonetheless, Maltese film practitioners in their vision and sensitivity have transformed their localized versions of human existence. Culturally, it is important even for a small nation like Malta to see itself on the big screen, reflecting its cultural and emotional landscapes. National, cultural, and cinematic storytelling concerns, and the relationship between television and national identity, take on a distinct history and inflection in Malta. The ambivalent status of nationhood during post-independence Malta still produced television drama reflecting the immediate post-independence concerns, even with its limited traditions of cinematic storytelling. Vince Briffa asserts that Malta has no stories to tell if one had to look at Malta in terms of trauma and nostalgia, but the material presented in this thesis proves otherwise. The post-Independence and post-EU accession Malta offers enough trauma and nostalgia based on conflict, whether historical or contemporary, to generate narratives for television and cinema, while screenworks can act as an agency of change reflecting and acknowledging the realities in Malta.

The question of language is part of the ‘Maltese condition’ and the choice of which language to use in the home is an immensely loaded one, for it is about ideology and social classes, particularly because the Maltese language is perceived as an identity marker for many Maltese.⁵⁶ Additionally, different conditions and practices offer different sensibilities. Modes of engagement differ from nation to nation, from culture to culture and the key issue in screenwriting discourse is the dominance of Hollywood. The struggle to establish a sense of a cinematic ‘self’ to give answers to the search for the questions ‘‘who am I?’ and ‘where am I?’ as part of cinematic storytelling. In addition to this, having experiences of Malta as a stand-in location, or as the ‘Other’ location, makes such identification even more difficult, and presents one valid reason why some screenwriting students have a difficulty in addressing and defining ‘what it means to belong here’. This absence of representation in the cinematic world also inhibited the way Malta, as a postcolonial country, writes its stories stuck somewhere between themselves and ‘the Other’, turning their gaze outside towards the cinematic stories originating from other cultures. Screenwriting involves a large, albeit, the unacknowledged process of self-understanding, self-perception, and most of all, self-reflection. These are, inevitably, interpretations and evaluations not

⁵⁶ Gatt, discussion, 2 March 2018.

only of reactions to the question of ‘who am I’, but creative constructions of their immediate surroundings to be shared with the outside world. Maltese scriptwriters and screenwriters are no exception. ‘Self-knowledge is best learned, not by contemplation, but by action’.⁵⁷ Nothing can be more cinematic than telling audio-visual narratives through action rather than words. The section in this thesis on the development of the Maltese language presents linguistic examples of the externalization of negative sentiments (or hidden psychological complexes) encapsulated in the ‘Maltese condition’. Artists are aware of the conflicts and crises within an individual; as Samira Damato notes, to be Maltese ‘is a special thing being part of something that’s small and different, with levels of history and layers of differences. I’m still trying to figure out what Malteseness is’.⁵⁸

As the research progressed, however, it became clear that the situation was changing, and that today’s writers are addressing contemporary concerns, for example in the areas explored in Chapters 2 and 3. The emerging and established talents—who applied consciously or unconsciously the ‘double storytelling’ technique—such as Rebecca Cremona, Cecil Satariano, Abigail Mallia, Chris Zarb, Alex Camilleri, Audrey Brincat Dalli, Jamie Vella and Jeremy Vella still have a lot of ground to cover, and there is a hard journey ahead for Malta to place itself at the heart of the global film and television narrative, and to make itself accessible to foreign audiences. This will require a concerted investment in the education of future screenwriters and directors in terms of practical elements, professional networking, and audience development. Influences need to be diversified—the guidepost cannot be Hollywood’s big-budget productions; co-production with other European and non-European countries must be made possible. The point being made here is not to lobby for a political cinema, nor for propaganda, but a mere protest, a desire to see Maltese films and television that offer a deep exploration of political realities, just like Daniel Massa protested through his political poetry, and to keep discovering the concept of the nation in its fullest sense.

The current production culture can be still defined by a lack of proper screenwriting and film education by a lack of a dedicated film school or academy. Unfortunately, the history of the colonial mindset, the smallness of the domestic market and the fear of stepping out of line inhibit the development of a healthy cinematic industry. Another aspect that Malta’s film education is lacking is raising awareness and teaching the importance of film and television marketing and distribution. Scriptwriters and writer-directors can discover different types of storytelling aesthetics to reinforce the process of indigenization of Malta’s own idiosyncratic narratives, with specific reference to its cinematic identity within a universal context. Another way forward for these practitioners is to be aware of the educational opportunities available to them via the country’s membership in the EU.

⁵⁷ Tryon Edwards, *A Dictionary of Thoughts, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, (F. B. Dickerson Co. 1908), p. 517 <[A Dictionary Of Thoughts : Tryon Edwards : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)> [accessed 3 July 2021].

⁵⁸ Ann Dingli, ‘Chasing Malteseness’ (para. 22 of 22).

New funding opportunities offered by The National Book Council, *Inizjamed* and particularly *Kultura TV* scheme made it for television drama content creators and producers to access some much needed which allowed the writers to focus on the stories without the stories being subjected to advertising and the audience's expectations of 'drugs, violence, and crime'.⁵⁹

As screenwriting continues to establish itself as a discrete discipline in academia, either in alignment with creative writing departments or film and media practice departments, there is a danger that such developments may entrench a distancing of the craft from the cinematic form itself and that such a distancing may ultimately reinforce the screenplay's propensity for dramaturgy and the dramatic, rather than the sensory and experiential of the cinematic. There are also numerous training opportunities offered by London Screenwriters' Festival, the Sarajevo Film Talent, and Berlinale Talents. A more concerted effort could be made to create educational opportunities for the increased specialisation of the screenwriting and filmmaking industries, for example by creating partnerships with foreign universities and film academies.

Another aspect beneficial to improving the situation in Malta would be educating the audience through community outreach, working with the national and private broadcasters in terms of funding and exhibition, and increasing the number of 'art house' screens and film education initiatives.

The Broadcasting Authority, Screen Malta and the education sector could learn from the production models of overseas broadcasters, such as that of the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, perhaps even reaching out to the writers and creators of the shows to train Maltese television writers and cinematic writers. One aim of the present research was to indicate how producers, particularly in television, could make greater use of something akin to the tenets of 'one vision' and 'double storytelling'. The latter should be explored with particular attention to the political situation because something like this is very much ingrained in the Maltese fabric: in the manner of Maltese thinking, and in how the Maltese look at themselves and at the world. Although the public television production houses, in particular, may be reluctant to make a thematic priority of such uncomfortable subjects as the history of corruption, political murders, drug trafficking, land theft, the discord between the two political parties, and human trafficking, they have produced less threatening manifestations, as has already happened in the television series *il-Miraklu/Holy Mary!* Ultimately the scope was to contribute to the emergence of a new generation of highly skilled film and television screenwriters with a strong domestic mainstream audience and appreciated by an international audience.

National cinematic identity must be continually fought for and fostered through the creation

⁵⁹ Carlos Debattista, 7 July 2018.

of a discourse that goes beyond the promised investment by the stakeholders whose statements tend to be generic while taking a cautious approach in advocating changes. There is a small body of such works that are more experimental and art-house but definitely worth examining. An example is Kenneth Scicluna's short film *Plangent Rain/Daqqet ix-Xita*, (2010), inspired by William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in which Scicluna presents a moody examination of insecurity, loss and urban decay very much in the vein of Béla Tarr's aesthetics.⁶⁰ Other examples are among the works of Peter Sant's full feature *Baħar Żmien/Of Time and the Sea* (2018). Sant creates films for people who are interested in the kind of cinema that 'explores new ways of working and seeing, the kind that steers away from conventional methodologies and hierarchies'.⁶¹ There are also further opportunities for future research into very commercial Maltese works such as Winton Azzopardi's full feature drama/horror, *The Boat*, although this has minimal relevance to my own primary aim of researching the effects of the 'Maltese condition' on screenwriters and filmmakers. Azzopardi, Sant, and Scicluna represent quite different storytelling ambitions and cinematic executions of those ambitions, demonstrating that Malta is ready to have a national film industry to accommodate different creative visions.

Some potentially fruitful avenues of research were closed off to me, either for reasons of confidentiality, because archival materials were unavailable or non-existent, or because they were less relevant to my topic. I would have liked to have been able to research which screenplays were rejected and why when applying for the funds. European Cultural strand EU funding and the European Commission want to ease access to the funding opportunities available for the cultural and creative sectors across all the funding sources of the European Union available in 2021-2027.⁶²

Despite my wish for Malta to find its voice stronger while encouraging my screenwriting colleagues to keep on writing *their* stories and despite my constant encouragement of my students, the only way they can advance is to continue studying their craft of screenwriting at a postgraduate level overseas, in places such as Screen Academy Scotland at Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland; National Film School at Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology Ireland; National Film and Television School, London, UK; Łódź Film School, Poland; TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts, Prague, Czech Republic. All of these offer full-time programmes in writing for the visual media. The education in film-making, however, needs to begin much earlier. Media literacy education as of 2018 is part of the national curriculum taught to the students (13-16 ages). The students currently learn the process of cinematic story specificity with some teachers

⁶⁰ 'Plangent Rain wins awards', *Times of Malta*, 24 September 2011 <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/Plangent-Rain-wins-awards.386456>> [accessed 31 October 2021] (para. 5 of 60).

⁶¹ Peter Sant, email interview, 12 April 2018.

⁶² European Commission, 'Creative Europe' <<https://culture.ec.europa.eu/funding/cultureu-funding-guide>> [accessed 30 April 2022].

having a superficial knowledge about screenwriting. It would be beneficial if they were taught writing and producing short screen texts.

A number of suggestions and recommendations can be made for both teachers and students, besides attending a training course in screenwriting: (1) creating a series of ‘Maltese stories’ to raise awareness and create familiarity based on emotional proximity to the Maltese culture; (2) making Maltese-language screen texts for children a priority, as this helps to raise awareness in a new generation of cinema-goers, create cultural intersections, and open up the educational potential of film; (3) obtaining a general visual competence from the analysis of paintings to the analysis of films; (4) expanding national cinematic storytelling to help understand one’s position among other people/nations, to allow the audience to get to know themselves and their surrounding world better; (5) schools should support the skill of reflection (besides the technical skills) and teach ‘the how and why of cinematic storytelling’; (6) part of the school curricula should include a list of recommended films to watch. A small nation like Malta cannot (and should not) hope to produce Hollywood big-budget films. Students should be exposed to films that show other worlds, and other storytelling paradigms; (7) learn about the history of films: their historical context and social topics; (8) create a system of screenwriting and film-direction scholarships; (9) public funding should include a planned framework for promoting film education, a substantial part of which should be scriptwriting education.

In addition to the above, what needs to be sought out are projects with another school/non-profit organization; cooperation with the local councils; cinema visits (unrelated to festive seasons such as Christmas); guest (film and television practitioners) lessons; cooperation with national television; participation in a film-making workshop; visiting shooting locations; creating possibilities in attending film festivals. Part of the strategy would be educating the audience through community outreach, working with the national and private broadcasters in terms of funding and exhibition, and increasing the number of ‘art house’ screens, which currently stands at one (*Spazju Kreattiv*), and film education initiatives.

I have wished to conclude this thesis, then, by briefly outlining some possible future directions for Maltese screenwriting and film-making. Talent is key, and nurturing it is the most important way forward. Within the economic and cultural ambitions of small nations, talent is the most critical resource. Strategies for nurturing, developing and leveraging talent are an important part of the support infrastructure of many small nations. For small nations, the question of talent is even more pertinent as their own pool may be limited and they often have to compete with the lure of bigger markets in other nations where opportunities seem more abundant and attractive.

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