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Perspective on culture

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In the European Union there are funds for Maltese culture - somewhere - though it seems sometimes that our government is still trying to trace them, while looking up the word 'culture' in the dictionary.

It is a word far more difficult to define than is supposed. It embraces our traditions, ethos and urbanity, as well as the meaning I write about, which involves itself mainly with the performing and visual arts and literature - not only as entertainment but also as food for the mind.

To put it my way, or just metaphorically, mind marries head to heart, and begets the spirit - and man cannot live by bread alone. In a society where Religion seems to be more concerned with ritual, formulae and platitudes, and Education with stuffing information rather than rousing interest and creativity, the human spirit craves some stimulation, some meaning, some means of exercising its ability to form connections, patterns, harmony.

The Independent (UK) of December 26 carried an article by Stephen Castle, "Europe discovers its new secret weapon: culture", which claims that "the arts and creative industries now earn more than double the cash produced by European car-makers and contribute more to the economy than the chemical industry, property or the food and drink business... and creative workers tend to be better educated and more flexible than others... Jan Figel, the European Commissioner for education, training, culture and multilingualism, said: 'This study confirms that the arts and culture are far from being marginal in terms of their economic contribution. The culture sector is the engine of creativity, and creativity is the basis for social and economic innovation'."

The craving for more sustenance for the mind and spirit in Malta took the very organisers of the White Night (October 14) by surprise. And yet, how equipped are the country's public figures, especially politicians, to address this craving? That one hardly sees them, except in an official capacity, in the theatres, cannot, I think be used as a yardstick - family duties, ill-health, meetings, etc., keep even private people away. It is understandable, I think, that those who have had long (and often tedious) days in the public eye, should relish their privacy. Moreover, it is in private that one can really read.

But do our politicians do even this? Or the businessmen who, through them, govern us indirectly? I personally know a few who do. However, I can think of many more who, judging by their rigidity of thought, do not.

If you wish to form an opinion, look at what buildings are coming down or going up, at what activities (cultural or otherwise) are being sponsored, at what the ratio of sponsorship is, at the uglification of so many areas, at the programmes that are being produced or not produced by our media (remember FM Bronja?), at the fact that the word 'progress' is immediately associated with financial expansion, but, above all, at our lack of time or opportunity for personal interaction, for courtesy, for idiosyncrasies, for reflection, for metabolising what we learn, at university or from life, about what is outside ourselves and, most important, inside ourselves.

How far does religion or institutional education help the inner spirit to grow and share and develop into a society where happiness - not pleasure - is possible? What kind of education have our politicians received? What are they dishing out to those who ask for more, if cramming is only another form of being force-fed? What can be done? I can think of one thing as an example - the choice of books for the Matsec English A- and Intermediate levels.

Forster's *A Passage to India* is a book I love, but was it attractive to the majority of students when I taught it? Rhetorical question! The majority responded to *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, as also to Graham Greene's 21 short stories - they dealt with issues that touched their own experience, and as a result they learned to interact with the books in a way which sharpened their minds, instead of merely recording what was instructed, to be regurgitated at exam time and leave nothing behind.

I suggest that when events like the escape of Natascha Kampusch in Austria happen, educators should pounce on their implications. The uncanny similarity of a 'real' event to a fictional story, John Fowles's *The Collector* (which was converted both into a play and into a film), would inevitably engage the students' interest and could form a more concrete approach to the concept of 'mimesis' (mime, imitation) as the basis of much that is cultural.

Then, since Fowles's book is itself a modern interpretation of *The Tempest*, guess what's coming for Shakespeare? To top it all, the book's main theme is the threat to the inquisitive, creative imagination of a rigid, claustrophobic mentality empowered by wealth, through structure, narratology, discourse, etc. Culture is something we learn through, it has far more to do with quality rather than quantity. The very meaning of the word tells us that.

To quote from Margaret Minhinnick's Policy Review for the National Assembly for Wales: "Education is too obsessed with function where the role of education is perceived to be the provider of workers to oil the wheels of western industrial and post-industrial societies. Competition and the pressures of the exam/assessment culture can have an extremely adverse effect on the growth and development of individuals. Students, especially at the secondary level, are not given the time or the space to experience an education which relates to their own needs and interests.

"The Thomas Report in the 1980s identified this aspect of education as being one of the strengths of the primary curriculum. Time should be set aside in the curriculum so that students can experience the excitement of learning for its own sake. Opportunities which open up the world of imagination and creativity must be available. This surely is the key to innovation and indeed lifelong learning. Education should not always be curriculum-led."

Inquisitive, creative imagination being smothered by restrictive and 'brick in the wall' attitudes in too many of our classes and lecture-rooms is, I feel, the source of our cultural problems, since many of those who govern us are also the product of the system. With the advent of computers, information is always and only a click away. What the governors and the governed need to learn is how to structure that information - how to put the questions which will, and should, stir up a multitude of answers that will change with the flux of time.

The purpose of culture is to provide a multitude of perspectives, a structuring and restructuring in infinite ways of what have always been the essential questions about life, death, love, hate, fear (and everything in between), God, afterlife, selfhood, relationship, etc. Culture opens windows we didn't even know were there. It is the only thing we create which can defy Time and mortality. Above all, it doesn't teach, but it helps us learn and grow - through pleasure and stimulation.

Can politics do that for us, unless it is nurtured itself?