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Island landscapes and European culture: An 'island studies' perspective

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Abstract The active imagining of a European identity needs to engage with the geographical possibilities, visualisations and performativities of place. It is all too easy but superficial and naive to consider geophysical parameters as the silent backdrop or empty canvas on which cultural initiatives unfold. European islands, amongst other features – mountains, coasts, forests – are imbued with powerful (and often Western) myths and tropes of place: they combine materiality and metaphor, presenting spaces that at once appear open and closed, fixed yet fluid, complete and peripheral, vulnerable yet resilient. The geo-social constitution of their culture is also subject to the vantage point of the observer, him/herself caught in the liminality between being a visitor, being an islander, and various other uneasily defined categories in between.

Acknowledging the insights of the likes of Clifford Geertz, Ulf Hannerz, Anna-Maria Greverus and Owe Ronström, this paper proposes that a critical analysis and appreciation of European culture in island landscapes must be one that engages with the nature of islandness; the *locus* of study should also be the *focus* of study. This paper also suggests epistemologies to flesh out this approach, its merits, but also the dangers associated with essentialising island spaces and peoples.

Introduction: challenging immateriality

All events must "take place" (Hubbard et al., 2002: 239); they happen in space and time – meaning that they do not simply ensue and occur, unfolding in some kind of abstract or ethereal sequence or progression; but that they take place *in* a place, requiring some kind of material positioning or referent for them to unfold, as they do. It is the juxtaposition of event, people and place that is a defining signature of human and social life. Hay (2006: 33) describes this as the "dialogue between the physicality of place and the interaction of people within it". As to the exact

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relationality between these concepts, that is the hard core of many ontological debates: be they driven by structuralism, economic determinism, phenomenology, structuration theory, the structure-agency dialectic, or the nature-nurture controversy; they date back to the problematic relationship between form and matter already posed by Aristotle.

What this suggests, in simple but still profound terms, is that humans are not insubstantial species; they engage with the world, with nature, with their physical and metaphysical environment, in order to change, to domesticate, to somehow make their world safer, nicer, better; to the extent that what they fashion – shall we call it 'culture'? – in turn predisposes human actions and possibilities.

It seems quite important to make these statements, even though they may sound truisms. They are not. First of all, there is a recent fascination with the adoption of space as a generated construct of the human condition. The notion that space is an objective, stand alone 'thing', receptacle-like, a fixed reservoir that contains events, and that we therefore, as pop star diva Madonna reminds us, ''live *in* a material world'' (my emphasis) is largely *passé* in the social sciences. Instead, space is now increasingly seen as inexistent unto itself, but rather an outcome and product of interactions, '*consequences* of the ways in which bodies relate to one another' (Latour, 1997: 176, emphasis in original). With this ontological switch, we are alerted to those processes whereby space is continually reinvented and re/presented through emergent human action and design (e.g. Bingham and Thrift, 2000: 288–289). The paradigms that are now in vogue conjure up the idea of a fluid, quasi-philosophical entity, untrammelled by the physicality of dross, material substance. People are invariably 'on the move' and 'out of place', creating space, rendering it through diverse senses, and ascribing it with meaning and history. Spaces are de-territorialised; they are actively embodied, being just socially produced. Space, Deleuze (2004: 12) argues emphatically, ''is imaginary and not actual; mythological and not geographical''.

Of course, such postmodern approaches provide a welcome and overdue privileging of mobility and kinesis. They offer a powerful and relevant critique of reductionist, Euclidean geometry, Ptolemaic cartography and Newtonian (solid-state) physics, whereby space has long been construed as an absolute, an unproblematic and homogenous given. But: what these approaches also tend to do is to render the material world inexistent. ''Endless change rather than enduring identities'' is the signature of this postmodern fluidity (Hay, 2006: 28).

And yet, can one entertain memory and belonging without materiality? Is it not 'things' which become seeped in, and with, social memory in their production and consumption? Is it not also materials – *souvenirs* – along with and apart from thoughts – *pensées* – which perform the past by virtue of their enduring existence in the present? Connecting with our immediate surroundings, through tactile and other sensory means, is such a basic and constant constitution of life (e.g. Clark and Clark, 2009: 311). Perhaps it is no coincidence that our skin, the interface of the self with/in the world, is our largest organ (Montagu, 1971). Our societies punish criminals via imprisonment to restrict their material fields as much as their mobility horizons. Touch reduces stress levels, improves immunity and enhances attentiveness (Field, 2000); while touch deprivation is fatal to infants (Montagu, 1971). Meanwhile, capitalism urges us to measure the quality of life by the material things we own and consume.

Perhaps it would be fairer to hypothesise a melding of the material and the contingent, whereby each becomes folded into, subsumed by, and imbricated in the agency of the other. Places would not just be attached to, or *rooted* in, spaces; but nor are they just *routed*, travelling and becoming with us. Places also travel with and become by means of the materials through which they are expressed and performed. Resources, objects and technologies, as well as spaces, are much more than the affects and effects of human intent and action; they constitute ''situated knowledges'' in time and space (Haraway, 1996; *also* Massey, 2005); they structure, define and configure interaction, even as they themselves are also outcomes of decisions, choices and interventions made by people. Places are captives of this ''living in-between'' (Game, 2001: 226), and are always unfinished (Heatherington, 1998: 187). ''The things that people make, make people'' (Miller, 2005: 38). It is an embodied engagement with materiality that constructs personal and social identity; as much as it is the other way round. And so, by way of example, within the Western imaginary, sand on a beach on a warm and sunny summer day conveys this dialectic co-production by ushering in a whole repertoire of ''doing'' (e.g. Butler, 1990) and of ''body techniques'' (Mauss, 1936/1979) which socialize and constitute us temporarily as pleasure–cum-tactile seeking subjects (Baldacchino, 2010a).

And so, the contemporary 'givens' of simulacra, fluidity and immateriality need to be challenged. The conjunction or intersection of the social and the material can still be understood without the former swallowing the latter. The proverbial baby should not be thrown out with the bathwater: and this expression is all the more useful since it conjures up a very material, even dramatic, event.

Things island: beyond myth and metaphor

Among many other things, this means that we need to re-engage and re-energise our commitment and connection to our material base. And that includes a strategic retreat from the exclusive representation of 'the island' as metaphor, shorn of physicality or situatedness (e.g. Polack, 1998). ''Certain natural environments have figured prominently in humanity's dreams of the ideal world: they are the forest, the seashore, the valley and the island'' (Tuan, 1990: 247). And, more recently, islands have become, unwittingly, the objects of what may be the most lavish, global and consistent branding exercise in human history. They find themselves presented as locales of desire, as platforms of paradise, as habitual sites of fascination, emotional offloading or religious pilgrimage (Baldacchino, 2010b: 374; Baldacchino, 2013). The metaphoric deployment of 'island', with the associated attributes of small physical size and warm water, is possibly *the* central gripping metaphor within Western discourse (Hay, 2006: 26, emphasis in original; *also* Connell, 2003). Stratford summarizes some of the rich harvest of island tropes thus presented:

> ''Islands ... absolute entities ... territories, territorial; relational spaces – archipelagos, (inter)dependent, identifiable; relative spaces – bounded but porous; isolated, connected, colonised, postcolonial; redolent of the performative