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Thinking Diversely:
Hellenism and the Challenge of Globalisation

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The Modern Greek Studies Association of Australia and New Zealand (MGSAANZ)

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The Association issues a Newsletter (Εβδομηθηρη), holds conferences and publishes two journals annually.

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Introduction*

Aspects of Greek Culture

Over thousands of years Greek culture has spread across the globe to many people - through language, medicine and the sciences, philosophy, art, archaeology, architecture and politics; much of has been bestowed upon the world by Greek civilization. Greek culture has survived from the 3rd millennium BC when the original Hellenes first arrived in the area now known as Greece. Despite many wars, foreign occupations and other threats to its culture, Hellenism has persisted. Today however, we question its future. What do we mean today by the concept of Hellenism? How will Hellenism survive in a globalised world? The trends of speedy explorations, technology and the sciences as well as the minimisation of the concept of time and place, the unprecedented mobilisation of the populations and the rapid diversification of what were once perceived as exclusive national cultures have transformed the Globe into a village. As such, these circumstances have created new avenues by which to understand the world. Globalisation is paradoxical insofar as it restricts the world and at the same time effectuates a global dynamism. New trends construct new identities, and the need of a re-evaluation and redefinition of the Shelf is now paramount to many academic disciplines. The articles included in this publication well - project this attitude, encapsulating the concept of Hellenism in light of the contemporary concerns that relate to global realities.
Whilst exploring past, historical themes, the section entitled History and Theology is not without contemporary relevance insofar as it envisions aspect of Hellenism as global phenomena. Thus Hellenistic Globalisation and the Metanarratives of the Logos, articulates the current contradictions with globalisation in contrast to that of Christian antiquity. The author’s argument reveals that despite its claim of cultural and political integration, contemporary globalisation has assisted in the loss of metanarratives such as the Logos; metanarratives which, he suggests should be revived. Tipping Points: Greek culture in the age of Internationalisation, explores the themes of Art and its politicisation during the 1970s and beyond, as Greece’s position symbolically changed upon the European map. The article, What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? discusses the historical and religious connection between Athens and Jerusalem. The author explores the very long relationship of Hellenism with Greek Orthodoxy, both philosophically and historically, giving particular emphasis to the transformation from the pre-Christian to Christian era. Racing ahead to globalising world: The Ptolemaic Commonwealth and Posidippus’ Hippika, relates the global Greek civilization of the post-Alexandrian world to the foundations of our contemporary globalised world. The author’s proposition that Hellenic kingdoms actively sought legitimacy and validation through maintenance and reinforcement of Greek institutions and values is well established through his focus on a selected text from the poet Posidippus’ Hippika. The author of The Hellenism of Aemilius Marcellinus focuses upon the personality of Marcellinus by giving particular emphasis to his love of Hellenism; although a noble Roman, Marcellinus wanted to be remembered as “former soldier of a Greek”, a statement that uncovers his admiration of Hellenism during the powerful, Roman era. Byzantine – Rite Christians (Melkites) in Central Asia in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, presents a comprehensive, historical overview of the presence of Byzantine-rite Christians, in Central Asia, an article which has often been neglected within early Christian studies. In the article, Ancient Coins for the Colonies: Hellenism and the History of Numismatic Collections in Australia, the author observes global Hellenism through a history of numismatic collections; he successfully develops a cultural connection between Greece and Australian (the imperial colony) and links it to the concept of Hellenism within the era of contemporary Globalisation. The Greek – Cypriot Settlement to South Australia during the 1950s, concentrates on the contemporary presence of Greek-Cypriots in South Australia, and as such provides a springboard for further investigation into their settlement in that particular state. Update on the missing persons of Cyprus from the 1974 Turkish invasion, is an original piece of work that investigates the geo-political and historical position of Cyprus in its globalised dimensions. The inherent ongoing political agendas interwoven within the humanitarian issue of “missing people” is the central theme and it is the basis of a much larger piece of research which investigates the shifting tides of international, political tensions and alliances during the last four decades. Darwinism and its Impact in the Recent Greek Press, discusses the concept of Darwinism as depicted in the process of journalism in the daily press.

The second section includes papers whose focus is on culture and identity, popular themes that pervade interdisciplinary studies as a means of exploring today’s multidimensional identities. A generation (Υπόδειγμα) presents a number of Greek Australians, or those of Greek descent, reflecting upon their forebears, and/or their succeeding generations, as well as upon themselves revealing – through cross – comparison - insightful personal, socio-cultural and political layers across time.

The Greek Diaspora in a Globalised World, offers a thorough investigation of the term Diaspora, and in the process discusses the dynamics of Greek diaspora historically and geographically. Sarantaris and Prometheus, the Idiot and the Thief, nourishes and develops further understanding of the work and thought of one of Greece’s significant, but not very well-known, poets of the early 20th century Greece. Multiple, Intergenerational Identities: Greek-Australian Women across Generations, explore the multiplicity of identity in three generations of women in Australia; oral narratives reflect a self-defined process and development of identities that exist within a continues flux of re-evaluation and redefinition; it also reflects the process of transformation from first generation migrant to third generation Australian-born women. The author of Cosmopolitan orientation & creative resistance in contemporary Athenian culture, focus on the free press magazine Life to reveal the dialectic between global and local culture in Athens; it also includes the then-emerging economic crisis in Greece and its effects upon the “cosmopolitan orientation and creative resistance” in Athens. We are different and the same: Exploring Hellenic culture and identity in Aotearoa- New Zealand, adds valuably to our
understanding of the multidimensional qualities of cultural identities, from
the local, to the global; the author explores the dynamic complexities that
generate and regenerate cultural identity in both positive and negative
light. Towards a multi-layered construction of identity by the Greek Diaspora: an
examination of the films of Nia Vardalos, including “My Big Fat Greek wedding”
(2002) and “My life in Ruins” (2009), presents an attempt to investigate the
multiple-layered metamorphic flux of “identity” within the context of Nia
Vardalos’ films. What this paper offers is of relevance and immediacy to
current contemporary thinking on the transformative nature (empowerment/
disempowerment) of identity. Switching Channels between the old and new
mentalities: Exploring inter-generational changing expectations faced by Greek
Orthodox their ministry in Australia, deals with a growing – and indeed, often
overlooked– area of research into the Greek-Australian experience in the area
of the Greek Orthodox Church; it exposes the inter-generational complexities
encountered by Greek Orthodox priests and their wives in congregations
containing both “old” and “new” outlooks (towards the Church, its priests and
their perceived roles and responsibilities).

The last section entitled Education incorporates papers that deal with
education in regard to the “legacy of Hellenism”. Hellenism is often relegated
to Ancient History studies in both high school and tertiary education; a
reductionist approach which envisages its legacy as part of distant – and for
this reason – mystic past, and which is not easy to overcome. Teaching the
legacy of Hellenism in an Australian University – an interdisciplinary adventure,
exposes the process of teaching this “legacy of Hellenism” at the level of
tertiary education, particularly within the International Studies Department
at Macquarie University. Greek language in the age of Globalisation: The
translator’s perspective, explores translations and their problematic as a mean
of communication within the global context.

Special papers for Athens 2004
Athens became a global city during the Olympics of 2004 and beyond;
significantly Athens became a global symbol when the Olympic torch passed
through the streets of the most important Olympic cities, including Sydney.
The relay from Olympia to the stadium of Athens marks, for the “first time
ever” the flame’s globetrotting around the world, in order to disseminate
the message of unity, peace and ekecheiria (Olympic Truce). It is in this
framework that some distinguished historians, philosophers and philologists,
from Macquarie, Sydney and Charles Sturt Universities came together to
celebrate the Olympic city of Athens for one day conference entitled Athens
Day Conference- A day for all things Athenian (31st of July, 2004). The event
also highlighted the 40th anniversary since the foundation of Macquarie
University, and as such, explored the apollonian light of Olympism, spiritual
armonia and noble competition as encapsulated within Greek Studies
and at Macquarie University’s former emblem, light house – a symbol of
knowledge, innovation and distinguished scholarship – (that is, another way
to disseminate Hellenism in the era of harsh Globalisation). The one- day
conference attracted ten distinguished scholars; a selection of the presented
papers, included in this publication: Images of Greek Goddess in Anene: Athena
and Nausicaa of the Valley of Wind, examines the formation of Miyazaki’s
Nausicaa in visual, psychological and cross-cultural contexts whilst at the
same time exposing the Japanese appreciation of Greek mythology in both
artistic and literary creations. The Impact of Athens on the Development of the
Greek Language and the Ancient Letters discusses the significance of Athens
in antiquity as a centre of knowledge. The paper reveals the remarkable
development that took place in Athens in every aspect of human thought;
the author gives however emphasis to the role of the Greek language as a
mean that transferred the knowledge of the great Greek minds to the rest
of the world until today. Athena, diamond-jewelled, ring of the Earth; A Poem
about Athens or Athens as a Poem? In the light of Athens as an Olympic
city that attracted the interest of the globe in the 2004, the author of this paper
explores the Greek literary universe in order to sightsee the way that poets
create an artistic image of Athens; thus the question that is proposed and
discussed in this paper is Palamas’ hymn for Athens: is the hymn of Athens
one of the national poems created only to enhance the nationalistic conscience
of the Greek people, as many scholars believe, or did Palamas create, poetically,
a personal image of Athens?

The papers presented in this volume are interactive, diverse, synchronic
and diachronic. The contributors redefine Hellenism in the age of globalisation
within various disciplines. It seems that Hellenism is no longer a monolithic
aspect of scholarship but an ongoing process able to absorb the multiplicity
of novel, cultural aspects. Greek studies has emerged from its traditional
introversion into the dynamic arena of a globalized extroversion. It has
expanded successfully into various other fields making it interdisciplinary in nature and diverse in notion. Interdisciplinary process gives to Greek studies a fresh breath which pushes it forward into new areas of scientific research, as well as teaching and learning. From the contributions of this volume the creative dialogue that Greek studies has initiated with the past, namely between antiquity and early Christianity with the present, has been made evident. Until recently antiquity exclusively belonged to a scholarship which did not permit - or have a place - for a dialogue with the present; which means that a creative dialogue with the past gives a new dimension to Greek studies. Greek studies is not longer a dead past but a living, creative force which enlightens the past and fertilizes the present. Also, a creative dialogue is evident with diverse social and cultural dynamics. Greek scholars in the Diaspora appreciate the scientifically productive dialogue between the past and contemporary scholarship which allows them in turn to engage in an innovative exchange of ideas, develop diversification, and conceptualize an enriched construction of a hybrid Greek-Australian identity that is unique and promising for posterity. Hellenism certainly is not limited to Greeks inherently lends itself to an expansion which encompasses individuals from all over the world. In its renowned Greekness it is not identified with the limited boarders of a place, namely Greece but is amplified, enhanced and fertilized by new elements, new routes, new minds unaffected from destructive constructions. Hellenism constantly re-invents whilst preserving its initial nature and it is this paradoxical stability and flexibility that has allowed it to survive throughout the centuries as a continuous, re-creative process. Hellenism is that notion which is maintained and promulgated by all those individuals - such as the contributors of this volume - who study, research, teach Greek, or even find a personal, existential meaning in its humane values. The various thematic contributions within this volume prove that Hellenism has a bright future in the Diaspora.

*The articles in the present edition have been selected from peer reviewed papers that were originally presented at the 10th International Conference of Modern Greek Studies Association Australia and New Zealand, at Macquarie University in December 2010.
The Night Boat to Ancona

The red grapes hang heavy
above the Italian lovers' balcony in Nicopolis*,
their dew droplets glisten in the moonlight.
The heat has quenched itself,
mellowing in the arms of the night.
The scent of the night jasmine fused
with the passion and insomnia
of the cicadas,
waking from an eight year slumber,
too long the wait,
the air a frenzy of mating calls.

Further up by the Gates at the Acheron river,
Pluto, silent
but deadly,
keeps his cool, waiting...

The midnight boat to Ancona,
a chandelier all lit up,
sails by silently,
gliding on the Ionian sea,
vanishing into a starry darkness,
leaving behind a vacuum of night,
of emptiness.
A loss.

In the woods the tourists frolic merrily;
shrills and the breaking of bottles
pierce the night,
punctuating the cicadas' concert.
A night owl startled flies past
crying out in a tone
one might wrongly
interpret as despair.

Despair, is this what Antony felt here, in the hills of Actium,
measuring himself against Octavian and Rome?
Do the hills remember the echoes of his lost battle?
Do the old olive trees still carry the cry in their rings?
Do the shells, the pebbles under my feet,
hide deep inside, the memory
of Cleopatra's ships leaving him?
Do the waves bring it ashore,
whispering it,
again and again?
Do they?

And all along, down south in the African heat
Alexandria —
implacable,
an end waiting—
peering through its windows,
nonchalant,
languid,
for Antony's return
and his farewell.

© Martha Mylona

*Nicopolis - an ancient city, north of Actium, founded by the Roman emperor Augustus (Octavian), in 31 BC, to commemorate his victory, in the battle of Actium, over Mark Antony and Queen Cleopatra of Egypt. The ruins are near Preveza in Western Greece.
Mersina Tonys-Soulos

Towards a multi-layered construct of identity by the Greek diaspora: an examination of the films of Nia Vardalos, including *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *My Life in Ruins*

Abstract

The analysis of the two Vardalos films involves a multi-disciplinary approach through the social sciences. The analysis examines constructs of multiple-layered constructs of identity. The themes relating to conformity versus non-conformity will be examined through such constructs within popular culture, as 'beauty', the 'internalizing' of inferior status by children through research in the social sciences. The ascribing of status and power to a minority culture by the majority culture using a Gramscian analysis will enable a window into seeing contemporary Greek diasporic culture as told through the migration experience.

Introduction

Given the rapid pace of globalization, the processes that contribute and help formulate individual/group multiple-layered identities can face torrents of upheaval and turbulence. The migration experience as told through the characters in Nia Vardalos's films, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) and *My Life in Ruins* (2009) have resonated with audiences across the world. *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is the highest grossing independently-made film of all time and will be the central focus of this article. However, very little has been written regarding an analysis of the themes of these films, that reflect the on-going struggle of self/group definition of minorities.
This article is an attempt to de-construct some of the salient themes, that are inextricably linked with the migration/settlement experience, as emerging through the lens of multidisciplinary research and analysis from the social sciences.

Background notes

The film My Big Fat Greek Wedding (2002) (MBFGW) was solely written by Nia Vardalos, directed by Joel Zwick and grossed over US$368.7 million worldwide. It cost US$5 million to make, with a US$1 million publicity budget and became one of the top romantic films of the 21st Century according to Entertainment Weekly (2003) (see also Holden 2002, Kinzer 2002, Susman 2002). In MBFGW the plot revolves around the advent of a multicultural marriage.

My Life in Ruins (2009) (MLIR), was written by Mike Reiss and (uncredited) Nia Vardalos, directed by Donald Petrie, and grossed $20,031,211 (Box Office Mojo 2009). Described as a box-office fizzer, it had a budget of US$17 million (Killer Movies 2007).

This latter film is an example of the new genre of 'film tourism', that uses as a vehicle an emotional attachment/nostalgic view of place, given the international phenomenon of tourism and travel (Hudson & Ritchie 2006). In MLIR an American university professor Georgia Ianakopoulos (played by Vardalos) decides to make a new life, going back to her ancestral roots, through her newly-adopted homeland, modern Greece. She works as a tourist guide for Pangloss Tours as she tries to find her, as Georgia puts it 'mojo' (κύπε) meaning ‘passion, joy, spirit’. We see her mentored in this film by the aging Irv Gideon, a widower played by Richard Dreyfuss, and Georgia’s love interest is the driver of the tour bus, Prokopi Kakas, also known as ‘Poupi’, played by the Greek actor Alexis Georgoulis. The pun regarding his surname and nickname is intended, much to the amusement of the tour group.

At the film launch in Sydney, Australia, 6 July 2010, Nia Vardalos in a packed-to-the-rafters Hayden Orpheum Cinema, described this film as an encouragement to people to ‘hang in there, when 99 things go wrong, this film is about the 1 per cent of the time when things go right’ (as heard by me at the event).

Antonia Bugenia (the modern Greek affectionate form is Nia) Vardalos was born in 1962, raised in Canada, and is a child of the Greek diaspora and a product of Canada’s multiculturalism policies. She based MBFGW on her real-life experiences marrying, in 1993 Ian Gomez, who was a former regular on the Drew Carey show, and originally from Chicago’s famous Second City Comedy Troupe. He is of Russian/Puerto Rican/Jewish background, and played the cameose role of Mike in MBFGW, and the sleazy, stamp-licking, Greek Hotel owner in MLIR.

In MBFGW the plot revolves around the wedding between Fotoula (Φωτούλα) Portokalos (played by Nia Vardalos), affectionately known as ‘Toula’ (Τούλα), (from the Greek meaning 'enlightened one') to Ian Miller (played by John Corbett) a teacher at Lincoln Park College. The plot accompanied by all the machinations of the Portokalos Greek extended family in the lead-up to the wedding. I disagree with Tzanelli’s representation of the Greek family in this film. I believe the Portokalos family are an example of the ‘nouveau-riche’ self-made, migrant background, middle-classes in the U.S. This is in disagreement with Tzanelli’s (2004) interpretation of them as working class.

Both films portray an Odyssey quest in search of identity as evidenced through the struggle of the Greek diaspora, one without and the other within the country of origin.

The highest grossing, independently-made film ‘of all time’!

MBFGW is based on the one-woman show, written/performed by Vardalos. Her largely autobiographical one-woman show in 1997 was originally financed through the Hollywood husband and wife team, actors Rita Wilson (also of Greek background) and Oscar-winning actor Tom Hanks. Nia referred to Rita Wilson as her ‘fairy God-sister’ (The Hampson Interview 2000), because it was Rita who first saw the one-woman show and then approached Vardalos to make it into a film (Whitfield 2002).

It needs to be noted here that the Playtone Company that Hanks owns with his wife and producer Gary Goetsman (of Silence of the Lambs, Philadelphia movie fame) purchased Vardalos’s screenplay adaptation of the one-woman show. Vardalos’s fine crafting of her one-woman play was a great test for gauging live audience appeal. This was the first independent film project for Playtone.

Vardalos passionately was wanting to reflect the authenticity of this diasporic culture. In fact the Pentagon, in its attempt to produce write/films
has recognized Vardalos’s intimate experiential knowledge of this subject matter that validates the authenticity of the portrayal as a means for teaching authenticity in script-writing (Halsfinger 2005).

Up until this point, Vardalos had been approached to make her one-woman show into a film about Hispanic-Americans. For her, this was unacceptable. Such was the clarity of her vision for the play being made into a film, that in an interview she explained that if her screen-play were to be sold to the major studios ‘she’d be out as a screen-writer and lead actress in a heartbeat’. ‘They would not have backed a project with an unknown, and it’s such a great part for a female that they would have grabbed Julia Roberts and put her in a brown wig and called her Greek and I would have wept’ (The Hampson Interview 2000). It is no small wonder, Vardalos kept her integrity and portrayed the Greek minority culture within Chicago that authenticated the intricacies of entanglement between an ethnic minority within an Anglophone dominant culture. That is, from the minority’s point of view, looking back at the majority culture.

In its first week of release in April 2002 in the U.S. it attracted a small audience and earned $822,088. The impact of word-of-mouth advertising on the success of this film should be recognised. The film had a 52 week run by April 2003 and had earned $241,438,208 in U.S. cinemas and a further US$115,099,973 in overseas takings. Despite being a box office smash, DVD/VHS sales and rentals in the U.S. made $222,000,000. I agree with Muravyov’s (2003) summation that the impact of word-of-mouth advertising must have been a key to its resounding popularity and should not be underestimated. Especially given the meagre, US$1 million advertising budget for this film. MBFGW became the fifth highest grossing film of 2002 and the highest grossing independently made film of all time. This makes a convincing case that the film’s popularity, was fuelled through word-of-mouth. The case is also made for the product placement of the cleaning product Windex, within the film (as the panacea for almost every skin ailment) being now a ‘marketer’s dream’ with sales increasing up to almost 23 per cent since being featured in this film ‘with an estimated 144,138,940 viewers worldwide’.

This film had touched a raw nerve it seems, right around the world and not only from the Greek diaspora. It also highlights the effects of migration and transnationalism, as the cultural values that are brought with migrants seek to adapt and survive in the New World. This is also as much a statement regarding the evolving nature of cultural identity.

Vardalos described in an interview (Whitfield 2002) the cross-cultural family encounter in the following way, and gives a clue as to the reasons for MBFGW’s resounding popularity:

Yes, that’s been my favourite thing, actually, the amount of people that have come up to me on the street and said, ‘I’m Irish, and you are talking about my family. We had this moment too, where a Chinese family came to our table in Montreal and said, we are from Detroit, my Dad—my Mom is just like your Dad.

Further:

‘I’m Italian, I’m Jewish, I’m Chinese, and this is my story. How did you know?
Did you place a tape-recorder in my house, because my father didn’t want me to date the guy who was white, black, Jewish, Chinese, Italian,’ I think this became the film for anyone who has a family that drives him or her nuts, but they couldn’t live without them.

That definitely includes her family, Vardalos admits (Pearlmam 2003). The following quote from MBFGW regarding Toulas’s childhood in fact, describes the kind of socialization (processes) with minority children, who knowingly and typically are from a different culture, feel awkward, apparently not fitting-in, appearing different and therefore consider themselves different. In self-esteem language – ‘inferior’. Toulas narrates a school, lunch-time scene:

When I was growing up, I knew I was different. I so badly wanted to be like the other girls ... who were blonde and delicate, and I was a swarthy six year old with side-burns. I so badly wanted to be like the popular girls, all sitting together eating their wonder bread sandwiches.

Conformity or non-conformity?

What follows is a brief analysis from psychological research as it impacts social policies. The idea of conforming with the dominant culture, supported with the added layer of what the dominant society considers ‘beautiful’ or ‘pretty’ is not a new concept. It was studied through the psychological research of Kenneth B. & Mamie Clark, (Clark & Clark 1950).

This research effectively linked lowered self-esteem and ‘internalised racism’ in black children in the U.S. with poorer future outcomes. This research was used in a landmark case, that in effect ended the racial segregation of
The black and white dolls, as used in the filmed study, by 16 year old K. Davis. (2005) Replicating the original (1950) Clark research.

schools in the U.S. (what were known as part of the Jim Crow laws) in the win of Brown vs Board of Education, 1954. The doll studies of Clark and Clark (1950) have been successfully replicated for over 50 years (American Psychological Association meeting, New York City, 1987. Also reported in Time, September 14, 1987, p.74).

Recently, the Clark research has been replicated and filmed by K. Davis (2005) as part of research through a three minute documentary called A girl like me.3

The results being again, that the majority, 15 out of the 21 black children, still prefer the 'white doll' over the 'black doll' replicating the Clark's original research. This demonstrated the black children devaluing 'blackness', in favour of the white doll. Whilst the white children from these replicated studies continued to consider their own colour favourably whilst continuing to see the black dolls in expressly negative terms. The doll studies allow a particular form of identification in psychological research of this kind, that is a form of preference that can cut across race, such as the black doll or the white doll as preferred by the black/white children when questioned. (Clark 1955; Bagley & Young 1988: 46).

Through such psychological studies children's attitudes to self are thus 'inferred' (Aboud 1980; Williams & Morland 1976). This research comparing results from young children in Jamaica, Ghana, England and Canada suggests that part of the reason ethnicity and language need to be maintained is because these dimensions contribute to the creation of identity in children, especially through multicultural policies. This becomes positive reinforcement for a 'healthy ethnic identity' in the child and helps wider family stability that allows plurality to exist within a socialization of a broader hegemonic culture. It is not surprising then, that multicultural policies challenge established notions of access to information and attempt to address disadvantage not of presumed, usurped privilege.

Further, Bagley (1985) sees 'a necessary ethnocentrism' in the development of the child's construct of identity, based on further research (Bagely & Young 1988:58). For without it, underachievement and identity confusion is seen in child development studies. Not only this, he sees it as a requisite for 'adequate general self-esteem and global identity which is a critical factor' if we are to participate in a wider cultural system (Scourby 1994).

The replicated doll studies suggest that many black children had, to a large degree, 'internalized' such negative stereotypical attitudes which the majority community held concerning them. So that the consequences were that the black children had a poorer sense of identity and self-esteem than the white children in these studies.

It is evident that children recognize the pressures of socialization if we are to take the previous research into account and therefore the view of the world as expressed through the 'young Toulia' in MBFW is an essential part of the construction of identity in youth minorities.

The end of the film MBFW is characterized by the main character Toulia explaining to her daughter why she needs to go to Greek School (symbolically, the maintenance of Greek language and identity). The child's reward according to Toulia then is: 'that you can marry anyone you want'. In a narrative sense this explains the meaning of the film and why the conclusion of the film comes to that end, even with a cross-cultural, mixed marriage, with the prospective
husband attempting to learn the Greek language and being baptized in the rites of the Greek Orthodox Church. In the U.S., those of Greek background marrying non-Greeks are estimated at 70 per cent (Joanides 2003: 191–92). Joanides (2002) from an analysis of the American Greek Orthodox Archdiocese Yearbook in part also confirms the ‘inter-Christian marriage’ statistics. That is marriages within the Greek Orthodox Church between Greek Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christian participants. So concerned has the Greek Orthodox Church in America been, that it has produced a resource for Orthodox adherents wanting to marry (Joanides, C. 2002).

‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder’

The concept of beauty in search of approval is a theme portrayed cinematically through both films. In MBFGW, we see the transformation of a grumpy girl, the ugly duckling, who wishes to further educate herself by going to night college and in so doing transform herself – complete with tighter fitting clothes, the bulky cardigans and thick-glasses gone, replaced with contact lenses – into a modern Greek goddess; who then confidently asks if she can sit with the other girls at college (something she was unable to do at the beginning of the film, while at school, as she was eating ‘moose-ka-ka’, a Canadian pun on the classic Greek dish, moussaka according to the other school children).

Ian Miller (played by actor John Corbett), a teacher at the night college eventually becomes smitten by her and cannot resist. It is poignant that he remembers her before the goddess transformation as a ‘waitress’, then corrected by Toula ‘eating hostess actually’ in the family restaurant ‘Dancing Zorbas’, with Toula just staring at him, literally dumb-founded, transfixed, oblivious to everything around her.

After an awkward silence and equally long stare by Toula she then snaps: ‘... just your regular Greek statue.’ (Toula being rather awkward, trying to make excuses for staring at Ian Miller). Her self-esteem is characterized by Toula, slumping to the floor after the payment at the counter by Ian Miller and his teacher friend, Mike (played by Vardalos’s actual husband, Ian Gomez).

The character Poupi in MLIR also undergoes a physical as well as a psychological transformation. He is described initially as: ‘perhaps they caught a bear and let him drive’, or again as: ‘the creepy, hairy, creepy guy ... he’s right behind me ... isn’t he?’, ‘What is it with this hair? Is it a full moon? Yet as his interest increases in Georgia, he slowly attempts to change his looks, the most dramatic being when the beard is totally effaced with a smart haircut at the end of the film for the celebration at the conclusion of the tour.

Here all the popular allusions to Greek masculinity/virility through a hirsute attribute, such as male body hair, comes into play. Poupi eventually brings his hair under control and wins the girl from the American Greek diaspora.

The concept of beauty in both films is as much transformative in terms of the creation of a positive self-esteem, in as much as it is seen to be a desired commodity. It is as much an attestation of identity herself, desirous of being ‘beautiful’ and in turn seeking such approval.

In the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, T. Adorno (1991) considered the concept of beauty as part of the manufactured ‘culture-industry’, in which he made the argument for beauty itself, becoming part of the ideology of advanced capitalist society along with the false consciousness that contributes to social domination. This ultimately becomes a manufactured culture-assigning identity from without – on a macro societal level, according to what is considered ‘beautiful’ and what is not. Adorno has conclusively made the important connection between the inherent manipulation of consumerist capitalist, dominating culture alongside the all important contributor to self-esteem - the desire to be considered ‘beautiful’ or attractive in contemporary society.

The advent of such unstoppable forces as technological, economic globalization and the ever present desire for the ‘beautiful’ glossy images in popular culture, already conjures a heady, intoxicating mass-market mix, in order to rally forth conformity and a mass culture purposely constructed, dominated and fuelled by such aspirant values.

It is what N. Chomsky writes in the foreword of the late A. Carey’s posthumous work (Carey, Lobrey & Chomsky 1997):

Alex Carey’s enquiries unravel the story as it unfolded through the twentieth century in its manifold aspects:

Advertising devoted to creation of artificial wants; the huge public relations industry with its goal of diversion to meaningless pursuits and the control of the public mind; academic institutions and professions today under renewed assault
from private power determined to narrow still further the spectrum of thinkable thought, the increasing concentrated media.

This is also a visual statement, of the individual to the society, 'this is who I am', or even a more telling identity concept: 'this is who I'd like to be', a veritable case of 'keeping up appearances'. This representative struggle from without, on a societal level often conflicts with the internal, personal, individual's construction of identity. This is especially relevant to aspirant ethnic minorities given an ascribed identity, position, power by the differing majority culture.

A Gramscian analysis

G. Steinem in her number one international bestseller, Revolution from within: a book of self-esteem (1993: 256), described the ' politicization of beauty' as being conferred traits, that are globalised, and therefore hegemonic culture can dictate what is beautiful and what isn't. What is sinister here, is that such conforming values, once inculcated internally within the individual, can become self-limiting. This phenomenon can also be interpreted through the prism of 'cultural hegemony'. In A. Gramsci's view, (using his pivotal concept of 'cultural hegemony'), any class that wishes to dominate contemporary culture has to move beyond its own narrow 'economic-corporate' interests, to exert intellectual and moral leadership, and to make alliances and compromises with a variety of forces. Gramsci had already seen this through the combined union of fascism and the Roman Catholic Church in Italy in the 1920s-30s (Duncombe 2002). Gramsci identified this union of social forces as a 'historic bloc'. This point at the crossroads forms the basis of consent to a certain dominant social order, which produces and reproduces the hegemony of the dominant class through a nexus of institutions, hierarchical social relations and conceptions of class. As the establishment of 'cultural hegemony' by the ruling classes, establishes a dominant culture to whom most others want to aspire (Gramsci, Hoare & Nowell-Smith 1971). This analysis is helpful in de-mystifying the impact of 'the American dream' particularly as it seeks to define, categorize and stereotype ethnic minorities. However, more importantly, it outlines position and power as ascribed to ethnic minorities by the very mechanisms used to establish the foundations of majority culture and ensuring its continuation. This Gramscian analysis when especially applied to minorities, is summarized with great wit and candour as applied to contemporary culture by the late Gore Vidal (1925-2012):

The genius of our ruling class is that it has kept a majority of the people from ever questioning the inequity of a system where most people drudge along, paying heavy taxes for which they get nothing in return.

Vardalos has chosen to begin and end her film, My Big Fat Greek Wedding from the point of view of the child within an ethnic minority. Thematically, this explores the ongoing construction of identity from without (that is, the dominant majority culture) and from within (the individual) incorporating 'internalised' values as the child grows and takes her place as a functioning member of contemporary society. Subsequent research coming through the social sciences (using the doll studies research as applied to analysing the effects of social policy) has greatly contributed to the understanding of the formation of negative and positive models of identity, especially pertaining to minorities. Further, aligning theorists, such as Carey, Adorno and Gramsci, it is possible to de-compartmentalize forces inherent within globalization that ultimately contribute to the formation of modern identities. These relentless forces can then be used as vehicles of manipulation promoting conformity by the dominant culture and thereby ensuring their dominance. The Gramscian analysis is central in this analytic endeavour, as it seeks to unmask such malleable constructions used by the dominant culture. This conceptual framework in turn allows for a multi-layered, investigative approach to identity, enabling further clues in understanding its formation, construction and metamorphosis. These dynamic processes as exemplified through the Greek diasporic identity attempting to re-assert their presence within a differing majority culture. It is consistent that such analysis lends itself to a multi-disciplinary approach. The search for 'beauty' as a measure of self-esteem and approval, as it contributes to the formation of identity in minorities, is a salient theme explored in both films by Vardalos. Such themes explored through their complementarity, assembles a foundation on which such problematic constructs, as the ongoing formation of identity, can be explored.
References


Notes


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