

Fluorescent heart of Magaluf

Ben stringer

b.stringer@westminster.ac.uk

Jane McAllister

j.mcallister@londonmet.ac.uk

“No they were not inhuman. ...They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.”¹



Magaluf revellers'

Mallorca's contrasting urban spaces are represented in guide books and websites for tourists and holidaymakers like different narratives to be explored through different styles of 'reading' and using urban space. There is a parallel between the interactive websites that cater for Magaluf's young revellers and the ways they party in the street. This parallel is very different to the way that a more 'authoritative' guide book invites its readers to explore the alluring historic fabric of Palma. This paper attempts to critique and explore the distinctions between the tourist cultures of these places and the ways that they are represented. It is accompanied by a series of photographic studies and 'souvenirs' made by us which set out to transgress and play with, and question some of the cultural codes that apparently divide classes of tourist. This is particularly true of our photographs of Magaluf's night-time street revelries. Our impression was that Magaluf plays host to a more creative and 'fluid' tourist culture than its reputation would suggest.

To travel the short 10 kilometres from the impressive historic city centre of Palma de Mallorca to the 'notorious' beach and nightclub resort of Magaluf is seemingly to traverse a huge cultural divide. The

¹ Conrad j, Heart of Darkness,

kinds of tourist 'gaze' afforded by these two places could not be more different, and one could be forgiven for assuming that the kinds of people that go to these places could not be more different either.

Two summers ago we arrived at Palma on an evening flight. We had come to try and organise an architecture workshop in Palma². We were met by friends at the airport who took us for supper in a local restaurant in the city where everyone seemed to know each other except us, we were grateful outsiders. Our friends asked where we were staying, and we told them it was a bit out of town in a place called Magaluf. This caused some concern, we were warned that the place would probably be 'disgusting', but since it was late, we should stay there for now and re-locate into Palma the next day. Anxiously we paid up and our friends insisted on driving us to the hotel.

First of all we drove through Palma's shadowy hinterlands of suburbs and industrial areas, then, we sped into the quiet darkness of the M-20 motorway, which winds gently through the lush hills northwest of Palma until one finds the Magaluf exit. Then it is a short drive into the resort which is huddled up tight along the shoreline. Within two or three turns, of driving in to Magaluf, we suddenly found ourselves on what is known as 'The Hill' in the midst of a brightly lit and extremely wild and crowded street party. We could only go at a snail's pace, because the people had taken over the road, and we sat silently amazed at the spectacle happening all around us. A girl stepped into the glare of our lights to lift her skirt and wiggle her bare bottom at us, a couple of cross dressed Osama Bin Ladens tottered by on high heels, a group of pink Cowgirls were laughing as we inched along, an awful lot of fun was being had. We felt clumsy, as if we were driving a car uninvited through a private party in someone's very large living room. How different this was to the shadowy and beguiling alleys and courtyards of Palma.

Eventually we emerged from this spectacle into a quiet leafy suburban street flanked by palm trees and spectacular modernist slab block hotels with stylish illuminated balconies and walkways. We joked that the journey into Magaluf had been like a home grown version of 'Heart of Darkness'. Our friends told us they never go to Magaluf and that they found it really strange being in such a foreign place on their own island. For us it was strange seeing in Spain a phenomenon that is supposed to be so British like us, but which seemed unusual to us too.

In the morning we hired a car and drove back into Palma to walk around the old city. In our hands we had the 'Time out guide to Mallorca and Menorca' which gave us some of our earliest impressions of Palma and Magaluf³. In general we found this guide to be very useful, for example; it offers a short history of Palma, which, it says; '*..was probably founded by the Romans in 123 BC*', but '*it wasn't substantially developed until the arrival of the moors in AD902.*', and then; '*...although the Moorish street plan was unaltered, almost all Arabic architecture was eradicated as the city took on a Gothic look.*'⁴ But while using this guide to find our way around, we became aware of how the guide's language was subtly suggestive of how we should experience Palma and Magaluf⁵ as well as what we should know about them.

Palma is described like this; (*within it's*) '*pristine historic core.....lies a clutch of compelling sights secreted among its (largely traffic free) twisting medieval streets...*'. The sense of things hidden that the

²We are both university lecturers in architecture.

³Time Out p.46

⁴Time Out p.45

⁵It is not clear who actually wrote the Time Out Guide, but its editors are Anna Norman and Patrick Welch.

guide engenders is unsurprising given the kind of architecture that comprises Palma's historic fabric. A courtyard building type, developed over centuries, is prevalent here. Built as palaces, or merchant's houses, they now contain apartments, offices, garages, hotels and so on. And they vary from elegant neo classical or Baroque compositions, with lots of room for parking cars, to small and simple vernacular stairwells or lightwells, with only enough room for a parked moped, some potted plants and a stair to the first floor. They are typically accessed from the street via arched doorways and shadowy passageways that reach into the daylight courtyard space. These buildings are tall, 4-5 generous storeys typically. Collectively they form tight blocks and flank narrow streets which are often only just big enough for a single small car to fit in. These streets occasionally open into neighbourhood plazas of varying shapes, sizes and importance. Of course this does make Palma's city centre a really interesting place to explore. Within its tight and gently undulating streets, one is typically up close to massive and extensive old stone walls whose surfaces reveal palimpsest like layers of decay and change over time. Where there are openings into private spaces such as courtyards or windows, they seem to catch ones attention in a way that reminds us of the kind of alluring glimpses that Roland Barthes described when he was talking about ways of reading books in 'The Pleasure of the Text'; '*..it is this flash...*', or '*intermittence*' '*..between two edges*' he said, '*...which seduces*'.

Ok cities are not books, but lets say a kind of narrative unfolds seductively for the exploring tourist in Palma, because of the way that it seems to arouse one's curiosity through sequences of narrow walled spaces punctuated with partial glimpses of semi-hidden courtyards, gardens, churches, and so on. These partial views bring a sense of fragmentation in the mind of the tourist, a little bit like the reader whose visual imagination illustrates writing. This sense of fragmentation is enhanced by the way the bright sun penetrates these narrow streets brightly illuminating some pieces of walls and plunging others *into shadow*. For us, this effect recalled the darkness of Caravaggio's chiaroscuro painting style. The pleasure of exploring Palma seemed to us to be between discovering and creating impressions from such fragments in ones mind and in conversation and also in the slight sense of unfathomability lurking in the shadows and places not seen.

In a similar spirit the Time Out guide presents Palma, with its hidden charms, its '*...narrow streets that meander..*', as an ideal place to disappear into. It uses words like 'secreted' and 'wandering' to describe the experience its spaces offer. Such words seem to offer the reader a little sense of empowerment and freedom in the way it encourages the tourist to explore and discover. This encouragement to construct one's own narrative among the streets of Palma is a bit like a less radical version of the kind of individualistic reader that Roland Barthes advocated in the 'Pleasure of the Text'; one whose idiosyncratic readings effectively play a role in the authorship of a text. The Time Out guide seems to advocate the idea of a more creative and individualistic tourist in Palma but not so much in Magaluf.

Of Magaluf the time out guide says; 'despite the clean up a few years back, when the worst of the strips hotels were demolished, Magaluf retains a personality that is overbearing to the point of being offensive.....it's very notoriety has made it a 'sight' in it's own right. You wouldn't want to stay here, but it's worth spending half an hour of your time observing the phenomenon of mass tourism up close.'⁶ Magaluf and mass tourism seems to be presented here more like a problem requiring some kind of assessment or judgement. And the inference is not of a freedom to roam, but a suggestion that Magaluf

⁶ Time Out p..95

represents some kind of constraint to individual liberty, as if one's personal space was being confronted in some way. The fabric of Magaluf is apparently not conducive to the same kind of exploratory, or creative tourism, as we think is suggested by 'Time Out' in Palma.

The suggestion that 'you wouldn't want to stay here' places readers on the bourgeois side of an implied boundary between two classes of tourist; one side of this boundary leans toward the 'traveller' with aspirations of exploration and the challenge of unknown territory. On the other side is the package tourist, or what Time Out calls the 'boozed up bucket and spader', who tends to be characterised from a bourgeois perspective as part of a crowd of passive consumers who desire the security of the familiar as opposed to the challenge of the unknown or of the other and who are not credited with the same spirit of independence as the aspiring 'traveller' type of tourist⁷.

If Palma's fabric unfolds cinematically for the tourist, then Magaluf invites its holidaymakers to play a part in a theatrical production. Its public life focuses emphatically on 3 different daily 'stages'; Stage one is the beach by day, with families, children, young and old baking and playing in the sun and sea or sheltering under sunshades; Stage two, as the sun goes down and the beach empties, is the promenade walk at the back of the beach, which begins to fill with strolling friends, lovers and families dressed for the evening. And then stage 3, for the party animals, the grand finale, as darkness falls, takes place in Magaluf's main interior streets which become the setting for scenes of exaggerated camaraderie, sexuality and house party like familiarity.



Magaluf by day



Magaluf by night

From an inland point of view the back of Magaluf looks like some kind of isolated penal colony locked between a scruffy wilderness and the sea. The tall hotels present their unloved concrete rear elevations, with their ducts, pipes and fire escapes, onto acres of scruffy overgrown hinterlands within which are grids of decaying roads and lampposts which have been waiting in vain for Magaluf to expand further into the island. This position of isolation makes Magaluf stand apart from the rest of Majorca, like some kind of Heterotopia whose role may be to confirm the dignity of the rest of the island in the minds of its 'proper' citizens.



Magaluf hinterland from the Rear



Magaluf interior

Scales of architecture within Magaluf contrast a lot here there is not the same sense of a narrative punctuated with fragmentary views as in Palma's city centre. At street level there are one and two storey shops offering a seemingly endless display of holiday consumables alongside the myriad of nebulous bars and restaurants. When they are open (which seems like all of the time) barriers or glazing between street and interiors of shops and bars are minimal or nonexistent, creating an easy going market place relationship which allows shoppers consumed with heat to drift under shady awnings amongst the colourful beach goods and rude T-shirts. A sense of Britishness pervades because of the constant availability of UK creature comforts and services such as 'Red Top' newspapers, Sky Sports TV, fish and chips and 'British doctors' surgeries which seem to be present on every block. There are not many cars around, and compared to the large scale of the hotels the one-way streets close to the beach are dinky affairs, as are the little two lane streets with grassed central reservations which feel like the shrunken cousins of the kind of grand multi lane boulevards found in bigger cities. Behind the main streets, loom high rise hotels and time-share buildings that reach like periscopes, for views of the sea and the distant horizon, a smattering of towels, some with Union Jacks on them, adorn their balcony railings. Le Corbusier once said that 'All modern Architecture has a mission to occupy itself with the sun.'⁸, and Magaluf evidently agrees.

Among the typological precedents to the kind of slab block hotel prevalent in Magaluf, are the Hiltons of the 1950's and 1960's, which commercialised the architecture of modernists Mies van der Rohe Le Corbusier as Wharton says that;

'The Hilton was a machine for viewing. In the foreground that it framed was the body of the guest; in the background was the immediate sources of the patron's status, the foreign panorama. The extended vista opened through the plate glass windows, offering visual control of an alien urban landscape from an entirely secure site of observation. The Hilton provided a haven from exotic difference'. And she also says; 'The Hilton transformed the anxiety of being observed into a pleasure'⁹.

⁸Quoted by Flora Samuel in; Samuel, F 'Le Corbusier in Detail' p.80, originally quoted in Sekler and Curtis 'Le Corbusier at Work' p.194

⁹Annabel Jane Wharton, *Building the Cold War*, P.

The beach resort version of this hotel type replaces the panorama of the foreign city with the generic sea view, and in Magaluf's case of resorts like Magaluf the whole surrounding resort has become a heterotopic 'haven from exotic difference', where Mallorca is diminished to little more than sun and sea and welcoming hotel receptionists

At night, the main streets of Magaluf are bathed in the glow of excessive florescent lighting emanating from the bars and shops and their verandas. In the warm summer nights this further blurs the distinction between inside and outside creating a mood of a continuous corporate interior. When the partying is in full swing, particularly on Friday and Saturday nights when most hen and stag parties are celebrating, it is something like a wild outdoor office party punctuated with signs of Britishness in the forms of music, drink and football on TV and such like. (ironically one of Magaluf's bars is called 'The Office'). Within this all this corporate light a frenzied carnal drama is enacted, wherein its bawdy participants, seem for a moment to identify more with a corporeal tangibility than an increasingly institutionalised world of controls and disciplinary measures. In the morning or afternoon these revellers will open their curtains to the private, absorbing and ethereal views of sea and sky afforded by their theatre box like hotel bedroom balconies.



Magaluf cowgirls



Hotel theatre boxes

Hazel Andrews argues that Magaluf is a form of colonization that compensates the holidaymaker for a lack of identity available in the homeland by offering an environment replete with exaggerated and clichéd signs of Britishness from Trafalgar to PG Tips. [1] This may ring true for the majority of the British holidaymakers who go to Magaluf, but a high proportion of the revellers we met were not British. In fact we met people from all over the world, Western and Eastern Europe, the US, and even Asia, (but none from Spain or Mallorca). Many will have been attracted by the international reputation of the enormous BCM nightclub and the big stars that regularly perform there. But they are evidently also there to take in to take part in a (British?) style of holiday party whose purpose is not just to affirm or deny some sort of national identity or class, but to explore aspects of their own identities, through the hen and stag night style rites of passage.

The way of obtaining information and formulating opinions and ideas, or a kind of social geography for the Magaluf holidaymaker, is unlikely to be through a guide book, and much more likely to be through websites, chat rooms, blogs, tweets and so on. Sites like 'Magaluf uncovered' and 'Shagaluf', give individuals the opportunity to share plans and thoughts and opinions directly with others who are interested. Here the authority of the expert travel guide has been replaced by that of the ordinary tourist.

In Pierre Bourdieu's influential book 'Distinction', published in 1979, he '...predisposes tastes to function as markers of class'¹⁰. This would seem, at first glance, to have found a good fit in the perception of Magaluf that we have discussed thus far, ie that the gulf between tourists in Palma and Magaluf is one of class as well as geography. But, when we took photographs in Magaluf's riotous night time streets, what we saw did not conform to neat class boundaries. By no means were all of the revellers we met 'working class'. There were as many university students as off duty soldiers and our impression was of a broad cross section of society including many middle class people. Some revellers must have spent quite a lot of money to be there too, because they had flown in from quite far flung places such as the US and Asia.

We also perceived a 'creativity' in the exaggerated personas that people adopted and played with and acted out on the street that does not accord with the lazy impression given to the 'boozed up bucket and spader', or to the working class package tourist generally. A different kind of 'creative user' emerges amongst the wildness of Magaluf to the explorer of cities in Palma.

Zygmunt Bauman argues that we live in a 'fluid' capitalist system now, whose cultural logic is far less rigid than would have been the case when Pierre Bourdieu was making his ground breaking studies of the politics of taste in the 1970's. For example it is much clearer now, than even 30 years ago, that there is no shame at all for the 'highbrow' aesthete who wishes to enjoys the 'vulgarity' of 'lowbrow' culture. And this would seem to be borne out by the mixture of people that we met in Magaluf. As Bauman says;

'It can be said that in liquid modern times, culture..... is fashioned to fit individual freedom of choice and individual responsibility for that choice; and that its function is to ensure that the choice should be and will always remain a necessity and unavoidable duty of life, while the responsibility for the choice and its consequences remains where it has been placed in the liquid modern human condition-on the shoulders of the individual, now appointed to the position of chief manager of 'life politics' and its sole executive'¹¹

The complexity does not stop here. The thing is that the wild goings on in Magaluf also have a palpable collective spirit and a desire for camaraderie that simultaneously runs counter to the logic of the individual. This is evident in the teams of Las Vegas era Elvises and Viking warriors, as well as the English football shirts. In this scheme one might say that the theatrical party clothes of revellers at Magaluf corresponds with an exaggerated ideal-ego and signs of an institutional 'big other' is represented by signs of the British 'institution' and by a corporate modernist architectural aesthetic. Magaluf is a theatre where a nightly struggle is enacted between self identity and a 'Big Other' of the institution, or perhaps where a fear of loneliness and loss of identity in a fluid world are momentarily compensated.

¹⁰ Bourdieu *distinction*

¹¹

Photographs and Souvenirs of Magaluf and Palma

We have been developing a series of photographs of Magaluf and also some 'souvenirs' of Palma. Our discussions about the different ways these places are perceived and experienced has led us in two different directions: our thinking about Palma has culminated in plans to make a series of castings of some of the fragmentary views that we discussed earlier. Their form is derived by measuring out plans, sections and elevations of one person's view from a single point at a single moment on one of Palma's alluring streets. The resulting drawings are translated into a 3 dimensional mould, into which plaster is poured or 'cast'. In English the word 'cast' has numerous meanings. Not only does it refer to something setting in a mould, but it also means something like to 'throw'. A fairly common expression in English is to 'cast a glance' which means to have a quick look. The whiteness of these cast glances is meant to be reminiscent of the traditional white clay figures with green and red painted markings (called ??) that one finds in souvenir shops all over Mallorca. They are also meant to be reminiscent of the souvenirs of fragments of ancient buildings such as those that have been on sale in places like Rome since the days of the 'Grand Tour'.¹²

Earlier we mentioned that Palma reminded us of the paintings of Caravaggio, because of his 'chiaroscuro' shadows and 'fragments' of figures. In Magaluf at night we were also reminded of Caravaggio, but not because of the light or fragments, here it was the groups of people engaged in animate and sometimes vicarious activity and conversation on the street and in the pubs where 21st century versions of the tavern and street subjects that he portrayed in some of his paintings.

Our idea in Magaluf was to try to recreate photographically something like Caravaggio's chiaroscuro. Technically this is not an easy thing to achieve because of the omnipresence of fluorescent light glows in Magaluf's strip. Our solution was to take photographs with a camera that we had converted to receive infra red light only. This is because we learnt that fluorescent lights usually do not give off very much infra red light and therefore an infra red camera would not record the main source of light in Magaluf.

We noticed that the lighting in the bars of Magaluf was predominantly fluorescent whilst that of Palma had more electric incandescent lights and candle light in its bars and restaurants. Thus the Magaluf lights washed the occupants into a mass, recalling a kind of standardization, hygiene, efficiency that can be associated with institutional strip lighting, while the Palma lighting seemed to animate and describe more sympathetically individual bodies and parts of figures in space and darkness in a way that is not too dissimilar to a Caravaggio painting.

We wanted to try to highlight people and their bodies in Magaluf in ways that brought out the physicality that pervades the atmosphere, but which seems to get washed out by the evenness of the ubiquitous and almost institutional fluorescent light that washes most of the busy public spaces in Magaluf at night.

Most fluorescent lights do not throw out very much infra red light and so by using an infra red camera we were able to diminish greatly the background light and introduce our own more directed light by means of a remote flash, as well as producing effects a bit like Caravaggio's deeply contrasted and shadowy

¹² Rome fragments essay????

chiaroscuro style. Photographic technologies of course have their own cultural histories, and infrared photography's development is mixed up with the military, with covert surveillance and night time wild life photography. All issues which seem to accord faintly with the kind of distant and very critical gaze with which Magaluf and its style of mass tourism seems to be viewed, by many or most Mallorcans and by travel guides such as the Time Out guide. Having said that we should say that our photographs were far from covert, on the contrary, taking these pictures was mostly a catalyst for meeting the people we photographed.

The Infra red camera enabled us to create images of Magaluf's vicarious night scenes which echoed some aspects of Caravaggio's paintings. People are foregrounded in these pictures and architecture fades sometimes to invisibility. In our minds this form of representation brought out the individuality and 'creativity' of Magaluf's revellers. They appear more like the 'active' or 'creative' users of space that we saw than the 'mass' tourist for whom Magaluf was originally created.

Bibliography

Barthes, R (1980) *The Pleasure of the Text*, Hill and Wang.

Bauman, Z (2011) *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P (2010) *Distinction*, Routledge Classics.

Conrad, J (2007) *Heart of Darkness*, Penguin.

Kaplan, C (1996) *Questions of Space*, Duke University Press.

Norman A and Welch, Patrick (eds) (2009) *Time Out Guide to Mallorca*.

Samuel, F (2007) *Le Corbusier in Detail*, Architectural Press.

Wharton, A (2004) *Building the Cold War*, University of Chicago Press.