Cleansing and Capitulation

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**Superwicked Moral Trifecta**

In 2016, British documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis released his 165-minute-long feature *Hypernormalisation*, taking viewers through a volley of globalised traumas induced by sweeping geo-political forces and economic systems. He painted a dire portrait of the world, and while doing so juxtaposed its disorders with humanity’s inability to see any potential for a different reality. Curtis apportioned responsibility for people’s mental sterilisation to the powers-that-be – the politicians and political class, the lawmakers, the rich, the corrupt, and the morally criminal. He positioned the everyday individual as a victim of what he termed ‘hypernormalisation’, a condition where total situational immersion equates an anaesthesia of principle or action.

In essence, Curtis tells the story of the boiling frog – an age-old apologue that describes a frog being boiled alive in a slowly heated pot. The premise is that if the frog is abruptly flung into pre-boiled water, it will react wildly and attempt escape; but if it is immersed into tepid liquid and then brought to a simmer gradually, it will not perceive danger, will not react, and will be cooked gently to death. Curtis retells this story with specificity – the pot full of water is our world, the 20th and 21st century, its leaders and politicians, its corrupted structures, its economic frameworks, its prophets, heroes, and villains collectively. Humanity is the frog.

In a similar way to how Curtis reveals what people both can and cannot see, Norbert Francis Attard’s series, SOAP T THINK WITH, functions as a hard-working, vast, and tangentially circuitous reckoning with the past decade of Malta’s corrupt, criminal, and physically debilitated context. It does this by enlisting the qualities of the ordinary, regular, commonplace, and funnelling them into messages of self-examination. An everyday bar of soap becomes an overarching metaphor for moral cleansing – Attard collects these bars in vast numbers, carving into them with hieroglyphic precision and composing them with a level of order that bleakly contrasts the ethical chaos behind their message.

Brightly coloured plastic soap boxes are equally used as building blocks for didacticism. In his work *Skin Deep*, Attard’s empty soap boxes invite consideration on the hollowness of Malta’s collective conscious – the boxes’ pale pink colour resembling the raw pink tint of hands that have been scrubbed clean of wrongdoing. The work positions the body against the world; pink for flesh, black for darkness. Its words spell out the sin of superficiality that underpins many of the caustic themes that Attard interrogates throughout the series.

SOAP TO THINK WITH deals directly with three seemingly separate, yet dimensionally connected, episodes in Malta’s recent history – the country’s financial and political corruption scandals; the Covid-19 pandemic; and the murder of a prominent public figure. In its treatment of this superwicked[[1]](#footnote-1) moral trifecta, the series interrupts the hypernormalisation of a nation in ethical and social stasis, flinging its audience directly into the boiling pot, and allowing art “to hold, as ’twere, the mirror up to nature”. (Shakepeare, 1992)

**Ubiquitous Depravity: *Dirty Money***

The word ‘nature’, as it relates to the composition and constitution of the real world, holds significance throughout the unfolding of SOAP TO THINK WITH. Within the series, the true nature of the world, as well as the nature of human beings, is both reflected and disrupted in equal measure across singular works. The nature of how people live is revealed through pieces that recruit the viewer into their own subject matter – most notably, Attard’s reflective light boxes, which stoically illuminate moral missives that remind viewers of a nature that is corrupted. As they do, they reflect back the viewer’s own visage, positioning the latter as either culprits or victims (or both) of that same context of corruption. A new nature is suggested, with art standing back and giving this definition space to be assessed.

This consistantly provocative, revelatory action is punctuated throughout the series by precise allusions to events and happenings that, in their distinct way, each burrow deeper into the phenomenon of hypernormalising immorality. It is perhaps in his chapter of works on the theme of financial and political corruption – which he himself labels ‘dirty money’ – that Attard confronts the viewer with most precision, relating directly to specific events as they occurred in Malta’s recent political history, citing them explicitly, and at times spelling out the names of their most prominent actors.

In the specific case of *KSJMKM II*, Attard names the three most damned protagonists in Daphne Caruana Galizia’s investigation into widespread political and financial corruption – Malta’s former governmental chief of staff, Keith Schembri; ex-prime minister, Joseph Muscat; and the former minister, Konrad Mizzi. In her time, Caruana Galizia wrote extensively about all three figures, dissecting Schembri and Mizzi’s exposed links to the Panama Papers, (Multiple authors, ongoing) as well as the connection she alleged Muscat had to the scandal. Caruana Galizia puported that Muscat’s wife, Michelle Muscat, also owned an offshore firm in Panama – an allegation that triggered a snap election in Malta, and that set in motion a series of events that would eventually lead to Joseph Muscat’s resignation.

Attard intersperses the three men’s initials, which he carves meticulously into soap cars, together with the symbol of universal currency. In so doing, he lays out a medley of themes in horizontal precision – the currency symbol represents the ravenousness of financial greed; the initials symbolise the power and consequences of naming culprits; and the soap bars themselves are emblems of the historic habit of laundering all manners of wrongdoing by those most trusted to lead with righteousness.

In a separate trio of works, *Kickbacks I, Kickbacks II* and *Kickbacks III*, Attard cites the corruption scandal around Malta’s citizenship by investment scheme, known officially as the Individual Investor Programme (IIP), and unofficially as the Golden Passport scheme. In 2014, the programme was launched to allow non-citizens application for Maltese citizenship, asking in exchange for a significant contribution to a national development fund, as well as other Maltese investments. The scheme and its entry conditions were contingent on maintaining residence on the islands and passing criminal background checks.

The composition of *Kickbacks I* and *II* elevates the passport as an object to holy status. Attard surrounds the document – one of which is his own expired passport, its corner cut out in a manner that resembles a modern-day marking of iconoclasm – with a thick frame of ecclesiastical burgundy. The passports are footed by gilded lettering that recalls materiality of the divine; the status of the passport becomes otherworldly, representing the power with which its value has been wielded at a political level. (Cooper, 2016)

In 2017, Malta’s then leader of opposition declared that Malta’s prime minister's chief of staff had received monetary kickbacks from the IIP scheme, claiming that he had documented evidence to prove it. (Staff reporter, 2017) Outcry ensued and then expectedly abated, prey to the cycle of disgust-demand-despondency that had long infected the civic conscious of the Maltese people. Seven years later, in April 2021, news broke that the IIP scheme had also manipulated its pledge for foreign buyers to have to demonstrate at least twelve months’ residency on the islands before being able to buy citizenship. Emails were leaked into the public domain, revealing evidence that a cohort of super-rich applicants had been able to spend as little as two or three weeks on the islands in return for unrestricted access to the EU. But by then the public was distracted by the socio-cultural omnipotence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Scandal had gone beyond hypernormalisation, infiltrating the realm of the invisible ubiquitous.

Malta’s Golden Passports saga characterises just one of several financial and political degradations that the islands have seen over the past two decades. The bending of rules around citizenship had become known as another inevitability in the ether of events beyond the public’s control. By this time, few had any power – or energy – to put a stop to the injustices that were pickling at Malta’s social fabric. Eventually, each politically depraved episode would convert into another forgettable headline, drowned out by the daily hum of survival.

It is here that Attard’s work, *Purity & Danger*, becomes a cautionary poster for inaction. In its title, the work references the1966 publication by anthropologist and cultural theorist Mary Douglas, (Douglas, 1966) which traces the words and meaning of dirt in different contexts, questioning the assessment of dirt in any given society as being out of place – an ethical analysis between what is clean and unclean. Attard’s evocation of that historic judgement exercise is coupled with the visual of an everyday hand towel – a tool with which to wipe away the daily grime acquired while navigating through life. As the outrage of Malta’s dirty money fades into individual backgrounds, hands are wiped clean and dry, signifying the population’s blindness or indifference to the pervasiveness of ethical filth.

Sold citizenship is sampled by Attard as just one aspect of Malta’s progressively accepted maximalist culture – a culture of acknowledging dirt as a necessary means to satisfying demand. Demand for paid citizenship links to demand for new industry, all of which ultimately point to demand for more money – a subject that features consistently in this series. In a prolific outburst of works related to scandals of money laundering, financial corruption, and overall commercial obsession, Attard obstinately chips away at the viewers’ otherwise intact socialised apathy.

Perhaps the most symbolic of Attard’s focus on the omnipotence of financial greed are his works, *Universal Currency* and *Laundromat I*. Each make their subject the symbol of universal currency – a hollow circle with four diagonal spokes radiating outwards from its perimeter, each pointing to the historic pervasiveness of financial allure. In *Universal Currency*, Attard carves this symbol into one loan soap bar, juxtaposing the purity of its appearance – its cream-coloured, clean, waxy surface – with the associated depravity brought about by the greed that is so often linked to money. In *Laundromat I*, he repeats this paradox 180 times, each block of soap representing the 180 different currencies of the world. Through these detailed carvings, the audience is able to read the rhythm of Attard’s repetitive method – a repetition that echoes the recurrence of vice superseding virtue time and time again.

Works like *Capital*, *Polluerent Eam Melitensis*, *Laundromat II*, *Money*, *Dollar*, *Digital Gold*, *Bitcoin 1* and *Bitcoin 2* defy timeliness. These works exist collectively as ambient, yet constant, reminders of a people’s fixation with profit. They stand side-by-side with counterparts that dictate stories with more pointed exactness – stories like those told by *17 Black*, *Roulette* or *Mossack Fonseca*, which allude to several allegations of corruption brought to light by journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia before she was murdered.

*Mossack Fonseca* is perhaps the nucleus work that binds the dirty money theme within SOAP TO THINK WITH. It relates to Mossack Fonseca & Co., (Harding, 2016) a Panamanian law firm and corporate service provider that was at one time one of the world’s largest providers of offshore financial services. The firm received worldwide media attention in April 2016, when the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists published what came to be known as the Panama Papers, uncovering an enormous collection of documents that implicated at least 140 politicians from more than 50 countries in tax evasion schemes. One of those countries was Malta, (Borg, 2020) and one central figure helping to uncover the identity of the people involved locally was Daphne Caruana Galizia. Attard unveils the sordidness of what ensued from the revelations of the Mossack Fonseca and the Panama Papers, furrowing the name of the law firm into the malleable soap bars and alternating its spelling with symbols of currency.

Caruana Galizia would go on to write about the integrated and deep-rooted implications that the Panama Papers held within the wider, increasingly opaque corruptive powers of the Maltese government. In a post published on her blog in May 2017, she wrote: “The date was 15 January 2013, less than two months before a general election which all the polls were saying Labour would win by a massive majority. It was a dead cert that by the beginning of March, Joseph Muscat would be prime minister. […] The stage was set for a money-laundering operation that would crack immediately into action in March 2013”. (Caruana Galizia, 2017)

Almost five months later to the day, Caruana Galizia would be murdered by car bomb. But the legacy of her revelations and money laundering accusations would come to define the very ether of Malta’s sordid yet accepted nature – a nature composed of greed, curated by money-drunk autocrats, and fed by a largely imperceptible and highly infective national lethargy.

***DIRTY MONEY***

**Alone: *Invicta***

In 1882, Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen released his play, *An Enemy of the People*, (Henrik, Rudall, N., 2007) or *En folkefiende*, a story about a medical officer and civic-minded man – Dr. Stockmann – who worked at a spa in his small hometown. Over the course of the story, Stockmann reveals his personal belief that the town’s spa water had been contaminated with bacteria – a suspicion eventually confirmed by lab tests. Stockmann has an article printed to this effect in the local press, risking the closure of the spa and the subsequent economic ruin of the town. What ensues is a multi-player debate around the sanctity of truth and the greater good at the sacrifice of a nation’s prosperity.

By the end of the play, Stockmann endures total social persecution, suffering attacks of vandalisation to his home and becoming a ridiculed pariah to friends and family. Despite this blanket excommunication, Stockmann pledges to stay in the town he has fought for standing by his calling to hold truth to power at all costs. As he does, he promises to “proclaim the truth at every street corner! […] write to newspapers in other towns!” and avows that “the whole land shall know how things go on here!”

On October 16, 2017, at 2:35pm, journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia published the last post of her *Running Commentary*, metaphorically crying out the same decree and devotion to truth as the character of Stockmann had in the 19th century. “There are crooks everywhere you look now,” she wrote, “the situation is desperate”. Later that day she would die – killed by the force of a detonated car bomb as she drove away from her family home. Attard builds a work that spells out those final words in over two metres of traditional soap boxes laid beside one another, leaving no space between letters. This deliberate constriction symbolises the suffocating effect of corruption and its asphyxiation of those who fight it.

Throughout her lifetime, Caruana Galizia had also been subject to widespread societal condemnation. Her house too had been vandalised on several occasions, she had been denigrated, humiliated, and alienated. She worked in solitary quarters, her physical isolation juxtaposing the reach of her investigative web of sources. Like Stockmann, her vocation was to reveal the contaminated segments of society. In doing so, she was not only classified as an outcast, but paid a high financial price – at the time of her death she was besieged by over forty libel cases, of which one had left her fiscal assets seized and her livelihood prey to debilitating inertia. Attard’s *Libels Make a Book* displays an unrelenting list of the libel prosecutors, his elegant graphic order contrasting the disorder of wellbeing brought about by the onslaught of the cases.

During his own solitary confinement throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, Attard’s contemplation on the life of Daphne Caruana Galizia – who had been a friend and supporter of the artist – was refocused. Prompted by the extended rumination afforded by lockdown, Attard returned to a photograph he had taken years earlier of the journalist, a tender portrait of a woman he had come to know beyond her public persona. *Im Media Res (In the Middle of Things)* becomes the plumb line to the scope of the SOAP TO THINK WITH series. Daphne, as Attard knew her, is not featured purely as a martyr. Her image becomes the narrative drive to Attard’s encyclopaedic analysis of ten years of corruption, scandal and finally, an enforced, society-wide understanding of the isolation she once endured.

Caruana Galizia’s fate within the narrative arc of SOAP TO THINK WITH becomes an instance or ‘event’ that the entire content of the series orbits around. Attard aligns her assassination as the ‘Event’ according to the philosophy of Alain Badiou, wherein an incidence suddenly interrupts and drastically abstracts the social scene, rupturing the veneer of normality and inviting a rethink of reality. In other words, Caruana Galizia’s murder becomes the event that holds the power to jolt collective consciousness out of hypernormality and towards an acute appraisal of not just matters of morality, but a summation of the soul. As such, Attard prescribes to Badiou’s central proposition that truth comes to occupy a ‘hole’ in our common knowledge, and that the power of the truth of an event can change the basic parameters of how the world is known and understood to us all. (McLaverty-Robinson, 2014)

**Culpability and Redemption en Masse**

SOAP TO THINK WITH builds its climax in the two monument compositions Attard creates to commemorate and crystallise the Event of Daphne Caruana Galizia’s murder, titled *Monument* *II* and *XVI.X.MMXVII*. The first depicts an image of Valletta’s ephemeral memorial to Daphne Caruana Galizia – a makeshift commemoration point at the foot of Antonio Sciortino’s monument to the Great Siege (1927). Despite the monument’s misalignment to Caruana Galizia’s own values, its location directly in front of the Maltese law courts secured its candidacy as a people’s monument to her memory. Over time, people would place flowers and candles at the foot of Sciortino’s sculpture, its original theme and references superseded by the shock of Caruana Galizia’s fate.

The work second spells out the date of Caruana Galizia’s assassination, carving it in serifed digits into a Carrara marble plaque. It is with both these works that audiences are forced to piece the entire contents of the series together, pushing logic onto the factual episodes that each of its artworks represents. As a result, each one of these individual episodes can be seen with newfound clarity – their interconnectedness revealed in frightening yet beautiful lucidity.

Attard once again brings gravitas to the everyday in his work *Digital Mausoleum I*, where he blows up the form of a QR code to grand proportions. The QR code – a type of matrix barcode which has become a permeating symbol as a result of Covid-19’s paperless, touch-free world – offers a scannable optical label that links to an attached digital item. In this case, Attard attaches the code to a photograph of another physical marble plaque – another work in the series that he titles *Running Commentary*. Together, these three works allude to the significance of Daphne Caruana Galizia’s online presence – the stage from which she launched her numerous investigations.

Through these works, Attard positions Caruana Galizia’s blog – also titled Running Commentary, which remains online to this day – as her actual memorial. In carving its title into the timeless surface of Carrara marble, a material that invokes the imagery of the mournful, he pays homage to Caruana Galizia’s digital sink of investigations, probing accounts, and often scathing judgements. In directly focusing on the importance of the digital world, Attard once again converges themes, inviting us to contemplate on our own digital footprints and what picture they might paint as they subsist against our fading physicality.

Paradoxically, Attard positions the experience of cleansings as a metaphor for summoning truth to the consciousness of the individual – cleansing a nation of political deceit, cleansing humanity from the plight of a global pandemic, and cleansing society’s rejection of culpability for the end of one person’s life. Combined, these provocations reveal the fundamental matter and force of life; whether good or evil. SOAP TO THINK WITH positions the act of dirt versus cleanliness as a symbol of humanity’s inertia – or impotence – against the great cycle of morality. Attard’s most poignant call to action invite audiences to take one step back from the act of cleansing, manifesting first as an invitation to *Surrender*. A light appears from the darkness, compelling its viewer to acknowledge their own inconsequentiality, without neglecting their duty to purify, repent and carry responsibility. Attard’s work surrenders us to the connectedness of the ailments of our time, reminding us that we are all marked with the same stain; everything is linked, everything should be questioned, every fight is important.

1. The term ‘superwicked’, usually used in relation to the climate crisis and global warming, relates to a class of problems that are particularly intractable because of limited time, lack of central authority, and the fact that those seeking to solve the problem are also causing it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)