

Surplus Cinema: A discussion of feminist filmmaking in the context of Greece and intertwining diasporas

This text is a transcription of a public discussion that took place on the opening night of the first film program *Surplus Cinema: Feminist filmmaking in the context of Greece and intertwining diasporas*, which took place at BSB in Brussels, 23 November 2022. The program began with a screening of three films made by filmmakers hosting the program, “Rerooting the Post Collective” (2022) by The Post (Film) Collective, “ΜΑΛΘΑ: The Thrice Burnt Archives of Unreliable Prophecies” (2021) by Maria Christoforidou and “Amygdalia” (2019) by Christina Phoebe. The discussion in between filmmakers Elli Vassalou, Mirra Markhaeva, Maria Christoforidou, Christina Phoebe and writer and film theorist Rabab El Mouadden.

Rabab: Welcome back. We have a discussion we will start soon and after you are free to ask your own questions. Having watched your films several times, I always feel I travel through many languages, memories, polyphony towards the future, the past, I am always thinking that there is a very intense presence of what we call *diasporic feeling*, which is also connected to “Surplus Citizen” and also connected to “Surplus Cinema”.

[Quiet – Α μπε μπα μπλο – του κήθε μπλομ -]

Christina: I just wanted to say congratulations – so much - to the post Film collective because its their premiere and also fun fact ΜΑΛΘΑ screened and I wanted to where several of us met or gathered, so I wa

[Quiet – Looking at each other smiling]

Ok, so now, the diasporic feeling.... [laughter audience]

I wanted to share that we’ve been doing a lot of reading in the Surplus Cinema group. Rabab shared the text “Feeling diasporic”, framing diaspora as an emotion, talking about the emotions, feelings of diaspora. This really resonated with me and with the films we watched today.

Coming to a diasporic lens we’ve been talking about [in making this program] has been liberating. Many times, in a similar way that national narratives and In cinema there is a similar hierarchy. Coming to diasporic cinemas, gazes and lenses for me has been very valuable, feeling more collective in cinema. Both Making and watching films with all of you, and all the filmmakers.

A few of the filmmakers are here too today, thank you for joining us. Around

Childhood memories of diaspora

The diasporic eyes of children, revisiting these memories, feeling fir

What happens when those experiences – of being diasporic and being a child – intertwine.

Maria: For me, the word *diasporic* is quite a successful word, following the metaphor: of the seed being spread, being far away. The feeling is that you are from this tree, but the air has taken you far away and you have *rerooted* - I'm looking at you Elli and Mira [laughter audience]

There is always a little bit of a sadness or a loneliness of being far away. And its also mentioned in "Amygdalia": "where are you from?", you're from somewhere else, but you are also connected, but you are growing somewhere else on your own. And there is a loneliness in the diasporic feeling.

But then there is an opportunity to join other diasporas. Like Alimu says in metasporea, in "Rerooting": "you're unique and then you join with other uniquenesses" and you can join intertwining diasporas. By being in diaspora you can relate to people in other diasporas, even if you haven't come from same tree.

Rabab: For me diaspora is also an act. The diasporic, is not only an adjective but an enactment. POFCO, what do you think?

Mirra: After my experience and my story, I remember a time when I just came to Belgium, when I was still young and plenty of energy and nothing could hurt me and I felt immortal. I felt I didn't need to belong, I didn't need to identify with anything.

But gradually I started to feel you cannot forever float in the space where you don't have rights, perspective and possibilities and you are unseen and invisible. Then you start to dig back and see "Ok, ok, I think I'm lost." What is the thing? What is the memory? What is the common thing you see when we are children? You go to the past, to find some earth under your feet.

(8.10) And most of the time the reflex is, when you are lost, to go back to a community with a similar linguistic context, the immigrants that share the same patrimony as you. But I quickly realized that going back to the community of people that came from my country was not such a successful experience, and I started to search for people who went through a similar way as me, but were not from the same country as me, who came from different cultures, and we started this process of, not diasporic but as we call it metasporeic context, as we say, where we are trying to practice our cultures, mix them together, search for common things, celebrate differences.

Elli: Yesterday we had a dinner of Surplus Cinema, and Elena was telling me "What are you doing there?! You are the most greek of all!" I remember when I was living in Greece, it was something that made me suffer: this ultimate Greekness/ [laughter audience] Being *in* the narrative of Greek culture, whatever that means. its such a contested culture in itself. But it's like what

“Amygdalia” says; “When you are too close to yourself, you cannot see who you are.”

So for me, migrating was a search for myself and a search for my roots. When I came to Western Europe, I realized which is my family somehow, which people I feel more close culturally. So the nationalistic narratives could more easily crumble and I could base my love for my land or the culture of everyday life, was not in the patriarchal construct but was much broader. Coming here to Belgium, a very active multiethnic environment after Greece – I mean, its becoming now, but it was not always so rich – or at least when I was at school in the beginning of the ‘90s it was not...

Being here shifted this narrative of eurocentrism and Greece being the ‘cradle of European civilization’, or whatever its supposed to be. I would say more a West-Asian or maybe a Mediterranean one. Culture if not rooted in land but in migrational routes. This is where people meet.

Christina: As a child when I moved to Athens in the late 90s, school was a major site of feeling diasporic. On the one hand not speaking the language of the other kids in school [not speaking Greek when we moved] but also through other cultural codes that are taught in everyday life. Feeling diasporic also related to jokes, television shows of the 90s, songs that everyone knew and feeling that there is so much loaded history that I will never be able to catch up on. And even if I try and I also know it’s so distorted and warped in a certain direction that I’m always very cautious of it and feeling that there is always something behind what it being presented that’s not being said, or put into words.

So making “Amygdalia” – part of it– was feeling that there is a space I can have, we can have, to speak back to this cultural indoctrination, this alienation. I really like this phrase bell hooks uses about “talking back” as a feminist practice: when something is being shoved down your throat and you almost have to vomit it in order to feel you have space again inside for something else.

But also, I think there is a lot of a lot of humor in pop culture and these cultural codes we take for granted. I love being able to visit diasporic feelings and laugh about it and have fun and make fun, codemixing, for example with dresses [as in a scene in Amygdalia], which was an action of the United African Women Organization organized for 8 March 2015, International Working Women’s Day. The Organization had the idea to make this action in the central square of Athens, of Greece, where parliament is. Being able to make those interventions with your clothes, what you’re wearing, with your friends, with other women that feel the need to intervene, in films or other forms, is very liberating.

Maria: It’s interesting you mention school. Once you go to school, the national identity is pushed on all the children that got to school. That’s where you learn you are from that country, but maybe you are not so much from this country and you have certain issues with that.

So I was always interested in Ancient Greece and mythology, and I was told

“This is the history of Greece” and “I am Greek, cause I’m at school” but you’re also excluded, because you don’t see anyone that looks like you in these histories. And if there is a representation of you somewhere, and if there is it’s quite distorted and hurtful. And you have to answer back, talk back.

In school, you discover a lot of think. That’s where I discovered I was foreign.

And then I left Greece and went to the UK and realized how Greek I was. [laughter audience] And then I go back to Greece. So its this backwards and forwards. And I didn’t have all these cultural references, I had other ones.

And then I also saw how Greece is seen in western Europe, which I also didn’t know: “I was like, that’s the greatest civilization on earth, and *everyone* thinks that.” [laughter audience] When you go abroad, people have other ideas about Greece.

W learn how to think through popular culture, and that’s why it’s very important for cinema and media is another education apart from school. And that’s why I think there is work to be done there, and things can change about the images that you see.

In “ΜΑΛΘΑ» I use images from the film “Family Adventures”, a comedy which was very traumatic for me to see as a child. Where they present child in Black Face, a *baby* in Black Face. And I was quite traumatized, thinking “Oh, is it bad? Is it bad for a baby to have Black skin?” I didn’t think so. But the man just goes away screaming. It’s also kind of funny but its also very hurtful. So culture is someplace where you don’t see yourself reflected and you try to insert yourself back in.

Elli: For me, folklore can also have a deeper notion than how its represented in the media. I connect this to surplus cinema, surplus citizen or whatever surplus experience There are places in Greece, where patriarchy and capitalism haven’t managed to deconstruct on such a great level.

In the last 200 years when the nation state and the narrrative of the nation state is 200 years of bleaching and sanitizing multiethnic, multicultural and multi-religious societies. Because we were really a place where different cultures were meeting each other. And the sea plays a role of mixing. There have been places that are not so easily accessible: so not yet a gentrified and sellable.

Like Santorini is completely ruined. But for example, Nisyros or Agraфа, places difficult to reach, still keep a memory of this mixicity that existed in this place. The songs, the food and the symbols that people put in their households and domestic spaces are still there. And if you go to Turkey or Serbia or Egypt you see the same codes. You might find a different translation of a song, but its the same tune. So I find folklore a very rich resource of rerooting yourself, not in nationalism, but in the land and ancestral knowledge.

Mirra: Coming from a little village in South East Siberia, until I came to Europe I had never seen Black people in my life, or a living Greek person [laughter audience], so I had to discover here that not all Greek people look like Zina Warrior Princess [laughter audience], or not all Black people are playing basketball and making hip hop. As people say “you are what you eat” or “you are what you consume”. If all your view on the world is through pop culture, which portrays people a certain way, you fact this and you have to confront massive misunderstandings and lies. And then sometimes in this massive cultural accumulation suddenly you find something common, with my friend from a little village in Syria, and and it was part of her childhood and my childhood, and we can sing a song together.

It is a treacherous thing, and you cannot escape pop culture and folklore. There are great advantages and experiences in them, and also great misunderstandings and pain. I think there is a big need to show it talk about it on the screen.

Rabab: Having talked about definition and redefinition of pop culture, I would like to talk about the workshop that happened a few hours ago in Surplus Cinema program focusing on camera work as care work, and how care is needed in order to change how people are represented. Is it something you implement in your work? How do you do that? What do you think about it in general?

Mirra: What we have shown [“Rerooting”] is just a part of a bigger project with the Post Collective and Post (Film) Collective, where we were working with all types of cameras: going from pretty expensive super8 cameras to bad quality skype on an old phone, asking: Who is holding the camera? Who is it directed on? Where is consent? Is it something staged? Is a living experience?

I saw it as a practical thing. Where the camera created a space for people who otherwise don't really have it outside of this created space. And I have been repeating this lately often, that making cinema and art residency seems like a good alternative for refugee camps. Where camera can create a ground for flourishing, for creativity, for love. Literally using the camera to communicate, to reach each other.

[More to be continued]