

Ten Frames

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Over the course of the past ten years, the Syros International Film Festival (SIFF) has always been just as much about the condition of viewing and experiencing cinema on an island as about the films themselves. Looking back on this decade, we pointed out ten moments that stayed with us, which elicited questions that arose from the process of programming and realizing this festival. Often, they speak to our confrontation with notions of locality, time, chance, as well as the occurrence of natural phenomena, all of which bring us face to face with our choice to organize a film festival on a Cycladic island. In this text we attempt to share some thoughts on these moments, keeping in mind that the duration of the Festival itself, as well as the physical experience of the event in its entirety, cannot be entirely shared in words.

Cinematic Phantoms

On any given summer day, Asteria, the seaside dock of the Vaporia neighborhood in Hermoupolis, is normally covered in sunbathers, towels, and straw beach umbrellas rooted in the concrete. From sunrise until sunset, Lakis, the benevolent guardian of the dock, used to hold court from his small shack built into the dock's adjoining steep rock wall. His signature soundtrack blasting all day from a tinny transistor radio included a wide repertoire with top hits of traditional and recent popular music. It's 2015, and the Festival's theme is "Cinemas of Place". Situated from our vantage point on Syros, we ask: what cinematic phantoms might be conjured up? It is night; the umbrellas have been painstakingly unscrewed one by one; the large aluminum screen frames, projectors, cables, tables, and three hundred plastic chairs have been lugged down the meandering path of stairs leading to the dock. The wind is acting up, with five beaufort gusts. All hands are on deck for the projection of Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*, shown on a 16mm copy stamped with fuzzy yellow Greek subtitles. The projector whirs on, its sound mingling with the lapping waves. Halfway through the film, Fitzcarraldo himself directs the manpower of indigenous natives to pull his three-deck steamship over a muddy hillside to reach an adjacent river, in desperate search of a rubber fortune. Just then the lush green Amazonian forest lights up with an apparition: St. Nicholas Church, located high above Asteria, is flooded with light, superimposed over the celluloid jungle. The bell strikes on the hour, a repeated chime blending with the sounds of Enrico Caruso's operatic overtures.

Future or Past

This third edition of the festival coincided with the July 2015 referendum, in which Greek citizens voted on whether they should accept the bailout conditions proposed by the European Union to solve the country's government debt crisis. Following the announcement of the referendum, capital controls are put in place, and we are left to put on a festival with a miniscule ATM withdrawal limit. The festival audience scrolls through their phones in search of the latest updates, ducks into cafes to watch the evening news broadcast, and marvels at the lines around the block of people waiting to gain entry to banks. We are watching the film *Portrait of Greece* directed by André Sauvage, screened at a church courtyard in a verdant gorge above the Catholic settlement of Ano Syros. The church, Agios Athanasios, is located above a whitewashed semicircle of stone pavement shaded by the foliage of a massive old oak tree. In the film, Sauvage makes his way through the Greek islands by sailboat, documenting a country at the threshold of modernization in the 1920s. His camera captures a singular portrait of the Cyclades islands, dwelling on their archaeological sites, fishing villages, country roads, farmers, and monks. The barren, undeveloped landscapes and hardened faces are rendered in crisp black and white images. That evening at the Agios Athanasios courtyard, a filmmaker at the screening wryly remarks: does the film represent a sneak preview of the future or a snapshot of the past?

Cinematic Experiences

Another question that motivated us to explore dozens of screening locations over the years, spanning the gamut from film screenings to cinematic experiences, expanded cinema and performance, was: how to never settle into projecting in the same places in the same way? In 2017 we assembled an event inspired by the traditional *gamelan* performances of Indonesia, wherein villagers leave their town at night and head into the forest to immerse themselves in a combination of music, shadow-play, and dance, allowing a jumble of sounds and sights to enter into their dreams and sleeping moments. Borrowing from the aesthetics and concepts of these events, *Gamelan Oneirum* was a night of immersive cinema performances, seeking to transpose this play of light, shadow, space, and exploded time into the realm of the moving image. In an event highlight, Cypriot musician Andys Skordis conducted an ensemble of Javanese gamelan, flute, and percussion instruments in a symphony he composed to accompany a selection of short films. The gamelan set, on loan from the Indonesian Ambassador's personal collection in Greece, was played by students of the Syros Contemporary Music School (CMS). Dug into the bedrock of the island's former quarry, these performances discarded the traditional film experience in favor

of an orchestra of moving images, sound, dance, and shadow, scattered through space, flitting across the stone walls.

Natural Phenomena

The wind's humors dictate the rhythms of so many activities in the Cyclades, including one's own arrival or departure from the island, permissible only under favorable weather conditions. Yet for all the times the excessively gusty conditions of the summer *meltemi* winds has made the festival's screenings precarious or even canceled them, it has also animated and magnified them, rippling the screen into waves of image. The day starts in trepidation or, depending on how bad the forecast is, anguish. "*Will we be able to carry it off?*" becomes a daily refrain. Once, the screen snapped mid-film, a premature end, some kind of unintentional curatorial edit, the film forevermore known to its audience in unfinished form. But most times the show goes on, and we gather in another experience of communal viewing, adding a notch to the film's public existence. In 2018, perched above the village of Ano Syros in an amphitheater that functions as a makeshift parking lot throughout the year, we saw Alfred Hitchcock's face billow and shift to the rhythms of the meltemi in Johan Grimonprez's *Double Take*. Except for brief moments of absolute stillness, the wind nearly always picks up enough at one point in a program's duration to activate the screen in a different register. It shakes the film's box frame, recalling the audience to their bodies and physical senses other than sight, stirring them back and forth between the dream of the movie and the process of watching, winding these two experiences into a temporary third sight.

Incomplete Projects

Across from the harbor of Hermoupolis, a tiny, unassuming island colloquially known as Faros is home to a lighthouse, one of the first of its kind in modern Greece. It is uninhabited, and rumor has it that it is overpopulated by snakes. In the hazy uncertain summer of 2015, we invited Peter Greenaway to perform a live VJ show on the lighthouse island, based on his pre-existing multimedia project *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*. Just a week away from the event, with preparations fully underway, Greenaway canceled due to an ongoing commitment with a film on sculptor Constantin Brâncusi, which followed the young artist's 18-month trek from Bucharest to Paris to reach the metropolis of world culture. And so we were left with a screening of his most recently finished film, *Eisenstein in Guanajuato*, without the director himself in attendance. For each completed screening, how many projects and ideas have been left unfinished? The uncertainty of organizing this event was compounded that evening at the screening, when a windy gust blew the bottom half of the screen off its frame. The technical team paused the projection on

a particularly intimate moment, which caught the great Russian filmmaker in the midst of a sexual act. The audience was left to ponder the meaning of this interruption, with no director to provide the answers.

Revivals

In the lumbering stop-and-go summer of 2020, haunted by the still-fresh specter of COVID-19 pandemic, we took a moment to reflect on the drastic changes to cinema-going. Theaters had been closed since the beginning of the pandemic, gathering viewers instead around their individual screens. Our way of countering this was to hearken back to the cinematic medium in the first years of its inception: an ephemeral amusement immersed in public space, similar to arcade games or street performance. Commemorating the first film screenings on the island of Syros in August 1900 – only the second series of film screenings to ever take place in what was considered to be Greek territory back then –, we screened a selection of the originally shown films precisely one hundred and twenty years later, each of them barely a minute in duration and produced by the Edison Studios company. The site was the Nisaki Theater, a legendary and long-gone summer venue located at the end of Hermoupolis' main promenade, which had initially hosted this pioneering film projection. How could we revive this specific event, transposing these films into the present in a metaphysical twinning of time and space? And so these early films – presenting small sketches of a couple kissing, a shocked spectator attacking a screen at the unfamiliar sight of a moving image, or a sudden sneeze – were presented outdoors on a loop, inviting today's visitors to similarly perceive cinema beyond their private screens as a communal and synaesthetic process, and to consider the transient nature of film in relation to the fragile qualities of the present.

Chance

It's 2016 and we're at an open field in Posidonia, a seaside town on the island's southwestern side also known by the name of Della Grazia. The field is property of the Catholic Diocese of Syros, which owns it along with an adjoining stately mansion. Two goalposts sit on either end of the rectangular space, neglected amidst the growing weeds and plants. Passing the field one day, it struck us as the perfect setting for a drive-in cinema, that staple tradition of film culture of the 20th century. And so, at this first drive-in cinema to land in the Cyclades for quite some time – indeed, perhaps the first time – we sit under the August sky. The vehicles represent a panorama of island life, and a distinctly summery spirit: an open-top beach buggy, a farming tractor, a beat up family sedan, a jeep filled with surfboards. The program of the evening is a double bill. First

up, Stanley Kubrick's *Space Odyssey: 2001*, paired with James Whitney's *Lapis*, a work of abstract cinema and Péter Lichter's *Non-Places: Beyond the Infinite*, a reinterpretation of Kubrick by way of Hungarian highway rest areas. Shortly after the film's opening sequence, the spacecraft, astronauts, and Hal 9000 are in flight away from Earth. A space enthusiast in the audience has realized a canny coincidence: the International Space Station, in orbit over the earth, is about to pass Greece. And so we are treated to a double spectacle, as the space station traces its blinking arc through the sky the very same moment astronaut Floyd speeds through space in the Orion III. Can chance create more interesting connections than the scheduled programming?

Metaphysics of Space

A double bill from 2014: *Villar's Adventures* and *The Magician of Athens*. Silent films, from 1924 and 1931 respectively. The first is the earliest Greek fiction film salvaged in its entirety, which follows the exploits of a famed popular comedian of the era who seeks to win over a young lady's heart, touring the Odeon of Herodes Atticus and dancing to Dixieland in a dusty and undeveloped Faliro neighborhood in Athens. The latter, a feature-length sepia-colored tale, tells the story of a musician-magician of noble heritage who seeks to win over the hearts of women through his overtures. Each time we decide to include a film in our programming, the next question that follows is where to screen it. How to best pair a film with the ambiance of the space it will be hosted in? Over the years, different locations on the island have acquired specific resonances. In Tarsanas, we have come to show experimental short film programs and live scores, as well as highly site-specific works related to the location's boatbuilding activity; at the Della Grazia Drive-In we have gravitated towards the golden age of Hollywood and world cinema, in a nod to the heyday of drive-in cinemas themselves. And so for this double bill, we settled on a location that somehow reflected the essence of the early 20th century, and the theatricality of silent film. The Apollon Theater in Hermoupolis, said to be a scale replica of La Scala in Milan, served as a suitably regal backdrop, the flickering images scored by Brazilian pianist Fabio Luz in a medley of late 19th-century composers from Europe and Latin America.

Insular Temporalities

The festival is simultaneously embedded into and in contradistinction to island time. Each festival day is organized around the sunset, that breaking point into darkness, and the prerequisite for the projection of a filmic image in an outdoor location. How can we adapt our needs to the particularities of this insular temporality? Local custom and municipal code dictates the opening

times of shops and services essential to the festival's production. Unaware of the pace of festival production and the specific needs a filmmaker or musician scheduled for an event that evening might have, the shop selling a desperately needed provision will only open later in the day, after an appropriately timed afternoon siesta hour. In the summer of 2017, we had invited musician Yves Tumor to compose and perform a live score to the Japanese silent classic *A Page of Madness* from 1926, by Teinosuke Kinugasa. His performance rider, along with a list of technical needs, included requests for various items needed for the performance at the Quarry: a pair of black socks, a bottle of Hennessy, some rose water, and a pack of Marlboro light cigarettes, among other things. In a race against time, we sourced things from shops at the last minute. The rose water remained elusive.

Third Landscapes

It is 2018, and director Miguel Gomes is invited as an artist-in-focus. We discuss programming ideas for his carte blanche at length and settle on Manoel de Oliveira's sophomore feature, *Rite of Spring*. As it recounts the annual Passion Play of a small Portuguese village, both medieval and modern, it dissolves the frontiers between reality and myth, passing from pure documentary record to the glorious artifice of spectacle. This artifice, albeit on a different scale and continent, is evident also in Kevin B. Lee's *Transformers: The Premake*, a quintessential desktop film in which 355 YouTube videos are transformed into a critical investigation of the global big budget film industry, amateur video making, and the political economy of images. Both films sit next to one another uneasily in the reverberant darkness of the Quarry, uniting Oliveira's Portuguese back-country and the vast avenues of Los Angeles, swarmed with Michael Bay's robotic creations. What third landscape can be created when combining different worlds, temporalities, and spaces into particular locations and moments in time?

Jacob Moe and Cassandra Celestin are the founders of the Syros International Film Festival. Aaron Khandros contributed to Festival programming between 2014-2022.