

Inventing a People: *Laboratory Athens* and Minor Cinema

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ABSTRACT

Modern political cinema, claims Gilles Deleuze, can no longer presuppose the existence of a “people” or give utterance to its struggle, but has to invent that people through the fabrication of peripheral, collective, or “minor” images. Laboratory Athens/LabA,¹ a non-commercial initiative for the production of small gauge films, founded 2008 in Athens by the curators and filmmakers Vassily Bourikas & Yannis Yaxas, might be considered as the site of such an invention: its workshops, screenings and gatherings of filmmakers constitute not only an alternative practice outside major film industries; they also act on a dominant socio-political discourse that generated Greek and European austerity policies. At the same time, however, LabA’s political impact seems attenuated by some of its own traits (a certain withdrawnness of its ephemeral events, or the ‘nostalgic’ aura of Super 8 or 16mm footage). Thus, with a view to several formative activities and outstanding short films of LabA, the paper locates its ‘image politics’ in the interstice or field of tension between the transfer of technical knowledge and latent aesthetics of experimental cinema, the creation of collectives and sense of esoterism, the involvement in topical issues of (Greek) society and use of obsolete or ‘retro’ media.

KEYWORDS

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film activism

LabA

minor cinema

retro aesthetics

small gauge film

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1. MOVING IMAGES

That electric spirit and exuberant practice of the *avant-garde* – merging all possible apparatuses (camera & dynamo & steam engine) to multiply their speeds, rush ahead of the present and invent a new society; Dziga Vertov shooting film during the journeys of his *Agit-train*, improvising screenings at every station and dreaming of mobile film laboratories;² or Aleksandr Medvedkin's *Kinopoezd*, a train equipped with darkroom, cutting room, projection room and sleeping berths for fifty-nine political “enthusiasts and romantics” (Betz, Taylor, Walsh 1991: 169) – this spirit also pervades the ‘founding narrative’ of *LabA/Laboratory Athens*:

In 2009, Vassily Bourikas and Yannis Yaxas travel by train through the Balkans to propagate their independent substandard film initiative *LabA*. Accompanied by several fellow campaigners, they record the trip on Super 8, day by day developing the footage in their compartment and presenting it to “unusual audiences in odd places and with increasing projection time” (*Gran Lux* 2012: 28; my translation). Some segments of this impromptu travel log, shot between Sarajevo and Budapest, edited in-camera and copied to 16mm film, later become the seven-minute short *The Green Sheep*: it shows the sunlit aisle and compartments, boxes of lab equipment, hazy vistas rolling past, or a girl with a blue plastic bucket in the train lavatory, or a close-up of the cookware used for heating the chemicals, or two members with surgical masks filling developer like liquid amber into the Lomo tank under a wide open window, behind it the railway embankment, yellow fields, a black streak of forest, or a flimsy curtain of film strips hanging from the baggage rack above the seats, or patches of grainy azure, or reflections of the restless landscape flickering over the glass panes ...



The Green Sheep (excerpt): <http://www.filmlabs.org/films/introreq.swf>

² See Heftberger 2015: “[Vertov’s] idea of shooting and showing film was intrinsically connected with speed and movement, but also to working with limited possibilities.” See also Tode 2008.

With this, *The Green Sheep* comes as close as possible to the paradox of recording its own origination. The film is the result of the same improvisation skills that are chronicled by it and find their expression in its offhand, unadorned form. In fact, it could be this very film which is exposed, rinsed and dried there on the screen. By presenting its own production process, *The Green Sheep* is at least three things: the trans-border introduction, documentation, and outcome of the specific practice of *LabA* – resembling those images of a train that Vertov shoots on a train and then delivers by train to one Soviet provincial station after another (Petrić 1987: 232). However, while *LabA* might seem to revive the methods, mobility and “potential for change ushered by the Avant-Gardes” (Mamula 2013), the lighthearted substandard film experiment *The Green Sheep* hardly shares Vertov’s socialist zeal or Medvedkin’s staunch propagandistic aims; it rather exhibits a spontaneous, roughly sketched and almost ‘artless’ political practice that does not conform to classical *avant-garde*, but, according to curator and filmmaker Vassily Bourikas, to an instrument-based activism or the partisan image production of marginal European film cultures like the Yugoslav Black Wave (Bourikas 2016b).

Invoking Russian formalism, modernist *avant-gardes* or the largely fossilized tradition of ‘experimental’ cinema may therefore burden *Laboratory Athens* with an all too heavy historical weight and also divert attention from the crucial – technique and craftsmanship – to the supposedly irrelevant issue, continually spurned by *LabA*, of a resistant *aesthetics*. Yet at the same time, a certain ‘look’ or appearance, a family resemblance with experimental film keeps haunting these images. Despite all diverging claims, intentions or lineages,³ this affinity might be caused by common material circumstances (the film footage itself, its particular tone and graininess, in-camera editing, a commitment to formal as well as technical ‘presence’). Or perhaps it is the visual residue of a long-canonized experimental style whose heritage remains hard to reject. After all, *LabA* and many similar projects⁴ hark back to film workshops of the 1990s, which in turn “lead us to the ‘underground’ laboratories of the 1970s: Jonas Mekas and the Anthology Film Archives in New York, Guy Sherwin and the London Film-Maker’s Co-op, Werner Nekes and the Film Coop in Hamburg” (Grèzes, Lurz, Schlag 2012: 7). Therefore, how could *LabA*’s images not secretly remember this underground and store it in the latent memory of their forms and rhythms? Experimental cinema, seldom surfacing but forever present in contemporary film lab practices, seems a tenacious pictorial and cultural vestige

³ The distance to experimental cinema is a *topos* in all of *LabA*’s self-descriptions: “*LabA* [puts] emphasis on a solid theoretical basis, but without trying to exaggerate the importance of the experimental film” (‘*LabA*: Eclipse’ 2016). The participants are “not aligned to specific film traditions or artistic doctrines. [We] do not try to disseminate and endorse styles, theories and approaches of what was and is still understood and marketed under the general description of Experimental Cinema” (Bourikas 2016a).

⁴ Such as “filmkoop wien, LaborBerlin, Tree LAB Vilnius, [...] MAAC-Le Labo Bruxelles” (Grèzes, Lurz, Schlag 2012: 7).

“in the shadows of consciousness”; and *LabA* would be both its contestation and continuation, or what Aleida Assmann calls a complex of “keeping-forgetting” [*Verwahrensvergessen*].⁵ This would allow many imaging modes and discursive operations of the *avant-garde* to persist – in *LabA*’s occasional programmatic statements and references to ‘partisan cinema’, in the vague *esprit de corps* of its gatherings, or in the renunciation of established art: “[Developing] celluloid on a train and projecting in a station [acts] as a manifesto: no place is needed to make and show films, thus opposing a logic of constant de-territorialization to the territorialization of the art market and its spaces” (Mamula 2013).

2. EX VOTO: A POLITICS OF ASSEMBLY

While *The Green Sheep* can be seen as *LabA*’s international charter and sometimes opens its screenings of short films, the initiative forms already in August 2008 – some months before the founders’ journey through southeastern Europe, in the same year that sees the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers and kicks off the government debt crisis as prelude to the recession in Greece. Whether causal or by coincidence, these political factors inscribe themselves in the project’s beginnings, the question of the economic existence of images and the conditions of their production, of the communal and collaborative value of cinema, of ‘How to work together’ which inevitably leads over to ‘How to live together’.

Since year one of the Greek *argyrocracy*, *Laboratory Athens* provides a basis for the acquisition of technical knowledge and the invention of variable connections or ‘minor’ publics in a cultural as well as political border zone. It commences as a “self-help project” for local film artists (*LabA: Eclipse* 2016), “an attempt to prove that do-it-yourself cinema is possible everywhere, without requiring special conditions or localities. Films are shot, developed and watched on the move: in apartments, hotel rooms, trains, boats, in the mountains or by the sea” (*Gran Lux* 2012: 15-16). This do-it-yourself ethics, enabling every professional or amateur to process and project film with the most limited equipment, is complemented by a pronounced element of ‘do-it-with-others’: not only does the Greek venture consider itself a model case for neighboring countries, a prototype of solidarity outside the industrialized infrastructure, commercial production methods and expensive laboratories of Northern and Western Europe. It also conveys knowledge about the handling of Super 8 and 16mm formats in small community workshops without charge. Such group events may evoke what John Hartley – not without a certain utopian ardor – describes as

⁵ On remembering cultural forms through (incomplete or ‘conservative’) forgetting, see Assmann 1999: 161).

do-it-yourself citizenship”, a self-organized and ludic association of countercultural media users: “DIY/DIWO citizenship is [...] driven by voluntarist choices and affiliations, but at the same time it has an activist and communitarian ethic, where ‘knowledge shared is knowledge gained.’ It is a ‘connect-collaborate-create’ model of ‘contributory’ citizenship or ‘conversational democracy’ [...] with gift-economy characteristics.” (Hartley 2012: 16)⁶

In this sense, the temporary encounters of filmmakers link practical productivity to an increase of knowledge and the individual to a community – for instance at the *Hand Over Cinema* project in Athens in 2011 (in cooperation with *LaborBerlin e.V.* and funded by the *Goethe Institut* Athens), at meetings in the backroom of the 30th *Alternative Film/Video Festival* in Belgrade in 2012 (Mamula 2013) ...

Or on the Greek island of Tinos in the summer of 2013. When Eastman Kodak announces to discontinue the production of its *Ektachrome 100D* color reversal film, *LabA* invites amateurs from twelve different countries to the Aegean for a unique funeral ceremony. While Tinos – where the Virgin Mary is said to have indicated the hiding place of a miracle-working icon to the nun Pelagia in 1823 – is the annual destination for thousands of pilgrims who put up small metal plates, the so called *tamata*, as votive offerings on the walls of the basilica, it now becomes the scene of a quite different image ritual. Under the slogan ‘Ex Voto’, its aim is to expose all remaining Super 8 cartridges from the stock of *LabA*, shoot the city of Tinos, whitewashed streets, inhabitants, rock and waves, develop the footage by hand and project it publicly – maybe onto a wall in the same alley that appears in the film itself.⁷ This “funeral for Ektachrome’s colour reversal film in the form of a gathering of kindred souls” (‘Ex Voto’ 2013) not only brings forth a number of small gauge *tamata*, devotional pieces of celluloid and silver emulsion. It also follows *LabA*’s vocation to create ever-changing, heterarchical assemblages – when citizens of Tinos gather in front of the camera, when participants from all over the world collaborate in processing film at the kitchen table, when people meet at night on a remote beach to watch these images – on a screen anchored in the water near the shoreline – and stay even after the last one has flickered out, well into the early morning hours.

⁶ On the relation between do-it-yourself and do-it-with-others with regard to documentary film making, see also Rose 2014.

⁷ The ten-day initiative is documented in the ‘making of’ video *TinosTamaToom* by Nicolai Gütermann and “20 other persons” (‘LabA: Eclipse’ 2016).



Screening of the short film *Thasos* by Takis Kanelopoulos, August 13, 2013: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqGluZrCnKk>

This demonstrates how *LabA*'s use of a minor medium generates mobile publics and dissolves the boundaries between filmmaker and spectator. While the image production is put into the hands of the individual, that person stands in the midst of others and in close exchange with the audience.⁸

Yet, John Hartley's praise of 'do-it-yourself citizenship' exhibits a micro-political romanticism that might also disguise an unvoiced skepticism. His statement appears too fraught with catchwords of equality (*voluntarist affiliations, communitarian ethic, 'connect-collaborate-create' model, conversational democracy, gift-economy*), its rhetoric is too laborious – and similarly, the picture of *LabA*'s nighttime gatherings on a Greek island is perhaps too seductive – to effectively coalesce with actuality. In fact, neither that summer commune of film enthusiasts nor *LabA*'s wider international collaborations seem to succeed in keeping their metastable collectives alive beyond a limited time span; all the workshops can hardly establish substandard film as a practicable medium or initiate a lasting exchange between participants so that, already since 2012, *LabA* reduces its range of activities and returns to accompanying only one selected project at a time, sifting requests from various countries, transporting boxes of equipment and positive film, developing film in private bathrooms – on the only condition that expenditures and technical support are compensated for by crediting *LabA* as co-producer. But even these bilateral collaborations

⁸ T. Mamula describes how “the audience [in Belgrade, 2013] was asked to hold meters of reel, still in the process of drying, before it was projected.” This suggests a use of the medium which is open to “multiple productions of a community, without the need of traditional mediations. Also, against the division of labor implied by the output of a conventional filmic event, *LabA*'s workshop and screening managed to articulate a more horizontal model” (Mamula 2013).

occasionally wear out in disenchantment or withheld acknowledgement, until the founders recur to their initial concept of working with acquaintances and friends in Greece. From loose communities – on islands, in vacated factory halls, in the backstage areas of festivals – everything seems to shift towards a circle of people who know (and have already known) each other, who share a language, environment and technique, who are friends rather than allies – as if only the close and familiar and local could stand, that which never exposes itself completely to the boundless disseminations of economic power or transnational policies ... However, it is precisely the diffuse impact of ‘crisis’ which then puts an end to the original *LabA*. When the Tsipras administration decides to exercise fiscal law without audit of the respective body, a tax liability of 2.000 Euros is determined for the non-commercial film initiative so that, in 2016, it is coerced to relocate: *LabA* in Athens becomes *Là-bas* in Paris.⁹

3. RESIDUUM: A POLITICS OF APPROPRIATION

Apart from, or even ‘before’ the gathering of filmmakers, Vassily Bourikas and Yannis Yaxas consider small gauge itself a medium of political invention (‘medium’ indicating, in this case, the substandard format as a specific “*gestalt* item” and set of components – footage, camera, editing tool, projector – that ensure its survival and are indispensable “to conjure the *geist* of the machine at full strength” [Thomas 2009]). The dark background of any politics of substandard filmmaking would be a fully capitalized production system that exhausts itself in ideological redundancy and technical innovation. By introducing ever-new imaging devices, it creates an extremely thin wave ridge of latest novelties and behind it a long trail of outdated technologies. But what this film industry discards in the course of its progress can then be abstracted by small initiatives or semi-public ‘laboratories’ and reinvented as *something else*.¹⁰ Their subversive potential consists in the appropriation, preservation and demystification of tools and skills which – while being encircled by commercial cinema and an entirely digitalized sphere of private images – permit a both affordable and ecological use of analogue film (Bourikas 2016a). Taking possession of an obsolete small gauge format and placing it at everyone’s

⁹ While the project now officially resides in France – with Vassily Bourikas’s friend and collaborator Theo Deliyannis – most of *Là-bas*’ film work continues in Greece where a fully equipped studio with four darkrooms is available (Bourikas 2016b).

¹⁰ See Thomas 2009: “[The] amateur film gauges’ contemporary survival and significance is as *something else*. [...] When the large scale consumption that had supported Super 8’s manufacture dropped away, it revealed the set of much smaller, apparently non-transferable uses that would determine whether and as what Super 8 survived. Consequently, though Super 8 has been superseded many times over as a home movie format, it is not obsolete today as an art medium, a professional format used in the commercial industry, or as an alternative to digital video and 16mm for low budget independent production. In other words, everything it was never intended to be.”

disposal claims to be no mere nostalgic counterproject to the dominance of ‘new media’, but a critical act of self-empowerment. It makes a form of expression accessible “that no longer submits to the pressures of commercial industries. Outside of technological dependency, one discovers that analogue cinema is a free and openly available practice” (Grèzes, Lurz, Schlag 2012: 7). What is more, the position at the margins of a sprawling dominion of exclusively digital consumer images allows to inspect that sphere, its conditions and conditionalities: by observing from the technological, discursive or geographical periphery, one can survey the spaces between the creation of the new and the reconfiguration of the old, between accumulating and accommodating – an intermediate zone which, according to Charles Acland, also contains views to deeper cultural, social, and political shifts (Acland 2006: xv). Indeed (states Acland, quoting his guarantor in cultural theory, Raymond Williams), everything which is supposedly obsolete but still active in a culture inevitably develops a force of resistance:

The residual formations’ distance from the dominant, however razor thin at times, is the source of its oppositional potential, if only “because they represent areas of human experience, aspiration, and achievement which the dominant culture neglects, undervalues, opposes, represses, or even cannot recognize.” [...] In this relationship between the old and the new, the edges of class formation and class consciousness are made visible. (ibid: xxi)

This means critique in a strict (and leftist) sense: cellulose acetate footage and small gauge format mark not only an aesthetic difference to the contemporary big screen but a diverging viewpoint that provides insight into the general economy and politics of film.

However, Acland has also some reservations regarding his own proposition. On the one hand, the leftovers of the market, when saved from the ash heap of capitalism, appear as a material reservoir for new artefacts or narratives; and in keeping with Walter Benjamin, this ‘erstwhileness’ of the commodity as memory trace holds a revolutionary potential. On the other hand, the appropriation of abandoned technologies, like small gauge film, often feeds popular fringe cultures and the peculiar contentment of nerdism: “[The] discarded object carries a semiotic richness ripe for appropriation [...] in which the low-tech clunkiness of vintage forms like filmstrips and educational films achieves an unexpected fan status” (ibid: xvii). Suddenly, the obsolete is neither trash nor an instrument of resistance but a highly valued sensual and auratic cult object. Should one therefore not assume that this quaint pleasure of the analogue also affects *LabA*? (And would it not be the emphasis on analogue film – surviving only as scarce remainders, expensive import article or rare custom-made product – which threatens to turn *LabA* into an exclusive and self-

contained project for insiders?¹¹) In any case, it is hard to overlook the sense of 'fandom' and idealization of the obsolete in films like *Circling the Square* (*Κυκλώνοντας το Τετράγωνο*), an impetuous Super 8 improvisation about the civil commotions on Syntagma Square, shot 2011 by Alexandros Kontos, aka 'Zanmanfu', that takes the viewer among protesters and policemen in riot gear. One certainly has to concede an element of irony when the film matches the austerity protests in Athens with Louis Armstrong's mawkish evergreen *What a Wonderful World* (even if that song has its origin in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam movement of the late 1960s).¹² Meanwhile, its recourse to the grainy texture, warm hues and vintage spirit of the small gauge repudiates all calculated irony and creates a subdued feel of reminiscing bygone popular and political cultures.



Circling the Square: <https://vimeo.com/31599646>

¹¹ T. Mamula notes that "celluloid in the art world equates rarity of a medium with an economy based on the production of unique or serial commodities". Against this background, *LabA* cannot deny the "increasing difficulty of working with actual film" (Mamula 2013).

¹² Even the transition to Joey Ramone's more aggressive cover version cannot counter the film's overall 'wistful' mood since by now, the rebellious stance of punk rock is equally enshrouded by nostalgia.

In fact, *Circling the Square* reveals how Super 8, like 16mm film, can have the latent effect of evoking not only a concrete historical moment but Fredric Jameson's notion of a both timeless and untimely 'pastness', "what the French call *la mode retro*" (Jameson 1991: 18-19). The coarseness of the substandard emulsion, its particular coloring, scratches and dust partake in the uncanny and essentially late capitalist substitution of history through its mere connotations (this might be another reason for Bourikas's insistence on a perfect developing process: to free Super 8 from its vintage look and bring it closer to the definition and richness of a cinematic image [Bourikas 2016b]¹³). The *LabA* project is thus traversed by a paradox. Its obsolete film formats imply a vague and perhaps always already commercialized pastness – a pastness which then has to be reconciled with *LabA*'s critical and decidedly topical image politics to vouch for a successful escape from the commodification and exploitation cycles of contemporary visual culture. *Retro*, however, would achieve exactly this: it "elevates to the status of custom the commodities of early mass production [...]" and it does so by imbuing them with artisanal qualities, so that, in a strange historical inversion, the first industrial assembly lines come to seem the very emblem of craftsmanship" (Thorne 2003:103). In this manner, mass-manufactured *Ektachrome* is reconceptualized as hand-processed, hand-dried, hand-edited to become a materially and socially 'authentic' artefact.

4. LAYERING: DISSENSUS AND THE SENSES

But inasmuch as *retro* is a discursive effect, its transformations of consumer products into auratic workpieces are easily reversed to fuel the sphere of mass production: downloadable vintage filters, the simulated grain of digital photographs, a flickering tinge of red in TV ads, trembling frame lines in HD videos – all the insignia of the aging, marginal, material, or experimental contribute to the stylistic repertoire of commercial imagery (Acland 2006: xviii).¹⁴ Therefore, since any obsolete medium, vanguard form, or dissensual

¹³ This literally goes against the grain of what most advocates of hand-processed Super 8 consider its essence: it is "not for those who prefer a film surface with a smooth, polished complexion. Instead, oozing mounds of crusty chemical infections will bleach, bleed and belch all over your perfect Kodak moments" (Rosenthal 1998, 93).

¹⁴ Considering the immense gravitational pull of post-industrial capitalism, it seems impossible to save any meaningful image strategy from its commercial utilization. This, however, is the goal of *Keep On Walking Greece*, a 're-appropriation' of a TV ad for Johnnie Walker (*Keep Walking Greece*, PR agency *The Newtons Laboratory*, first broadcast: Dec. 2011). Staging the gathering of young people in the streets of Athens in an "unconventional, documentary-style advertising approach" ('Keep Walking Greece' 2012), the original commercial converts the visual inventory of the Greek recession and occupation of public spaces into professional advertising aesthetics. In order to re-politicize its images, 'Anonymous Non Alcoholics' then hijacks the promotional video as a 'readymade' for Vassily Bourikas to integrate it in his short film program "The Shit and the Fan", for instance at the 7. *Underdox* Film Festival for "Document and Experiment" in Munich in 2012 (Bourikas 2012b).

politics is eventually assimilated by the market, what could an alternative or 'resistant' image be? How could it preserve its difference, if only for a brief moment? How could the *LabA* films display a *dissensus of the small gauge* which maybe comes close to that of a pauperized people?

A possible tactics might be to constantly invent new images (that are not always discernible as gestures of political objection), for instance during *Hand Over Cinema Athens 2011*,¹⁵ a seven-day meeting of Greek, German, Egyptian, Serbian, and US-American filmmakers who shoot the city in the aftermath of enraged uprisings against the austerity policies of government, European Union and International Monetary Fund, producing nineteen short films, some of which belong to the core repertoire of *LabA* screenings until today. Since the protesting students, unionists and citizens have left Syntagma Square a few months earlier, many of the films are concerned with the physical and mental sediments in the (sub)urban landscape that happen to show some residue or imprint of 'crisis' – Natasa Efstathiadi's *Diving Film*, a sunlit study of bathers jumping into the sea of Vouliagmeni, answering to the country's economic plunge with carefree moments of free fall in slow motion; or Nikolas Strouggof's untitled three-minute survey of inscriptions, street signs, logos, graffiti in the center of Athens that he collects on a single afternoon with a single Super 8 cartridge (Bourikas 2012b); or Guillaume Cailleau and Ben Russel's kaleidoscopic *Austerity Measures*.



Austerity Measures: <https://vimeo.com/32502282>

¹⁵ *Hand Over Cinema Athens 2011* (September 07-13, 2011) took place as a collaboration of *LabA* and *LaborBerlin e.V.*, and was funded by the *Goethe Institut Athens*: <https://laborberlin.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/flyerhoc.pdf>.

Its opening sequence of the distant Acropolis is followed by a series of spectral, iridescent views of Exarchia, the neighborhood between Polytechnic University, Lycabettus Hill and Parliament, “a place thick with stray cats and scooters, cops and molotovs, ancient myths and new ruins; where fists are raised like so many columns in the parthenon” (Berlinale Forum Expanded 2012). Photographed through a red, green, blue filter and rewound each time, every triple-exposed shot piles the colors of streets and faces on top of each other – a palimpsest with flickering contours, due to the layers’ slight misalignment. Placarded walls and luminous shadows of trees, a young woman’s semi-transparent portrait, banners, pigeons, rows of parked cars, a hand on a marble banister, a clothesline in the wind, faintly gleaming ghosts of pedestrians, spray paintings (star and skull, *ΑΣΤΕΡΑΣ ΕΞΑΡΧΕΙΩΝ*) materialize with a gentle tremor and surrounded by a narrow halo. Color separation and multiple exposure also seem to efface the depth of these images – or rather: they question and negotiate that depth, the images’ strata (and perhaps also the strata of society), the immobility and agitation of stones (and humans), the two-dimensionality of a written slogan (and the three-dimensionality of civic life), the right perspective (and the left; in both the optical and political sense). The plane of the screen and the multiple layers of politics combine in a reversible figure that oscillates between cinematic image and public imaginary. Inasmuch as *Austerity Measures* is a “film of surfaces” (ibid.), it touches these surfaces to feel out the threshold between the sensory and the social. Just like in *Diving Film*, politics thus gains a distinctive visual presence – not as a documentation of repression or resistance, as yet another image of police phalanxes and billows of tear gas, but as a literal *metaphora*, carried over, relocated or transferred to the form of the film: to blissful slow motion or to the complex density of triple exposure.

There are certainly other short films that take on a more straightforwardly engaged attitude (like Zanmanfu’s *Circling the Square*). But regardless of how often they appear in *LabA* screening programs, their activist stance does not necessarily coincide with the initiative’s main agenda: in preference to the mere depiction of a political topic, Vassily Bourikas would doubtlessly champion a politics of the image itself. In this regard, the color separation technique of *Austerity Measures* not only translates the basic material features of a supposedly ‘retro’ medium, the very emulsion of chromatic Super 8 footage, into a unique image texture, and from there into an interrogation of the layers of social and political space. Beyond that, the film devotes itself to what Gilles Deleuze calls the “invention of a people” – and it invents this people precisely by challenging its representability.

5. INVENTING A PEOPLE

“If there were a modern political cinema, it would be on this basis: the people no longer exist, or not yet ... *the people are missing*.” (Deleuze 1989, 216) According to Deleuze, only an earlier or ‘classical’ cinema, from Eisenstein to Ford, is able to

discover a subjected or revolting people in the streets or factories (much like the TV ad for Johnnie Walker, or *Circling the Square* whose 'ethnologic' approach still imagines a great concord and reliable presence of protesters). Here, the people appears as a presupposed reality; it is real even before it is actual, before it is actualized as a political body or film image. In contrast, modern cinema – and especially that of “small nations” or the “third world” – can no longer take a people for granted. Instead of a disenfranchised mass that would have to develop a 'consciousness', it faces a fundamental condition of *minority* that has nothing to do with mere quantities or a lack of power, that knows nothing of being a crowd or class and can never rise to become a new 'proletarian' majority. Acknowledging the failure of old fusions, unifications or political struggle, the minor and its cinema are “created on this fragmentation, this break-up” (ibid: 220). They do not distinguish between private and public; they call for the *invention* of a people; all their utterances are necessarily collective, “like the seeds of the people to come” (ibid: 221).¹⁶

Thus – since one cannot posit the idea of an active gathering of political individuals – the specific 'minor' perspective of *Austerity Measures* would consist in the filmic deconstruction of unity, presence, or being and, at the same time, in the construction of an aesthetic zone where an event or encounter of political elements might occur. The streets of Athens are no stage for protesters, but pure potentiality, a variable space which might receive a still uncertain figure or bring forth an unexpected constellation. Any actual appearance of a people is transformed into a virtual apparition – 'virtual' in the Deleuzian sense of a possibility or generative 'intensity' that moves towards its actualization and the future...

This would in fact answer to Vassily Bourikas's slight discomfort with an overly explicit film image that restricts its own politics to showcasing resistant crowds on Syntagma Square – emphatic enough to highlight *LabA's* political concerns, but all too certain of a people “which is presupposed already there” (ibid: 217) and for that reason cannot be invented by an unpredictable originary act. The 'minor' and its call for invention may also motivate Bourikas's passion for the *practical*, for workshops, manufacture, creation, politics as something which has to be *made*. Rather than producing rough, grainy, experimental images of protest, *LabA* conceives alternative modes of deploying residual media and forging communities; rather than recording the circumstances of Greek political life, it seeks its active modulation (Bourikas 2016b). This even seems to pertain to Bourikas's emphasis on the sheer *number* of projects, to the point that the “production of as many films as possible” (ibid.) would aim for something completely different than mere quantity. Increasing the amount of collaborative work might turn out to be an – at best 'inventive' and at

¹⁶ For a more comprehensive discussion of the concept of 'minority', see Chapter 3 (“What Is a Minor Literature?”) in Deleuze, Guattari 1986: 16-27.

least ‘pragmatic’ – answer to the urgent question of how to live together. After all, the Deleuzian definition of modern political cinema also applies to its production process: it is a matter of the *masses* (Deleuze 1989: 217) “in as much as it brings collective conditions together through itself” (ibid: 222).

In the end, *Laboratory Athens* appears as a purposely and pointedly ambivalent undertaking that keeps calling into question its own claims. It asserts to exclude all issues of style and confine itself to the transfer of technical skills, while at the same time the resulting images carry perceptible traces of experimental or *avant-garde* aesthetics (an impressive example is Theo Deliyannis’s *Eclipse of Useless Light* [Ἐκλειψη ανώφελου φωτός], the first film made under the guidance of *Là-bas*, whose both sensual and surreal landscapes seem to remember Jean Cocteau). It proclaims collective workshops, screenings and congregations of ‘kindred souls’ to be its prime political practice without which even the unique materiality of celluloid would be meaningless (Bourikas 2016b), while at the same time it seems compelled to gradually proceed from assemblages of strangers to a circle of confidants. Its use of obsolete media purports a critical rejection of contemporary consumer culture, while at the same time substandard film resonates with an easily commercialized nostalgia. It does not document or comment on the Greek ‘crisis’,¹⁷ while at the same time many of the screened films point to the effects of economic policy and austerity – from public protests to the ritual defilement of luxury goods.¹⁸ All this reveals *LabA*’s heterogeneous, changeable and freely inconsonant relation to a ‘politics of images’, a deeply critical mistrust of critical unambiguity.

The maxim, then, would be this: to maintain an unsettled, contested political position and to not relinquish the invention of a people to accustomed imaging strategies and notions of ‘unity’ or ‘unanimity’, for there is always a multitude of practices and an infinity of peoples who “should not be united, in order for the problem to change” (Deleuze 1989: 220).

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¹⁷ See Bourikas 2012a: The films “should not necessarily be understood as statements about the current crisis. They are rather a statement of themselves. [...] They originated from the idea of ‘another cinema’ whose development in Greece we all would wish for.”

¹⁸ Theofanis de Lezioso’s 16mm short film *XXXIII* (2012) includes the ‘ceremonial’ pollution of a lipstick, Louis Vuitton handbag, and perfume flacon with various body fluids – “tous les signes extérieurs d’une fausse beauté ou d’une richesse dénuée de fonds. En quelques mots, la Grèce contemporaine” [all the exterior signs of a false beauty or a wealth without substance. In short, contemporary Greece] (‘XXXIII’ 2012).

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