

Archive as Texture:

Postmemory at work in Maria Anastassiou's *Notes: Remembered and Found*

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In her essay “The Generation of Postmemory” literary scholar Marianne Hirsch argues that children of parents who lived through traumatic events such as the Holocaust can have a kind of second-hand recollection of those events, even if they were not alive at the time. She frames “the nonverbal and non-cognitive acts of memory transfer”¹ that occur within families in terms of symptoms. The harrowing psychosocial conditions experienced by parents in the past, for example, break into the family home “in the sounds of nightmares, the idioms of sighs and illness...tears and acute aches”² that are heard, seen, and sensed by their children in the present. For Hirsch, memory is tangible. It is embodied.

Notes: Remembered and Found, the latest short film by Cypriot filmmaker Maria Anastassiou, grapples with the postmemory of displacement, turning its varied, yet distinct, symptomatology into a formal principle of texture. The film is intimately auto-ethnographic. Anastassiou was born to a family of forcibly displaced persons who fled their homes as a result of the 1974 Greek-backed coup d'état and subsequent Turkish invasion that divided the island of Cyprus along ethnic lines, and she draws on an incredible trove of family archives collected and created by her mother and grandmother in the years after the war as the main focus of the film.

Notes: Remembered and Found can be roughly divided into four sections, each homing in on a different kind of material manifestation of memory. The opening section is an exploration of the filmmaker's now deceased grandmother's written notes, describing life before the 1974 war. The second comprises footage recorded by Anastassiou herself in the summer of 2022, while visiting her family's ancestral village in the Mesaoria region of Cyprus to the north of the UN Buffer Zone that divides the island, a region still illegally occupied by the Turkish military. The third section sees Anastassiou filming her mother as she paints a portrait of *her* mother, while the fourth and final section of the film is a meditation on old family photo albums, all of which mix scenes from daily life in the years after 1974 with poignant photos from the refugee camp that housed the family in the months after the war.

Through this archival kaleidoscope, *Notes: Remembered and Found* presents four generations of women—Anastassiou's infant daughter is also present in the film—circling around, approximating, interrupting, and reconfiguring the origin story of the family's displacement. This grappling with the past is both an act of reciting (repeating from memory) and re-siting (resituating) of inherited narratives, the iterations of which constitute the shared vocabulary of a cross-generational language invested in the existentially important goal of mediating and preserving the family's history. The film thus attempts to document the act of archiving; to mediate the act of mediation; but it does so in a way that openly resists the conventional archive's aggressive demand for mystification and the often unbearable weight it places on the shoulders of the postmemory generation.

¹ Hirsch, 112.

² Hoffman, 6, 9.

Anastassiou's choice to document her family archive through film is also a choice to document the archive's movement across time, challenging its authority, its origins, and by extension the kind of knowledge it has hitherto produced. Both etymologies of 'archive'—*arkhē* [αρχή] as both "commencement and commandment"³—are in play here. On the one hand, the archive is traditionally that which arrests time, which stops all motion.⁴ It is that which 'contains' a specific historical period within a delimited space and onto a particular medium. On the other hand, the inventions of photography, film, and the phonograph in the 19th century introduced the concept of an archive *of* motion,⁵ where sound waves and moving images created a paradox out of the archive's very function. The ubiquitous technologies of our contemporary world—the Internet, artificial intelligence, instant communications—further complicate the archive's definitions and functions, decentralizing both the sites of archival storage (through digitization and public accessibility) and the sites and means of its production (we are all constantly documenting and curating our lives), reaffirming Derrida's claim that "archivization produces as much as it records the event."⁶ In other words, "the methods for transmitting information shape the nature of the knowledge that can be produced."⁷ Form and content, surface and interior, are flattened out. The container is as much a source of knowledge as is the contained. The former does not 'block' entry to the latter. It is a portal to it.

The first lines spoken in *Notes: Remembered and Found* are an excellent illustration of the paradox of the archive as stasis vs. the archive as motion, or of a stable vs. an unstable archive. With her camera hovering over her grandmother's notebook in jump cuts that deliberately keep the text mostly out of focus, Anastassiou states: "The date is the 2nd, 3rd of July 2022, in Aglandjia, and I am reading from grandmother's notebook." Claiming the time and place of the announcement, the filmmaker's voice wants to 'fix' the activity of her documenting in time, but both the (moving) image and the content of the text appear to resist that 'fixing', presenting themselves as unstable and indeterminate. Anastassiou ventriloquizes the written memoirs of her grandmother in an act of postmemorial performance, but the entry in grandma's notebook is itself part-postmemory, part-mediated by intergenerational knowledge: "My village. My village is called Prastion Mesaorias because it is situated in the middle of the vast plain of Mesaoria. It got its name either from the word *pnaston* or from the word *proastio* of Sivouri." The beginning or *arkhē* (αρχή) of this archive is an uncertain etymology (*proastio* or *pnaston*?), an example of how the passage of time results in imperfect transfers of meaning, and in ever-widening deviations from the original 'event's' authority. Before we even attempt to resolve the multiplicity of the village's semantic origin, however, Anastassiou's film introduces yet another crucial element of its approach to postmemory: that of intergenerational interruption. The filmmaker stops reading from her grandmother's notebook when her own daughter coos, and the process of reciting the past stops for the sake of attending the present: "Have you woken up, my baby?"

Anastassiou's family archive is extensive. It spans a range of containers and media: boxes of papers, loose letters, diagrams, notebooks, paintings, fragments of texts written on the back of envelopes, photographs, and—most poignantly—tapes: stacks and stacks of cassette

³ Derrida, 1.

⁴ Røssaak, 12.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Derrida, 17.

⁷ Manoff, 12.

tapes featuring interviews that the filmmaker's mother had conducted with her own mother about their village, Prastio, and their forced displacement from it. What is remarkable in *Notes: Remembered and Found*, is that the film shows the expansive breadth of Anastassiou's family archive, but it does not reveal its content *in depth*. What I mean by this is that the film does not give into the impulse of *excavating* the family's story of displacement and its legacies in a way that makes it entirely, and full-frontally, available for the audience. It does not prioritize a conventional narrative mode of bringing the 'innermost' workings of a collective or individual psyche out in the open. Instead, it *displays* the archive, in the sense that it unravels its content like a neatly-packed piece of fabric reserved for special occasions that is unfolded and carefully smoothed out on the table for family and guests to see. The film treats the archive as texture, the backdrop of the family's intergenerational relationships and its surface; a material to be handled, recited, thumbed through and even re-produced, making it an active part of the family's life as an exteriority.

Textures abound in this work. The film does not historicize or contextualize, and there are no metaphorical or literal establishing shots. We are constantly close to the surface of texts, close enough to see that the handwriting in most of them uses the polytonic system of Greek, which was replaced by a monotonic system in the 1980s. When we finally leave the surface of documents, photographs, and tape cassettes, we come close to another surface: that of the walls and floors of an abandoned building, which is actually the now-dilapidated church of the filmmaker's ancestral village, Prastio, in the occupied north of Cyprus. We are so close to the surface that we almost feel our skin scrape on the rough sandstone of the walls. This is decidedly deliberate: the film demands of the viewer to leave aside their analytical lens and to engage with the past as texture, and with texture as a valid form of knowledge produced and attained by the film medium. The film's music is equally remarkable for the way it calls attention to itself and its constituent parts. Created by French composer and cellist Brice Catherine and featuring a performance by clarinetist George Georgiou, the film's soundtrack involves organic sounds and folk Cypriot musical elements, but they are persistently distorted. Any lyrical sequences are duly interrupted by a grinding, abrasive screech that gives the impression of a playback device glitching, getting stuck; of a memory remembered but distorted, of a process gone awry.

It's easy to see how the family archive that Anastassiou has at her disposal could've been used towards creating another type of film, one that would prioritize seeking out depth over handling the surface. The most obvious choice would've been a testimonial type of non-fiction film; a 'documentary' that would give the viewer all—or most—of the content of the tapes, the diaries, the notes, complemented by extensive talking-heads-style interviews with family members. Such a film could have leaned heavily on the tropes that dominate media representations of Cyprus, such as an insistence on framing the complex history of the island in terms of an overly facile division or 'clash of civilizations' narrative (East vs. West; Greek vs. Turk; Europe vs. 'Orient')⁸, or leaning on the sentimental potential of stories of displacement and war and their melodramatic applications, including visual tropes such as close-up portraiture or images and/or audio recordings of explicit suffering, staples of disaster pornography.

⁸ See Nicolaou 2023.

But there can be a latent violence in asking someone to share their story for you and for your recording devices, and people born in a post-conflict society like Cyprus know this all too well, even if it is rarely acknowledged or articulated as such. One can describe the violence in terms of psychology (re-traumatization) or in terms of the legacies of a (post)colonial epistemology (the relationship of filmmaking to ethnography, and the epistemic project of constructing the imperial authority/interviewer/recorder as superior to the native/interviewee/subject).⁹ When hoards of foreign press, journalists and YouTubers descended on Cyprus after the opening of the so-called ghost town of Varosi in 2020, for example, producers were actively seeking Cypriot refugees from the town ‘who hadn’t been back before’ in order to document that moment as part of their productions and programming. This sort of co-opting of an extremely fraught, difficult, and intimate moment in a refugee’s life for the sake of clicks and eyeballs seems particularly grotesque, and it relies entirely on a narrative value system that prizes digging up a ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ emotion for the camera.

Anastassiou’s film, by contrast, rejects such facile strategies. In its esoteric and auto-ethnographic mode, *Notes: Remembered and Found* prioritizes a kind of representation that is unabashedly postmemorial. It records the archives of the past as symptoms of an older generation’s ailments, which may permeate a younger generation’s material reality and imaginary but remain, nonetheless, exterior to them. The postmemorial mode of Anastassiou’s film is also evident in the way *Notes: Remembered and Found* pays homage to feminine tropes of remembrance and the role that women have traditionally taken on of “rebuild[ing] and reembody[ing] a connection that is disappearing.”¹⁰ In one of the most poignant scenes found in the film’s third section, Anastassiou constructs an exquisite mise-en-abyme that reflects the overarching pattern of intergenerational repetitions and interruptions that often characterize the familial environment of displacement. Anastassiou’s mother is being filmed while working on a painting of her own mother, the filmmaker’s grandmother. In the painted image, which is based on a surviving photograph from the family’s life in Prastio before the war, the grandmother is presented in traditional Cypriot dress, using a large sieve to sort through wheat, a centuries-old agricultural practice associated with the region of Mesaoria. The grandmother’s facial characteristics have not yet been fully painted in, and, as a supplement, Anastassiou’s camera draws our attention to her own mother’s face instead, seated in front of the unfinished painting. Image and image-maker are thus shown together, highlighting the interdependence that binds them. This double portrait draws attention to the importance of artistic representation in the shaping of every new generation’s impressions and sensations of the past, but it also reveals the constructed nature—and fungibility—of representation. The postmemorial generation feels an undeniable urgency to remember, even as it finds itself increasingly distant from the original event, grasping at representations that are already one or two generations removed from it.

By presenting three generations of women recording each other, storing, preserving, classifying and accessing the information they have gathered from each other, Anastassiou

⁹ The field of Mediterranean anthropology, or the anthropology of Mediterranean societies, has been historically associated with the British and French imperial projects and the hegemonic structures created by and perpetuated by their respective ethnographic practices. See Giordano.

¹⁰ Hirsch, 124.

also offers a counterpart to masculinist deployments of the archive in nationalist propaganda and its demands to remain uninterrupted and unchallenged as the sole official narrative authority of the 1974 war. Among the many adverse effects of this intractability is a particular kind of institutional representation of the Cyprus problem (and an accompanying representational saturation) that is as overbearing as it is ubiquitous, and which has turned certain visual and narrative tropes into banal clichés. The generation of postmemory often wants to escape its themes, both by focusing on subject matter that is as distant as possible from the ‘problem’, and by physically moving as far away from the problem as possible. (Anastassiou herself has lived and worked abroad for most of her adult life.) If contemporary filmmaking practices of Cypriot artists reveal anything, however, it is that what these escapees seek often (and paradoxically) reveals itself in bits and pieces of the (Cypriot) past, alternatively textured. In the non-fiction *Tongue* (2019) by Panayiotis Achniotis and Andreas Anastasiades, for example, a history of Cyprus’ leftist subculture merges with its directors’ stated desire to escape the oppressive political and representational narrative of a divided Cyprus, with the physical and mental barricades it imposes, and concern themselves with ‘something else’. Eventually, however, this ‘something else’—embracing the cause of a global anarchist struggle that rejected any local manifestations as parochial and irrelevant—slowly melted into a renewed engagement with the Cyprus problem. The big catalyst for this re-engagement was Achniotis and Anastasiades’ encounter with a particular way of using the Cypriot Greek dialect, which they found in the poem “The story of the eye that peeks” [“Η ιστορία του αμμαθκιού που ποσιεπράζει”] by Adonis Florides.¹¹ Ignored by mass media and suppressed by the public education system, the Cypriot Greek idiom is usually branded as ‘lower register’ and is associated with folk-style comedies and satire. What Achniotis and Anastasiades found in Florides’ poem, however, was a handling of their native language in a way that showed it to be a texturally rich and politically powerful tool capable of conveying the complexities of the Cypriot postmemorial experience. In the narrative voice over that they craft for their film—which is their chosen way of documenting their own contribution to the diverse history of the island’s leftist subcultures—Achniotis and Anastasiades reclaim the Cypriot Greek dialect by bending it to their will and putting it to their preferred use, far from the established clichés of the dialect’s usual representational associations. Such an approach neither razes the past to the ground nor promises a *terra nullius* on which an entirely ‘new’ Cyprus or a ‘new’ artistic vocabulary can be invented. It is the recovery of what was always already there, and its subsequent re-appropriation and re-siting in a new context, that successfully brings the past into a conversation with the present and opens up productive possibilities for the future.

Anastassiou’s family photographs function in a similarly epiphanic way in *Notes: Remembered and Found*. In the final section of the film, we look on as the filmmaker flips through dated photo albums from various moments in her family’s history post-1974. Once again, we are given little to no context with regards to who is who in the photographs (are we looking at an image of the filmmaker as a child, for example, or of her sister?) and the pace with which Anastassiou flips through the images precludes a sustained meditation on any individual photograph. We are invited to look at these images in aggregate, as a photo archive set in motion, with motion itself being the scene’s protagonist. In Anastassiou’s hands, still images become an unstable reference point. This point is highlighted when, in the final minutes of the film, we are given a glimpse of the artist’s process of making images.

¹¹ Readers of Greek can find the poem in *Entropia* magazine (Vol. 16, November 2020)

As the music loops around like a stuck record, we see Anastassiou stack the negatives of an image on top of each other on a lightbox. The developed photograph is then seen flooded with water, swirling around in a bucket filled with liquid, its image elusive and in motion. The image's very origin—its commencement and its commandment (*arkhē*)—is revealed to be always already unstable.

Marianne Hirsch writes that part of the experience or structure of postmemory is that one's generation trauma obliterates the second generation's experience. To keep the flame of memory alive, the offspring of those who experienced the harrowing and traumatic events of war often have to put their own experiences, and their own life, at bay. Repetition, recitation, and representation take over. *Notes: Remembered and Found* flips this adage around, liberating the archive from its talismanic bind, moving it along, making it part of the new generation's way of living, and of making art. In this work, life deliberately gets in the way of memory, as Anastassiou grapples with the simultaneous needs of paying homage to a familial past, but also of being pulled away from it thanks to the inexorable forward-motion of time.

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