

History Theory Methods

Part 1 : Audiences and Issues of Spectatorship.

Exceptions to the Norm.

This essay will explore the work of Cinemaximiliaan, a platform based in Brussels, Belgium, which organises film screenings in asylum centres, private homes and cultural venues. It will investigate the way in which it engages with its audience and how it evolved its film programming from one that provided a cinema of escapism during times of hardship, to one that offers a different kind of emotional engagement with its audience through their representation on screen. The essay will go on to examine how Cinemaximiliaan developed its audience, creating a community from different cultures and perspectives, and how, in turn, its events went on to inspire future filmmakers to tell their stories and contribute to the much-needed diversification of the cinematic landscape.

In 2015, when Belgium's bureaucratic reception system found itself unable to provide shelter for all of the newly-arrived asylum seekers, Maximiliaan Park in Brussels became the site for a temporary refugee camp. Local volunteers stepped in and formed various civic initiatives, one such example being Cinemaximiliaan, a 'pop-up cinema' created by Gwendolyn Lootens, a visual artist and documentary filmmaker, and her partner Gawan Fagard, an art historian and film programmer.

Cinemaximiliaan started with a simple projector and screen under a tent in Maximiliaan Park in September 2015 and, with the help of volunteers, offered nightly film screenings. (fig. a) These events effectively turned a space associated with marginalisation, boredom, frustration and limited resources, into a valued cultural destination for both recent migrants and the local population. Over time, it became a community made up of newcomers¹, working alongside local people on a variety of screening projects.

¹ Cinemaximiliaan chooses to refer to refugees and asylum seekers as newcomers in order to avoid language which might suggest an otherness implied via a legal status.



fig. a

Since its screenings at Maximiliaan Park, the organisation has branched out its activities by showing films at various asylum centres all across Belgium, as well as other screenings organised in collaboration with various cinemas and cultural centres. As many newcomers and locals would not ordinarily have the opportunity to encounter one another in an intimate setting, further screenings were organised by Cinemaximiliaan at private homes, offering an occasion for people to meet, share dinner and watch and discuss films. (fig. b)



fig. b

The preparation of the 'pop-up' cinema structures, the selection of the films, and the recruiting of audiences were all achieved through a network of volunteers, many of whom were recent migrants themselves, all working together. Cinemaximiliaan's focus on building a community

translated into a relationship with its audience that is very much interwoven with the organisation. The broad network of volunteers and audiences are encouraged to take on a role beyond that of passive recipients of this initiative. They help with the technical aspects of the screenings, produce advertisements (such as signs) for upcoming events, and are actively involved in the screening choices. (fig. c)

All of this activity helped the cinema become a focus of positivity and a way for connecting people perhaps dealing with feelings of estrangement and isolation in their new environment. In a testimony, one of the volunteers, Kevin Kola from Albania, spoke of the significant emotional impact of these asylum centre screenings on their audience:

A very little part of those born in freedom know what it's like to live in an asylum centre and also the reasons that brought people there. It's survival that brought all of us to these doors. But when you're surviving, you can't dream. Due to the existence of this (Cinemaximiliaan) family, people started dreaming again...It's an escape, it's a joy. (Kola)



fig. C

The screenings in the park and at the asylum centres usually commenced with animated stories for the children, such as *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961) and *Mowgli: Legend of the Jungle* (2018) (fig. a) followed by film choices made with the adults in mind, with titles that offered distraction and entertainment. In an article about the organisation, and specifically the screenings at the park, the writer,

Teun De Voeght, in conversation with one of the founding members Gwendolyn Lootens, describes the scene at one of these events:

Gawan has a stack of DVDs with him, which pass from hand to hand with lots of loud discussions. 'There is always a tough round of negotiations first', laughs Gwendolyn Lootens. For now, *Mr. Bean*. Everyone laughs...Their laughter seems to prove their resilience, I tell myself. The next choice on the list is *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. After half an hour the boys in the back start to grumble. Then the Bollywood blockbuster *PK*, a hyperkinetic film described as a satirical science fiction comedy, partly filmed in Bruges. (De Voeght)

Other selections identified via photographic research included *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Vertigo* (1958). (fig. e) The fantastical content of such films made them easy choices for an audience in need of some escapism, but in some cases the makeup of the various communities within the park and asylum centres also dictated the film programme, as observed in an interview with Lootens:

The historical tension between Afghans and Arabs makes it not so easy to bring these two groups together. An Afghan doesn't understand a film from the Middle East either. At such moments, American action comedies prove to be a good choice. Charlie Chaplin also seems to be liked by everyone (figure f). On evenings when the group of Afghans is largest, those Bollywood films really turn out to be a party. (De Voeght)



fig. d



fig. e



fig. F

Reflecting on the audiences and community of Cinemaximiliaan, I wanted to look briefly at another organisation entitled MediCinema, a charity which, as in the case of Cinemaximiliaan, brings comfort through film screenings to an audience that finds itself in challenging times - in this case, hospital patients. Recent research² undertaken by the organisation has revealed that a visit to one of its in-hospital cinemas has a notable positive effect on the mental health of those attending, indeed, the shared experience of viewing a film is seen to increase feelings of wellbeing among patients, while also providing a sense of normality.

² This research was carried out by MediCinema from Summer 2017 - Winter 2019, across five MediCinema sites with 1229 people

Residing at a hospital and living in an asylum centre are two very different experiences, but one could draw parallels between the aspect of temporality associated with such places and find similarities in common feelings of boredom, frustration and isolation associated with life in stasis.

In a 2016 conversation between Kat Mason, Chief Executive of MediCinema, and Sarah Rutterford of the Independent Cinema Office (ICO), Rutterford writes, 'Cinema can have a profoundly restorative power; the ability to lift you out of yourself and change your emotional state as well as entertain you...If you're unlucky enough to be in hospital for months, the escapism of cinema is particularly valuable to you.' (Rutterford)

Regarding MediCinema's film programming strategy, much like the screenings at Maximiliaan park, Mason explains, 'We tend to choose mainstream titles... a mix of films including action, comedy and drama; relaxing or inspiring titles, or those that may offer an opportunity for catharsis and emotional release...For older audiences we sometimes programme classic films, which can be comforting for patients with dementia.' (Rutterford)

As with the MediCinema example, Cinemaximiliaan's screenings were a small distraction from the harsh realities of life during the eternal wait for a decision on an asylum case. However, a point of difference that I found particularly interesting is how Cinemaximiliaan, due to its way of working collaboratively and operating as a community, identified a particular need within the audience and started to shape its programming activities in response.

In an interview with co-founder Gawan Fagard, he describes how audiences responded to events advertised on the organisation's social media platform: 'A Facebook page was put online to communicate our activities, and people proposed movies from their own culture and background.' (Horst) This feedback from audience members was a significant development in the future shaping of the Cinemaximiliaan film programme, which began to focus on the representation sought after by its audience.

Similar to MediCinema's programming of 'classics' to comfort older hospital patients with familiar images from their past, it became apparent that there was a desire for the newcomers to reconnect with images from their past and stories from their homelands, from a time before the upheaval in their lives. This experience ceased to be about escapism through glitz and glamour or comedy but about something more profound than that, something more humanising and nourishing that could be provided through audiences feeling visibility, relatability, representation, and in turn, validity.

This shift in programming is exemplified in a number of screenings organised by Cinemaximiliaan that I have been able to identify via their social media platform, including: *The Emigrants* (2015) by Mohamed Abdulaziz, *Our Hands* (1982) by Abdellatif Abdul-Hamid, *Djomeh* (2000) by Hassan Yektapanah, *Sonita* (2015) by Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami and *Ragbar* (1972) by Bahram Beizai, all of which focus on diverse experiences of immigration and of finding oneself in a new home with all of the associated challenges that brings. The films were always followed by Q&As and discussions, offering audiences the chance to tell their own stories, with the ongoing aim of making connections between communities.

The thought processes and consideration that went into the film selection are summed up on the organisation website as a commitment to creating 'a platform for a film programme especially conceived for a very diverse audience. The programmes are curated with a special sense of context, preceded and followed by encounters, debates and presentations around the films.' (Cinemaximiliaan)

These events were taking place in a number of cultural institutions across Belgium - running alongside the screenings in asylum centres and private homes - and included, among others, the Bozar cinema situated within the Centre for Fine Arts, Cinema RITCS, the in-house movie theatre of the RITCS School of Arts, and independent arthouse cinemas like Nova Cinema and Cinema Galleries. The combined ingredients of these particular spaces and the screenings on offer created a diverse mix of viewers, composed of Cinemaximiliaan audiences (both newcomers and volunteers) as well as local audiences who habitually

frequent these cultural institutions, or whose attendance might have been driven by an interest in the specific film exhibited.

A screening that exemplified this shift in programming, which I will examine in more detail here, was that of the documentary *Homeland: Iraq Year Zero* (2015) by the Iraqi filmmaker Abbas Fahdel, which was shown at both Nova Cinema and Bozar Cinema in the presence of the director. In line with Cinemamaximiliaan's mission to share cinematic experience and create a bond between newcomers and local communities, they invited along thirty newcomers, mainly from Iraq, who watched the film alongside local audience members.

It is, of course, difficult to assess (without a specific questionnaire) the exact relationship between each audience member and the film screened, and one might expect each audience member to have an individual relationship with it. However, within the context of this screening, by the physicality of sharing the space, combined with the discussions which followed the event, it is plausible for those personal experiences to be altered and potentially moved from an individual experience to a collective one. This area was researched by Julian Hanich (Associate Professor of Film Studies at the University of Groningen) who explained that 'when we watch a movie with others, we automatically enter a social relationship that changes our experience of the film – collective viewing is different from watching a film alone. Particularly when strong emotions and affects come into play, we often become conscious of what I call "affective audience interrelations" in the cinema.' (Hanich)

In a 2016 article about the screenings³ of *Homeland: Iraq Year Zero*, Gawan Fagrad goes on to describe the effect of the film on some members of the audience: 'The almost six-hour documentary proved difficult to digest...and emotions of homesickness, despair and sadness also surfaced during the discussion afterwards.' (Fagrad) The strength of emotions and all of their associated reactions could have, as Hanich suggests, altered the degree of awareness and relationship between audience members, and could have influenced the mode in which

³ *Homeland: Iraq Year Zero* (2015) was screened at Bozar Cinema in June 2016 and in Nova Cinema in September 2016, both screenings were accompanied by the director and are commented on in this article.

the viewers experienced the screening. The audience's relationship to each other thus had the ability to push the viewer's experience towards a collective experience or indeed an individual one, with the emotional impact of the screening being drawn from this aspect as much as from the film itself.



(fig. g) Left: Director Abbas Fahdel answers questions after the screening at Cinema Nova. Right: audiences outside Cinema Nova waiting for the screening.

An example of how the event succeeded in its goal of creating empathy and understanding amongst the local audience is also outlined in the aforementioned article:

For those who have never visited Iraq, it offers a picture of the wealth and beauty, the warmth and solidarity that binds people, and of the power of family ties. These are images that are so rarely seen here. 'Suddenly we understand', says Ophélie, a social worker who is committed to the procedures of Iraqis, 'what all our Iraqi friends must miss, and how they have had to leave their often happy lives to live in complete uncertainty, in an unknown context to start over.' (Fagard)

This event demonstrated Cinemamaximiliaan's ongoing commitment to sharing otherwise untold stories and using films as a catalyst to bring diverse audiences of both newcomers and locals together in a powerful and mutually beneficial way. Via film programming, venue selection and audience creation, they have constructed a space for connections to be made across communities and cultures, and in this case went some way

to fulfilling director Abbas Fahdel's objective for the film: 'to give a face to the Iraqi people.' (Fahdel)

Whilst Cinemaximiliaan's screenings have nurtured cultural discourse on the migration experience, the importance of having these stories told on screen was hugely significant for audiences looking to find representation there, and went on to inspire some audience members to tell their own. As Fagard and Lootens explain in a 2018 case study: 'Around the many film screenings we organise, a lot of newcomers we met have asked us to make a movie themselves.' (Fagard and Lootens) As a result, Cinemaximiliaan have extended their operations further and now also support newcomer filmmakers through a collaborative film production platform centred around the Cinemaximiliaan project house in Molenbeek.

The first Cinemaximiliaan production was a short film entitled *Screaming in Silence* made in December 2017 and directed by Marof Hakimi (Afghanistan), assisted by directors Rokhsareh Ghaemmaghami and Julie De Clercq. In 2018, a short film by Rand Abou Fakher (Syria) was made under the guidance of film director Béla Tarr and a subsequent workshop ran by Tarr led to four further short films by Louay Daboos (Syria), Anastasia Zolkina (Russia), Angela Al Souliman (Syria) and Omar Al Samarrai (Iraq). Also in that year, Fatma Osman (Somalia) completed her first short film assisted by director Hans Van Nuffel. Osman exemplified this move from audience member to filmmaker, explaining:

I arrived in Brussels from Somalia, and have been involved with Cinemaximiliaan for the past five years. I was living in an asylum centre myself when they visited, and that's how I enrolled. I wanted to help reach out to other people in asylum centres, because I know how this isolation feels, the sense of having no connection to society. It's necessary to build bridges and bring out people's potential, give them the opportunity to do something with their lives, passions and talents...For me, it helped to make my dreams come true, I made my first film *Undocumented Love* (2018). (Horst)

Reflecting back on a grassroots organisation like Cinemaximiliaan highlights an example of a significantly different audience experience to that found in mainstream film exhibition culture, demonstrating the value of a kind of cinema that is the antithesis of passive film-watching, that stretches beyond pure entertainment to something altruistic with the potential to bring about social change.

The organisation's engagement in a collaborative and dynamic relationship with its audience, which, as we have seen, has so impacted its film programming strategies, has enabled Cinemaximiliaan to identify and address the clear need of its audience members to be seen and represented in film culture.

In addition, Cinemaximiliaan's mission to bring communities together and melt the social structures, highlights the power of cinema and broader film culture to connect audiences of disparate backgrounds. By offering film screenings as a way to share a given physical space, be it public or private, it enables an audience to collectively experience what is taking place on screen regardless of one's social, economic, or cultural background, thus giving the opportunity for some much-needed mutual understanding and empathy between communities, whilst highlighting the role of cinema as a mode of emotional release and a type of bonding.

Grassroots collectives such as Cinemaximiliaan have been gaining momentum in recent years, likely in response to the lack of diversity within the current film exhibition landscape. Other examples of organisations harnessing this idea of cinema as an instrument for engagement and participation include *T A P E*, which focuses on identity and mixed heritage experiences, the *Habibi collective* supporting women's filmmaking from South-West Asia and North Africa, and *Twelve30 Collective* reframing Caribbean cinema for UK audiences.

I would suggest that further analysis to examine the cultural impact of these collectives in inspiring future filmmakers, and in shaping today's film exhibition landscape, as well as their consequent influence on cultural discourse around diversity and representation, would be a fruitful and timely study.

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