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STUDYING BELOW-THE-LINE
FILM LABOUR PRACTICES**

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The ‘Me Too’ Movement spread virally as a hashtag in October 2017, followed by #timesup in January 2018. Both movements were introduced by women who work in television, cinema, and theatre confronting sexual harassment and assault at work. Feminist Film Theory influenced by second-wave feminism was introduced as an academic discipline already in the early 70s. Drawing from critical theory, gender studies, semiotics, Marxism and psychoanalysis, Feminist Film Theory meticulously analyses depictions of women in moving images – by delving into their influences and pointing at their socio-political references. The viral movements of 2017 and 2018 have put forward experiences of established above the line practitioners, while Feminist Film Theory has been mostly dealing with representation. Yet, a niche research field named *Production Studies*² or *Feminist Production Studies* is currently developing, focusing on how female professionals, other than directresses and actresses, articulate their working experiences within media industries.

Production functions as a term for all the procedures often referred to as *behind the scenes*. Production is mainly an ‘invisible territory’ where working codes and relations might be even more perplexing or foggy. Unsurprisingly, the film industry has proven to function just like any other corporate environment, obeying a very strict code of social conduct and a severely solid hierarchy. Within this space, not only sexual misconduct, but also systemic violence, verbal derogation, and an expectancy for keeping up a constantly pleasant and nurturing presence are realities that female workers encounter on daily basis. Due to the frequency of low or no budget productions over the last decade, the film industry is often euphemistically referred to as a family (or fraternity). An extended, sometimes toxic family – that has adopted and maintains its use of military terminology³ – in which female workers’ bodies are strictly regulated and scrutinized continuously.

The film industry has historically been a boys’ club for almost a century; reaching its peak of machismo during the golden era of Hollywood mainly through the expansion of studio films, led by alpha-male directors. Mid-20 century Hollywood classics are now held responsible for

creating the myth of the *eccentric, domineering auteur*⁴. However, we could pause for a moment and mention the avid female presence behind cameras, active in all facets of movie production, just before the establishment of the numerous Directors' Guilds, Actors' Guilds and the strong influence of several unions post-WWII⁵. Nevertheless, the departments which are inherently considered to be female-dominated and statistically still employ a vast majority of women, are the casting, make up and costume department. These sectors are also evidently less visible and surely underrepresented in international film summits, talent campuses or seminars⁶. Their contributions are highly likely to remain unmentioned in publications, press kits, or posters. In addition, the workers in the aforementioned departments have to deal with or plainly accept an immense wage gap between their salaries and those of their colleagues. Furthermore, workers in the they are broadly considered as available for multiple tasks of on-set nurturing, care-taking and providing unpaid emotional labour⁷ – demands which are never disclosed in their contracts.

I could offer an illustration of what I consider gendered labour in such context, referring back to my experience working in the costume department. To begin with, a popular assumption shared between other colleagues, would be that a wardrobe worker's labour cannot be considered by any means different than what everyone else might already had been doing at home. Wistfully, working in the costume department is often rendered synonymous with shopping, washing, folding, scenting, ironing, pampering, holding, foreseeing, back-upping, nurturing, providing, surprising and pleasing. Costume designers and assistants struggle to absolve the domesticity and the overall stereotypical femininity they are assigned with; regardless of their gender, their reasons to be in the industry, their education, political position or interests.

When a day on-set translates to 12 working hours on average, either the costume designer or their assistant is regularly expected to take laundry as additional work at home. Every costume needs to be clean, free of stains, exempted from the actor's body odour and ironed for the next day, which would frequently be less than 10 hours away after wrapping up. The responsibility for these materials' maintenance is rarely shared with another person hired in the costume department, but even when it is, the person is not regularly present on set. On fewer occasions each actor is assigned with washing and bringing back their costume on every working day. Lastly and most rarely, there would be a sufficient allocation of budget to cover dry cleaning expenses, yet it is a matter of fact that if there was a budget surplus it would most probably not be announced and certainly would not be spent on dry cleaning. Anecdotally, a producer once called 45 minutes before show time to request that the costume assistant would rush to the theatre and iron the protagonist's dress, even though there were 5 people – plus a flatiron – in the building already.

Bizarrely, the costume department is commonly assumed to be equipped with an endless supply of hats, rubber boots, or windproof jackets; not for dressing the characters but to

distribute between the members of the filming crew when necessary. These items usually belong to the costume designers. While their work is being undermined as something that anyone could do and even do better, confirming the myth of *female incapacity within the capitalist mode of production*⁸, their colleagues with presumably superior, hard-earned skills cannot bear the responsibility of keeping a hat in their car. Concurrently, a costume designer would be seen as frivolous, irresponsible and unprofessional, if only she refused to carry another 10 kilos of gear or if she called attention to the hat or jacket that she offered and got lost or returned to her dirty. It is essential to understand social and professional caretaking as productivity contributing to the creation of surplus value. Meanwhile, the costume designer is reduced to a provider of services filled with domestic qualities and attributed with several so-called feminine characteristics compatible with the acceptable female image enforced by patriarchy.

A young professional is instructed early on to know her place – far behind the camera – and to *stay there*. Meanwhile, it is taken as a given that she will not only offer her time and expertise but also her space, contacts, even personal clothes or jewellery for any no-budget short film, as the costume department is always expected to supply unlimited items and options no matter the resources available. When *dressing the part* all set boundaries tend to disappear. The director might start suddenly inquiring for a stylistic *surprise*, after seeing several styled outfits previously agreed upon. The director might as well invite everyone who happens to be present in the building to attend the costume fitting and *offer their opinion*. In most cases when such opinions are offered, they are done so in a completely inappropriate manner and at moments that could not be more unwelcome. Yet costumes are considered to be just clothes after all, and apparently everyone is entitled to an opinion on clothes and may share it at any time.

While several women who work as costume designers find challenges in owning the authorship of their creative labour, women who are production designers (art directors) find it difficult to advance in that profession. Similar or worse are the obstacles for women in other more masculine departments, such as camera, sound or animation. So, what happens when one expresses rational demands? In 2016, I was accused of being *rude* for inquiring an estimation regarding the payment day, *irrational* for requesting per diems, *unprofessional* for replying the following morning to a text message that had been sent at post-midnight.

In addition, wardrobe workers are expected to maintain physical contact with actresses and actors by actually dressing them. Most acting professionals can certainly tie their shoes, zip their dresses, button up their shirts or hold their purses perfectly by themselves. Other practices that include physical contact and moving beyond personal space are to cover actresses and actors with a blanket in between shots, put a hat on their head for the 30-second pause when shooting outdoors, or brush them for lint when none of the aforementioned actions are

applicable. Genuinely, it is unlikely that the actresses and actors enjoy this procedure either, which is indeed a form of violation of personal space and an interruption in their concentration. Yet, it is something both sides still perform plainly for the gaze of their colleagues whom they need to reassure how present and caring they are.

Simultaneously, women who work behind the scenes are judged harshly for either not looking overtly polished and *well-taken care of* themselves. A male colleague once approached me and casually made a derogatory comment about a person who was working with me on that day as a wardrobe assistant. What he commented on was the length of her trousers, that barely touched the floor but looked *filthy* according to him. Another female colleague took pride in being preferred over her co-wardrobe assistant who was dismissed and mocked as *fat*.

Coming back to public discussions on sexual harassment and other sexist behaviours at work that are currently taking place globally, Flix.gr⁹ recently produced and published video interview under the fairly pompous title “*Women of Greek Cinema*”. Flix invited 36 female practitioners currently active in the field who were offered a set of particular questions¹⁰. The platform set a frame for a discussion without first acknowledging the apparent ascendancy of sexist behaviours on-set. This decision of course triggers concerns from the very beginning. The publication was formatted in a manner in which the interview questions were listed as text via a small introduction to the video interview, yet they never appeared in any format throughout the video. The lack of context specificity here is crucial; as it always remains unclear what are the interviewees responding to each time.

Furthermore, the video was edited (either deliberately or not) in a manner which constantly interrupts the interviewees sentences. Presumably, each participant must have been interviewed separately, yet in its final cut the interview presents working women interrupting or talking over other working women. Although some responses appear to be fairly problematic, they cannot be commented on since it is apparent that they are cut and pasted in a sequence that doesn't make clear sense. For instance, when an interviewee says that “*sexism goes both ways,*” it is utterly unclear whether she is referring to internalized misogyny or the so-called reverse sexism that men claim to experience. Female practitioners were again denied the space for articulating their own views and experiences.

The first part of the video interview is comprised from a mixture of catch-words conventionally connected to femininity, presumably meant to describe the contribution of women in Greek cinema. To cite a few: *persistence, patience, creation, struggle, ecstasy, frustration, love, passion, power, tenacity, inspiration, contribution, sexy, emotion, talent, beauty, selective oblivion or even mother goose*. Several interviewees did acknowledge and address sexism in their passages, yet the majority refers to *facing challenges beyond gender, the presence of stupid people*

regardless of gender or equated sexism with the idealization and pursuit of power, which again according to the video has nothing to do with masculinity or gender. Several statements even went as far as to imply that to acknowledge or address sexism is a luxury, while key terms such as feminism, or gender equality, are avoided (or possibly edited out) altogether.

The aforementioned video publication fails completely to establish any ground for a solidarity network among practitioners within the field. Even worse it proposes that exposure to sexist behaviour or willingness to discuss such misconducts publicly shows weak character. Consequently, those who share such opinions, consider themselves to be higher in any professional or moral scale, since in their understanding encountering sexism is something that can only happen to people who have no concerns *about the real problems of the film industry* (sic) and never occur to passionate, dedicated women of career who refuse to be like *all the other girls*.

Overall the film industry might indeed be open for women – “Women of career” who seek to join the boys’ club; cis-gender, white, upper-middle class women, who can afford to be mostly (un)paid as “trainees” for the first five years of their working life; women who are later expected to join and unconditionally cater for a no-budget, no-payment, time-consuming, high-demanding project only to pay their dues to the industry; women who are recruited to help an emerging, ambitious young director – most times male and almost all times upper-middle class – who refuse to undergo the formal procedures and logistics of film making, as they consider their work superior to that; or women who will accept being infantilized for the rest of their working lives; women who are so passionate about their career that they can overcome any obstacle like being constantly subjected to sexism, underpaid and expected to nurture the whole set, always smiling and prepared for countless backup solutions; women who cannot see that their “only makes me stronger” attitude contributes to the exclusion of less or differently privileged females from entering the space.

The film industry is deeply sexist, racist and classist worldwide and has overly failed to secure acceptable working conditions for *below the line* practitioners¹¹. Concurrently, there is a strong, strange omertà on referring to the class or gender disparity of the industry. During the last decade in Athens, such discussions with colleagues were bluntly dismissed at their very beginning as referring to *individual incidents*, being irrelevant or as being *small talk*. Workers in the film industry – in front or behind the camera, critics, those in funding committees, festival curators, distributors, and viewers – are all responsible in deciding whose stories are told and promoted. This is a fact to be acknowledged and a certain ‘fiction calling’ to be exercised during all the stages of production and mediation.

Resolving a condition so deeply embedded within the culture of the field will be slow, yet not impossible. Firstly, mutually acknowledge and address all the forms discrimination might take.

Secondly, instead of speaking “from a personal perspective” and stating “our own opinions”, understand that the very fact that we keep debating whether discrimination and inequality actually exist is not only being oblivious to the issue, but outrageous. Thirdly, make a collective strong statement asserting that such behaviours are simply unacceptable, and ensure that all colleagues are safe, heard and properly compensated.

¹ In film production terminology the “line” functions as a separative for production costs and budget allocations. The producers, directors, actors and scriptwriters are classified as being “above the line” while the rest of the production team is grouped under the term “below the line”. Most salaries, production expenses, publicity, insurance, and travelling costs fall “below the line”. Essentially any cost that is not linked with the main actors, directors, producers or screenwriters will be categorized as a below-the-line expense.

² *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* by Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks and John T. Cadwell was published by Taylor & Francis in 2009 and Vicki Mayer’s *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies* by Duke University Press followed in 2011. The aforementioned work shifts the discussion about entertainment and media production targeting the professionals within the industry whose work is mostly uncredited or invisible and does not focus on the elite “above the line”, whose influence and power over the production as well as their visibility is already immense.

³ The filming process is called shooting, the production’s groupings are named units, while the Director or Director of Photography are semi-jokingly introduced as the chiefs or the generals among the film crew. To add on the paramilitary clichés many productions still use walkie talkies to communicate on set. It is still taken for granted that the job would often require a certain ferocity and that men would be better at acting that part. Borrowing a passage from an interview of film director Karyn Kusama: assumption is that a man is a much better monster.

⁴ Auteur theory, theory of filmmaking in which the director is viewed as the major creative force in a motion picture. Arising in France in the late 1940s, the auteur theory—as it was dubbed by the American film critic Andrew Sarris — was an outgrowth of the cinematic theories of André Bazin and Alexandre Astruc.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Auteur Theory.” Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., December 27, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/art/auteur-theory>.

⁵ Dorothy Arzner (1897–1979) was pioneering in fiction films in the US, while Ruby Grierson (1904–1940), Margaret Thomson (1910–2005), Jill Craigie (1911–1999), Budge Cooper (1913–1983), Kay Mander (1915–2013) were mainly active in documentary filmmaking.

⁶ For instance, Berlinale is a reputable annual film summit, with “franchise” localised festivals in Beirut, Buenos Aires, Burdan, Guadalajara, Sarajevo, Tokyo and Rio, which also hosts a talent campus for young professionals. In their application section they explicitly disclose their policy on gender parity and proudly state that 50% of their attendees identify as female. Yet Berlinale Talents still does not host summits for the predominantly female departments’ representatives.

⁷ In a professional context, emotional labour refers to the expectation that a worker should either contain her feelings or manipulate their expression in order to satisfy both her colleagues, customers as well as the perceived requirements of her job, while avidly responding to other’s emotional needs. Emotional labour can also include being constantly quietly present and available for any conversational inquiries or menial tasks, charmingly resolving any conflict that might occur in her working environment etc.

⁸ Dalla Costa, Mariarosa, and Selma James. *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975.

⁹ Flix.gr is an online publication posting news related to the Film Industry.

¹⁰ As listed in the website: Being a woman professional in Greek cinema. What does it mean nowadays? Does sexism exist? Is the field, also in Greece, male dominated? What kinds of problems are women faced with? Are female characters real enough, complicated enough, smart enough? What kind of stories do women want to share with the world? How do they hope to see heroines on the big screen? 36 women answer these questions. The video is available with English subtitles. Flix. "Menu." Flix, March 9, 2018. <http://flix.gr/en/women-of-greek-cinema.html>.

¹¹ Shooting days regularly extend their agreed duration. With production companies having normalised that it is not uncommon to schedule even a 30-hour working day or group numerous all-nighters back to back. The minimum compensation is constantly under negotiation especially for workers employed in certain departments and the payment day is most times unspecified, with the salaries being finally deposited even a year later. Social security or health insurance are rarely included. Even if these working conditions apparently deprive the employees the ability to plan their lives, surprisingly many still do take pride in coping under these conditions.