

hungry host

Project Proposal
Aitan Ebrahimoff

"I haven't got several identities: I've got just one, made up of many components combined together in a mixture that is unique to every individual."

Malouf 2000

"there is a strong effort to deny that we humans are also animals positioned in the food chain."

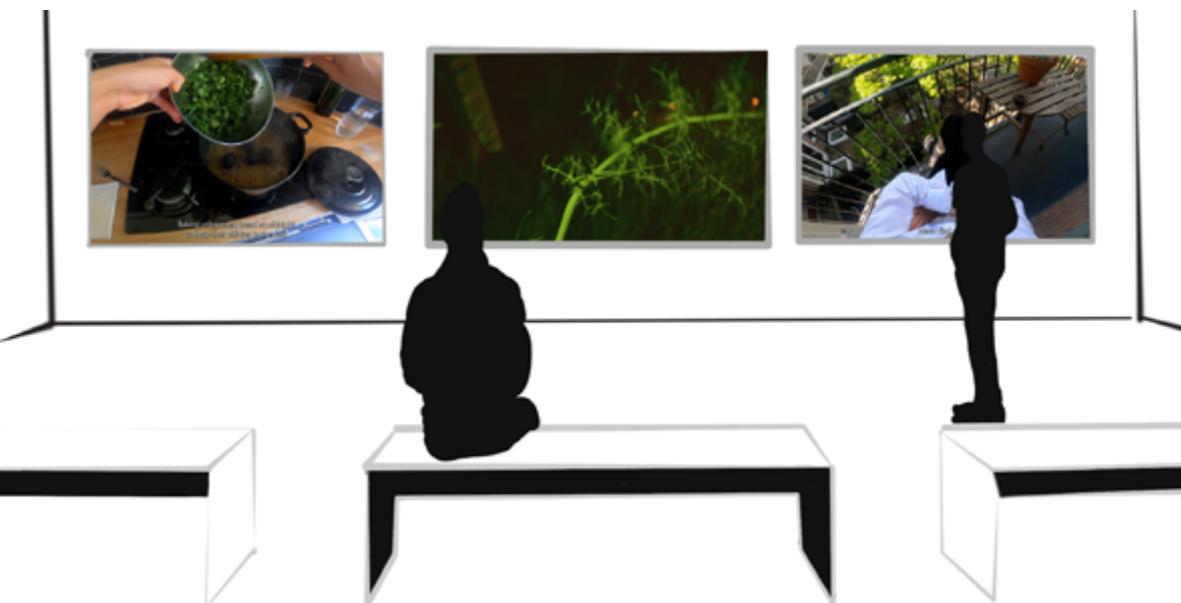
Plumwood 2009

Introduction

Can we speak of diasporic hunger? I have a theory that my people – displaced Jews across the world with multiple national identities – eat not just to live but to fill a void. Eating food with kin can be a full-body experience. It is a layered communal ritual; we are immersed collectively in a thick, fatty vacuum. When a people are displaced, what cultural ingredients can be mobilized and taken along for the journey? Recipes can be stored in muscle memory and replicated just about anywhere.

The power-dynamic inherent to feeding is a suitable metaphor when analyzing the diasporic experience. How does a host culture feed on its alien subjects? And reciprocally, how does the host feed its new subjects? How does the outsider assimilate or mutate to adapt to the new environment? With these cursory questions my interest in the overlap between science-fiction and the diasporic experience rises to the surface. Can feeding as a metaphor connect otherness and science fiction?

Through my thesis and project hungry host, I aim to explore these questions and substantiate my sci-fi worldmaking with personal material. How might personal histories be channeled into new forms of sci-fi cinema? These are questions I'm exploring through artistic research with a view to create a film installation.



hungry host (2023)

installation view
3 channel film
5.1 surround sound

What Is It?

What's a suitable container to express this research? The essay film can hold so many ideas and place the maker at the center, usually as a voiceover. By using my own subjectivity as a lens, I can acknowledge the problematics confronting this research. How do I relate to the turbulent histories of my ancestors? As a Western European, to what extent might I exoticize my Persian heritage? My grandparents were exiled from their homes under nationalist and fascist regimes, in Iran and Eastern Europe. I don't wish to literally translate these materials but explore them in relation to my own subjectivity.

This is a first-person point of view experiment. But the first-person essay film risks being hermetic, dogmatic, cinema's equivalent of a monotonous lecture. Sci-fi offers a way out, an ability to delve into speculation, hyperbole, and to create immersive images and sounds which touch the subconscious. However stylish or intriguing "science fiction properly conceived...is a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on". (Le Guin 1988) A solution is therefore a hybrid form, a mongrel, which oscillates between first-person essayistic POV and tableaux from a more fictive universe. Together they express hungry host, a map of the diasporic experience in relation to science fiction. My Visual Abstract exhibits this blended approach.

visual abstract
(2022)

dir. Aitan Ebrahimoff
video, stereo sound
04:00 duration

[click still to view]



What's The Method?

The *inputs* include films, art, fictive and academic texts that feed into hungry host. Diasporic essays such as Amin Maloof's *On Identity* intersect with contemporary cinema such as Jordan Peele's sci-fi Western *Nope*. Autobiographical research will also be used to generate text, imagery, interviews, and sounds. Finally I will delve into physical and virtual archives for traces of kin and their families to better understand the relationship between the outsider and the host culture.

The screenplay is a vital tool in sculpting these inputs. *Writing*, storyboarding, and developing scores, will create blueprints. I will translate these scripts using the following tools to *mediate* my research: documentary cinematography and field recordings in hungry locations; POV scripted and semi-improvised one-shot performances using a bodycam; constructed sci-fi scenes with narrative threads to connect to the POV footage. Through an ongoing and iterative post-production editing process I will continually sculpt and structure the material to develop a cinematic language for the project. The final *output* is a film installation. It may be a single-channel film presented in cinematic conditions. It could also be a multi-channel work with objects, audio recordings, and photographs, in the installation space. At this stage it's important to develop and produce the material and allow it to find its primary form.



Who can help?

My moving image colleagues at the PZI and my Graduate Project mentors, Cihad Caner and David Haines, will be instrumental in advising and inspiring me throughout this research process.

As a researcher at The Institute of Human Activities, the studio founded by artist-filmmaker Renzo Martens, I have access to an established Dutch artist who has a practice revolving around POV filmmaking. His films are often divisive and cause great controversy – for better or worse. His reliance on a single handcam in *Episode 1* and *Episode 3: Enjoy Poverty*, prove that low-tech approaches to filmmaking can be impactful and that by implicating oneself in the process a filmmaker can dissolve the distance a director usually has from their subject.

Through freelance directing work and my autonomous practice, I have also collaborated with a number of sound designers, color graders, and cinematographers. These film professionals will be able to help when filming the more choreographed and constructed scenes and in the final polishing process when it comes to mixing and mastering.

Why Make It?

hungry host is an exercise in self-analysis and understanding. "I scour my memory to find as many ingredients of my identity as I can. I then assemble and arrange them. I don't deny any of them." (Maalof 2000) My work to date has touched on some of these key oppositions described: insider/outsider, reality/fiction, predator/prey. My work has used a number of the techniques described above – such as POV filmmaking, voiceover, essayistic registers, and constructed science fiction narratives. *hungry host* is a way to bridge these interests and methodologies. To integrate these strands into a whole, a bundle, a practice.

Relation To Practice

One thread running through my filmography and videos is the power dynamic active in feeding. Who is feeding who? What does it mean to be prey or predator? In *OOO (2020)* there is a deity in my loft that needs feeding. In *Commander (2020)*, a colonel is offered to the sea by animal-human hybrids. Finally, *Third Rock (2022)* depicts members of a secret movement making offerings to a giant frog. Through feeding powerful entities, characters wish for positive outcomes in worlds that mirror ours but play by different rules.

G Zi (2022) is a first-person POV video performance. With a GoPro strapped to my body, I make Ghormeh Sabzi, a stew from my childhood that my Persian grandmother often cooked. While purchasing lamb shoulder, frying onions, chopping herbs, and eventually eating the stew I recount some of the history of the crypto Jews of Iran, a community that hid their religion in plain sight, pretending to be Muslim for many centuries. This video performance directly inspired *Third Rock (2022)*. The opening scene is a character making a stew in a domestic space which he seems alienated from. Its premise of a secret movement serving a supernatural being relates directly to my pre-history. Sci-fi is a container for personal material. *hungry host* can use this same dialogic – of autobiography feeding science-fiction.



Third Rock (2022)

dir. Aitan Ebrahimoff

film, stereo sound
07:30 duration

[click still to view]

Cultural Context

These films, with their digestive subtext and speculative content, belong to science fiction. How does a host culture feed on its alien subjects? In Jordan Peele's sci-fi Western *Nope* (2022), the protagonists hunt an alien that is haunting the sky above their ranch, threatening to swoop down and devour them whole. Feeding becomes a metaphor for the black experience in the USA, where the possibility of being consumed by the host is an ever-present threat. Peele skillfully combines the Western and sci-fi to create an empowering tale of prey overcoming predator. However, it is the humans, the host, that hunt and obliterate the beautiful cosmic alien life form. What if humans came last? What if humans were devoured in an epic Hollywood reversal?

There are strong ecological implications in reversing this power dynamic. "The idea of human prey threatens the dualistic vision of human mastery in which we humans manipulate nature from outside, as predators but never prey." (Plumwood 2000) The positioning of the human as subordinate to the planet highlights the enlivening potential of *hungry host*. Indeed, as well as dealing with first encounters, outsiders and aliens, sci-fi often responds to ecological concerns such as resource scarcity and biological catastrophe.

When combined with archival research of the diaspora, hungry host enters a dialogue with decolonial artistic practices (Vázquez 2021). I think this movement in contemporary art and academia is particularly poignant when it engages the maker's personal narrative. Fiona Tan's film *Footsteps* (2022) combines silent documentary footage from the Eye Film Museum's archive of Dutch life over a century ago with a voiceover reading letters sent from her father when she first moved to the Netherlands in the 1980s. The result is emotive and stunning, activating memory and historical material in a profound way.

Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1981) is the quintessential hybrid of essay-film and experimental cinema. The narrator reads from letters sent to her by the cameraman Sandor Krasna. In a perversion of the documentary form, it becomes clear that Krasna is fictitious. As a meditation on the deficiencies of memory, it shows how cultures and global histories can transform beyond recognition over time. The shape-shifting nature of hybrid films make them suitable referents for *hungry host* and its slippery content.

References

Texts

- Deleuze, G (1989) *Cinema 2: The Time Image*. Tomlinson, H & R Galeta (Trans). University of Minnesota Press.
- Foucault, M (1984) *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*. Published by French journal *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* in October, 1984.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble*. Duke University Press.
- Jones, S (2016) *Living Bodies of Thought: The "Critical" in Critical Autoethnography*. Published in *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1-10.
- Kolk, B (2014) *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma*. Penguin, London.
- Le Guin, U (1988) *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. TJ Books Ltd, UK
- Maalouf, A (2000) *On Identity*, trans. B Bray, The Harvill Press, London.
- Plumwood, V (1995) *Human Vulnerability and the Experience of Being Prey*. *Quadrant*, 39(3), 29–34 .
- Slager, H (2015) *The Pleasure of Research*. Hatje & Cantz, Ostfildern.
- Vázquez, R (2021) *Vistas of Modernity*. Jap Sam Books. Prinsenbeek, Netherlands.
- Weber, A. (2019) *Enlivenment: Toward a Poetics for the Anthropocene*. MIT Press, London.

Films

- Eraserhead* (1977) dir. Lynch, D. 1 Channel Film, Stereo soundtrack, 01:29:00 duration, Libra Films, United States.
- HyperNormalisation* (2016) dir. Curtis, A. 1 channel film, Stereo soundtrack, 02:46:00 duration, BBC Films, United Kingdom.
- Nope* (2022) dir. Peele, J. 1 channel film, Stereo soundtrack, 02:10:00 duration, Universal Pictures, United States
- Pulse* (2001) dir. Kurosawa, K. 1 Channel Film, Stereo soundtrack, 01:19:00 duration, Toho, Japan.
- Sans Soleil* (1983) Marker, C. 1 Channel Film, Stereo soundtrack, 01:40:00 duration, Argos Films, France.
- Space is the Place* (1974) dir. John Coney. 1 Channel Film, Stereo soundtrack, 01:25:00 duration, United States.
- Spirited Away* (2001) dir. Miyazaki, H. 1 Channel Film, Stereo soundtrack, 01:25:00 duration, Studio Ghibli, Japan.
- Titane* (2021) dir. Ducournau, J. 1 channel film, Stereo soundtrack, 01:48:00 duration, Diaphana Distribution, France.

Videodrome (1983) dir. Cronenberg, D. 1 channel film, Stereo soundtrack, 01:29:00 duration, Universal Pictures, Canada.

Artworks

First Person Plural, The Electronic Diaries Of Lynn Hershman Leeson 1984-1996 (1995) dir. Leeson, L.H. 1 channel film, Stereo soundtrack, 01:15:00 duration, Zentrum für Kunst und Medien, Germany

Footsteps (2022) dir. Tan, F. 1 Channel, HD video installation, tinted, hand coloured and b&w, 5:1 Surround, 01:37:00 duration. Eye Film Museum, Amsterdam.

I turn over the pictures of my voice in my head (2009) dir. Export, V. 1 channel film, Stereo Soundtrack, 12:00 duration, Austria

Liquidity Inc. (2014) dir. Steyerl, H. Architectural Installation with 1 channel film, Stereo Sound, 30:00 duration, Germany

Personal Artworks

Commander (2021) dir. Ebrahimoff, A. 1 channel film, Stereo sound, 05:00 duration.
<https://vimeo.com/360577826>

G-Zi (2022) dir. Ebrahimoff, A. 1 channel film, Stereo sound, 09:15 duration.
<https://vimeo.com/769060800/c4d96fb726>

OOO (2020) dir. Ebrahimoff, A. 1 channel film, Stereo sound, 03:03 duration.
<https://vimeo.com/411479414>

Third Rock (2022) 1 channel film, Stereo sound, 07:30 duration.
<https://vimeo.com/723286598/c3246e8b33>

Visual Abstract (2022) 1 channel film, Stereo sound, 04:00 duration.
<https://vimeo.com/761100674/9fccd9a1f1>