

Interview with Astero Styliani Lamprinou on her use of archive images in her screendance work *Secret City* (Belgium, 2020)

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Following a screening of *Secret City* (2020) at the Projection Room in Brussels on 24 September, 2021 I contacted Astero to ask if she would be interested in granting an interview, focusing on the use of archive images in her film. I sent her my questions via email to which she replied also via email.

The interview is divided into parts 1 and 2, reflecting a two-month interval. Both parts are written on the basis of email exchanges with the film director: Part 1 focused on what led her to use archival images in her film; and in part 2 the interviewer wanted to highlight the creative process adopted by Astero and her team.

Secret City (Belgium, 2020) by Astero Styliani Lamprinou is a work of screendance inspired by sites and buildings that no longer exist. Two characters dance and move through Brussels re-igniting a connection to the city as it was and offering viewers a different perspective of the buildings they encounter and inhabit, a fluid and ephemeral perspective as they experience it. Described as a “passage in time and place” (Styliani Lamprinou, online. Accessed 6 September 2021 at <https://lefifa.com/catalogue/secret-city>) by Astero, the two characters find and lose each other in fleeting moments until they reach a utopian-like place where we are reminded amusingly of the inevitable changes that take place in life’s continuum.

Credits: Directed, conceived and produced by Astero Styliani Lamprinou, performed by Ana Cembrero and Astero Styliani Lamprinou, Edited by Yorgos Lamprinos, Sound by Thomas Damas, Mixing by Thomas Guillaume, Cinematography by Oliver Imfeld, Color Grading by Jorge Piquer, Music by Philippe Létalon.

Film trailer <https://vimeo.com/505760401>

Full film <https://vimeo.com/471664697>

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Part 1

The interview below with Astero Styliani Lamprinou focuses on her use of old postcards embedded within the narrative of the film and how the archive materials influenced the film from pre-production to the final stages of its making

1. Could you start by telling me about yourself and your relationship to Brussels?

I arrived in Brussels on a cold December night in 2004. I remember coming out of *Botanique* Metro¹, and vaguely seeing an incredible panorama in the dark. I was motivated to join a very vibrant dance scene, but the city's architecture made an even bigger impression on me! In the daytime I was more amazed to discover a city in which so many older buildings were interspaced with those of a more modern structure. I found the city very small and practical in which to install myself: to work and have a family - like a village in the center of Europe. Observing the city over the years and its mixture of old and new, made me want to discover its past, when it was obvious that the city had had a different image.

2. You say that the book, *Bruxelles Disparu*, by Marc Meganck inspired the film. I am interested in knowing more about the element of "disappearance" that influenced the film.

The book by Marc Meganck shows old images of buildings and places in Brussels that have disappeared. These images helped me understand more or less what the city looked like in the early 1900s. It was very harmonious and the buildings were thought out in great detail, unlike today. Wisely, Marc did not show what replaced the old buildings that disappeared, because these keep changing. Brussels has been described as a site in constant construction! But, what he didn't show is what inspired me to make the film, the past and the present next to each other. First, I wanted to show several old images of the city, unveil a glorious past that had disappeared, so the use of archive material was absolutely crucial to start this comparison and bring the city's past to light. Then, I wanted to show how some of these sites have remained the same and how others have been completely altered. By this simple juxtaposition, I thought I could invite the audience to decide which sites they prefer and raise some sensibility about the past. Do modern interventions respect the surroundings and their history, or do they just impose themselves, in disregard of the old buildings?

1 Underground station

3. *Secret City* uses archive material (postcards). Could you tell me a little about how the archive might have shaped the filming?

The archive material was the point of departure for the whole film. Guided by Marc Meganck's book, I went to the archives of Urbanism in Brussels, where I found 2000 old images of the city. I selected 140 and used 13 in the film. Based on the images, I made a trajectory for the dancers' passages through the city, starting from sites that had not changed much, such as the Royal *quartier*², to areas that went through major transformations such as the *Place Rogier*³ with its modern white flat circular canopy. Based on the angle of each archive image, my goal was to find exactly the same angle for filming today. This was only possible for some images, like the first images of *Botanique*⁴ and *Parc Royal*⁵, because some areas have changed drastically. Moreover, some buildings that were photographed at the time (early 1900s) were no longer there.

4. Did the archive also have a resonance in the movement material on site in your film?

The choreography was conceived solely on site and was inspired by its past and present images. For example, when Ana is sliding on her back down the stairs of *Mont des Arts*⁶, we are alluding to the cascading fountains of water that were there in the early 1900s.

5. You mentioned that movement best emanates the ephemeral quality of time, but I was also attracted by the element of stillness and sculpture in your film. How important was this with relation to conveying time?

The movement in this film is based on the theme of passage. In a city that has existed for years and years, the characters make a flowing passage, pausing only to contemplate and bring about visions of the past, and frame details of monuments of the city. The stillness of the characters is an active meditative state, where they are floating between present and past. For me, seeing this passage and the transformations of the city within the span of a century, points out the ephemeral aspect of movement and of our mortality in general. The movement takes place fluidly but vanishes like smoke in the air. In a way it

2 The district in the center of Brussels known as such because it houses the main square (*The Place Royal*) and the Royal Palace of Brussels, which is no longer used as a royal residence.

3 Major square in the Brussels municipality Saint-Josse-ten-Noode

4 The botanical gardens in Brussels

5 The Royal Park in Brussels

6 Meaning "Hill of the Arts", *Mont Des Arts* is an historic site in Brussels that includes an urban complex and a public garden

describes our fate: from inhabiting this city every day to inevitably disappearing one day.

6. What are your thoughts about the cinematography in relation to the archive?

The old black and white postcards in the film were used as images in stillness. The characters arrive at a site, and in a moment of contemplation they have visions of the past suspended in time. There is a clear distinction between the past and the present. The still, black and white past, is then found in the living and colored present, identical or altered. On two occasions, the semi-real and semi-fantastic characters acquire qualities of their visions and lose color. When they become black and white at the end of the film, it is as if their ephemeral story has already vanished into the past.

7. How was the archive material choreographed within the editing of the film?

We used a metronome throughout filming to sustain a dynamic tempo. For the editing, I relied on someone with years of experience. Yorgos started the editing slowly, following the tempo of the first character and then he accelerated, following the running and matching the tempo of the flowing choreography. Introducing the still archive image at this pace was the biggest challenge. We needed to allot enough time for the image to register, but not so long as to drain the overall rhythm of the film. Yorgos decided to directly cut the old images in and out to add more dynamism, instead of slowly fusing the images from the past into those of the present, which he considered inappropriate and old-fashioned for this film.

8. In a few shots, I like how the people in the archive postcard look as if they are actually watching you perform, and how the points of view shift among various characters. In another interview you say that the film is “a passage in time and a passage in space”. It seemed to me that this passage is non linear and multifaceted. Could you comment?

The characters make a flowing passage in the present time and space of the city, but they also bring in the old images as their visions of the past. Their costumes, inspired by the color of the statues in the city today, were chosen to make them look distinct from everyday people, make them easy to detect from afar and transform them into animated statues. They are there now, but they could have been there in the past just like the city’s statues. They appear and reappear in various areas of the city constantly losing and finding each other. They appear in color, but they also lose their color, as if they’re traveling into the past, which accentuates their ephemeral quality as passengers in this city and of movement itself. Their surreal journey ends in a colorful utopia of plastic design of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in a museum, another preserved space of the past.

Part 2

This second part of the interview follows a more creative approach to questions and answers based on the process as initiated and explained by Astero in Part 1 in relation to her use of the archive material in *Secret City*

1. You mention that Brussels's architecture had an impact on you when you first arrived in the city and that the book inspired the architecture in your film. Did the images in the book reawaken your memory? Could you reflect on archive material and memory?

I did not know how Brussels used to be in the past. I was just very surprised to see this landscape of mixture and inclusion of old and new buildings. The landscape itself raised questions about the past, which I was able to partially answer through the book *Bruxelles Disparu*. There I could discover the old face of the city, which I never knew and which has partly disappeared. However, I knew the city well enough to locate all the spots where the old buildings had been and see what had replaced them at the present time, which was not revealed in the book. This kind of comparison became my own mission throughout the film.

2. Numbers of postcards of Brussels from the past that you observed and selected
2000 - 140 -13

There are about 2000 words at this point in this interview, could you make a first list of about 100 and then select only 13?

City, panorama, perspective, **landscape, past, present, passage**, movement, **architecture, comparison**, harmony, classicism, flowers, curves, statues, **buildings, monuments**, flowing passage, meditative state, stillness, visions, ephemeral, connection, **disappearance**, vanished, **surreal** journey, colorful utopia, **trajectory**, departure, filming, angle, frame within a frame, sculpture, surroundings, sensitive, surroundings, embrace, contrast, **transformations**, dynamism, mix and match, constant construction, details, glorious, juxtaposition, sensibility, allusions, black and white, vivid colors, **archive, postcards**, challenge, movement, observation, impression, unveil, images, suspension, contemplation, semi real, semi fantastic, story, experience, localize, spots, colorful utopia, mission, melting, flowing, state, inhabit, fate, identical, losing, finding, characters, surprise, face.

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Surreal Passage

Past Buildings

Present Architecture

Monuments Transformations

Landscape Trajectory

Postcards Comparison

Archive Disappearance

3. Trajectory



Image 1: Styliani's sketch on map of Brussels indicating choreographic pathway, Credit: Astero Styliani Lamprinou

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4. Allusions

The sites and their function in history determined the choice of movement in the choreography of the film. For example, when Celeste is melting down at the paws of a statue of a lion, she is representing the unknown dead soldiers for whom this monument was built, *Tombeau du Soldat inconnu*, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.



Image 2: *Tombeau du Soldat inconnu*, Credit: Oliver Imfeld

Image 3: *Tombeau du Soldat inconnu*, Credit: Archive image from the collection of Belfius Banque, Copyright ARB-SPRB, Documentation center of Brussels Urbanism and Patrimony "*Service Régional de Bruxelles, Centre de Documentation de BUP*" with the authorization of the Royal Academy of Brussels

Or, by sliding on her back down the stairs of *Mont des Arts*, she makes an allusion to the water that used to cascade down the center part of the stairs when it was designed for the International Exposition in 1910.



Image 4: Dancer sliding down steps of *Mont des Arts*, Credit: Oliver Imfeld

Image 5: *Mont Des Arts*, Credit: Archive image from the collection of Belfius Banque, Copyright ARB-SPRB, Documentation center of Brussels Urbanism and Patrimony "*Service Régional de Bruxelles, Centre de Documentation de BUP*", with the authorization of the Royal Academy of Brussels

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5. Framing the frame

The idea of frames within the frame of the camera was to draw the eye to small details of the city. And to show that the two characters are very sensitive to their surroundings revealing interesting angles and points of view. A framed sculpture suddenly looks different than in its full aspect, and the bodies of the characters literally embrace the details.



Image 6: Dancer framing a sculpture from the *Parc Royal*, Credit: Oliver Imfeld

Image 7: Dancer framing a sculpture from the *Parc Botanique*, Credit: Oliver Imfeld

6. Can you comment on how you worked with each location in relation to the image?

It was a big challenge to find the same angles from which the pictures were taken in the past. I wanted to show the past accurately next to the present.

The image of the gardens of *Botanique* in the beginning of the film was quite easy in that sense, because the building where the photo was taken in the past still exists, and I managed to get access. However, as one can see below, even though the gardens of *Botanique* are still very similar to what they once were, the changes in the surroundings are not as discreet.

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Image 8: *Le Jardin Botanique*, Credit: Archive image from the collection of Belfius Banque, Copyright ARB-SPRB, Documentation center of Brussels Urbanism and Patrimony “*Service Regional de Bruxelles, Centre de Documentation de BUP*” with the authorization of the Royal Academy of Brussels

Image 9: *Le Jardin Bortanique*, Credit: Oliver Imfeld

In *Place Rogier*, the old railway station in the middle of the picture has disappeared and only the two hotels on the right-hand side have remained there. This square is barely recognizable today.



Image 10: *Place Rogier*, Credit: Archive image from the collection of Belfius Banque, Copyright ARB-SPRB, Documentation center of Brussels Urbanism and Patrimony “*Service Regional de Bruxelles, Centre de Documentation de BUP*” with the authorization of the Royal Academy of Brussels

Image 11: *Place Rogier*, Credit: Oliver Imfeld

The *Grand Place*⁷, used as a parking space during the International Exposition of 1958, is looking empty and clean before the constant invasion of tourists at mid-day, nowadays.

⁷ The central square of Brussels

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Image 12: *Grand Place*, Credit: Archive image from the collection of Belfius Banque, Copyright ARB-SPRB, Documentation center of Brussels Urbanism and Patrimony "*Service Regional de Bruxelles, Centre de Documentation de BUP*" with the authorization of the Royal Academy of Brussels

Image 13: *Grand Place*, Credit: Oliver Imfeld

7. Can we have a statement/reflection/poem/sketch from Yorgos that responds to how you described the editing and inclusion of the postcards?

With this project there wasn't really a question of a visual reference with the edit. It was more about performance and achieving fluidity. We wanted the jumps into the past to be dynamic and visually incorporated and not have the "reminiscing" feel of a dissolve.

Another interesting technical part in the editing process was that initially, we edited on a pre-existing recording, which we could not keep due to very expensive copyright fees. We decided to commission an original track instead. While the original music was being written, the composer had to decide on the bpm (beats per minute) of his track, even though the melody was still evolving. The bpm defined the tempo of each scene and could not be altered once they were communicated to the editor. During the editing, we used those precise bpm so we could have the edit as precise as possible to the tempo of the action and the movement. Eventually, the final music score matched the tempo of the final version and the synchronization was achieved.

8. Color and fading

My initial idea about the color grading was to use all the old images in black and white so as to contrast the full color images of live sequences in the present. Together with Jorge Piquer, we worked the different sepia color of the old pictures to a unified black and white and accentuated the contrast to make them look more cinematographic. For the full color of the rest of the film, we worked with a very vivid Technicolor aspect, accentuating reds, greens, yellows and the turquoise color of the costume to make it stand out in the panoramic shots. This maximized the contrast between past and present, adding fun and lightness to the film and juxtaposing these with the heavier nostalgia of the past, the aging and transformation of the city.

The fading of the characters in the film is an allusion to the ephemeral aspect of our lives. It can be interpreted in several ways: These two women might be present now, but sooner or later they will become part of the past. Time is running for everyone, themselves and the city; or, their visions of the past make them discover a city they perhaps prefer and want to return to. Finally, the fading color adds to their atemporal surreal aspect, as they are literally floating between past and present throughout the film.

Biography: Astero Styliani Lamprinou

Astero Styliani Lamprinou originally from Athens and based in Brussels, studied movement, dance, cultural theory and choreography, at the *Laban Centre* and *London Contemporary Dance School* and completed a Master's degree in *Surrey University* with a scholarship from A. Onassis foundation. She was predominantly a performer in various fields (contemporary dance, opera, theater, video, installation) in London, Ireland, Athens and Brussels. She has worked with *Dance Theatre of Ireland*, *English National Opera*, *English National Theatre* and with choreographers such as Joanne Leighton, Yolande Snaith and David Hernandez. Her first short dance film is *SECRET CITY* (2020), a dancing passage in the city of Brussels and her second film *WALL TO WALL* (2020), is a site-specific dance on camera. She is currently working on the project *STONES*, for film and live performance.

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