

## INTERVIEW

# Conversing with Dreams: An Encounter with Antoinetta Angelidi

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Antoinetta Angelidi has been one of the few representatives of avant-garde cinema in Greece, consistently and persistently since the 1970s. The term 'avant-garde' is not one she has used for self-description until relatively recently, in accordance with a certain reluctance to pronounce the term, characteristic of the members of the 'second avant-gardes' of the 1960s and 1970s. There have been other terms to describe this kind of cinema, such as 'non-narrative', 'poetic' and 'experimental', none of which is exactly co-extensive with the other, each of which enters an equally controversial and complicated definitional dialectics. I will avoid entering the details of this debate and limit myself to a few remarks. 'Avant-garde' is an approach to the arts (and cinema) and not a specific visual style. It implies a definition of art as revolution in the sense of subverting existing structures and creating new ways of perception and expression. It involves a radical questioning of the institution of art; a structural belief in the indissoluble relation between form and content, and the subsequent revolutionary potential of form; the subversion of conventions, including the ones regarding representation and narration; and the transcending of categorical distinctions, including the one between art and life. There is no doubt that Angelidi's work fulfils this definition.

Having studied extensively Angelidi's films and texts, and after many conversations during a life-long creative collaboration, I have observed the recurrence of dreams as a central element of her work. Dreams define her personal theory and poetics. They appear, in multiple ways, as a point of intersection between epistemological levels and categorical divisions. I have tried to organise these multiple encounters with dreams in the following nine groups: (1) significant dreams that defined her life-path; (2) the structural similarity between the dream-mechanism and cinematic semiosis; (3) dream as a model for conceptualising her film poetics; (4) the technique of writing down her

dreams as a part of her filmmaking process; (5) dreams as raw material for her films; (6) dreams as represented in her films; (7) dream-communication as a simile for creative collaboration; (8) dreams as a part of her teaching technique; (9) lucid dream as a simile for her films' address to their spectators.

The following conversation took place in Greek, in Athens on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2017.



**Fig. 1:** *Topos* (Angelidi, 1985)

**Rea Walldén (RW)** – *I wish to address the multiple conversations your filmmaking develops with dreams, as structure, form and content, as lived experience and as a creation-technique, literally and metaphorically. I have counted nine such encounters and I would like us to discuss further each of them.*

**Antoinetta Angelidi (AA)** – *It is true that I converse with dreams in multiple ways: via the dream-mechanism, via memories of sleeping and dreams of awakening, via the personal and collective unconscious, and via the secretly alive world of art.*

**RW** – *You have many times described your entrance to the world of cinema as a path through different arts and a succession of revelations, punctuated by significant dreams.*

**AA** – *In the beginning was painting. It was through painting that I first felt this 'thing-condensation' that nourishes our lives. I have been drawing ever since I remember myself, and I have come to know myself through painting. In school breaks, I would study the veins of dry leaves and spider webs. Art books had a*

life of their own. When I first visited Paris, aged 17, I was enthralled by the stained-glass windows of Sainte-Chapelle. Soon after, I dreamt of a cathedral made of spider webs, a gigantic weightless three-dimensional structure illuminated by the sun-light. So, I decided to study architecture.

I entered the School of Architecture of the *Ethniko Metsovio Polytechnio* (EMP) in 1968. I struggled with the transfer from two to three dimensions. Three-dimensionality is a central question in Western painting, which of course gains a material literality in architecture. I was also much interested in geometric tracings, i.e. the structural organisation underlying apparent form, an element that architecture shares with painting. But I didn't find in architecture the magic I had dreamed of.

In 1972, after visiting the Documenta exhibition in Kassel, I had a life-changing dream. I saw an image that looked like a Magritte painting but included a slight, infinitesimal movement, internally, in the objects and the faces of people. This minimum movement shook me – yes, I am aware of the possible double meaning of this expression. What this minimum movement did was to introduce time into a painting. Time, the existence of time, haunted me, obsessed me, and has never left me since. After that, I knew that I wanted to make films but also what kind of films I wanted to make. I didn't know how to do it yet but I knew that I would. Cinema had been a forming parameter in my adolescence and first youth, even before my realisation that I wanted to be a filmmaker. In the mid-1960s, before the dictatorship, I had watched obsessively Soviet avant-garde and French Nouvelle Vague films – *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* made a lasting impression on me –, while during my university years I read and thought a lot about cinema.

Nevertheless, in the early 1970s, politics and the resistance to the dictatorship were becoming increasingly dominant parameters in my life. Art has always been my life, there was never a dividing line between the two. When political activism became a necessity and a priority, revolutionary politics became a part of that same continuum. While studying *Das Kapital*, in the same year that I saw my Magritte dream, I had a kind of vision: I saw the buildings around me as condensed labour. They were all made by luminous, palpitating grains of human labour; they were alive. This was, of course, a visualised understanding of the Marxian theory of surplus value. Soon after graduating from EMP, a comrade was arrested and our resistance cell was exposed. I had to leave the country immediately with nothing but the clothes on my back. I arrived in Paris as a political refugee, in August 1973.

I found myself in an extremely fertile environment, intellectually and artistically. In my first year in Paris, I attended the University of Vincennes, where some of the most prominent intellectuals of the time were teaching, and I was introduced to semiotics and psychoanalysis. I was also involved with the Greek political

refugees and feminist groups. Toward the end of that year, I became aware of the existence of the *Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques* (IDHEC), which at the time had the most innovative filmmakers and film theorists as teachers, as well as a radically new way of teaching cinema. When I decided to take the demanding IDHEC exams, I already knew what kind of cinema I wanted to do, my Magritte dream had told me: moving visualised concepts.

In the first days in IDHEC, the first film I was given to study on the editing table – we didn't have computers then – was Murnau's *Faust*. For 20 days I studied the film, turning it forward and backward, again and again. And then, I had a revelation. I observed something in the cut where the image of a cathedral is succeeded by the image of Mephistopheles. I realised that the body of the demon falls exactly where the axis of symmetry of the cathedral was in the previous frame. In other words, I understood the way geometrical tracings function in cinema. That same night, I saw a lucid dream of a huge wheel floating in the darkness. It was so immense that I couldn't see where it ended upwards and downwards. Then, I heard a voice, which I knew was Murnau's. And the voice said: "This is the way". And I knew then that I am a filmmaker.

**RW** – *What a story! In your narrative, there is a continuum between art and everyday life, visions and dreams, thoughts and films. You seem to be experiencing life as a lucid dream. A second way dreams appear in your world, in your theoretical texts in particular, is through their structural comparison to the cinematic medium.*

**AA** – When I studied in IDHEC, among my teachers was Thierry Kunzel and Noël Burch, while I also attended Christian Metz's seminars at the École des Hautes Études. Both Kunzel and Metz hint at a potential similarity between cinema and dreams, situated in the mechanisms of displacement and condensation, as described by Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams*. This similarity is completely different from the one Metz proposed later in his *Signifiant imaginaire*, which compares the mental experiences of film viewing and fantasising. Metz's concept of heterogeneity, complemented by Burch's theory on the relation between image and sound, as well as Sergei Eisenstein's film dialectics, offered further leads. Finally, through my filmmaking practice, through my filmmaking experience and intuition, I came to realise that there is an even stronger structural affinity between cinema and the dream-mechanism. It was you, Rea, in 2001, that helped me formulate this comparison in semiotic terms, while also adding to it some elements of Derrida's philosophy.



**Fig. 2:** *The Hours – A Square Film* (Angelidi, 1995)

**RW** – *The structural comparison between cinema and dreams concerns the fact that they produce meaning in similar ways. It can be located in four levels. First, there is the similarity between the cinematic sign-function and the dream sign-function on the level of expression-substance: they both use moving images, and also speech, music, noises, and inscriptions. Secondly, there is what Freud calls the dream-mechanism of ‘visualization’, which means that dreams transform linguistic expressions into images, a process similar to rebus games. Correspondingly, a film’s signification-formation relies on visualisation, as well as on a multi-way communication between materials and codes, and between signifier and signified. Thirdly, Freud describes the dream-mechanisms of ‘displacement’, a kind of associative chain, and ‘condensation’, the intersection of several associative chains. In cinema, signification functions in similarly flexible ways. Finally, according to Freud, dream’s secondary process turns the dream-thoughts into a consistent narrative, evolving in time; the similarity to cinema is obvious.*

*Freud considers dreams as ‘the royal road’ to the unconscious, meaning not only that one can access one’s unconscious by studying one’s dreams, but also that dreams exemplify the ways in which the unconscious functions. This entails that what is described in the case of dreams is actually the general mode of meaning-production. In this sense, one could argue that the cinematic medium is privileged in its affinity to the way the unconscious functions, thus allowing the expression of human signifying potential to a greater degree.*

*This is the open potentiality of the cinematic medium as such, regardless of whether and how it is used. Your particular film poetics, however, consists in the way that your films actualise this potentiality.*

**AA** – My theoretical view of cinema and the way I make films are inseparable. And while I have been very concerned about theoretical issues and their practical actualisation from the very beginning, my filmmaking method has not always been fully conscious. I have retrospectively recognised the fact that more or less the same principles have structured my films since my first short, but it was only relatively later in life that I articulated these principles theoretically as a consistent poetics. While there is a constant two-way communication between my theory and practice, filmmaking practice genealogically comes first. It is through the experience of making films, and following the paths where films take me, that I come to understand cinema and my own films.

My film poetics relies on a complex use of the potentialities of the cinematic medium and its relation to the unconscious, my own as well as the collective unconscious. It includes a particular approach to heterogeneity and codes, a play between defamiliarisation and the uncanny, and the incorporation of lived experiences and fragments of re-interpreted artworks. Meaning-formation in dreams is a good model on which to conceptualise and understand synthetically all these elements.

Understanding cinematic heterogeneity means realising that every element in a film narrates; light and shadows and colours and sounds and body movements, on equal terms with words. In a film, one can recognize the multiple narrations of the different cinematic elements, codes and sub-codes, which function separately and in combinations, and together produce its meaning. Heterogeneity allows me to think of a way to decompose what is perceived as unified and re-compose it in new ways. It allows me to create multiplying counterpoints of meaning, commenting and subverting each other. My poetics involves working on and against the codes, the way dreams do, inverting and juxtaposing them. Moreover, it relies on a communication between the elements of heterogeneity; screeching noises transform into lights, body movements continue as screams, women's voices weep through inanimate objects.

The structure of dreams has also taught me the incorporation of contradiction and the crucial importance of connection: between shots, as well as between the different elements inside the shots, and most importantly, the blanks in between, the voids. Signification depends on what is left out: out of the frame, in between the frames, out of consciousness, the ineffable, what is not and cannot be represented.

Furthermore, time in my films is structurally close to dream-temporality, the non-linear product of displacement and condensation, before the secondary rationalisation. One cannot fully unravel the temporality of my films, one cannot retrospectively conceive it as a linear causality. The exact temporal construction of my films depends largely on an intuitive feeling that cannot be fully rationalised even by myself. Timing, as internal and external rhythm, as created during the shooting and at the editing phase, is somehow dictated to me by a gut feeling.

Another matrix in my poetics is the combination of the structures of defamiliarisation and the uncanny. Defamiliarisation, according to the Russian Formalists, is the process through which art allows us to see the world in new ways, makes us perceive what we think that we know of old as totally new. Uncanny, according to Freud, is something that has always been familiar, but has become unfamiliar through repression. It is a characteristic of childhood beliefs, as well as archaic social beliefs, that survive in adult life as irrational fears. I consider that these two structures have common elements, and their combination characterizes my films. Importantly, what I mean is not the uncanny thematised by a film, as is the case with horror movies, what I mean is that the entire film partakes of a structure of strangeness, thus producing the defamiliarising effect of revealing the world in a novel way. Moreover, defamiliarisation as I conceive it is not simply distancing. It is rather a complex movement between identification and distancing, similar to the structure of the uncanny.

My films are textually structured on a constant oscillation between the inside and the outside, like lucid dreams. They aim for openness, the refusal of a definitive secondary interpretation, in order to make possible multiple readings. This effort is combined with the demand of experimentation, addressed both to the filmmaker, i.e. myself and later my students, and to the spectators.

Finally, a constant of my poetics has been using my own dreams as a source.

**RW** – *And a fourth encounter of yours with dreams regards the particular process you have developed in noting down your dreams, in order to use them in your work.*

**AA** – Every day of my life is part of the creative process that may lead to a film. Central to this process is the experience of lucid dreams, a laborious technique of emerging from the dreaming experience, as well as keeping dream-notebooks. I started systematically writing down my dreams after *Topos*, in 1985, on dream-notebooks that I keep beside my bed.

When I wake up from a dream, I don't want to emerge abruptly to the surface. I consciously keep the feeling of being in between as long as I can. It is a struggle

between memory and forgetfulness, a struggle to stay part of both worlds. I emerge slowly. Then, I try to note down the dream-events as they were, without adding new thoughts. I wish not to decode any meaning. I try to keep away the interfering and interpreting thoughts, which come buzzing like insects around the light, to obscure it; the light that shines out of the darkness of dreams. I wish to write down the dream-images, the dream-events as they are. It is an act of consciousness but not yet a secondary process in the Freudian sense. It is an act of acceptance and trust toward the dream. Then, I place the elements of these submersions side by side, and I reshape them, observing how they are traversed by threads of meaning. I use images and structures and entire phrases of speech.



**Fig. 3:** *Thief or Reality* (Angelidi, 2001)

**RW** – *So dreams become a kind of raw material for your films?*

**AA** – All my films are founded on a work on the unconscious; my own unconscious and the collective unconscious of world art. They are based on what is secret, on what is hidden, even from one's own self. I take material that is partly repressed and I work on it, using everything I have to create a new composition, which combines consciousness and the unconscious.

I devour my raw material and melt it in new forms. Fragments of dreams, and of experiences, and of paintings, and of texts; I decompose them and shape them in new formations. Heterogeneity allows me to think in this way. Heterogeneity allows me to decompose what is perceived as continuous and unified into smaller elements, and re-compose them anew. A face may be riven from its gaze, an utterance may be separated from the way it is uttered, and a small girl may escape from a painting and stroll through a film.

The way I recompose these fragments follows consciously the principles of the dream-mechanism. So, in a way, my dreams are subjected to the dream mechanism in the second degree: once by my dreaming unconscious and a second time as part of my conscious creative process.

**RW** – *Interestingly enough, in the many encounters with dreams that we have discussed so far, the one that is missing completely is what most people would conceive as dreams in cinema: i.e. the representation of dreams inside your films. Of course, the thematics of dreaming and dreams is present in many of your films, and in quite prominent ways. What differs from a more conventional approach to the subject is that there is no clear demarcation between what is dream and what is not. Considering that the entire film is structured as a dream, the representation of dreams is neither structurally nor visually differentiated from the rest of the film. This is in accordance with an intra-narrative questioning and blurring of the borderline between dreaming and the waking condition, which appears consistently in your films, from the character who vows that “from now on [she] will dream that [she is] awake” in *Topos* to the repeated awakenings that never get the character out of the dream in *Thief or Reality*.*

**AA** – There is no demarcation line between dreams and non-dreams in my films because I consider both conditions equally real. Dreams are real. And our waking selves are dreaming in a way. I perceive life as a dream.

**RW** – *Going back to the description of how you use your dreams and lived experiences as a source for your filmmaking, one has to admit that this is a very personal process. Yet filmmaking is by definition a collaborative project. Moreover, in your case, you have also developed two intimate creative collaborations, with Clairi Mitsotaki in the early 1980s and with me since the mid-1990s.*

**AA** – Filmmaking is an oscillation between the personal and the collective. In the beginning, it is an effort to see your own face, a tortuous effort to perceive yourself; in later stages, it evolves into a succession of communications and painful letting-goes. It is an immersion and an opening at the same time, a condition between memory and forgetfulness. This difficult oscillation is the source of deep pleasure.

Creative collaborations are elective affinities, they rely on a communication between unconscious as much as on conscious communication. I always develop a personal relationship with everyone who contributes to the creation of my films. Of course, there are different degrees of communication as there are different kinds of collaboration. The collaboration that I had with Clairi, and even more the one that I have with you, are extremely intense and intimate.

**RW** – *I agree that there are different kinds and different moments of communication in creative collaborations. Sometimes one invites the other to enter one's dreams, sometimes one shares theirs, and sometimes we dream open-eyed together. Sometimes one has to stay faithful to one's vision and sometimes one has to lose oneself in the vision of another, and what is created in the end is both very intimate and totally other.*

*A particular kind of communication, though, is the teaching process. Your eighth encounter with dreams is through your method of teaching film direction.*

**AA** – Since I was a student myself, I have considered the teacher-student relationship to be a two-way learning process, a revolutionary practice in the way this is defined in Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*. As a teacher, I stand by that definition. The teacher becomes the student of her students and through teaching I have come to learn better who I am. I am grateful.

As I explained earlier, my filmmaking method was revealed to me through the making of my films and is the outcome of many years of filmmaking practice. In my 50s, when I started teaching in the university, and more intensively since I started teaching film direction in the Film School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, I started articulating my experience into a method exceeding my own. Obviously, it is modelled on my filmmaking, of which it constitutes a condensed distillation; it functions, however, not as a final objective but rather as a stepping stone for the students to discover their own methods.

The first objective of teaching is to help the students develop their own point of view. A course in film direction does not primarily teach how films are directed, but rather how one can find one's own way of directing films. And, however widely applicable my filmmaking method may be, it remains only one possibility. The objective is for the students to develop not only their own directing style, but also their own filmmaking method.

Therefore, my teaching method aims at activating the students' unconscious and allowing them to shape their own poetics. Its main elements include an awareness of the potentialities of the cinematic medium in their affinity to the dream-mechanism, the use of personal experiences, and particularly of childhood memories and significant dreams, the immersion in the history of art, and the demand for experimentation. Dreams and repressed childhood memories, in particular, become paths for the students to access their unconscious. Much relies on my personal contact with each student, where my unconscious has to act as an intermediary toward their own.

**RW** – *As you mentioned earlier, dreams are often connected to cinema through the comparison of the experience of the spectator to the one of the dreaming or*

*fantasising subject, which Metz interprets in terms of identification. On your part, you have mostly approached dreams from the point of view of the film, as the general mechanism of meaning-production and the textual structure of your own films, and from the point of view of the film-maker, as lived experience and inspiration. Yet, you have also insisted on resituating the spectator-dreamer simile, no longer on the model of escapist fantasy but on the model of liberating lucid dream.*

**AA** – I don't want to manipulate the spectators. I don't want my films to be fantasies or wet dreams or narcotics. I want them to function as lucid dreams. I hope that they create a fertile oscillation between identification and distanciation, and allow multiple interpretations. My films aim at the activation of the spectators' unconscious, not their numbing and manipulation. They are addressed to emancipated spectators, who will find in them freedom and themselves. The only thing my films ask is to be received with open eyes and open minds.

**RW** – *So, what do you think about the so-called narrative cinema, this ideologically dominant identification machine?*

**AA** – I refuse to accept that narrative cinema is the rule and every other kind is an exception. Narrative cinema is just one of the many possibilities offered by the cinematic medium. After all, why "narrative", what is narration? I think that the Aristotelian model provides a very restricted definition. I believe that there are many kinds of narration and that every element in a film develops its own narrative. What is often called "non-narrative" cinema is in reality filmmaking that takes into account some of the infinite possibilities of the cinematic medium in innovative ways; in other words cinema-poetry.

I was never interested in doing narrative cinema. I have always aimed at creating moving visualised concepts.

**RW** – *This other cinema, which should not be perceived as an extreme exception but rather as actualising the open potential of cinema as such, is cinema as poetry in the broad sense, i.e. cinema as art.*

**AA** – And as the main function of art is to produce new language and to offer new ways of seeing, the gift of poetic cinema to the world is double: it discovers what cinema can do and reveals the world anew.