

INTERVIEW

**“What Has Happened? ...
A Challenge for the Established
Mode of History”:
A conversation with Angela
Melitopoulos**

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Angela Melitopoulos is a well-known video artist and media philosopher whose work has been shown at international film festivals and in museums all over the world – from the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and New York's Whitney Museum to the Antoni Tàpies Foundation in Barcelona and the *documenta 14*. Her video essays, sound installations, documentary projects and photographs often centre around mnemonic and micro-political processes. They reflect on the complex relations between geography, psychology, and migratory movement; on modes of individual or collective remembering (and forgetting) and the act of witnessing; on history, especially that of fascism, and the neoliberal and neo-colonial present, together with its various wars and destructions; on new forms of minoritarian or resistant subjectivity that produce a different kind of knowledge. Combining artistic practice with theoretical research (since 2008 Melitopoulos was teaching at various European art academies, at last as a professor at the School of Media Arts at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen), she perpetually explores alternative ways of expression, calling for new vantage points, critical inquiries and intellectual responses – “a new language to rethink histories and our present condition”. To a certain extent, her work enters into dialogue with the political thinking and activism of others: with Félix Guattari, in the first place, but also with Antonio Negri (whom she interviewed during the last days of his Parisian exile in 1997 and, then, in the prison of Rebibbia) or the philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato (who, for his part, states that

his own concept of videophilosophy has been informed by his encounter with Angela Melitopoulos' work).

MARIA OIKONOMOU: *Let us begin with the opening scene of Passing Drama (1999). The video essay was inspired by oral reminiscences of refugees, including members of your own family who have, through generations, experienced deportation from Turkey, then forced labour in Austria and Germany in 1942 and, finally, migration as guest-workers or Gastarbeiter to these same countries. The video begins with a quotation from Agamben's essay "Beyond Human Rights" (Agamben 2000) that addresses several momentous facts of 20th century history, the number of displaced populations after World War I, or the significance of specific peace treaties. Meanwhile, the voices in your video – the voices of witnesses and their descendants – describe the same events, retold from one generation to the next, in a way that "sounds like a fairy tale". Does history occur somewhere between evidence and fable? And when you say that Passing Drama "is neither documentation nor fiction", how would you describe this other 'genre'?*

ANGELA MELITOPOULOS: I would say that it is a becoming genre, something that has not yet been recognized as a defined category. (As far as this matter of genre is concerned, I personally refer to *A Thousand Plateaus* where there is one question in the centre of what defines the genre: *what happened?* [Deleuze, Guattari 1987: 192ff.] This is the key question, regarding not only matters of genre, but also creation itself.) And at the same time, it is a new format that may have been invented as a new powerful possibility. I don't think that essays like *Passing Drama* have existed before that.

Passing Drama emerges from a very brutal situation – from an often intense amnesia that was forced upon the refugee populations from Asia Minor. These people all had very different stories, depending on the group they belonged to and their migration itinerary. They were also from differing cultures. The trauma of the exodus during the years 1921 to 1923 and the so-called "population exchange" between Greek and Turkish peoples decided in the treaty of Lausanne of 1923 inscribed itself as a machine repressing the memories of the violence they experienced. This was certainly the case in Greece: refugees from Asia Minor were not really welcome, and that harsh reception followed them from country to country, along their migration paths. Still today it is a difficult historical debate and mostly not seen from the perspective of the refugees.

Each time, another audience, another 'public of listeners' would reshape their accounts and stories. Silences and police repression shaped these stories, for example after they crossed borders and had to respond to the question where they came from. These types of 'listening' are shaping the storytelling. In addition, their story has been formed from generation to generation. For instance, the first generation of my grandparents experienced the deafness of an autochthon Greek population who had to host 1.5 million refugees from Asia Minor, often

called with the racist taunt 'the sperm of the Turks'. In a sense, this sheds light onto the Greek nation state's politics of 1923, which impacted on the reception and attitude towards these refugees and informed the way they themselves could tell their stories. From the nation state perspective, the 'catastrophe of Asia Minor', that included a 'population exchange' and a settlement of the conflict through the treaty of Lausanne in 1923, was coined as a political success, but beyond this rather strong leading assessment, we can also see a continuity of escape routes: from generation to generation, from World War I to the time of the *Gastarbeiter* in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

The forceful repression of memories acted directly upon the stories of the next generations and was intensified by their own trauma. They wanted to forget, they wanted to begin anew. Walter Benjamin describes the migrant as someone who is beginning anew. They tried to re-create their lives; they had to do that. But then, they were forced to flee again – because of the occupation of Greece by Bulgarian and German forces during World War II, and then because of their intense poverty. So, the third generation, to which I belong, grew up in Germany and was confronted with a triple-repressive force of forgetting its history.

The refugees after World War I, (the Ottoman Empire was allied with the German Reich – a very important circumstance) did not have formal accounts of their specific history from the nation-states they lived in after. Today we are officially informed – twenty-two years after I made the film and a hundred years after these historical events – that Germany was of course at least a witness to the Armenian and Greek genocides in the Ottoman Empire and new Turkish state. During World War II, the second generation was subjected to new forced migration movements from Greece that included people who had earlier been displaced from Asia Minor. From 1941 to 1945 many were deported to labour camps or to the death camps. After World War II, there was the civil war in Greece dividing the people, a schism that has not healed until today. Then, the general context of the anti-communist alliance between Britain and Greece forced many people to flee again, not only those who fled to Eastern bloc countries.

You can see how one event leads to another, and we are still trying to understand how this is possible, how a group of people is confronted with forced migration from one generation to the next. Many of them became 'guest-workers' in Germany, sometimes working in the same factories where they had been as slave-labourers during the war. Historical research was, and still is lacking. This blind spot in history did not enable the victims to assemble and recollect the facts. There was also intense poverty that made Greece the poor-house of Europe. Thus, the stories were mostly told within families, within small minoritarian groups that struggled with the mechanism of forgetting – a sick process and also a sickening one, and a real physical threat. But some of these

people fortunately became incredible storytellers, somehow being able to navigate through their life stories.

At this point, the questions of what is real, what is true, *what has happened* appear again. Therefore, in *Passing Drama*, I chose to give preference to the crossings and polyphony of voices in conversations, and to how these conversations allow each other to touch a ground of truth. I focus on the voices that repeat each other, that are repeated and repeated from one generation to the next until they become a song, a song-line or some sort of crystallized memory. In *Passing Drama*, I included many such text lines, edited because of the melody of their voices. Stories have been transferred from mothers to children, or among family members, or from one family to another, in this minoritarian context. I listened to these voices as a child, and the mere sound of them was very important.

Somewhere I am quoting Franz Rosenzweig – actually a quotation that I found in a text by Walter Benjamin (1968: 132) – who describes the Chinese ancestral curse as the forgetting of today merging with the forgetting of yesterday, which in turn merges with the forgetting of the day before yesterday, a process that creates ever-new monstrosities. It is this type of reality, these forces of amnesia, this form of storytelling, which is neither fictional nor documentary. It is rather a radical reading and re-reading of oral history, of stories that I heard when I was a child and also later, when I did my research in the villages near the city of Drama.

This is how I created an editing method that transforms the whole process of reading, re-reading and reading-again into a material of itself. This was possible through video technology which is *time-based* and, thus allows you to inscribe the time of reading and image-speed into those of the next image generation. It is an analogue video processing that offers you these specific technical possibilities. When I developed this idea, I had already been working with experimental approaches, mainly as member of an international group of experimental video artists in Germany. Then, of course, I was also influenced by the theoretical concepts of Henry Bergson or Walter Benjamin which made a lot of sense to me, aside from Fluxus and my very own artistic methods. So, the video becomes a ‘psycho-geographic’ recording of migrations – to cite the Catalan psycho-therapist François Tosquelles and his description of a new form of psycho-motoric therapy, which was fundamental for the work of Félix Guattari. One could probably say with François Tosquelles that this is a type of “migrant-work” it constitutes a ‘geopsychiatry’: a relation between geography, mobility and the mind; and I think that a lot of this has to do with migration (Guattari 1996).

MO: *Instead of reconstructing events or confirming our belief in archival material and oral history, Passing Drama challenges ‘truth’, ‘transparency’ and ‘objectivity’. It does so through an associative montage that interweaves sound, image, and text*

and produces disjunctions and abstractions. On the one hand, this reflects the various layers and modes of memory: the intentional selection of certain fragments or moments, but also lacunae, fissures, and the blind spots of trauma. On the other, your 'transgressive' montage seems to perform border crossings, displacements or lines of flight – as if the video translated migration into form. Is there a closer connection, in *Passing Drama*, between topic and artistic practice?

AM: Certainly. From today's point of view, I would say that it is *autopoietic*. Migration narratives in the arts are, from my point of view, a kind of *autopoietic avant-garde*, dealing with connectivities or a connective field – something that we understand much better now, since we are all the time embedded in some sort of connective field, a network that constantly creates new networks. *Passing Drama* was constructed on this idea of passing through, of passage, a kind of motion that Benjamin used to describe the modern condition.

In addition, there is something that has not been noticed very much. All these people who are in motion in so many different ways often like to use cameras to create their archives and recordings from their own perspectives, from the perspective of someone who is passing through and changing places. And of course, they also use them to tell stories – but without 'representing' the story. It does not take place within a stable historical or geographical context. This is precisely what makes them the *avant-garde* of storytelling, they are actually translating their operations into images, and they do not claim that an image is always true or a fixed reference while they are going from one geographic location to another. It is true only *there and now*, it is only a *point*. They are producing a point-point-point relation whose representation is not fixed in that sense.

This works against a certain colonizing mindset – for instance, in the colonization of indigenous people. A rupture of meaning occurs that is described in *A Thousand Plateaus* as another understanding of the subject-object relation in the processes of subjectivation. And I would add that it is a big problem for most areas of film theory as well, where images are often debated with respect to one stable geographic or cultural context within which everything has a fixed meaning. First, you take this meaning for granted, and only then can you be 'critical', 'against' it, or 'mainstream'. For me, however, everything depends on how one point forms a line with the next point, and then the next, and the next. In other words, we are dealing with a *becoming*, the image itself is a becoming. 'Representation' and the aesthetic debates about it often do not acknowledge this becoming. On the contrary, they exclude the becomings of 'minor languages', the micro-mediatic workings of image production. This is also the case in cartography: migration is turned into an issue of statistic features and powers. In this sense, *Passing Drama* tries to realize a more radical way of seeing and memory, a montage that documents the velocities and flightlines in a 'situation' or listens to a 'story', that recounts history from an antechamber perspective.

One could say that it is a meta-level of documentary work, a meta-level of storytelling which is formed in the condition of mobility. It could also be understood as the living metaphor of a changing landscape, an image ‘crystallization’, as we have called it with Maurizio Lazzarato.¹ Here, the processes of memory are taken literally. I actually used the capacities of video, of signals that I could expand or condense, in accordance with Henri Bergson’s notion of the human faculties of memory (Bergson 1988). Of course, this generates a certain element of transgression; it affects our perception very strongly, and we might not fully grasp the degree of ‘reality’ of what we see: is it a fairy tale, is this a documentary, or something ‘hyper-real’? However, we must remember that the hyper-real is sometimes more real than reality. Thus, the video transgresses our habits of perception, and this is necessary in order to counter the lack of history in the context of nation-states that left all these people in such situations after the war.

MO: *Since you mentioned Maurizio Lazzarato: while he praises *Passing Drama* for its abstraction and “a-modal”, “pre-verbal”, and “dehumanized” transsubjectivity (Lazzarato, Melitopoulos 2003: 124-25), there are others who criticize precisely this tendency of abstraction, claiming that the video confronts the viewer with indiscernible voices and opaque figures: “the people are missing”. What can you say about such figures – made, as it were, of shadows and movement – as representations of the migrant, the stateless, the politically disempowered? Do displacement and the destabilization of political status also produce a hole in the visual field, a troubling of representation?*

AM: This is perhaps a problem of how sedentary cultures envision mobile migration cultures. For example, you just referred to the figure of the ‘stateless’ – this is a figure who tells a story, it is a person, and the story changes very much from itinerary to itinerary, from location to location, as I tried to explain before. All these accounts cannot simply be joined, as it happens in the construction of the official historical truth of a nation-state or any other aristocratic realm. There is no ‘history’ made in *Passing Drama*, not only because it would be much too singular or individual, but also because it has been repressed, sometimes voluntarily. These people and their stories interfered with the prevalent historical narratives of the countries they were passing through.

It is a complicated subject, talking about such ‘figures’, about their position of speaking, or about citizens within political contexts. It is complicated to talk about what the political theatre of representation has done, and why a lot of people have not been represented in this theatre, why they do not have faces in

¹ See, for instance, the Introduction and Chapter 2 (‘Bergson and Machines That Crystallize Time’) in Lazzarato’s *Videophilosophy* whose original title was *Machines that Crystallize Time: Perception and Labor in Post-Fordism*.

this theatre. But when this theatre does not allow these people to speak, this does not mean that they don't have voices in my video. They are gaining a speaking position by joining their voices. Polyphony and Becoming. As I said before, it is the melody of these voices that passes certain sentences down from one generation or person to the next. This force of oral history and storytelling has a certain reality in terms of *where* it happens or *how* it happens. It is the context, and it is always an amalgam of voices. But at the same time, there are individual persons who can be seen in the video – and quite well, I think.

However, one must watch the video from beginning to end. At the beginning, the spectator is not able to identify the faces talking but has a partial image from different faces that are saying these incredible things. It is quite natural that you start wondering what, where, why, who did this – *what happened?* Nonetheless, all these questions constitute exactly the core of the genre. So, you have to go along with it, in a certain sense. I am familiar with that argument of the people that are 'missing': "The missing people are a becoming, they invent themselves, in shanty towns and camps, or in ghettos, in new conditions of struggle to which a necessarily political art must contribute" (Deleuze 1985). My answer is that I do not think the people I have been working with and who appear in the beginning as a part of a grouped voice would consider themselves as these 'missing' people. And even if somebody insists that the people are missing, they are there and would claim their place in the political theatre of the countries they lived in. This creates a very strong alliance between me and the people who talk about this specific historical condition. In her first book, *The God of the Small Things* (1997), Arundhati Roy gives us some wonderful stories from children who are marginalised and look at what happens as if they were looking through a window. For them, the history happens behind this window, but they are outside of the scene and watch from a marginalized position. This is what I work with, the peripheral and microscopic structures that are collected through various voices and persons. I tried, with a lot of effort actually, to bring them *out*, especially because I did not want the video to become some sort of a common family history. I tried to work on another level, the level of voices, their repetition and melody that give context and structure to the images.

MO: *Perhaps we can also approach Passing Drama through a concept which gives the title to another one of your works, Assemblages (2010) – a kind of documentary about Félix Guattari's life and practice that you produced together with Maurizio Lazzarato. If an assemblage is a complex of heterogeneous entities, affects, and deterritorializations that come together without ever constituting an organic totality, if it prefers exchange and fluid relations over individual elements, we can perhaps find assemblages throughout your entire work. Would you say that artistic assemblages have a particular potential for creating imaginative scenarios or historical understanding? And can they generate other modes of spectatorship?*

AM: Assemblage is a term that alludes to the formation of subjectivities. An assemblage is a group of things and people that work together, a dynamic between people, things, atmospheres, whatever is there. But somehow they are also in operation within a larger context. So, it is an idea of the workings of complex subjectivities that results from Guattari's 'intense' understanding of the mind, of the psyche, of how we perceive things, and how expression is created in our lives.

Again, in accordance with François Tosquelles, this is sometimes more real than a 'real' situation. In a certain sense, assemblages are a more adequate form of describing events because here we no longer talk about 'history'. We talk about an event that occurs, about how we are taking part in it, and how we explain to ourselves what has happened or what is happening. Hence, this is a challenge for the established mode of history; it radically challenges its methodologies. This has also left its mark on many postcolonial and poetic filmmakers since the 90s, in Europe, in Britain, or on myself in Germany, who felt the urge for a different form or new language to describe the past. We are familiar with the limitations of the methodological approaches in history to convey *what has happened*, that history can even forget genocides, entire populations that can vanish at any one point in time. When I made *Passing Drama*, this whole history was not known in Germany, despite the fact that Germany was a part of it. So, if this form or repression of memory and history happens again and again and again – and we know so much more today, after twenty or thirty years of postcolonial pressure – history-forms have to change. It is not possible to continue with a historical method that is not working. We must find another type of agency, an assemblage, other groups expressing themselves within the event. Assemblage is a translation of this idea of a 'grouped' expression.

MO: Yes, I completely agree. In a similar sense, your latest work *Crossings*, exhibited at the documenta 14 (Franke 2017), once again rejects the established epistemology and truth claim of the documentary. Yet, despite that, *Crossings* clearly remains a 'documentary project' which observes life in transitional social and economic zones of conflict – be it the refugee camps of Lesbos, the mining enclave in Skouries, crisis-ridden Athens or Lavrion. It follows "a sort of activist form of documenting", as you say, (Steiner 2008) without "taking the position of neutral survey". Can such a "documentary-activist-engagement" also help to transform the very material economic and political inequality in its demand for justice and empowerment? Can it create concrete political participation or even transformation?

AM: Yes, I think so. *Crossings* was made within a still active movement in Greece – not only in Skouries but also in other places. Of course, activism here means something that is also open to becoming; it is never a closed chapter. It is very intensively working with the moment, forming new expressions and analyzing the situation politically.

The movement in Skouries is a very good example, because it was a huge movement with many people who provided a massive amount of knowledge about what was happening there with the gold mining that no other journalist or institution could give. A lot of information has been gathered by this movement. This type of activist condition intensifies communication with many other people, and so you are becoming someone who collects images and memories and documents that can be useful within the movement and are exchangeable within it. Participating in such formats, with people who engage in the very making of those stories, offers much greater possibilities than other formats. I do not say that other formats don't have that potential – but I was deeply impressed by the strength of the artistic intuitions and creations, not only videos, that emerged from this. And I am still impressed by the significance of all this for political groups and movements. There is a future in there that we have not fully recognized yet.

Another example: right now, I am filming with Aboriginal artists working in Australian art centres, and it is absolutely overwhelming how strongly they weave their political agenda into their artistic one. So, yes, I would say that all this indeed achieves a transformation, gives us more participatory ideas, a more radical invitation to non-hierarchical or less 'structured' formats – in contrast to the filmmaking of the 90s, where 'structure' often acted like a force of military occupation, forming a kind of hierarchical body which defined some of the productions to their core. The examples that we are discussing are informed by an understanding of the production of subjectivities, assemblages, non-hierarchical groupings, intuitive artistic sensitivities that belong to everyone and not just the artist. That's what is in the making here, and I hope the same will happen in future politics.

MO: *By charting the geographies of global capitalism, migration, and policies that create unjust living conditions, Crossings comes to the conclusion that there are "some geographical areas which are always the site of the same kind of history" (Steiwert 2008) – what you call the "spleen of a place". Greece, you say, appears to be such a place; and indeed, if we juxtapose Passing Drama and Crossings, there seems to occur, time and again, a "certain kind of events". Does Crossings imply that there is No Passing Drama? And what is needed to finally overcome that drama?*

AM: I think, what is needed and what we must push for is storytelling. Storytelling is crucial, not because it would suggest that there is no drama, but because it reworks the question of *what has happened*, and this, after all, is a form of changing the story. It is a form of processing stories. Already the title *Passing Drama* points to some sort of passage, of something that you may take with you or leave behind. Thus, a *passing drama* becomes a very therapeutic moment in itself. When you leave your past, you are left with just this one moment of release. Sto-

ries cannot attack you in the same way anymore. You have processed them. This is a possibility that comes with storytelling. People who encounter many different crossings, who cross many layers of different crises are sometimes blocked and not able to understand what happens, what they have to do in this or that situation. However, instead of being subjected to these chaotic workings, instead of being afraid or stay traumatised, one could produce within a realm of storytelling to tell others what has happened.

This is why *Crossings* provides the possibility for understanding that things can be exchanged and juxtaposed with each other, contrary to certain academic or aesthetic regimes which do not allow the emerging condition of the NOW to enter the making of histories. Things are connected, and if we do not understand their connections, we do not understand the political significance of the whole workings in this situation. *Crossings* uses four screens, and sometimes the stories appear simultaneously next to each other.

In fact, there are a lot of double screens in my work; my montage is always based on the idea of letting images talk with each other, letting them be with each other, and see what happens. It is an experimental approach of montage because through such processes I can renew my ideas and imagination: I understand the reality of things as different – again, in a sense, more real than ‘reality’. A document that employs a fixed method of ‘documentation’ can hardly make you understand how to produce something real. Instead, you must develop an understanding of yourself having to liberate yourself from certain projections or notions of how things are. You must be confronted with realities that are not just real but more real than the real, in a sense.

MO: *One last question. With respect to the future politics of documentary and migration, the art historian T. J. Demos (2013) notes that the great challenge is to move away from the familiar spectacle of misery, suffering, and victimhood of migrants; instead, we must explore migration as a potentiality, as a mode of social resistance and political becoming. I think you would agree with this notion ...*

AM: Yes, absolutely. T. J. Demos has also invited me to Santa Cruz. We had lots of discussions; I think we agree on many issues like the juxtaposition, layering, or intersectionality of conflicts, but also on this figure of someone radically trying to create and, at the same time, being constructed *within* that specific situation, having no other possibility than to create within that context. It is amazing that with my latest project on the post-genocidal situation of Australian indigenous people, I have learned again that we are in the making of our worlds. We have to understand that.

MO: *Can you say something more about your new project in Australia?*

AM: I travelled to Australia last year, and I am working on the film right now. It is called *Matri Linear B²*, and it is about the relation between a landscape and the act of viewing a landscape, between the environment and how we perceive the environment, outside-inside in a certain sense, and also about the radical proposition to realise an act of perceiving as an act of claiming the history of the land that is included in Aboriginal cultures. I found this is a really interesting approach with numerous political, aesthetic, and social implications. I do think that we can learn a lot from it, that we should embrace all these artistic potentialities that come from people who confront ‘intensities’ like displacement and migration. For me at least, this is obvious – for others perhaps less so. In any case, we must be more precise, since our interest should not be an excuse in the face of miserable conditions. However, one should listen to these peoples and to the stories they can tell us, how they conceive of politics and what their understandings are.

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² Individual research files from the project are available on vimeo.com: <https://vimeo.com/409744230>

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