



After 10 or 15 minutes you can't see anything else — sky and water.



We live here, ten Kurdish families, thirty people.



It's an old story from the previous century about my father and me.



with the fragrance (you couldn't remember the name) of lindens.



EKTORAS ARKOMANIS

# Passage Variations

LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY  
THE SCHOOL OF ART, ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

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## Project details

Output author	<b>Ektoras Arkomanis</b>
Collaborators	<b>Serafeim Arkomanis, Stelios Bouziotis, Panagiotis Papafragkos (film crew)</b>
Project title	<b><i>Passage Variations</i></b>
Output type	<b>Q – Digital or visual media (Film)</b>
Location	<b>Athens, Greece and London, UK</b>
Dates	<b>2017–2019</b>
Budget	<b>£6,000</b>

Supplementary information submitted via URL:

***Passage Variations*** (2019). Directed by E. Arkomanis.



After 10 or 15 m  
see anything else



minutes you can't  
— sky and water.

Figure 2. Still from *Passage Variations* (2019); a passage in the refugee camp, with refugee testimony (subtitles) recalling the precarious journey to Greece.

## Research content and significance

### DESCRIPTION

*Passage Variations* examines, through film, the spatial qualities of the Eleonas refugee camp in Athens and their narrative potential. This practice-led research draws on spatial observation in order to devise a methodology for filming in refugee camps. The aim of this methodology is to integrate testimony, earlier histories of migration and literary accounts into the present image of the camp as captured on film.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How can the histories of refugeeism and migration in the area of Eleonas be brought forward through the filming in the refugee camp?
- How can the given layout and spatial qualities of the camp aid the integration of the aforementioned histories in the film's narrative?
- What methodology can be devised that may be employed by visual anthropologists, visual artists and historians working with moving image, in exploring the narrative potential afforded by similar environments?

### PROCESS

Filming, interviews and writing were used as principal methods. Transposing filmic observation into writing entailed redactions, but also rationalisation and new focal points—earlier histories of migration in particular—which then informed the editing of the film. This process, which is documented in the article 'Passage Variations: An Elliptical History of Migration in Eleonas', led to devising a methodology for integrating these histories in the film.

## DISSEMINATION

*Passage Variations* has been screened internationally (*Tacoma Film Festival*) and further contextualised in published journal articles (*Architecture and Culture*), book chapters (*Spaces of Tolerance, Migrations in New Cinema*) and conference presentations (*RAI Film Festival Conference*), as detailed in the Dissemination section of this document.

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The devised methodology bridges a gap between knowledge and practice; it identifies ways in which neglected or scarcely documented histories and accounts can be foregrounded in film, and when dealing with the particular type of spatial and social environment that is the refugee camp.

## Introduction

The Eleonas refugee camp, set up in 2015, is a refugee camp in Athens, which has been a crucial transitional point in the recent refugee movement from the Middle East into the rest of Europe.

This research was initially motivated by the chronically scarce documentation and under-representation of migrant/refugee life in the area of Eleonas. The aim was to conduct a place-based, visual-anthropological study of refugee experience in the camp (2017), and to foreground earlier migrations that have taken place in Eleonas (1920s, 1980s-2000s). While filming in the camp I became intensely aware of its actual layout, and I decided that the above aims should be pursued more narrowly, with focus on the camp's spatial attributes.

The objective was therefore to test and evaluate specific methods of filming and editing that would utilise the spatial qualities of the camp, so as to simultaneously incorporate its present image, testimony and historical record.





Figure 3. Still from *Passage Variations* (2019).  
Eleonas refugee camp: a child is cycling  
through one of the thoroughfares in the

camp, bringing back some shopping. In the  
background, the burnt factory of Athenian  
paper company.

## Research context

### HISTORY OF MIGRATIONS IN ELEONAS

Eleonas has a history of migrations, from the 1920s to the present day; some of them are listed in my article for *Architecture and Culture* (Arkomanis, 2019a) and referred to in more detail in the chapter: 'A Season in the Olive Grove' in the book *Migrations in New Cinema* (Arkomanis, 2020, pp.88-94). The archive footage used in the film has been obtained from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and depicts scenes from the 1920s relocation of one-and-a-half million Greeks from Asia Minor to Greece (fig. 5). The significance of this historic event is that 300,000 of the displaced Greeks were brought to Athens and many of them settled in Eleonas and the western suburbs. Other excerpts of interviews of immigrants were taken from Zoe E. Ropaitou-Tsapareli's ethnographic study of Eleonas (2006), in which she has collected testimonies that point to other, less documented migrations in Eleonas (e.g. Kurdish from the 1970s onwards, Albanian from the 1980s onwards).

### THE REFUGEE CAMP AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Concerning the refugee camp as the specific environment where my filming took place, I have used Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) as both a point of reference and departure. Specifically, I considered Agamben's concept of sovereign power and bare life in relation to the refugees' journeys; his paradigm of the refugee as embodying an inclusion in the form of exception, and the refugee camp as the environment where this is realised and manifest. Departing from Agamben, I use the scenes and signs of 'everydayness' in the refugee camp as complementary evidence of the refugee experience, which in some cases retrieves a sense of rehabilitation and evinces the re-constitution of normality. This is explained in more detail in my article 'Passage Variations: An Elliptical History of Migration in Eleonas', for the journal *Architecture and Culture* (Arkomanis, 2019a).



Figure 4. Still from *Passage Variations* (2019).  
Traces of immigrant life in Eleonas in 2014,  
on the site where the Eleonas refugee camp  
was set up a year later.

## FILM, ANTHROPOLOGY AND VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Gupta and Ferguson (1992) lamented that “anthropological theory has shown very little interest in the issue of space” considering how central in the discipline are spatial concepts such as field/fieldwork, exploration, and the remote—not to mention the relational classification of the ‘other’ as ‘non-Western.’ Since that claim was made, visual anthropology has contributed to intensifying anthropology’s preoccupation with concepts, theories and depictions of space. At the same time, topical subjects such as refugeeism and migration have afforded film an opportunity to redeem realism, or to restore our belief in reality (Deleuze, 1985).

I have examined films that have experimented with performative techniques in filming refugees, such as Laurent van Lanker’s film *Calais* (2017), where images were filmed by the refugees themselves, with their mobile phones, are then projected onto their own tents thereby creating an instant history—performed and distributed—of what would otherwise remain overlooked or marginal. I have also looked at works that, in filming refugees, have employed novel methodologies, as these arise from the filmic means/technology, as well as from the given environments and

circumstances, e.g. Richard Mosse’s video installation *Incoming* (2017).



Figure 5. Earlier histories of migration and refugeeism in Eleonas, on archive footage and manifest on material remains. *Top:* Greek refugees arriving in Greece and being

settled in refugee camps, after the Greek-Turkish wars and population exchange, in 1923. *Bottom:* Old brick and adobe immigrant house in Eleonas dating 1920s.

## Research process

### METHODS

The observation of existing spatial relationships informed a specifically constructed *mise-en-scene*. Filming was the principal method, because of its capacity to capture human interaction and everyday experience in the context of a setting, and to document the identity of place, the particulars of space and the material attributes of the human-made environment. Film also affords possibilities for narratives that transcend spatial and temporal boundaries, through non-linear editing and the incorporation of archive footage and interviews.

Interviews with residents of the camp were instrumental in accessing the refugees' memories of their journeys to Eleonas. These memories are essential in forming the overall narrative because they are in many cases unabating and they inform the present lives of refugees.

Research reading included six types of sources:

- NGO and government documentation on the Eleonas refugee camp;
- History and ethnography of Eleonas (Ropaitou-Tsapareli, 2006), to contextualise the current phenomenon of refugeeism within the history of migration in Eleonas;
- Greek literature about immigrant journeys (Papadiamantis, 1879);
- International literature and poetry about
- immigration, refugeeism and exile (Trinh, 2010; Sharma, 2007; Li-Young, 2009).
- Philosophy; specifically Agamben (1998), whose work places the refugee camp in the theoretical context of sovereign power;
- Urban studies of Athens (Bires, 1966) to study the urban form and developments contemporaneous with the various stages/identities of Eleonas throughout the 20th century.

### METHODOLOGY

During filming, a specific cinematography was employed for all the 'passages': still camera, below-eye level, centred-frame shots, 18mm lens (fig. 6). Technical variations were kept to a minimum, in order to:

- Depict the passages in an 'objective' manner which makes obvious their homogeneity and asserts the strictly planned symmetries of the settlement;
- Showcase the existing variations, owed to the human element, such as signs of inhabitation (shoes, baggies, crates, leftover items, etc.), and human behaviours and interactions that the camera recorded;
- Make apparent the spatial hierarchy of the settlement, which begins with

PASSAGE VARIATIONS



Figure 6. Stills from *Passage Variations* (2019). The same composition was used for all passage shots (symmetrical, slightly lower than eye-level, 18mm lens).

Various heteroclite narratives (testimony, literature, journalistic, immigrant poetry) are inserted in the form of subtitles.

the main thoroughfares, continues with the narrower corridors/‘back streets’ and ends with the personal element: adjustments and interruptions.

During editing, the non-‘passage’ shots (fig. 7) were used for filmic observation only, whereas the passage shots carried other, non-filmic narratives (in the form of subtitles): refugee testimony, historical testimony, and literary excerpts.

Consequently, the non-passage shots respond to—and depart from—Agamben’s concept of ‘bare life’ through first-hand observation of rehabilitation and scenes of ‘everydayness’ in the camp. Conversely, the passage shots, taking a cue from Agamben’s description of the camp as a closed system, attempt to notionally expand its boundaries in two ways:

- Temporally, by incorporating historical accounts about Eleonas;
- Spatially, by introducing accounts on migration from outside the camp and Eleonas, in order to underline ubiquitous elements of migrant/refugee experience.



PASSAGE VARIATIONS



Figure 7. Stills from *Passage Variations* (2019). Examples of 'non-passage' shots, more freely composed, employed for the public-activity spaces. Unlike the

passage shots, these shots focus on the 'everydayness' in the camp, and the slow reconstitution of normality, as a response to/ extension of Agamben's theory.

## Research insights

I have found that a cinematically ‘objective’ and consistent composition of the particular type of spaces that I refer to as ‘passages’ (the outdoor corridors formed by the rows of containers) showcases the formal homogeneity of the camp, and simultaneously foregrounds the variations owed to the human element: object-signs of inhabitation and interactions that the camera records. The passages can, therefore, accommodate extraneous elements (in the form of narration or non-synchronised sounds) better than other types of spaces. Thus, they offer an opportunity to notionally break from—and expand the narrative beyond—the closed system of the refugee camp. This contrast between the closed system and horizons of experience, is epitomised by the view through the passages: a perspectival view, which instead of creating a vanishing point is terminated by the perimeter wall.

The children’s presence in the camp alone speaks of the hereditary problem of integration, our collective attitudes towards the marginalised and the societal failures in that area. But there is another realisation: during filming I observed that the children, through their wanderings around, thread together the people, spaces and stories in the camp, which might otherwise remain unconnected.

They go out on errands; they pop round to other trailers to check or invite their friends; and they use the full camp as their play space, whereas adults experience is much more determined, spatially narrower and more fragmented in terms of interaction (fig. 8).

The editing stage reinforced this observation: I noticed that in the footage, the same children appear several times, at different times in the day, roaming around the camp, checking what is taking place or has changed (e.g. the state of the wooden ship model under the public tent), discussing these things with one another, dispersing at lunch time, then meeting up again to run around.

Thus, the topography and formal arrangements in the camp, which do not narrate much more than ‘confinement’ and separation from the outside world, are overlaid with a meaningful map of these regular activities and meetings of children. This particular finding is contextualised in the section ‘Merry Christmas Mr Agamben’ of my essay: ‘A Season In the Olive Grove’ (Arkomanis, 2020).



Figure 8. Stills from *Passage Variations* (2019). Children in the refugee camp, reappearing in the filmed material, threading together spaces, stories and people.





Figure 9. Stills from *Passage Variations* (2019). Interior of trailer in the camp, with shared kitchen and bedroom space (typically two bedrooms, each accommodating four).

## Dissemination

### FILM

*Passage Variations* (2019) [Online]. Directed by E. Arkomanis. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/391693546> (Accessed 16 Dec. 2020).

### SCREENINGS

*Tacoma Film Festival*. Washington, November 2020.

*Infrastructures of Care: Spaces of Refuge and Displacement*. The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London. London, February 2019.

### JOURNAL ARTICLE

Arkomanis, E. (2019a). '[Passage Variations: An Elliptical History of Migration in Eleonas](#)'. *Architecture and Culture*, 7(1) [Special issue: Spaces of Tolerance], pp.95-111. DOI: 10.1080/20507828.2019.1558381

### BOOK CHAPTERS

Arkomanis, E. (2021, forthcoming). 'Passage Variations; An Elliptical History of Migration in Eleonas', in Ewing, S. and Troiani, I. (eds.), *Spaces of Tolerance*. London: Routledge.

Arkomanis, E. (2020). '[A Season in the Olive Grove](#)', in Arkomanis, E. (ed.), *Migrations in New Cinema*, pp. 65-98. London: Cours de Poetique.

### CONFERENCE PRESENTATION

Arkomanis, E. (2019b). 'Imperfect Theories: Film notes on 'Bare Life' and Everydayness in the Eleonas Refugee Camp'. *Conference of the 16th Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) Film Festival 2019: Anthropology, Ethnography, Archaeology* [Panel: Transforming Theory in and through Film]. Bristol, March 2019.

PASSAGE VARIATIONS

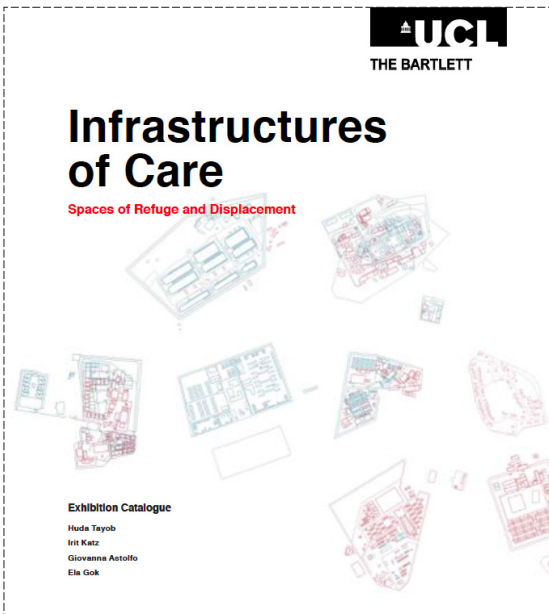
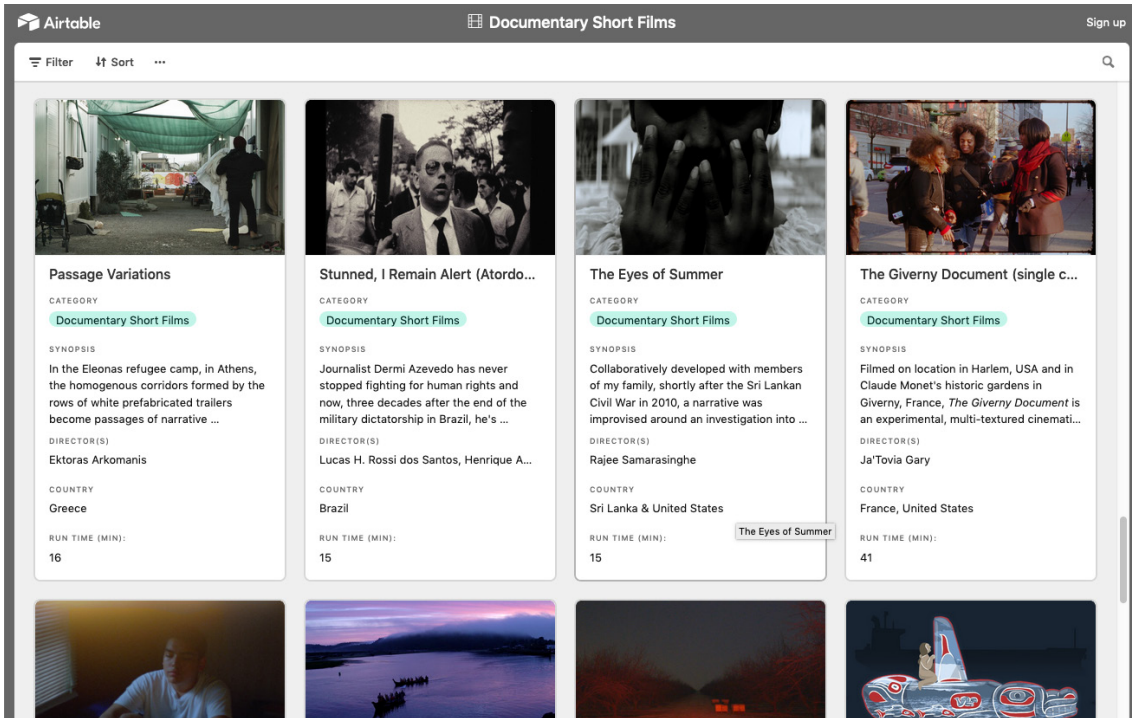


Figure 10. *Top*: Tacoma film festival (November 2020), excerpt from programme, including *Passage Variations*.

*Bottom*: Infrastructures of Care (UCL), exhibition catalogue, *Passage Variations* screen, and exhibition opening (February 2019).

## Impact

As part of the exhibition/conference *Infrastructures of Care: Spaces of Refuge and Displacement* (2019) the film was shown alongside other works about mobility and displacement, which reached a broad range of academics, NGOs and spatial practitioners.

The inclusion/screening in the *Tacoma Film Festival* has given the film international exposure.

The film has been submitted to other film festivals with artistic, documentary or anthropological content; the anticipation is that its reach will be broadened significantly over 2021. Subsequently the film will become accessible through the online platform Vimeo, for use as educational material.

The work described in this portfolio has been praised as an example of creative and interdisciplinary scholarship. The article: *Passage Variations: An Elliptical History of Migration in Eleonas* (Arkomanis, 2019a) was referred to by Susanne Ewing in the conference of the European Architectural History Network: *Fielding Architecture: Feminist Practices for a Decolonised Pedagogy*, as a paradigm for interdisciplinary research that architectural journals should strive to publish more often.

My research on Eleonas was shared with Prof. Maurice Mitchell and Dr Bo Tang of the research group Architecture of Rapid Change and Scarce Resources (ARCSR) of London Metropolitan University, and has informed their ongoing design teaching/research in Athens. Prof. Maurice Mitchell and Dr Bo Tang's work has a distinguished track record of impact (evidenced in the Impact Study submitted through this unit of assessment). My specific contributions to their work consisted in introducing Prof. Maurice Mitchell and Dr Bo Tang to the area of Eleonas (July 2017); delivering two joint talks on 11 Dec 2018 and 4 April 2019 at London Metropolitan University, reflecting on the spatial character of the refugee camp.



In this book migrations stands for a way of seeing. Artists, filmmakers and writers explore experiences of exile, displacement and urban transformation in film. Moving images of changing cities – Jerusalem, Kabul, Kobane, Athens, Moscow, Cairo, London – are slowed down and turned into stills and written word, so they can be dissected and reassembled. From these essays and visual pieces, cinema emerges as a restorative practice in times of fluid politics, dispersed narratives and fleeting images.

‘The set of wondrous essays in *Migrations in New Cinema* describe the memory of places constantly in transition. They outline a way of seeing in flux and flight, and they reveal a search for freedom and new possibilities. Whether the work of filmmakers or poets, these writings describe hope among histories of displacement; they set down their recordings in order to remember and remind. They describe memory work as a collapse of temporalities; utilize montage that reveals fragmentation of perception; record strata of stones that mark layers of time and identity; speak of exile that lifts the blanket of habit and frees creativity. All these frame the dissonance of migration into potentials for hope.’

M. Christine Boyer, author of *The City of Collective Memory*

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Figure 11. *Migrations in New Cinema* (2020), contains: ‘A Season in the Olive Grove’ which weaves the history of migrations in Eleonas with the history of the work.

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### FILMOGRAPHY

*Calais* (2019). Directed by L. van Lanker. Belgium

*Incoming* (2014-2017). Directed by R. Mosse. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, and Barbican Art Gallery, London.

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