

BOOK REVIEW

The Cinematic Language of Theo Angelopoulos

by Vrasidas Karalis,
New York & Oxford: Berghahn, 2021

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Professor Vrasidas Karalis needs no introduction to readers and cinephiles who have an interest in Greek cinema: his two latest books *A History of Greek Cinema* (2012) and *Realism in Greek Cinema: From the Post-War Period to the Present* (2017) have enriched the English-speaking academic literature on Greek cinema and have immediately become established as exemplary textbooks on this topic. However, one should stress that cinema is only one of the multiple interests of Karalis, who persistently works on the fields of literature, philosophy, ethnography and social history. This unique interdisciplinarity of his work, in which one field constantly informs the other, offers to the reader a widening of perspectives and could be described as the main feature of his writings.

In his previous book *Realism in Greek Cinema*, Karalis introduces the concept of “ocular poetics” when he analyzes the gaze of Theo Angelopoulos and shows the multiple unfoldings and meanings that the auteur can still produce, after so many insightful readings from scholars all over the world. In this study we can find the nucleus of this book entitled *The Cinematic Language of Theo Angelopoulos*, included in the series “Berghahn on Film”. However, the fascination of Karalis with this topic is far from having been exhausted by this project, but has continued into his next venture, the book that came out at the end of 2022 entitled *Theo Angelopoulos: Filmmaker and Philosopher*, in the series “Philosophical Filmmakers” by Bloomsbury editions.

As Karalis mentions in the first pages, this book was conceived from the necessity for a new monograph on Angelopoulos and at the same time as an update to Andrew Horton’s influential book that ends in 1998 (1999). Despite the large number of collective volumes that have recently appeared (Stathi 2001,

Koutsourakis & Steven 2015), academic articles dispersed in various journals, numerous PhD theses or studies that focus on a specific part of Angelopoulos's work, such as the monograph on the poetics of memory in *Taxidi sta Cythera/Voyage to Cythera* (1984) by Sylvie Rollet (2004), it is true that an overarching book that discusses the broad range of his aesthetics and covers his latest films, including his unfinished project in 2011, is both welcome and necessary.

Such breadth, however, does not imply the lack of a particular focus, as the author makes clear that his intention is to discuss Angelopoulos as a global auteur and to delineate the elements of his cinematic language, and specifically his "political, aesthetic and mythopoetic visual imagery", his "*cinécriture*" as Bresson would have described it. He also states that this book focuses on Angelopoulos "as a filmmaker and image maker –and not as a political thinker, or ambassador of a national culture" (p.1). Nevertheless, Angelopoulos as a philosopher is the topic of Karalis's following project, as mentioned earlier.

The book is divided into three chapters that follow different perspectives and methodologies but are complementary and closely intertwined. The book opens with an extended introduction entitled "Prolegomena to Theo Angelopoulos's Life and Filmmaking", which lays out the major axes of Karalis's approach and explains how this study enters into dialogue with the rich literature that already exists about the director. In this section the author makes clear that the topic which stands out as his major concern, among many others in this study, is "the construction of the sublime as an aesthetic dimension within the moving images of cinema" (p.3). The introductory section, entitled "Following Angelopoulos's Journeys", sets out the theoretical and ideological tools that help us navigate through Angelopoulos's works. Thus the author situates the formative years of the young director in the French political background of the 1960s, dominated by the figures of Louis Althusser and Nikos Poulantzas and reminds us of the belief in Marxism and the principles of historical and dialectical materialism which run deep throughout Angelopoulos's oeuvre. He also highlights the fact that while his early work was in a "constant, implicitly antagonistic, dialogue with Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre", this so-called Brechtian period ended with his fourth film, marking a transition to a unique version of Aristotelian narration having at its core the notion of catharsis through pity and fear (p.4). Furthermore, as Angelopoulos's journey continues, his language manifests a growing melancholia or pessimism about the Left, which was subsequently transformed into a kind of "anti-realism" that explored the visual forms of "grand utopian quests". Even in his more mature works Angelopoulos never lost his political gaze, "in the age of neoliberal, post-ideological and post-metaphysical consumer capitalism" (p.5). Having said that, Karalis explains that in his final chapter he tries to "unframe Angelopoulos from the heavy politicization of his films" and their readings, mainly by Greek reviewers, as allegories or interpretations of the history of modern Greece and

its tragedies. The author does not omit the historical and political importance of this corpus, and this is evident in the two first chapters of the book: however, the singularity of his approach lies in the fact that he is trying to explore the existential topics found in Angelopoulos's films, in close relation to the transformations of his visual style. Furthermore, Karalis goes back to the autobiographical elements of the films, as Angelopoulos had many times stated that all his films contained biographical elements and proposes a reading of the work as a "sustained autobiographical visual narrative, or a cinematic roman-fleuve in the form of mythobiography" (p.5).

As Karalis suggests that there is no "single Angelopoulos language", he proposes a useful periodization of Angelopoulos's oeuvre into four stages: the first is the period of political films, marked by Brechtian theatricality and the exploration of political powers; the second is the period of existential dilemmas and the discovery of the introspective conscience of the individual; in the third Angelopoulos, now as a cultural icon or as a prophet or a poet (p.15), explores collective myths across borderless regions; and in the fourth period, while he "oscillates between scepticism and nihilism", he continues to explore questions of visual temporalities. This trajectory shows his never-ending quest for innovation and the search for what Karalis calls "visual historicity". As mentioned earlier, at the heart of this venture we find the starting point of Karalis's approach, which is to describe a "cinematic visualization of the sublime", and the way Angelopoulos's films achieve the construction of "a specific, non-literary perception of sublimity as primarily a mental event, as a 'noumenon' in the Kantian sense of the word" (p.7). Following Kant's thought, Karalis reinvests the concept of the sublime in Angelopoulos as a mental event, as a "visionary configuration of the real", and reminds the readers of images of the sublime (such as the broken finger of the colossal hand in *Topio stin omihli/Landscape in the Mist* [1988], both "numinous and ominous" [p.8]), leading to the conclusion that Angelopoulos's cinematic language was a systematic attempt to achieve the cinematic sublime "as immersion and emergence, the catalysts for ecstatic and oneiric experiences through filmic images" (p.8).

The first chapter entitled "Life and Works" is mainly constructed around a biographical approach: as explained in the introduction, this biographical approach is not an old-school academic presentation of the auteur's life but is driven by Angelopoulos's admission that all his films are slightly autobiographical. Furthermore, the director never stopped giving lengthy interviews, explaining and deciphering aspects of his films, giving insights and proposing alternative interpretations, interviews in text and in video, that remain extremely popular and still circulate on the web. The image and the voice of Angelopoulos speaking about his films, and at the same time about his life, is so familiar at least to the Greek cinephile audience that this form of "mythobiography" that Karalis proposes seems absolutely pertinent. The first

section, entitled “Elements of Biography” briefly follows the major points in Angelopoulos life, such as his formative years in Paris during the 1960s and his return to Greece and presents the most important collaborators who were to accompany him in different eras, until the end of his life. The second section focuses on the “contextual webs of history” and draws parallels between Angelopoulos’s life and the sociopolitical context of Greece, including the history of Greek cinema, situating the auteur in the spirit of his era, a particularly useful section, especially for the non-Greek reader. The three other sections of this chapter that help contextualize his work focus on his public image and the appreciation of other filmmakers, on the organizing structures of his work—for example his preference for trilogies, or rather triptychs—, on major directorial choices that emerge from the unity of his oeuvre, and on the contribution of his closest collaborators, such as Eleni Karaindrou, Yiogros Arvanitis and Andreas Sinanos.

The second, and most lengthy chapter of the book, is entitled “The Life of Films” and presents a “polyptych” of Angelopoulos’s oeuvre. It is divided into five sections, which correspond to the four periods that delineate the corpus, as the author suggested in the introduction, plus one last section entitled “After Angelopoulos What?”. In these sections Karalis achieves a fascinating close reading of each film; he situates the film in its era, explains all relevant socio-political contexts, stresses the dialogue Angelopoulos opens with Brecht, Kurosawa, Bresson, Tarkovsky and other auteurs or thinkers, and analyses the cinematic language with its techniques, structures and meanings, as it unfolds from one visual text to another. Here Karalis combines readings and views from reviewers, filmmakers and philosophers with his own compelling interpretations, and of course with Angelopoulos’s autobiographical voice as it has been expressed in interviews, presentations and essays. The first section, which corresponds to the period from his first films until *O Megalexandros/Alexander the Great* (1980) highlights the “political temporalities” of Angelopoulos’s writing, while the second one, in which “Alexander leaves the realm of the fables and enters the cities”, traces this shift in Angelopoulos’s thought, from the subject as an unconscious structure, “a functional form of historical forces beyond and above the individual” towards a quest for individuality and the “discovery of the human psyche” (p.76). The third section, entitled “Cultural Aestheticism and its Discontents”, describes the turn in Angelopoulos’s themes towards a redefinition of his political identity and the emergence of a new transnational perspective with the aim of exploring post-communist, Balkan and European identities after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the war in Yugoslavia. Finally, the last section entitled “Between Scepticism and Nihilism” discusses his two last films, which were meant to form a trilogy, together with his unfinished project *I Alli Thalassa/The Other Sea*, interrupted by his sudden death. Karalis also covers the short film *Ceu Inferior/Sky Below*, which Angelopoulos shot in Sao Paolo a few months before he died.

The third chapter is the shortest in the book, but the most important, as the reader has the feeling that it recapitulates this kaleidoscope of information, analyses, and readings into a solid affirmation about the construction of Angelopoulos's cinematic language. Karalis starts this chapter with a discussion of auteurism, taking in the history of the term and its transformation in contemporary cinema. In his hypothesis about Angelopoulos's scope and perspectives, Karalis does not shy from mentioning the negative reviews that the director has received, or the fact that his post-millennium films were box office failures and situates the director in a peculiar position between a universal critical acclaim for his work and his status as a cultural icon, and marginality or "a splendid isolation bordering on incomprehensible eccentricity" (p. 125). The final sections of the book are innovative and enjoyable, as here Karalis delves into all the visual and thematic patterns of this corpus, as for example his categorization of the use of perspective in Angelopoulos's films, where he discerns four different uses, or the less-discussed issue of sexual representation, almost always depicted as absence, lack or self-revelation, or the mostly political uses of the naked or exposed body in his films (p. 136). Furthermore, the author discusses issues of self-referentiality and post-modernism, the use of acting and actors, or the theme of religion (and its absence) in Angelopoulos's films. The last, and most revelatory section is entitled "In Search of the Cinematographic Sublime" where the reader has the feeling that all the fragments of this book contribute to this purpose, as Karalis masterfully explains the functions of this aesthetic category within the work of Angelopoulos, drawing on theorists from Longinus to Burke and Kant, up to contemporary thinkers:

The devoured fallen God, the broken hand of God, the dismembered statue of Lenin and the encounter with Death are all liminal images of a profound semantic conflict between implied oppositions. The deified leader should lead, the hand of God should guide, the gigantic statue should inspire, the proximity of death should horrify. Yet in Angelopoulos, all these images being in ruins, generate empathy, verging almost on tragic pity—or *eleos* in Aristotelian language—and show that people who believe are more crucial than what they believe in. (p.149)

Finally, one of the most charming parts of the book is the photo essay at the end of the edition; there we find a collection of frames from Angelopoulos's films, showing the transformations of the auteur's gaze. Each still, wisely chosen, recalls a specific stance in the auteur's journey: so we have the Gaze of the Returning Father, the Gaze of History, leading, to the Gaze of Myths and Legends, the Gaze of Kosmos and the Man, the Gaze of Hidden God and many multiplications of gazes that testify the power of the "ocular poetics" of Angelopoulos. Suggesting that the aim of cinema is to revolutionize, to intensify reality, and to "de-create the obvious" (p. 164), Karalis notes "each image becomes the interface between the viewer and the viewed, or the source of light

and the bodies that resists it. The eye sees what wants to be seen” (p.164). In this way, Karalis closes this study in a poetic and visual manner, leaving aside for a while the analytical realm of language and inviting our gaze to meet again with the gaze of Angelopoulos.

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