

**BOOK REVIEW**

***The Cinema of Theo  
Angelopoulos***  
edited by  
**Angelos Koutsourakis & Mark Stevens**  
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**Thanassis Vassiliou**  
Université de Poitiers

The collective volume *The cinema of Theo Angelopoulos*, edited by Angelos Koutsourakis and Mark Stevens, attempts to establish and highlight the reasons why the cinema of Theo Angelopoulos holds a very important position in the history of world cinema. The book comprises seventeen essays and is divided in four complementary parts: authorship, politics, poetics, and time.

In the introduction of the book, discussion revolves around whether Theo Angelopoulos's work, which starts in the late 1960s, can be interpreted through the prism of late-modernism as the *oeuvre* of one of the many significant directors who proved that cinema becomes universal when is deeply anchored in the traditions and the history of its country of origin. This, however, cannot be perceived only in positive terms. The critical reception of Angelopoulos's work was often uneasy about the fact that his films are deeply imbricated in modern Greek history (p. 9). This uneasiness was further increased by the fact that Angelopoulos was always considered as a living anachronism. The editors aptly juxtapose the question of the position of Angelopoulos's work in modern cinema with its critical reception, and before they pass the torch to the contributing authors, they make sure to offer a short synopsis of modern Greek history, necessary to the unacquainted readers.

***I. Authorship***

The five texts comprising the first part of the book approach Angelopoulos's work through his formation as an author. Maria Chalkou's highly interesting text 'Theo Angelopoulos as Film Critic' provides previously unpublished information on the ways he received and interpreted cinema, on his personal cinephilic tastes and his anxieties as a future filmmaker, through a detailed study of

Angelopoulos's writings when he was a film critic for the evening newspaper *Dimokratiki Allagi/Democratic Change* (1964-1967). It is with great surprise that we learn that "characteristic of his critical texts was his purely cinéphilic and surprisingly apolitical perspective", and that he made only "occasional and brief comments on socio-political issues and with little relation to Marxist ideas" (p. 25). His love for genre films such as films noirs, westerns and musicals has always been both confessed and confirmed, but it is still quite unexpected that he was an ardent fan of James Bond, Jerry Lewis or American B-movies. His cinephilic background, of course, extends to the great auteurs like Bergman, Kurosawa, Hawks, Lang and others. However, it is Godard who at that point in time seems to be exerting remarkable influence on him and is constantly mentioned in reverent tones. During this period which precedes Angelopoulos's career as a filmmaker, we can already detect the traces of a self-reflective *critic* who will become a self-reflective *auteur*.

The next essay, 'Two Short Essays on Angelopoulos' Early Films', written by Nagisa Oshima, does not follow the usual academic standards, without however lacking theoretical validity. It is a pure expression of honest respect from one great director to another. Oshima opens his text by describing their first meeting, the impact that *I kinigi/The Hunters* (1977) had on him at Cannes, and continues with a few words on his admiration for the use of camera movement in *O thiasos/The Travelling Players* (1975). Reading about the ways in which a Japanese director interprets Angelopoulos's *mise en scène* is fascinating. It is no accident that Oshima focuses on the magic exerted on him by "Théo's powerful belief in the camera's ability to capture history" (p. 42) in the rotating panoramic shots during the scene of *Dekemvriana*<sup>1</sup>; what Oshima himself calls "the camerawork of hope" (p. 43). In his conclusion, Oshima demonstrates an admirable knowledge of Greek history which he compares with that of his own country, proving and confirming thus the universality of *The Travelling Players*, which left such an indelible mark on him.

The next three essays, which conclude the first part of the book, outline Angelopoulos's work by emphasizing his characteristics as a modernist filmmaker. In 'Generative Apogee and Elegiac Expansion: European Film Modernism from Antonioni to Angelopoulos', Hamish Ford attempts a juxtaposition between the work of Angelopoulos and that of Antonioni, drawing interesting comparisons concerning form (framing, time-space relationships, long takes and minimalism), time (ellipses, flash-backs, non-linear narrative), and reflexivity (intertwined looks of camera, filmmaker and viewer). Although the differences between the two auteurs are many and much-discussed, the writer, driven mostly by Bordwell's arguments, structures his essay around the

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<sup>1</sup>The events of December 1944 that marked the beginning of the Greek civil war.

concerns shared by the two directors; concerns we nowadays characterize simply as 'modernist'. Next, Angelos Koutsourakis ('The *Gestus* of Showing: Brecht, Tableaux and Early Cinema in Angelopoulos' Political Period [1970-80]') attempts another comparison: here, it is not a juxtaposition with another filmmaker, but rather with a concept, the Brechtian *Gestus*. Using the films of Angelopoulos's political period (1970-1980) as a corpus, but strangely focusing mostly on the importance of *Anaparastasi/Reconstruction* (1970), the author of this essay highlights the Brechtian process "of socializing emotional responses so as to create political divisions" (p. 64) through Angelopoulos's refusal to portray action, opting to represent it instead. Thus, History obtains a "scientific dimension" (p. 74), through the use of circular narrative, of the dialectic between the autonomous arts and the collective narrative, as well as through anti-dramatic use of music.

Robert Sinnerbrink's essay, entitled 'Angelopoulos' Gaze: Modernism, History, Cinematic Ethics', brings the first part of the book to a closure. By focusing on the film *To vlemma tou Odyssea/Ulysses' Gaze* (1995) it poses questions about whether the work of a "late neo-modernist filmmaker" (p. 84) like Angelopoulos can be considered innovative and why. Using the term "mythopoetic cinema" (p. 86) and exploring the importance of images that he calls "historical memorial-images" (p. 90), Sinnerbrink analyzes in detail the scenes he considers to be the most important in the film, and explains how Angelopoulos – almost two decades after his political trilogy and already distancing himself from the Marxist-Brechtian legacy of political modernism – finds "another way of exploring historical memory and cultural experience" (p. 95).

## **II. Politics**

Fredric Jameson's 'Angelopoulos and Collective Narrative' begins with a detailed introduction on the challenges faced by film critics and theorists when they attempt to properly place Angelopoulos's work within modernist cinema, mostly due to the complexity of Greek history. Jameson structures his approach around the premise that the narrative in Angelopoulos's films is defined by the merging of "epic and the nostalgia of antiquity" (p. 101) through the use of the sequence shot. He uses significant extracts from the theories of Lukàcs and Hegel on epic forms in order to highlight, through the unity of form and content, what is episodic in Angelopoulos. After underscoring the materialism of Angelopoulos's films, he focuses on what concerns him the most: "uniquely on the occasion of these films, a kind of unity of critical and theoretical discourses is also achieved" (p. 105).

Vrasidas Karalis's 'Theo Angelopoulos' Early films and the Demystification of Power' speaks of the exceptional use of historical representations, which, rather than exhaust themselves on accuracy, go beyond it, essentially losing their

historicity (p. 115). By analyzing the style of his political period, Karalis demonstrates how Angelopoulos deconstructs history aiming to record it with his camera “from below”. It is thanks to this deconstruction that the Greek director succeeds in the “demystification of the dominant language in order to present what was always obvious but not seen” (p. 127).

In ‘*Megalexandros: Authoritarianism and National Identity*’, Dan Georgakas attempts an extensive analysis of the film (1980), based on the two notions he considers fundamental for the film (“authoritarianism” and “national identity”). After placing the film within a historical and chronological context – speaking of a film tetralogy (p. 130) which concludes right before the rise to power of the first socialist party to ever govern Greece – the author explains the reasons why audiences and critics were not impressed by the film. According to Georgakas, the film’s esoteric format, the loneliness of its protagonist, and the ambiguity of Greek identity, as a fusion of Western, Eastern, and Balkan elements, created a filmic form which was criticized – unfairly – by the entire political spectrum. Perhaps because it was one of the very few films which managed to predict an unpleasant future.

This part ends with Mark Steven’s essay ‘Tracks in the Eurozone: Late Style Meets Late Capitalism’. By principally analyzing *I skoni tou hronou/The Dust of Time* (2008), the author establishes and demonstrates the stylistic changes which gradually occurred throughout Angelopoulos’s work, until reaching what Steven calls “late style” (p. 141). According to the author, this late style “remains unattractively disjointed” (p. 143), without, nevertheless, actually failing. He goes on to analyze two important scenes in the film and proposes that “the labour of *Dust of Time* [...] is to register that historical transition from modernism to neoliberalism dialectically” (p. 147). Then, he places the last films of Angelopoulos (as well as those by Tarkovsky and Béla Tarr) under the label of what he calls “post-utopian cinema”, where “the atomization of humans into unrelated and alienated individuals prepares them for a new life under capitalism” (p. 152). He concludes by pointing out the difficulty of screening capitalism nowadays.

### ***III. Poetics***

Julian Murphet opens this section of the book with an essay (‘Cinematography of the Group: Angelopoulos and the Collective Subject of Cinema’) which analyzes in depth how framing in Angelopoulos’s early work not only defines his aesthetic identity, but also contributes to forming and “articulating new collective ways of seeing and feeling in film form” (p. 159). This, of course, is diametrically opposed to a cinema which obeys “the hegemony of the close-up as ‘money shot’” (p. 159). Noting Angelopoulos’s preference for panning rather than tracking shots, cuts, or zooms, Murphet suggests that this particular camera movement allows

Angelopoulos to film groups “as a mobile and purposeful unit, and not merely a ‘planimetric’ spatial composition of bodies” (p. 163).

Caroline Eades’s essay perfectly complements Murphet’s analysis. Surveying Angelopoulos’s work from a narrative perspective, she stresses that the importance of Angelopoulos’s cinema is not limited to his aesthetic achievements revolving around the beauty of the image. What is most significant about this essay (“The Narrative Imperative in the Films of Theo Angelopoulos”) is the fact that Eades does not search for Angelopoulos’s references only in literary forms, but in the wider cultural heritage of Archaic and Classical forms, such as Greek sculpture, the dichromatic patterns and the treatment of colours, which “reveals Angelopoulos’ intention to place cinema in an artistic tradition that started long before the photographic image” (p. 180). Thus, she demonstrates how Angelopoulos, who carries the status of an “artist as storyteller”, integrates cultural elements in his filmic language that allow him to enrich his narrative dynamic, creating thus a cinema which “presents a successful counterpoint to old forms of literary cinema and historical literature, and offers a new legitimacy to memory as the ‘centre of history’” (p. 188).

The next essays focus on two films by Angelopoulos. In ‘Syncope and Fractal Liminality: Theo Angelopoulos’ *Voyage to Cythera* and the question of Borders’, Dany Nobus and Nektaria Pouli analyze *Taxidi sta Kythira/Voyage to Cythera* (1984) from a psychoanalytic perspective, while in ‘Landscape in the Mist: Thinking beyond the perimeter fence’, Stephanie Hemelryk Donald approaches *Topio stin omichli/Landscape in the Mist* (1988) through the questionable innocence of a child’s gaze which stops being childish long before it should have. In the first essay, the authors, after having discussed the characterological interest presented by the fact that *Voyage to Cythera* is the first of Angelopoulos’s films in which the protagonist is a director, they approach the film through its hesitations, limitations, and resonances. By using the terms of the title (syncope and fractal liminality) as “interrelated concepts” and “interlocking mental functions” (p. 192) and likening the film to a “psychoanalytic session” (p. 193) of the director himself, they raise questions about the artificiality of boundaries and the characters’ inability to “consciously acknowledge the moment when they start becoming a part of a film” (p. 198). However, it is almost impossible for the authors to answer these questions in their essay.

In the second essay, Stephanie Hemelryk Donald notes that *Landscape in the Mist* condenses some of the key themes from the larger oeuvre of Angelopoulos, such as “the repetitions in Greek history, leaving Greece (and staying put), mobility, the courage of children and the fragility of humankind, and God” (p. 206). The absence of the father, both literal and symbolic, the search for him by two young children and the children’s journey allow the author to link this story to the “biblical wanderings after the expulsion from Eden, and the ultimate loss of

Paradise” (p. 211). Furthermore, the children’s decision to jump on the train, refusing to listen to reason and return to their mother, makes them guilty, exactly because they refuse the protection that is offered to/imposed on them. In other words, they think before they should have to and so “the children are pensive subjects where adults are defaming objects” (p. 216).

Sylvie Rollet concludes this part of the volume by approaching Angelopoulos’s films through the prism of historiography and the ability of cinema to rise up to the challenges historiography presents. Entitled ‘An “Untimely” History’, the essay traverses almost the entirety of Angeopoulos’s work and manages, through dense but comprehensible writing, to outline all the important elements which compose Angelopoulos’s unique cinematic language. The characters of the exiles who are essentially presented as ‘revenants’ – since “[W]hat is repressed can only return in a spectral form” (p. 220) – the role of myth and its ‘translation’, the interest presented by the use/repetition of a ready-made form in order to deconstruct it (p. 222), and the obsession with the ‘return’, comprise what Rollet calls “spectral time”, which reveals that “the ‘unconscious’ of time repressed by scientific historiography destroys the homogeneity of the present” (p. 224).

#### ***IV. Time***

The fourth and final section of the volume begins with an essay by Richard Rushton, entitled ‘Angelopoulos and the Time-image’. The author attempts to interpret Angelopoulos’s work by employing Gilles Deleuze’s famous theoretical concept of the image-time. First, using the French philosopher’s terms recollection-image and pure-recollection, Rushton divides Angelopoulos’s work in two parts, setting *Voyage to Cythera* as a boundary to signify what he calls a “transition from ‘politics’ to ‘humanism’” (p. 237). The question “What can we do with the past?” appears as quintessential in Rushton’s reading of Angelopoulos’s films. However, in his effort to stay true to Deleuze’s texts, the author is forced to make inappropriate comparisons. The parallel he draws between Mankiewicz and films such as *The Travelling Players*, *The Hunters* and *Reconstruction* is baffling rather than illuminating. The Deleuzian theoretical frame is indeed capable of describing the character of Angelopoulos’s flashbacks. The problem, however, is that time, in Mankiewicz, is narrative, while time, in Angelopoulos, is historical. In other words, the function of the Mankiewicz’s timeless narrative structure is not comparable with that of Angelopoulos: Mankiewicz works with scripts based on dramatic action while Angelopoulos explores actions and behaviours that approach historical facts as a source of assumptions, assessments and comparisons beyond any narrative concern. The essay concludes with the discussion of the main issue raised by the second part of Angelopoulos’s work (pure-recollection), which Rushton refers to as “the battle of the self” (p. 242).

Smaro Kamboureli, in her essay 'Memory Under Siege: Archive Fever in Theo Angelopoulos' *Ulysses' Gaze*', reveals, with both density and clarity, the cinematic way in which cultural memory unfolds in *Ulysses' Gaze*, through the perspective of the Derridean theory of 'archive fever'. Firstly, based on the cinematic quotations of the film, Kamboureli argues that Angelopoulos deconstructs the singularity that is traditionally attributed to origins "[b]y querying the destination, that place of return to which the diasporic trope points" (p. 253), to conclude that "*Ulysses' Gaze* suggests that home and nation are not always aligned: that they are, in fact, often at odds with each other" (p. 253). Then, by underscoring the obsession with the search for archival material, which both defines and organizes the narrative of the film through A. and Ivo Levi (archivist of the Sarajevo Cinémathèque), Kamboureli explains how the Derridean 'archive fever' can reveal a significant proposition the film makes: the search for a lost gaze, the obsession with the survival of the archive, the restoration of memory "is at once malady and zeal" (p. 260).

In the last text of this section, entitled "'Nothing Ever Ends": Angelopoulos and the Image of Duration', Asbjørn Grønstad discusses the usage of long durations in the final two films of Angelopoulos (*To livadi pou dakryzei/The Weeping Meadow* [2004] and *The Dust of Time*). He believes that "these films give us history on a smaller scale, something that might be called *interstitial* or *decentred* history" (p. 265), since they are "pictorial fugues that render the historical through figuration, not narration" (p. 265). However, in his attempt to support his argument about the role of duration and "the poetics of slow seeing", the writer uses such a large number of references (from Bergson to Bazin, from Derrida to Ricoeur, and from Sontag to Moxey – among others) that the essay becomes disorganized and its problematics increasingly opaque.

In the afterword, 'Theo Angelopoulos' Unfinished Odyssey: *The Other Sea*', Andrew Horton, free from any theoretical concerns, bids farewell to his dear friend through a series of shared experiences during the filming which the author attended; experiences which were abruptly cut short. Horton, perhaps the most famous Anglo-Saxon expert on Angelopoulos, draws a hypothetical outline of Angelopoulos's unfinished trilogy, as he was very familiar both with the script and the progress of the shooting of *I alli thalassa/The Other Sea*. He signs a personal letter full of love and emotion, enriched with the verses of Spheris and Homer.

Under a general title, this book offers important information and reflects on almost the entirety of Theo Angelopoulos's *oeuvre*. It is a good start for readers who are not very well acquainted with the work of the Greek director and would

like to delve deeper into it from a theoretical perspective<sup>2</sup>. The lack of English-language volumes on the subject makes this book particularly valuable and a significant contribution to the overall literature on Angelopoulos. However, it cannot pass unnoticed that the vast majority of the contributors are of an Anglo-Saxon academic background. A wider diversity of methodological approaches (originating from Germany, Spain, Latin America, Italy, France, Central Europe, etc.) would add perhaps an even greater value to this important endeavour. Moreover it would be perhaps more interesting to include sections highlighting elements more specific to the director, such as the use of music, the importance of myth, the creation of a specific image aesthetic, or the relationship between cinema and history. Finally, the incessant references to texts by Bordwell, apart from being tiring for the reader, give the impression that he is the leading theorist on the cinema of Angelopoulos.

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<sup>2</sup> The worldwide literature on the work of Angelopoulos is rich and multilingual: see, for instance, Rollet (2003 and 2007), Ciment & Tierchant (1998) (in French) De Santi (1979) and Arecco (1978) (in Italian), Ruggle (1990) (in German), Horton (1997) (in English), Stathi (2000) (in Greek), Albero (2000) (in Spanish).