



landscape with three figures

Κωνσταντίνος Παρθένης, 1935

Andrew Horton

The Jeanne H Smith Professor of Film & Media Studies,
The University of Oklahoma

Theo Angelopoulos and the Cinema of Contemplation

*I dedicate this essay to Theo Angelopoulos' wife
Phoebe Economopoulou and their daughters,
Anna, Eleni and Katerina*

Abstract

I am honored to be here at the University of Sydney for this, the 11th Biennial Conference of the Modern Greek Studies Association of Australia and New Zealand. It was last Fall that I was invited to speak on the cinema of Theo Angelopoulos since I have known him and written about his films for over thirty five years. But the invitation was before this renowned Greek filmmaker died after being accidently run over by a motorcyclist on the set of his latest film *The Other Sea* January 24th of this year, 2012. I wish to state up front, what a hard moment this was and is, not only for the Angelopoulos family and for Greek cinema, but for those fans including myself all over the world who appreciate the kind of distinctively individually crafted cinema that Theo's films represent. I am speaking personally also because I was actually on the set of this film with Theo during the first week of January, two weeks before his death.

I wish to begin with three quotes that I feel provide a framework for Theo, as we shall call him here, and his cinema of contemplation that I wish to discuss. First, I offer the opening lines of Constantine Cavafy's well known poem, "Ithaca":

*As you set out for Ithaka
hope the voyage is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,*

*angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.
(tranl. Keeley & Sherrard)*



(Photograph taken by Andrew Horton, several days before
Theo Angelopoulos' death at the setting of his incomplete final film)

Yes, Cavafy was a Greek from Alexandria, Egypt, who in this poem captures Homer's spirit of *The Odyssey* as a journey towards "home", wherever that may be, but Cavafy's odyssey focuses on the journey itself, embracing the mental and spiritual as well as the physical travelling involved rather than the actual arrival.

Second, I offer George Seferis, the Greek poet from Smyrna, Turkey, who created voyages echoing *The Odyssey* in many poems including his *Mythistorema* that sets up in twenty four poems, the voyages of life and ends with this line, “*We who had nothing will school them in serenity*” (translated by Keeley & Sherrard). As with Cavafy’s “take” on the journey, the result is not about wealth and/or physical possessions, but an inner peace and spirit of contemplative accomplishment. And let us also note that both Cavafy and Seferis make it clear that being “Greek” is a cultural and historical process that is not limited to living inside the borders of geographical “Greece” but in an individual growing and maturing within the rich, diverse and complex elements that make up Greek culture across all centuries and all national borders.

Thus our third quote which is from Theo himself and emphasizes all of these elements as one of the characters in *The Suspended Step of the Stork* (1991) on the Greek border with “another” country not identified across the river in view says, “*How many borders do we have to cross to get home?*” Theo’s devotion to and exploration of personal and cultural “odysseys” that he has portrayed in all of his films is so well captured in this line. We can now turn more specifically to the characteristics of what I and others have called his “cinema of contemplation”, but I wish to first share why I have spent so many years writing about Theo’s films. In the PREFACE to my Princeton University Press book on Theo’s films I wrote:

“I have written this book because the films of Theo Angelopoulos matter. They matter because they dare to cross a number of borders: between nations, between history and myth, the past and the present, voyaging and stasis, between betrayal and a sense of community, chance and individual fate, realism and surrealism, silence and sound, between what is seen and what is withheld and not seen, and between what is “Greek” and what is not. In short, Theo Angelopoulos can be counted as one of the few filmmakers in cinema’s first hundred years who compel us to redefine what we feel cinema is and can become. But there is more. His films open us to an even larger question that becomes personal to each of us: how do we see the world within ourselves and around us? (Horton, 1997: xi)”

I feel the truth of my Preface even more so today, more than fifteen years after I completed this study.

Certainly a major part of what gives Theo's films a "feeling" of contemplation in his films has to do with the purposely "non contemporary Hollywood" pace, shooting and thematic development of each of Theo's films.

Consider this very contemporary question:

What do text-messaging, email, Facebook, mobile phoning, My-space, YouTube, internet blogging, multi channel television networking and your typical Hollywood films all have in common? Milan Kundera identifies the answer well: "*Speed is the form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on man (2).*" If anything, the pace of life throughout Europe, America and much of the rest of the world has increased even more with our technology, gadgets and with whichever form the "screens" we use take. Add to this observation, the point that such a fragmentation of time also breaks up our experience of both PLACE wherever we are and SPACE whether internal or external.

I wish to suggest that Theo in his life as a filmmaker consciously, consistently, and creatively produced films that manage to maintain the pleasures of SLOWNESS and to help us experience and better appreciate a sense of space and place that his characters and thus his audiences inhabit that bridges past, present and mythical time thus creating an atmosphere and spirit of "contemplation" rather than rapid activity of one sort or another. Take one example of Theo's approach:

Fade in on:

An old Greek walks along a waterfront in Northern Greece talking to a young Albanian refugee boy about a poem he wants to finish writing before he dies, a poem that was begun by a famous Greek poet, Dionysios Solomos, early in the 19th century but never finished before that poet died. As the contemporary poet and the young boy walk, the camera tracks—in the same continuous shot—to the 19th century poet arriving in a carriage more than a hundred years ago.

The scene is more than four minutes long and is done in one continuous shot in Theo's *Eternity and a Day* (1998) as Bruno Ganz plays Alexandre, the dying contemporary poet who befriends an Albanian orphan (Achilleas Skevis), in this film which won the Palme D'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1998.

How many borders does the old contemporary poet need to cross to get "home" to the end of his life? Many, as the film clearly develops but in

this one shot alone, Theo has combined past and present, memory and on the location observations which the viewer must enjoy and “contemplate.”

Let us take in one more scene that literally crosses international as well as personal and cultural borders. I am speaking of the wedding scene in *Suspended Step of the Stork* (1991). In this film we have a main character, Alexandre (Gregory Patrikareas), once again on an odyssey that is, this time, as a journalist to find a missing Greek politician (Macrcello Mastroianni). There are a number of memorable sustained tracking shots within the film, but I wish to mention the one which provides a wedding scene like none ever presented in cinema before or since as far as I am aware.

The set up is that Alexandre has traced Mastroianni to a small town in Northern Greece across the river from “another country.” The question is what happens if a young woman—the Mastroianni character’s daughter—is in love with a young man who is “across the border” and thus in another “place” and country. What Theo films in a continuous shot for minutes is a wedding that takes place with the bride, family and friends on one side of the river and, in the distance on the other side, we see the groom, family and friends. A priest arrives on the Greek side by bicycle and the service begins with chants and blessings pointed across the river, rice being thrown and thus bonds being made even as visually Theo is showing us a triumph of love and marriage over space, boundaries, borders and thus politics and history.

To simply describe this “cinematic space” to someone who has never seen an Angelopoulos film, might bring up a comment such as, “Well, clearly that’s a marriage that will never work,” or “how crazy is that young couple!” But to actually SEE the scene especially on the big screen rather than a small home screen is to have the sense of space and place clearly be transcended through the continuity of the shot thus making us feel that this couple has indeed transcended all obstacles put before them. Put another way, landscape and thus “actual place” in Theo’s films becomes a CHARACTER as well. Shooting primarily in LONG DISTANCE SHOTS rather than with the Hollywood approach of over 50% of shots being CLOSE UPS, we as audience cannot separate the characters from the landscapes and locations they exist in, and thus our memories of Theo’s films are both of the characters but also the places we have “tracked” them through in these extended continuous shots.

Transcendence of time and place has thus become a major theme in all of his films and it is this “transcendence” that I describe as “contemplation.” Angelopoulos himself speaks of the possibility and need for transcendence of “borders” political and geographical when he has told me, speaking of the Balkan wars:

*“I feel all of this—the ethnic cleansing, destruction, everything—shows us there is a vacuum in Central Europe now and in the Balkans in particular. Our era is ending and another is about to be born... People need a new sense of community, politics, beliefs. The old labels—Left, Right, communists, socialist, etc are finished. I don’t know what will happen now. But a new epoch is beginning. Borders, attitudes, relationships, nations, all will Change
(Horton, *The Films of Theo Angelopoulos 203*).”*



Cinematically and thematically, the wedding across a border captured in a continuous shot definitely points to a “new epoch” by the participants at the wedding. Put simply, the complexity and length of such shots as this wedding invite us to “contemplate” such a different “take” on the mixture of culture, history, politics and location.

My tribute to Theo’s distinctive cinema could stretch for many pages if I quoted all of those who appreciate his films around the world and who are moved by his passing, yet I will limit this reflection to simply a few additional commentators here. David Thomson, the author of numerous film books including *The Biographical Dictionary of Film*, notes (*The New Republic*: www.tnr.com, February 2nd 2012) that:

“Theo Angelopoulos was a master in a kind of cinema that is not much appreciated nowadays. He loved space and distance and movement, as opposed to close-ups, rapid cutting and doing anything to hold our attention.”

Let’s add that the average shot in a Hollywood film today is between two and three seconds, and thus what I call Theo’s “cinema of contemplation” often has single shots that last between two and five minutes or more.

Furthermore, Cineaste Consulting Editor, Dan Georgakas captures another important dimension of Theo’s work in his observation that a lot of what he takes on, especially in *The Travelling Players* (1975), is the on-going complexity and controversy as to the nature of a Greek national character given Greece’s ancient classical heritage, its thousand years as a Byzantine Christian culture followed by over four hundred of years under Turkish domination and even later under European influences in setting up the Greek nation in the 1820s. Thus, as we have noted from Theo’s quote, the importance of crossing so many “borders” of countries, history, mythology, religion and beyond. As Georgakas observes:

Angelopoulos has emerged as a European director devoted to individual vision and national culture. His influence on Greek cinema is immeasurable. As was said in the United States after Ernest Hemingway began to be published, half the directors in Greece have tried to imitate Angelopoulos, and the other half have tried not to.

Cut to Athens in January of 2012 on the set of *The Other Sea*, when I was able to be with Theo, the crew, his wife Phoebe who has been the producer of most of his films, and their daughters who was caring out a

position including casting, art direction and making a documentary about the film. I have been on film sets and film shoots around the world, but there was a very special SPIRIT on the Angelopoulos set as my conversations with many crew members revealed.

As Georgakas notes, Theo in his new film was once again taking on the themes of Greek identity, national and personal. And in *The Other Sea*, all those on the production of the film I talked with were enthusiastic and touched that Theo's script takes on the contemporary Greek crisis including strikes, illegal immigrants from Afghanistan and the Middle East, suicides and violence, and yet with a new set of "travelling players" attempting to perform Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*. In fact, a French admirer of Angelopoulos' cinema, Elodie Lelu, was under contract from a European publisher to do a "diary" book of the making of an Angelopoulos film.

That Theo was consciously reflecting ("contemplating"!) back to his highly successful early production, *The Traveling Players* deserves special attention to his accomplishment at that time. Let us briefly remember what Theo lived through. Born in 1935, he lived through the German Occupation of World War II as a child including the arrest and disappearance of his father for a period and then the Greek Civil war of 1946 till 1949. He later studied law in Athens but then in the 1950's moved to Paris to study cinema returning in 1964 to Athens as a film critic for a few years before making his first feature, *Reconstruction* in 1970 which won first prize in the Thessaloniki Film Fest.

I do wish to emphasize the importance of *The Traveling Players* (1975) that was made during the final part of the reign of the military Junta that ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974. What Theo managed to create was a view of Greek history and culture from 1938 to 1952 that covered the military rule of Metaxas, World War II and the Civil War through a "leftist"/Marxist perspective that had never been seen in Greek cinema before. "The Other Greece" is what Theo always wished to portray, thus the film deals with Greek villages, the effects of war on families and communities far from Athens and often in winter weather far from the sunny postcards of Greek islands in summer.

Theo has always "pulled" the viewer into his films with the long takes that often in a single shot cover many years as in several tracking shots in *The Traveling Players*. But Theo also makes it important for the viewer to "contemplate" his

story and characters by interweaving references to specific ancient works. The main characters in *The Traveling Players* include members of the acting troupe whose “real” names include Electra, Aegisthus, Orestes and Pylades.

Theo has often been accused of being an “art house director”, but I was living and teaching in Greece in 1975 and became aware that very swiftly *The Travelling Players* became the most viewed Greek film ever up till 1975 as my interviews of many Greeks revealed that audiences returned more than twice often to see the film again and again for the powerful visual style and for his portrayal of the complexity and destruction that Greeks suffered through those times. Besides its popularity at home, the film swept awards at Berlin (Forum of New Cinema award), the Cannes Film Festival (FIBRESCI prize), British Film Institute and Tokyo’s Kinema Junpo Award for best foreign language director.

I will also never forget that Theo was fully open to attending my class that year at Deree College in Athens to discuss his films with students, several of whom were inspired to become award winning filmmakers themselves. My point is, quite simply, that a “cinema of contemplation” as Theo developed it was not a cinema for that one small theater in each city that only plays “intellectual or foreign” films: he was able to reach a responsive audience around the world that continues to admire and appreciate his approach to cinema. Finally, film scholar David Bordwell sums up a lot of Theo’s accomplishments that I felt so strongly on the set of *The Other Sea* in his observations of Theo’s cinematic legacy that continues to be celebrated:

That Angelopoulos can receive such renown today suggests that, for many viewers, the postwar tradition has not exhausted itself, that it can endow our world of snack bars, video clips and ethnic wars with an astringent, contemplative beauty. At a moment when European cinema, both popular and elitist seems to be breathing its last, Angelopoulos’ work is particularly important.

I wrote my first draft of this tribute only a few days after Theo’s death and funeral and I am deeply moved by the outpouring of calls, emails, internet postings and efforts to celebrate his films with special events that were set up for screenings and tributes around the world including New York, Canada, Europe, Australia and beyond.

Theo, we know as several who were working with you on your latest film and who knew you well have said, “He has passed to THE OTHER SEA.” Put simply, Long Live Your Cinema of Contemplation!

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