Monuments of Time: The Works of Theo Angelopoulos

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We who set out on this pilgrimage
we looked at the broken statues
forgot ourselves and said that life was not lost
so easily
that death has unexplored ways
and its own justice
that when we die standing
like brothers in stone
united with hardness and weakness,
the old dead left the circle and were risen
and are smiling in a strange calm.
George Seferis, ‘21’, Mythistorema

In the opening sequence of Eternity and a Day (1998), Theo Angelopoulos’s latest film, a group of young boys rush down to the beach on an early morning escapade; repeating a favourite ritual, they run into the sea for another look at the submerged city, which one of their grandfathers remembers having once glimpsed. The older boy leads the younger ones onto the site and exclaims: ‘Here it is!’ The boys descend together. When they come back up, breathless, the older one asks quietly, as if respecting the strange calm of the site, ‘Did you see her? Did you see the head of the smiling woman?’ ‘I saw columns, broken statues, pieces of marble’, replies the youngest. ‘That is the ancient city’, announces the eldest boy, who continues: ‘Grandfather says that it sleeps
beneath the sea for centuries. It only surfaces once in a while, but for a moment only, and then everything stops; time stops. To the youngest boy's question, 'what is time?', the elder replies, with a definition freely adapted from Heraclitus: 'Grandfather says that time is a child playing marbles by the seaside'. The boys dive once more while the sun slowly breaks through the clouds. This is an appropriate opening sequence, setting the tone for a meditation on time, memory, nostalgia, loss; it also frames one of Angelopoulos's signature motifs: the broken statues, pieces of marble, which the children rediscover with every plunge into the depths. Though broken and submerged, the statues are reconstructed through the children's gaze, shown here to belong in the constant past of legend. At the same time, their absence from the frame suggests their impossibility, as if they must necessarily elude the gaze of the adult spectator. In this coexistence of the absent and the present, the invisible and the invoked, lies a poignant double gesture: the magical aura of the broken statues is both reinforced and defused, offering itself at once as 'hardness' and 'weakness'.

This mini-oxymoron is a characteristic trope. A synecdoche made visible, the broken statue represents both what was once whole, becoming in that sense a vehicle for nostalgic allusion, while also putting the imaginary in its place, grounding it in the reality of the fragment. Engaging the spectator in a similar process, (though this time through the conflation of the child-like and adult gaze) a lingering plan-sequence in Landscape in the Mist (1988) follows the transportation by helicopter of a giant stone hand, a fragment of some monumental statue, across the harbour of Thessaloniki. The aura of the marvellous exists here too, but this time what is evoked and simultaneously undermined is the magnificence of a once potent symbolic image; when intact, the hand would have pointed in a masterful, reassuringly paternalistic way, but in Angelopoulos's mise-en-scène it hangs from the sky with the index finger missing. Appear as it does, half-way through two young children's journey in search of their father, the broken hand both crystallises and sets in motion a set of contradictory effects. By its sheer size and the drama of its prolonged drift over the city, it confirms and monumentalises their quest; by its brokenness, it makes concrete the fact of the Father's limited, transient, even truncated, glory. And there is a further significance: for the first time in a film which, true to its title, is almost uniformly shot in wintry and misty landscapes, this sequence is shot at dawn, with a warm and soothing light gradually filling the frame. The light is beautiful and benign, but it is unclear whether it emanates from the hand or from its slow disappearance, and the dawning realisation that the era of the Father has passed. Either way, it is a temporary effect, an interruption. The children proceed with their journey regardless, to arrive at an end, which is another point of departure; the film closes at the imagined frontier of Greece and Germany, a realm of impossibility but beyond which the father may still be waiting.
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The broken statue is firmly lodged in Angelopoulos’s own cinematic imagi-
nation, though, one could also say that it was first erected in the minds of a
whole generation to which he feels he belongs. In Ulysses’s Gaze (1995), he
stages another farewell to a monumental father, this time as the emblem of a
revolution. ‘A’, the Greek-American director in search of three lost film-reels,
products of the pioneering ‘gaze’ of two early-twentieth-century Greek film-
makers, follows an Odyssean trajectory through the ravaged Balkan landscape
and reaches the Romanian port of Constanza. There he boards a Russian ship
which carries the pieces of many gigantic statues of Lenin, precariously held
together with ropes and propped up by rusting supports. The temporarily
reconstructed structures are on their way from Odessa to Germany, to be sold
on to collectors. As the ship sails through the Black Sea and out onto the
Danube, a long-take records the reaction of by-standers following the ship’s
progress from the shore. Some make the sign of the cross, as if in front of a
religious icon, or, perhaps a miracle. As the ship approaches the borders with
former Yugoslavia, the broken head dominates the screen while the camera
pans a full revolution. To the guards’ question if there is anyone on board, a
voice from the ship replies ‘Nobody’, recalling the episode of Ulysses’s out-
writing of the Cyclops. This elegiac sequence performs a sort of simultaneous
burial and restoration of the broken statue, albeit only for a moment, or for as
long as the sequence lasts; it also serves as a final farewell: bound for Germany,
Lenin, or the revolution returns to its origins.

A statue fixes an image and an era; it is a representation, but also, a relic of
history and, in that sense, a petrification of processes, relationships and ideas
which can never be static. Statues, then, may fall but will contain in their
fractured state echoes of what was once visualised in them. The fragment of an
original gaze is what the film’s ‘A’ seeks to encounter, in an attempt to realign
the seemingly divergent perspectives of the past and present. This realignment
is presented as a necessity in Ulysses’s Gaze, all the more urgent because of the
risks involved in the extinction of past visions.

The search for a lost gaze belies a further anxiety: that when the ghosts of the
past have been laid to rest, when the fathers’ ‘historical errors’ and absences
have been analysed, rationalised and forgiven, in other words, when the back-
ward look at history may yield no further insights, then there might be little left
but empty reconstructions. This is an anxiety which Angelopoulos dramatised
and dissected in O Megalexandros (1980), the most iconoclastic of his films,
which examines the process by which an emancipatory vision transforms itself
into totalitarian practice. A charismatic bandit abducts a group of English
aristocrats on a visit to Poseidon’s temple at Sounion (an adaptation of an actual
incident from 1870), and takes them to a mountain village where, with the co-
operation of Italian anarchists, he is attempting to establish an agrarian
commune. The film proceeds to follow the gradual mutation of leader into
despot, as ‘Megalexandros’ isolates himself, becomes unable to communicate
and convey his vision, imprisons himself in silence and is finally destroyed by his
subjects. In the final, ritualistic scene, he is literally consumed whole by the communards, and in his place is left a shattered shard of marble, his own head; a broken statue.

‘Megalexandros’ is a composite figure: in Greek, his name alone invokes an amalgam of heroic, imperial, mythical and folk nuances, and he is in that sense bolted together, a construct, or even a parody. His relationship with his daughter suggests an ambiguous and incestuous genealogy (she is a product of his marriage to his mother/wife), which further reinforces a sense of claustrophobia and inexorable self-destruction. ‘Alexander’ is both the vehicle and the victim of a false consciousness, which attempts to freeze history into myth. Angelopoulos stages here a critique of an abstraction, of the phantom of ideology and power, which echoes Karl Marx’s famous analysis in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*:

Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted. The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living. And, just when they appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them; they borrow their names, slogans and costumes so as to stage the new-world historical scene in this venerable disguise and borrowed language.5

*O Megalexandros* then presents an historical imagination in crisis; revolution as phantom and isolated, incommunicable vision. At the same time, the film engages in a critique of the power of cinematic representation, in itself a potentially mystifying, or mythopoetic medium. The absence of a subjective perspective and the interaction of rigid tableaux with long plans-séquences force a detachment upon the gaze of the spectator. The film’s silence is partly a reflection of the main character’s inability to communicate and his increasingly internalised vision, but it is also simultaneously an intensification of and a critical commentary on the power of the image.7

Angelopoulos’s critique in *O Megalexandros* is all the more poignant when considered alongside the work that preceded it; as a coda to the epic trilogy composed of *Days of ’36* (1972), *The Travelling Players* (1975) and *The Hunters* (1977), it adds a cautionary note to the work of historical analysis. *Days of ’36* and *The Hunters* frame that analytical project by exposing the brute force but also the fragility of a political victory founded on repression, silencing and civil strife. The pre- and post-war dictatorships which provide the films’ backdrop are haunted by the possibility that their crimes may yet be avenged. The paranoia suggested by the murderous reaction of the Metaxas regime to the threat of political scandal in *Days of ’36*, is amplified and taken to
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its extreme horrific conclusion in *The Hunters*, in which the body of a dead partisan is discovered in the woods by a group of hunters. As fresh blood begins to flow from the stone cold body, the group, all members of the ruling elite, the side that won the civil war, act out their fears and fantasies. Having dreamt of
own execution by partisans, they awaken to the decision to rebury the corpse and with it the reminder of their collective guilt.

If *Days of '36* prepares the ground and sets the tone for the crimes which will haunt *The Hunters*, *The Travelling Players* pushes them on stage. The film follows a group of itinerant actors in a period of fourteen years (1939–52) as they wander through Greece’s cities and villages, staging a nineteenth-century pastoral melodrama. In true Brechtian-epic style, history constantly interrupts the reconstruction of the folk idyll and involves the actors in political action. On that much bloodier ‘stage’, they assume their roles and live and die accordingly, while it gradually transpires that the travelling players are also enacting the revenge tragedy of *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus’s retelling of the fall of the House of Atreus. However, this performance does not signal a ritualistic acceptance of mythical fate; nor does it allow the meting out of justice where it is due. The film ends with the actors lined up, as if taking a curtain-call, in front of a deserted provincial train station, in a direct echo of the film’s opening. In that frame, the heroic dead take their places next to the traitors and collaborators, the opportunists, those whose spirit has been broken and those whose mind has surrendered to dreams of what could have been. Yet this is no reconciliation, but rather a reminder that, even the most resounding of ‘victories’ may not be a conclusion. The collective psychodrama of *The Hunters* imagines one way in which such decisive outcomes may be re-interrupted, but the suggestion is already there, economically and hauntingly, in *The Travelling Players*.

Formally and thematically, the film sustains a rigorous dialectic between history and myth, realism and allegory, collective action and individual fate; dazzlingly choreographed plans-séquences, in which two separate moments in time are simultaneously set in motion, coexist with static tableaux and monologues spoken directly to the camera. Most impressively of all, Angelopoulos avoids melodrama, psychological lure and didacticism, yet creates sequence after sequence of great emotional potency. One of the most memorable of these occurs towards the conclusion of the film. The year is 1950 and the players sit waiting around a seaside taverna table. It is a crisp and clear winter day. A military jeep arrives, its brakes screeching and delivers an excited group of American marines and their girlfriends. Among them, dressed in white, is Chrysothemis, the sister and counterpart to idealistic Electra, who runs to the assembled group holding a bouquet of flowers in one hand and in the other, an American sergeant whom she has just married. The party begins. The couples dance to music coming from the taverna, while the players watch. The music pauses and the old woman in the group stands up, visibly moved, nods to the accordionist and requests ‘a song for the bride’. One of the marines’ girlfriends
translates the phrase into English and the woman begins. The sound of her voice and the lyrics of this traditional wedding song transform the atmosphere of the scene, as if a shift in time has occurred. Meanwhile, the marines retrieve their own instruments from the next table and attempt to accompany the old woman and the accordionist. Chrysothemis is instructing her American husband in the complexities of the ceremonial dance; suddenly a trombone breaks in and draws the other instruments into a jazz rhythm. The old woman, confused, stops singing and sits down, but the newlyweds quickly pick up the steps and dance wildly to the loud cheers of the Americans' girlfriends. Returning to the table, the sergeant raises his glass and shouts excitedly, 'A toast!', but before he can say another word, a young man, Chrysothemis's son, suddenly gets up, lifts the end of the tablecloth and pulls it away violently. Glasses, plates, paper flags and flowers tossed into the air. The young man walks away towards the sea, dragging the white fabric behind him like an unfurled flag. The 'marriage' of differing traditions, emotions and temporalities forces the issue; the progeny of coloniser and colonised. The young man's gesture is the last of a series of interruptions in the sequence, and carries a sense of justice in it, though only as a reminder. Ultimately, the flag he is left with is the wrong colour.

The valedictory tone struck here provides evidence for those critics who seek to argue that Angelopoulos's work represents the last authoritative act of a political and artistic modernism which has been forced to come to terms with the demise of its heroic vision. The director's gaze has increasingly turned, so it is claimed, to a form of inner scrutiny, the contemplation of the predicament of the individual in an increasingly divided and divisive world. Furthermore, the exploration of the theme of borders and national boundaries, of an enforced homelessness and globalisation - with its attendant new mix of cultures and languages in films such as The Suspended Step of the Stork (1991), as well as Ulysses's Gaze - has been read as a shift of focus from his earlier concern with the processes of history as experienced by and engraved on national and collective consciousness. In Fredric Jameson's view, Angelopoulos's films since O Megalexandros 'drift decisively away from Greece itself towards some transnational situation which they cannot properly fix or identify'; similarly, he finds that 'a sadness and a frustration of the frontier seem to have more affinities with the "existential" melancholy of an Antonioni'. For Jameson, these are themes bound to a 'formally regressive structure', they are too 'easily deflected into metaphysics, and made to serve as "symbols" of some more generalised human condition'. Such a critique echoes Pier Paolo Pasolini's earlier definition of art in the 'neocapitalist' era, which 'ascribes to poets a late humanistic function: the myth and the technical consciousness of form'.

It is true that Angelopoulos considers himself and his outlook to be a humanist one: 'in dealing with borders, boundaries, the mixing of languages and cultures today, the refugees who are homeless and not wanted, I am trying to seek a new humanism, a new way.' Yet, in a different context, and seeking
of her voice atmosphere of the scene retrieve their memory the old woman in her husband in the two mains in and draws confused, stops steps and dancing to the table, but before he can get up, lifts the paper flags towards the sea, the ‘marriage’ of the progeny of a series of though only as a parcel, critics who seek interpretative act of a code terms with the freely turned, so it is a predication of Furthermore, the idea of an enforced cultures and (1991), as well as her concern with national and uno’s films since towards some entity; similarly, in to have more. For Jameson, they are too "easily" of some more Paolo Pasolini’s hich ‘ascribes to consciousness of outlook to be a ng of languages used, I am trying ext, and seeking
to distance himself from the metaphysical and mystical vision of Andrei Tarkovsky, Angelopoulos has stressed the critical tenor of his own, and as he argues, peculiarly Greek, blend of humanism: ‘There is no mystery in the Greek character, as there is in the Slav. Crudely put, that is the difference . . . [I]n us, there is a Cartesian element . . . [an emphasis on] doubt, the dignity of thought’. This is a significant emphasis for another reason: Angelopoulos is a committed secularist and, in consequence, immune to the appeal of any kind of apocalyptic angst or existential melancholy, such as Jameson might have detected in Antonioni. Yet there is a symbiosis between the two directors, glimpsed perhaps in the open letter Roland Barthes wrote to Antonioni in 1980:

Unlike the priest, the artist admires and is amazed; his gaze may be critical, but not accusatory . . . Unlike the thinker, the artist does not evolve; he scans, like a sensitive instrument, the successive New that his own history brings before him: your work is not a fixed reflection, but a watery silk screen.

Similarly, Angelopoulos’s work does not evolve, nor does it attempt to fix history on the screen; instead, he records its fluency. His journey is not a progress but a wandering, and its most characteristic moment the return, as either homecoming or retribution. Formally, too, scenes, images, and names from earlier works recur in every new one, evoking the past but also absorbing elements from this momentary immersion in the present. Depths charged with layers of past meanings generate constantly dynamic, but never truly novel, reflections on the surface of Angelopoulos’s films. As the children in Eternity and a Day come to know, time only stands still for the statues.

The tone of the film’s watery opening – bitter-sweet delight in the return to childhood through memory, to the ‘time when it was still time’, as Samuel Beckett put it in a rejected line from the little play ‘Gloaming’ – gives way to the setting of the scene of a sombre and anxious present. A man in his early sixties is lying in an armchair, with eyes closed, as if daydreaming. The grey and wintry morning has an air of steely melancholy about it, as it transpires that ‘Alexander’, terminally ill, is preparing to go into hospital. In the course of that day, he is to say his last farewells: to the Pontic immigrant woman who has looked after him for the three years since his wife’s death; to his daughter; to the old family home on the beach which is to be demolished; and, finally, to his mother. Throughout, in voice-off, and in occasional returns to the dream site of the once-elegant seaside villa, a belatedly yearned-for happiness appears in the form of ‘Anna’, the dead wife, whose letters to Alexander are read and re-read. Regret at what was left unsaid, guilt for what was left un-lived are conveyed by the juxtaposition of the wife’s voice and his own fractured monologue-apology, and the emotional struggle seems both futile and oppressively self-contained.

As is usual in an Angelopoulos film, the release from the hauntings of memory and the self appears in the form of a child, in this case, a young Albanian boy, a type immediately recognisable to a contemporary Greek audience, who is saved
by ‘Alexander’ from the clutches of a sinister mafia dealing in child labour. For a
day, the boy becomes companion and guide, another trigger for the memory
device, although this time, for an elegiac exploration of the political and the
poetic. In a familiar motif, the protagonist is an artist of sorts, in this case a
writer, whose unfinished project (his ‘scattered words’) consists in completing
another poet’s sketch; Dionysios Solomos’s The Free Besieged, the early nine-
teenth-century poet’s account of a famous episode from the Greek revolution, in
which the inhabitants of the town of Missolonghi under siege by the Turkish
army attempt a mass exodus, choosing death over bondage. Although appearing
in a period cameo, the poet is used here not so much as an historical figure,
but as a referent for the elemental relationship between language and freed-
only1; the Albanian boy is then witness to and cipher for the filmmaker’s
conviction that with each generation the fundamental bond between poetry and
liberation is reconstructed, a fact as inevitable as the succession of ever-new
forms of bondage. For the older man, the conclusion is more ambivalent: his
reconciliation with lost time and love is effected, though through the reawaken-
ing of the desire for time, for one more day.

Eternity and a Day was awarded the Palme d’Or at Cannes, conferring a
belated accolade on a consistently celebrated career.2 This elegiac
exploration of a personal and emotional temporality is probably the most autobiogra-
phical of the director’s films to date, yet it also aims to convey a sense of collective or
generational introspection. The retrospective gaze at a life lived in pursuit of
ideals or ideas, political and creative visions, suggests both melancholy and
celebration; it is in this latter sense an affirmative vision, and in the context of
this latest film, it is also offered as a patrimony, a personal and collective
bequest.

NOTES

1. My translation, George Seferis’s celebrated poetic sequence, Mythistorema [Mythical
Story] (1933–34), has been a consistent source of inspiration for Theo Angelopoulos.
2. As Angelopoulos jokingly claims, ‘Andrei [Tarkovsky] would have kept the painting
finger, but there you have our difference in one’ (from an unpublished interview
conducted by the author, Athens, December 1998). Another visual echo may be found
in the opening sequence of Federico Fellini’s La Dolce Vita (1960), where a statue of
Christ is carried over Rome in a helicopter; in Fellini’s film, the aura of the image
mutates in the final scene on the beach at dawn, with the apparition to the revellers of
a giant rotting fish.
3. Angelopoulos’s epigrammatic summary of the film is that it concerns ‘the silence of
God’; it is the last film in his ‘trilogy of silence’, and is preceded by The Beekeeper
(1986), or ‘the silence of love’, and Voyage to Cythera (1983), or ‘the silence of
history’ (interview conducted by the author, Athens, December 1998). See also,
Theo Angelopoulos: A Retrospective 27 May–21 June 1998 (ed. by Elly Petrides
28–33.
4. As the director put it to Michel Ciment, ‘It is the theme of my film, that of the lost
gaze, which is imprisoned … and must be freed. The gaze of the beginning of the
century must meet that of the end of the century.’ (‘Entretien avec Theo Angelou-
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7. As Akira Kurosawa remarked, ‘It is the weight of this silence and the intensity of the immobile stare of Angelopoulos’s camera which makes O Megalexandros so powerful that the viewer cannot break away from the screen. This kind of filmmaking, so personal and unique in its particularity, tends to return to the roots of the cinema’. Cited in Theo Angelopoulos: A Retrospective 27 May–21 June 1998 (ed. by Elly Petrides et al., Athens: The Greek Film Centre and London: Riverside Studios, 1998): p. 22.

8. As Walter Benjamin put it, ‘Finnish theatre does not reproduce conditions; rather, it discloses, it uncovers them. This uncovering of the conditions is effected by interrupting the dramatic processes; but such interruption does not act as a simulacrum; it has an organizing function. It brings the action to a standstill in mid-course and thereby compels the spectator to take up a position towards the action, and the actor to take up a position towards his part’ (Understanding Brecht, trans. Anna Bostock. London and New York: Verso, 1977): p. 100.


15. Interview conducted by the author, Athens, December 1998.

16. Since 1983, Angelopoulos has worked on his screenplays with Antonioni’s longtime collaborator, Tonino Guerra. As a film student in Paris in the 1960s, Angelopoulos remembers the daily visits to the Cinematheque for a ‘dose’ of Antonioni, who, in those early years was a favourite, along with Mizoguchi, Murnau, Dreyer, Welles and Minnelli. For an account of the director’s formal influences, see Michel Ciment, ‘Entretien avec Théodore Angelopoulos’, Positif 174, October 1975.


19. Solomon’s work was inspired by the Greek uprising against the Ottoman empire. His Hymn to Freedom is set to music as the national anthem.

20. For a list of awards, see the brief filmography that precedes this bibliography.

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1968 The Broadcast (short)
1970 Reconstruction, full-length feature: Best Foreign Film at the Hyères Film Festival (1971); Georges Sadoul Award (1971)
1972 Days of '36, full-length feature: FIPRESCI Award, Berlin (1973)
1974–75 The Travelling Players, full-length feature: FIPRESCI Award, Cannes (1975); Interfilm Award Berlin 'Forum' (1975); Best Film of the Year, British Film Institute (1976); Italian Film Critics Association; Best Film in the world for the decade 1970–1980; FIPRESCI: One of the Top Films in the History of Cinema; Grand Prix of the Arts, Japan; Best Film of the Year, Japan; Golden Age Award, Brussels (1976)
1977 The Hunters, full-length feature: Golden Hugo Award for Best Film, Chicago (1978)
1981 One Village, One Villager, documentary
1983 Athens, Return to the Acropolis, television documentary
1983 Voyage to Cythera, full-length feature: Best Screenplay and FIPRESCI Awards, Cannes (1984); Critics Award, Rio Film Festival
1986 The Beekeeper, full-length feature
1988 Landscape in the Mist, full-length feature: European Film of the Year Award (1989); Silver Lion Award for Best Director, Venice (1988); Golden Hugo Award for Best Director, Silver Plaque for Best Cinematography, Chicago Film Festival
1991 The Suspended Step of the Stork, full-length feature