

Theo Angelopoulos, a man against frontiers:

Ulysses's gaze

Director: Theo Angelopoulos

Reviewed by

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The cinema as ideal stands as one of the main components of the film *Ulysses's gaze* by Theo Angelopoulos, since it concerns a filmmaker for whom looking after three old reels of film becomes a reason for living.

In the film, the protagonist bears no name. Andrew Horton (1997) writes that in the script, he was called **A**: **A** like the first letter of the alphabet, and the initial of Angelopoulos, which hints at some autobiographical elements that have been woven into the fiction. However, it would be as misleading to speak of autobiography as it would be to say that the spectator is identified with the protagonist. Within the scope of this article it is enough to speak of a convergence, author-character-viewer, that depends on Angelopoulos's peculiar narrative approach.

In this as in his other films, Angelopoulos is developing a sort of imaginary biography that speaks of exile and the sufferings inflicted by impassable frontiers.

We analysts are keen on frontiers. For us the barrier against incest, the limits between self and other, and other differentiations, are steps essential to being human. It should be clear that Angelopoulos is speaking of frontiers in quite another sense: to denounce the frontiers that are instruments of injustice, exclusion and nationalistic hatred.

Ulysses's gaze was made at the end of 1994, at a time when the tragedy in Bosnia was still going on; the date is also the action's 'present'. Angelopoulos was not able to film in Sarajevo, as he wanted. The making of the film was also marked by personal tragedy: G. M. Volonté died shortly after arriving in Macedonia to participate, in the role that was taken by E. Josephson.

The protagonist, **A**, then, is an American filmmaker who has come to his native Greece after 35 years of absence with the explicit aim of attending a projection of his films; but he readily admits that this is a pretext. He has heard about two pioneers of the cinema, the Manakis brothers, and about three reels of film, shot at the beginning of the century, which remained undeveloped: not only very early material but also material that nobody has ever seen. 'An innocent gaze', as **A** says, a kind of *Urszene* for the attainment of which **A** starts an obstinate and ultimately perilous voyage across the Balkans, gathering in his passage traces of the tragedies that for a century have shaken the region.

He crosses many frontiers looking for the reels, until he finds them in Sarajevo under siege. I think that by this choice Angelopoulos wished to pay one more form of tribute to the multicultural city bravely resisting the barbarians.

Angelopoulos succeeds in creating suspense out of geography, and out of history too because this is also a journey in time, as several epochs in the past of the Balkans appear as 'inserts' throughout the film.

In all his films, Angelopoulos employs a striking narrative style (in some respects reminiscent of Antonioni and of Miklós Jancsó) that may be characterised by the following elements:

- a) a preference for long takes, sometimes constituting a whole sequence lasting several minutes;
- b) the coexistence in the same shot of events from different times;
- c) the slow pace of the action and of the camera movements.

Thanks to these peculiar procedures, the viewer remains in a state of suspense, at the same time detached and alert, as if confronted by a challenge and an enigma. It is as if Angelopoulos were suggesting, 'Take your time to really see what this is about, to grasp these materials I am proposing'.

These narrative procedures related to time are aimed at an intelligent viewer who is called on to participate in a genuine act of discovery. They make for a fascinating aesthetic experience allowing for a perfect blend of the objective and the subjective on both sides: the author's and the viewer's. They enhance the 'transitional object' aspect of the work of art.

Angelopoulos's cinematic writing seems to converge with our psychoanalytical method. We also recover fragments, necessarily anachronistic since they belong to different times and spaces, and are thus able to reconstruct the patient's history.

For **A** at a personal level, the pull of the past is not only dictated by the wish to find the old film. This could turn out to be another pretext: **A** needs to come to terms with his past at various levels, as we understand when moving into deeper and deeper layers of meaning. In one initial episode, as he follows the silhouette of the girl he loved 35 years earlier, he reflects, 'I meant to come back soon but got lost along strange roads. If I but stretched out my hand to touch you, time would be whole again. But something is holding me back'. This fragment, finely availing of the visual and verbal resources of film, sets the pace for a reflection on time and memory. What prevents the attempt at 'mending' a jagged time is an even more radical regression: the secret project of finding an original moment, perhaps a witness of an idyllic past. This personal project of recovering memory develops into a collective exercise of memory in which we are participants.

The film becomes comparable to a palimpsest through the coexistence of various inscriptions that we learn to decipher in order to get a more truthful gaze.

Even if accurate and rich, the psychological value is not what most interests Angelopoulos. From the psychological point of view, the protagonist is most of the time opaque. By this, I mean that he is a character in action, and his words convey more often an enigma than an explanation of conscious motives. Stubbornness and persuasion alternate in his constant movement to achieve his objective. The key comes gradually from the relation to other 'static' characters who assume a dialectical and even choral function.

A Greek friend living in Belgrade tells A that very few journalists ever go to the front; they just pay some dollars to the soldiers stationed on the outskirts of Belgrade and fabricate a picture of the war. Here, as in other occasions in the film, the validity of the image is put into question. The Greek friend proposes to follow a similar line, by getting somebody to fetch the reels from Sarajevo. However, the protagonist cannot accept this siren song, and he has to see for himself. And, with his ears and his eyes wide open like Odysseus tied to the mast, he sees Sarajevo.

Actually, the first sign he gets is the sound of Serbian artillery pounding the city. A in his quest, and we with him in his voyage, are thus gradually being brought face to face with larger social and political issues.

Another convergence of themes, and times, occurs in an episode at the Bulgarian border. During the First World War, in the role of one of the Manakis brothers A is first sentenced to death, and then assigned to residence in Plovdiv. Again in the present, A forwards his passport and says that he is going to Philippopolis (the ancient Greek name of the town): he is corrected by the guard who sternly stresses, 'Plovdiv'. On the other side of the border, A turns to look back and wonders, 'Did I really say Philippopolis?', as if addressing the public with the question: What unconscious forces are pushing me to retrace other times, and even other people's experience? This leads us to another parenthesis about the style. The scene is played without emphasis, in one continuous take that flows on for several minutes at medium distance; no pounding music, no close-up as the character reflects, 'Did I really say Philippopolis?' The lack of emphasis leaves all the rest to the public: the viewer has the task of processing the bewilderment and surprise, the mystery of this scene so that it seeps to different strata of feeling and understanding.

Even if rivers are sometimes borders in external reality, in the film they provide ways of eluding frontiers. A ship carrying a huge statue of Lenin up the Danube has taken A as a passenger. At the Triple Frontier (Bulgaria–Romania–Serbia), to a searchlight that scrutinizes the ship and the question, 'Have you anyone on board?', the captain answers, 'Nobody'. The negation implies multiple irony: not only are we smuggling our passenger A, but also Lenin, now like Prometheus bound, has lost all value, he is 'nobody'; and it also evokes the trick whereby Odysseus escapes the blinded Cyclops.

The whole sequence with Lenin's statue on the barge is one superb lyrical moment in the film, a poignant reflection on mutations and persistences in time. As the ship passes by, people on the riverbank stare in awe, and some kneel down and cross themselves.

Upstream to Belgrade, and then further from Belgrade to Sarajevo, the rivers are paths to recover healing memories. And downstream, the river is the road to freedom. In another insert from the past, a Bulgarian woman wakes A up and draws on a window pane the course of the river he should follow to attain freedom—she stresses, Bulgaria, the frontier, Greece, the sea! The brief nocturnal scene, charged with emotion, recalls the writing on the windowpane in *The lady vanishes* by Hitchcock, which is also set in the Balkans.

Angelopoulos does wonderful things with languages. The Bulgarian woman speaks no Greek but gives the Greek geographical names, perhaps as part of her

protective role towards **A**. In the sequence that condenses five years in the life of the family in Constanta (Romania), we have heard Greek and English spoken, but we hear Romanian only on the lips of the maid when the increasing pressure of the authorities pushes the family into exile.

Choosing one language over another can create a frontier, and express acceptance or exclusion. During the fog in Sarajevo, some phrases exchanged in Greek between **A** and a girl suffice to suggest another time, and the tenderness of a mother tongue. In addition, the words pronounced here by the girl had been quoted by **A** at the beginning of the film: the experience has come full circle; the voyage is nearing its end.

The Greek friend in Belgrade, through whom fine nuances are introduced into the dialogue, also takes the role of Greek chorus when his words, ‘We fell gently asleep in one world, and were shaken awake in another’, anticipate **A**’s arrival in Sarajevo.

It seems extremely difficult to suggest in fiction a contemporary collective tragedy. Perhaps this is what Adorno meant in 1949 with his severe dictum that, ‘After Auschwitz, to write poetry is barbaric’. And yet Angelopoulos succeeded in portraying the tragedy of Sarajevo at the same time as it was happening.

In the city under siege, yesterday’s neighbours have become a deadly frontier all around that is pushing to annihilate what little space and life there remains. This is a most abominable expression of a frontier—as barrier of exclusion and narcissistic hatred, as the idolisation of differences arbitrarily defined by one group to annihilate all other groups.

As in other films by Angelopoulos, we are struck by the theme of a suspended time in which the experiences of separation and exile remain in an eternal present. In *Ulysses’s gaze* these themes appear in a much larger perspective, in proportion to the vastness of the field covered and the contemporaneous urgency of the events portrayed. But there is more than that. At this point, we may fully appreciate the style, or narrative method, of Angelopoulos, his gaze that is the opposite of the unseeing gazes that surround our everyday life.

The person who holds the reels in Sarajevo, Ivo Levi, says in admiration, ‘To have come all this way for something believed to be lost, you must have a great faith, or is it despair?’ This clairvoyant remark (not for nothing is he the one who finally succeeds in developing the film) points at the initial void **A** attempted to fill by the three reels.

Thanks to the art of this man, who calls himself ‘a collector of vanished gazes’ (and whose name evokes Primo Levi), **A** is able to see the three reels—but we are not. The parallelism of our voyage ceases at this point. Angelopoulos had planned to materialise an image from the supposed old reels in which Odysseus would look at the camera, hence at us, confronting us with an ‘innocent gaze’ from a time prior to the tragedies of the 20th century. Instead, Angelopoulos has chosen to present a blank screen before our eyes, and we may very well wonder why.

When **A** has finished viewing the reels, he is crying. His visible emotion relates to all he has lived through during his voyage and more especially to his experience in Sarajevo. However, what he thinks of the three reels we shall not know. This is

consistent with the psychological opacity I mentioned. By refusing a material image produced by the search, Angelopoulos stresses the intrinsic value of the search itself. The latter corresponds to the actual experience of the film.

The possible fetishistic meaning of the reels has been dispelled, and we together with the protagonist gain access to symbolic values. Earlier in the film, **A** had prophesied about himself, 'The end will be my beginning'. And so it is for us. Having accomplished the voyage with **A**, having seen with **A**, we are ready for new beginnings, having acquired a new gaze.

References

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