

HISTORY, STORY, NARRATIVE ECAH/EUROMEDIA 2017

July 11–12, 2017 | Brighton, UK



The European Conference on Arts & Humanities
The European Conference on Media, Communication & Film
Organised by The International Academic Forum

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Theo Angelopoulos: “A Voyage in History, Time and Space”

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The European Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2017
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the historical and dialectical approach of Angelopoulos's mise-en-scene as well as its connection to historical events in his films: *Day's of '36* (1972), *The Travelling Players* (1975), *The Hunters* (1977), *Alexander the Great* (1980). Angelopoulos was particularly interested in Greek History of the twentieth century and put it under examination, because of the events that the Greek nation had been through during WWII and the Greek Civil War (1946-1949) and after them. The visualisation of the history from the point of view of the defeated gives him the opportunity to develop his narratives and style and allows us to conceive the story through a new language: melancholy, a materialist poetics with a Marxist taste, which follows the lives of those who lost someone or have been lost into the maelstrom of the historical events. This first period of Angelopoulos's film-making coincides with the most turbulent political and historical years after WWII: the dictatorship (1967-1974) of the colonels. The director uses the dictatorship as his advantage in order to represent history from a critical point of view and with a dialectic approach. He makes a reference to the current situation through a kind of political and theatrical scene that he creates in his films, which could include different places and different times, using forms and techniques of the well-known Bertolt Brecht's "epic theatre". Without flashbacks, he navigates into the historical events that appear in front of the audience as present.

Keywords: Theo Angelopoulos, film history, Greek film studies, Greek civil war trauma

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Introduction

Theo Angelopoulos was embraced by the Greek audience because he managed to wake up their collective memory and communicate with them through history, time and space. The period when he shot his first trilogy was during the dictatorship (1967-1974) of the colonels in Greece. Angelopoulos managed to deliver his political message against the dictatorship by visualising and criticising its historical background. He deals with “taboo subjects” of the Greek nation such as: the German occupation (1941-1944), the freedom of Athens (1944), the British invasion (1944), the battle of Athens (1944), the “white terror” period (1945-1949), the Greek Civil War (1946-1949), the Marshall plan (1947) and the governments after that, and he opens the “secret back door” of Greek history that was hidden from the people for many years.

As Prof. Stathi states “...critics had hailed Angelopoulos as “the film director of history”...with few exceptions that’s not completely true. Angelopoulos emerged in the film a singular model of political cinema, rather than a new historical cinema” (Stathi, 2012: 18). He managed to wake up the collective memory from all these events using history, myth and theatrical alienation.

This announcement will present the historical events from the dialectical point of view of Theo Angelopoulos in the films: *Day’s of ’36* (1972), *The Travelling Players* (1975), *The Hunters* (1977), *Alexander the Great* (1980). The way with which the director used the dictatorship of the colonels as an advantage for his narration will be also mentioned.

Angelopoulos’s relationship with history and politics

The creation of narratives for a historical/political film has to pass through the actual historical events and from the director’s perspective of these events. Angelopoulos had a very critical point of view with a dialectic approach. So, in order to represent historical events, he needs not only to take all the elements of this specific reality, but to modify them, too. The creation of this “new reality” is a journey from the real world to the perspective of the director for it and the combination of these two (Stathi, 1996).

German occupation and Greek Civil War were the main historical chapters that influenced his youth. After his studies in France, he returned in Greece in 1964, where the political status was very vague. Note that the dictatorship of the colonels started four years later. His first two feature films, *Reconstitution* (1970) and *Day’s of ’36* (1972) as well as the biggest part of *The Travelling Players* (1975) were shot during the dictatorship which made it difficult for him and for the rest of the open minded directors to produce films. Angelopoulos managed to use the current political situation as an advantage not only to succeed the style and aesthetics of his films, but also to politically criticise the dictatorship, by aiming at the root of its creation. He felt that the events, which brought that regime into life, were rooted back in Greek history, in the period before the dictatorship of Metaxas 1935. This is why the first film of The Trilogy of History is about the period before the dictatorship of Metaxas.

Angelopoulos approached history not from events that are known, but from stories and personal lives of humble people. Prof. Stathi is writing that *“Angelopoulos is dealing with the minor heroes, who are always the same, “poor” and nameless, and who, in different clothing, the same as themselves and yet different, inhabit the seasons as one turns into the other, weaving the net of that which we call popular memory. All the things that propel their fate can be found behind the stage of history, and they always lead, with ritualistic precision, to its usual tragic repetition* (Stathi, 2012: 19). That is the reason why Angelopoulos’s narration aims at the heart of the collective memory of Greek nation. He presents events that actually happened to family and loved ones and are in the Greek DNA. Understanding these events and their historical background means understanding a part of the collective Greek identity, which is hidden from them for almost a century.

Trilogy of history Days of '36 (1972)

In *Days of '36* (1972), Angelopoulos connects the two Greek dictatorships of 1936 and 1967 with an imaginary line. He communicates his political message against the Junta regime by visualising the period before the dictatorship of Metaxas. Prof. Stathi states: *“Ten films could be made about the colonels’ junta, and all of them could present the facts with verisimilitude and precision, however, if they do not touch upon the essence, which is mainly the general climate, but also at the same time the particular climate which precedes the conception, manifestation and establishment of all dictatorships, in all eras and in all countries, then something will be lacking.”* (Stathi, 2012: 20). The interesting and important messages that the director attempts to portray in his film come actually from the events that are happening in silence. The eye contact of the authorities in the prison, the whispers between the prisoners, the laughs in Sofianos’s cell etc. Angelopoulos said that: *“I tried to place the important aspects of this film behind the doors, away from telephones, with just whispers of truth. The dictatorship is on the structure of this film. It was because of the circumstances I was working under. It’s a film about the unspoken about those things we are not allowed to tell. I couldn’t express my own opinion. This way, I created a censorship for the aesthetics of my own film.”* (Crysanthou, 1981: 101). Angelopoulos introduces the dictatorship’s atmosphere through the claustrophobic effect in his cinematography. All the important events are happening in closed rooms and the camera is traveling from 90 to 360 degrees’ shots to show the walls around the action. The whole place is secluded from the authorities. Behind the door of the court is the police informer. In the most secluded parts of the city there are parastatal members. Everything is monitored by the state so the viewer, even in the scenes without walls, can feel the atmosphere of the dictatorship. Of course a basic element that helps this aesthetics is the alienation and the theatrical form that is used by these shots-sequences.

The chaotic reaction of the authorities and its true connection with lumpen working class elements can be observed in the film. Their decision to poison Sofianos is an element of their fear to obey the orders of the government that is controlled by the British government. The poison, as a weapon of murder, is mostly used by abused wives and represents the fear of taking action. Thus, it has a determinant role in the narration. Moreover, the friendly discussion that the audience is listening to inside Sofianos’s cell between him and the lawyer shows us the way the regime use criminals like Sofianos to act on its behalf.

There is a resistance message in this film but in the same time a feeling that these actions of resistance will not lead to revolution. Sofianos requests to listen a song and a turntable is placed in the middle of the prison yard. The long tracking shots of the prison in silence listening to music stops and the prisoners make noise against the restriction of freedom in the prison. This noise ends with the guards firing in the air. That truly shows the basic feature of all dictatorships and connects once again the two historical periods of 1936 and 1972 (Kolovos, 1990). Angelopoulos criticises dictatorships in general with many comedian references in his *mise-en-scene*, too. The ceremony for the new Olympic stadium takes place in the middle of nowhere, the attendants are few and from a certain class, the hymns they sing don't make any sense and all the audience can hear is the clapping. That surrealistic scene has an element of criticising both the dictatorship of Metaxas and the colonels. The way that the dictators use the history of ancient Greece, misrepresenting the actual essence of its philosophy and using some parts of it full of ignorance is exactly what the audience can observe in this surrealistic ceremony. The strict censorship that made Angelopoulos communicate his political message using silence was one of the basic steps in order to create his own aesthetics and gaze in cinema. The additional element that made the director as known as he is until today is his influence by Bertolt Brecht's techniques and aesthetics.

The Travelling Players (1975)

In *The Travelling Players* (1975), the director uses alienation and theatrical forms to let history represents itself to the audience. It is a linear narration but for events that happened in the past and works as a perfect circle. The second shot of the film starts, with the members of the traveling players in front of the train station in 1952 and ends with the same shot but with different members in 1939. The actors alternate between watching the events of history taking place before their eyes, and then appearing to go back in history, to attend something that took place in their absence (Stathi, 2012). In this film, there is no need for flashback to remind historical events and memories. History is always present and represents itself through narration. With the different characters of the traveling players, Angelopoulos wanted to show the different types of people in society. From the communist (Orestis), who fights for his ideology, and the informer (Aigisthos) of the police, to the girl (Hrisothemis) that will use her body to get a bottle of oil during the German occupation. To underscore that he uses myth as his operating tool of history. He connects the members of the traveling players with the myth of the Atreides and with elements of Oedipus myth and he summarises the adventures of the traveling players into a familiar archetypal model, which runs through the space and time of history (Stathi, 2012). That is also one of the basic elements of "epic" cinema. The audience has to observe these three sections of the film and watch history mixing with myth. After that, they will have to use these elements to find the connection with the problems of their reality. That is also related with Bertolt Brecht's idea of *Weltanschauung* (common sense). The members of the play are common people without any historical importance. They connect with history without even wanting to.

The director uses three alienation monologues in this film. The characters represent history and explain the historical events by looking straight at the lens. They explain events from the Catastrophe of Smyrna in 1922 until the end of the Greek Civil War

in 1949. Angelopoulos also uses time swifts, influenced again by Bertolt Brecht, in this film. He cuts the linear structure and leaves history always on the stage.

With this perfect cycle of history and narration, the audience experience history from a different perspective and observes the events in a time and space that is not steady, connect them with their reality and understand the course of history from the point of view of people that everyone can connect with.

The Hunters 1977

The Hunters was a film-shock for the time period that it was shot. As Vasilis Rafailidis states: *“This is a film that hit the winners of the Civil War under the belt, a film that wasn't funded by the Greek state, something that is totally reasonable because you do not buy the bullets for the gun of your enemy”* (Rafailidis, 2003: 16). The film deals with the historical guilt of the bourgeois who worked with the Nazis during German occupation and of the terrible crimes they committed during the Civil War, for which they were never punished. As Prof. Stathi wrote: *“The historical mistake, which cannot be recognised by history, is experienced by those who, exiled in the snow, will remain there forever, with no saying to the big decisions. The “political sickness” described by this film is full of ghosts, forgotten at the edges of official history. If history forgets, then it can also be forgotten. It can, but that doesn't happen. The collective memory will always transform historical figures into mythical entities, into archetypical constructions that replace heroes and give them a timeless dimension.”* (Stathi, 2012: 20). This film deals with the illusion and anxiety of the winners that know that the ghosts of their past will rise up and hunt them for their crimes.

All his films are burdened by a heart-breaking sorrow and nostalgia for the revolution, the great dream that was betrayed and aborted. Angelopoulos underlines that The Hunters repentant communist and the “subjugated Left” held onto *“that lost revolution, like an trauma, like an open wound”* (Amengual, 2012). This can be identified in the scene where the ex-communist who became a member of the hunters and betrayed his ideas, asks the corpse of the partisan *“When is the revolution going to happen?”*. During the surrealist tribe, the audience can observe the responsibilities of the bourgeoisie and the people who served them. The most characteristic scene is when the “hotelier” gets in the hotel that is given to him as a reward for his “support to the state” after the Civil War. The audience can observe the traitor who worked with the Nazis in the past become a respectful business man of the presence. Wearing the same clothes and doing the same job, as the informer of the current state. The “rape of history” that happened from the ruling class after the Civil War is totally represented by the rape of Kotamanidou by the invisible king Konstantinos. That works perfectly with the 360 degrees shot that travels the audience from reality to imagination and from present time to past with one single shot.

At the same time, Angelopoulos is criticising the leaders of the communist party. He leaves a huge question of why that happened and the communists didn't win. The audience can observe his critique from the reference of the partisan's body to Aris Velouhiotis. Velouhiotis was the only leader of the communist army that disagreed with its decision and the way they betrayed the Civil War in Greece by signing the Treaty of Varkiza (1945) etc. Vasilis Raphailidis wrote: *“...as far as the myth of Aris*

Velouhiotis exists (the costume design of the partisans have a clear reference on him in the Hunters 1977), the leftwings will contact (without their will), a way of historical terrorism to the rightwings, because it will be impossible to “execute” the living myth (of Aris).” (Rafailidis, 2003: 21).

The film works in a perfect circle, as after the dream of the communist’s returning and executing the hunters, they decide to bury the body back in the snow and leave the whole narration in the air, like nothing had happened. As Stamatiou wrote: *“the hunters bury with their bare hands the body back to the snow. As cats hide their impurities in the same way the hunters bury their own”* (Crysanthou, 1981: 69).

Alexander the Great 1980

The director in *Alexander the Great* (1980) deals with the mythical figure of Alexander the Great. Angelopoulos didn't include this film in the Trilogy of History because he wants to use it as his own personal reflection in politics and history. The director is using myth and history to create the ultimate mythical figure of Alexander the Great who has elements from different types of historical leaders throughout Greek history. Myth helps history to be realised and acquire meaning (Stathi, 2012).

Angelopoulos uses this film to put together and criticise all the historical events that he had visualised in his previous films. He deals with the idea of socialism and the myth of the hero that will save the world. This is one of his political films that truly put together his whole belief system. Angelopoulos criticises the decision of the communist party throughout the historical period of 1935-1952. The director raises the question of all the historical mistakes of the communist party through the narration of the film: like the agreement of Varkiza in 1945, the agreement of Yalta, the battle of Athens, the help that the Soviet Union never sent to the Greek partisans and others. Angelopoulos shows that with Alexander’s behaviour in the film. Alexander was talking with the authorities in order to come to an agreement for his freedom and let the official state to use him as a caricature of the revolution. A significant example was the photograph that was taken when Alexander the Great was photographed like he was killing a dragon just like Saint George did in the Christian paintings. The director presents three different types of socialistic ideas but he criticises only one of them. The first is the authoritarian socialism of Alexander the Great and his group that didn't want to collectivise their property, used their weaponry to gain power, and made deals with the official state to win their freedom. The second type of socialism is the way that the Italian anarchist group was thinking of. And that is that they wanted a fully understanding of the socialist ideas from the farmers, that couldn't have a dialectical approach to other beliefs and ideas. The third one is the approach of socialism from the teacher. The teacher created an open, democratic way of socialism, where everyone equally can discuss their opinion without the use of violence. Angelopoulos wanted to criticise the gain of power from one specifically group and especially from one leader that “will save the human kind from its suffering”. The myth holds its background to religions. We can detect a clear reference to them, as well as to Stalinism, where Stalin as the ultimate hero could act in any way he wanted without following the basic ideas of socialism.

However, from the film derives a positive message. First of all, he shows the true power of the bourgeoisie every time when there is a big movement against it. The

scene of the aristocrat in the middle of an empty field with his fine clothes and with the same appearance on the mountains when the surrealistic tribe of Alexander the Great starts, shows exactly what the director was approaching in *The Hunters* 1977, too. And that is that the ruling class is totally helpless and worried in the case of revolution of the working class against it. In addition, in the end of the film when Alexander is being eaten by his people and in the place of his body is the head of a statue, shows how history becomes myth. When that happens, history is never forgotten. It will always rise up from the collective memory and remind the crimes of the ruling class. The last scene where the young Alexander is wandering to the cities fully equipped with the ideas of socialism and knowing the historical mistakes of the past is a positive message for the future of humanity.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the historical and dialectical approach of Angelopoulos' mise-en-scene as well as its connection to historical events in his films: *Day's of '36* (1972), *The Travelling Players* (1975), *The Hunters* (1977), *Alexander the Great* (1980). Looking closely his work, it is noticeable that he communicated his political approach without stating it clearly. His point of view comes out from the eyes in the *Day's of '36* (1972), the alienation monologues of the members of *Travelling Players* (1975), the terror of the bourgeoisie in the looks of *The Hunters* (1977) and the ancient statue of *Alexander the Great* (1980).

Angelopoulos used the dictatorship of the colonels as his advantage to describe the events from a different point of view and present the history from the side of the defeated. The strict censorship and the references to slow cinema and Bertolt Brecht's techniques helped him to forge his own style and gaze in cinema and communicate his own political message through his mise-en-scene. By using time swifts, alienation effects, non-cathartic ending, narration in a cycle, slow tracking shots, references to myth, ancient tragedies, folklore and religion, he manages to wake up collective memory and bring history back on stage. And that's because history is always present in his film and looks the audience straight in the eyes waiting for the collective memory to wake up and demand a political payback.

Acknowledgements

We thank Stavros Kozobolis, PhD candidate in Department of Foreign Languages, Translation and Interpreting - Ionian University and Iralia Kotsakidou undergraduate student in Department of Foreign Languages, Translation and Interpreting - Ionian University for assistance with proof reading and checking the above paper.

We would also like to show our gratitude to Professor Irini Stathi of Aegean University for inspiring us and giving us useful information during the course of this research.

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