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BOOK REVIEWS

THE CINEMA OF THEO ANGELOPOULOS, ANGELOS KOUTSOURAKIS AND MARK STEVEN (EDS) (2015)

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 324+xi pp.,
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Reviewed by Sean Homer, American University in Bulgaria

The scholarly and critical literature in English on Theo Angelopoulos has been rather limited to date. Andrew Horton's monograph *The Films of Theo Angelopoulos: A Cinema of Contemplation* (1997a) and accompanying volume of essays, *The Last Modernist*, were both published in 1997 and therefore concluded with *Mia aioniotita kai mia mera* (*Eternity and a Day*). Dan Fainaru's collection of interviews published in 2001 similarly ended with *Eternity and a Day*. Irini Stathi's bilingual, Greek and English, volume *Θόδωρος Αγγελόπουλος* (*Theo Angelopoulos*) published in 2012 by Thessaloniki Film Festival Publications to coincide with a retrospective of Angelopoulos' work shortly after his death covers the full extent of his career but has unfortunately not received the distribution it deserves. *The Cinema of Theo Angelopoulos* is thus a much needed and welcome addition to this corpus of critical literature, providing the first complete overview of Angelopoulos' work in English. The essays are divided into four sections covering the main critical concerns with Angelopoulos' work: Authorship, Politics, Poetics and Time. The fifth category that immediately springs to mind, History, permeates all the above sections; as Sylvie Rollet notes, Angelopoulos' work is traversed by history from end to end. A number of familiar names are present, notably an 'Afterword' by Andrew Horton reflecting on his time on the set of *I alli thalassa* (*The Other Sea*) just a week before Angelopoulos' tragic death; Rollet's analysis of myth and history in terms of the cinematic double image; and Fredric Jameson's reappraisal of his earlier essay in *The Last Modernist*. Dan Georgakas' contribution on *O Megalexandros* (*Megalexandros*) and Nagisa Oshima's two short essays on Angelopoulos' early films are the only pieces reprinted from elsewhere.

The volume opens with Maria Chalkou's assessment of Angelopoulos' neglected work as a film critic for *Dimokratiki Allagi* (*Democratic Change*) and *Synchronos Kinimatografos* (*Contemporary Cinema*) between 1964–67 and 1969–71, respectively. In this fascinating study of the 221 reviews written during this period, Chalkou notes that only a handful were on domestic Greek cinema, and these tended to be scathing. What comes across is Angelopoulos' passion for genre film and the influence of French film theory, specifically auteur theory, which he was to apply to his own practice throughout his career. In other words, Angelopoulos' trajectory into film very much follows that of the French New Wave auteurs, and his admiration for Jean-Luc Goddard's use of ellipses and de-dramatization is strongly evident (Angelos Koutsourakis explores the Brechtian elements of Angelopoulos' early films in a subsequent essay). Angelopoulos was in a sense creating an audience for the kinds of films he wanted to make, and this seems to accord with David Bordwell's assertion that he is one of the last European modernist directors. Indeed, if there are two readings that hover over many of the contributions here, it is Bordwell's influential essay 'Modernism, minimalism, melancholy: Angelopoulos and visual style', revised and expanded in *Figures Traced in Light* (2005), and Jameson's identification of Angelopoulos as a late modernist, whose work underwent a certain 'regression' from *Taxidi sta Kythira* (*Voyage to Cythera*) (1984) onwards.

Angelopoulos, argued Bordwell, is a second generation Euromodernist director in the sense that he studied film in Paris in the crucial years 1961 to 1964 and that he has a keen grasp of the director's role in shaping the reception of his films:

A cinéophile in the Parisian mould, an eager exegete of his own work, Angelopoulos is also a modernist in creating a trade mark, a recognizable, self-conscious style which he carries from film to film.

(Horton 1997b: 12)

The elements of this style are now familiar, the long take, the sequence shot, dead time and the use of off-screen space. For Bordwell, Angelopoulos' work is important, not just for its singularity but for the way in which he synthesizes significant trends in European filmmaking over the previous 30 years. The key figure here is Antonioni, whose influence can be seen in Angelopoulos' use of the rear view shot, $\frac{3}{4}$ views and long takes. Bordwell further identifies two main forms of composition in Angelopoulos, what he calls recessional staging – an image situating figures within a strongly perspectival landscape – and planimetric staging – where the background is resolutely perpendicular to the lens axis, and the figures stand frontally, in profile, or with their backs directly towards us, strung out in a line across the frame. Through a comparison of the formal characteristics of Antonioni and Angelopoulos, Hamish Ford develops the argument for a more complex understanding of the trajectory of European modernism and its particular regional, national and global realities than either Bordwell or Jameson allows for. Ford acknowledges the influence of Antonioni in Angelopoulos' early films, especially through the representation of urban landscapes, but strongly contests Bordwell's reading for the later films. In particular, Ford notes that the planimetric composition that Bordwell sees as central to Angelopoulos' aesthetic is not present in Antonioni. For Angelopoulos, the planimetric composition results in an uncluttered frame with a very precise arrangement of bodies in space, frequently in a 'painterly' tableaux, while for Antonioni, 'the frame remains an absolute key means of

compositional effect in itself, played off against often complex graphic and textual details of the *mise-en-scène*, comprising a wide range of angles and material layers' (49). In Angelopoulos, the long take, or sequence shot, comes to predominate over the other modernist characteristics, enlarging the role of both time and space at the expense of narrative and character development. Paradoxically, therefore, Angelopoulos extends certain features of Antonioni's style at the same time that he reduces other aspects of his modernism:

The resulting aesthetic and formal 'language' is a pan-European and increasingly global modernism defined increasingly by the long take, which seems to have mounted a creeping takeover of the more varied formalism exemplified by Antonioni's peak early 1960s work. (46)

A number of contributors (Robert Sinnerbeck, Julian Murphet and Sylvie Rollet) take issue with Jameson's notion of a 'regression' in Angelopoulos' oeuvre between the early political films and the later humanist phase. Sinnerbeck argues that Angelopoulos is rather a 'belated' modernist, whose work operates through 'the dialectic between inheritance and innovation, synthesising elements of inherited traditions adapted to changing cultural-historical and cinematic contexts' (83). In particular, Sinnerbeck emphasizes the foregrounding of the cinematic image as a source of collective memory and shared historical experience. Cinema in this sense becomes an archive of collective historical memory, and the later films remain historical albeit with a lower case rather than capital 'H'. Rollet, on the other hand, takes *Voyage to Cythera* to represent a more radical break than Sinnerbeck, insofar as after this film History becomes unrepresentable and what is 'repressed can only return in a spectral form' (220). Rollet reads Angelopoulos' last completed, and for some of us deeply unsatisfactory, film *I skoni tou chronou* (*The Dust of Time*) (2008) as a return to and reversal of *Voyage to Cythera*. The crucial break with the earlier film was that a belief in History as an objective process is no longer available to us; Angelopoulos' fusion of past and present stops with *Voyage* and from this point on collective history and collective memory only gain significance if that history is filtered through subjective memory.

Murphet similarly rejects Jameson's idea of a humanist break through the importation of extrinsic themes in Angelopoulos' oeuvre and develops a fascinating critique based on the eclipse of the long-take circular and semi-circular pan in long shot by the sweeping camera movements of the later films. For Murphet, the circular pan is Angelopoulos' most distinctive device for the representation of dynamic groups within a specific space and operates as shorthand for social 'totality' as such. Drawing on Sartre's theory of the group in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Murphet argues that the pan transforms a mere community of individuals into a fused group, whereas the planimetric tableaux composition that comes to predominate in the later films presents the group in serial dispersal. The culmination of Angelopoulos' collective cinema and of the circular pan is the final sequence of *Megalexandros* (1980), where the villagers as an 'aggregated mass commune tighten into a single, pulverising social sphincter, which closes in on the hero and consumes him without a word' (169). The cinematography of the collective, suggests Murphet, can go no further and is replaced by aesthetics of beauty more fitting to the requirements of the international festival circuit.

As mentioned above, Jameson's own contribution to this volume offers a reappraisal of his earlier essay and a slightly different periodization of the films.

His focus, however, remains on the early political films and Angelopoulos' 'collective narrative'. Indeed, the volume overall feels weighted towards the early political work with almost half of the entries focussing on the first third of Angelopoulos' career. Mark Steven's political reading of Angelopoulos' late style did not quite work for me, as I find the 'Euro-pudding', *The Dust of Time*, an utter disaster in all respects. A number of the later films, *O melissokomos* (*The Beekeeper*), which Murphet describes as execrable, *Eternity and a Day* and *To livadi pou dakryzei* (*The Weeping Meadow*), are frequently mentioned in passing but are not subjected to sustained analysis. This being said *The Cinema of Theo Angelopoulos* will unquestionably become the key reference point in future anglophone studies of, perhaps, one of the last great European auteurs.

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KOUIA KAI FTERA: O MYTHOS TIS ODYSSEIAS STI LOGOTEHNIA KAI STON KINIMATOGRARO TOU MODERNISMOU (WINGS AND OARS: THE MYTH OF THE ODYSSEY IN MODERNIST LITERATURE AND FILM), MARIA OIKONOMOU (2016)

Athens: Nefeli, 351 pp., ISBN: 9789605041564, p/bk, €21.50

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What is the secret of the enduring appeal of the Odyssey? Nearly three millennia after the epic was composed, the story of the wandering, returning hero is still inviting new interpretations in literature, remediations in film and art, entries in popular culture and language, not to mention the vast critical engagement with both the myth and its multitudinous retellings. What emerges is a landscape or rather a seascape of immense variety, which Maria Oikonomou undertakes to map out in her study *Wings and Oars: The Myth of the Odyssey in Modernist Literature and Film*. The geographical framing of the myth in the opening pages makes a case for reading this book as 'dynamic cartography', to borrow Nicole Cesare's term, which explores the 'fluidities, mobilities and disjunctions' (Cesare 2015: 113) of the myth in its many metamorphoses and receptions.

In seven long chapters divided into smaller, thematically organized subsections, with endnotes conveniently placed at the end of each chapter to enhance their relative independence, Oikonomou explores aspects of myth in general – within the compass of western traditions – and of the myth of the *Odyssey* and its variations in particular, with emphasis on the subversive revisions of modernism. The short chapter entitled ‘Ruptures and Subversions’ (95–100), which can be read as either gap or bridge, or both, marks the passage from pre-modernist to modernist versions of the myth. Oikonomou’s examination of the depictions of Odysseus and of other characters and themes in the myth in specific modernist works of literature and film (most notably James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Jan-Luc Godard’s *Le Mépris* and Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* as well as texts by Ezra Pound, Rilke, Kafka, Brecht, Pascoli, Giraudoux, Seferis and Sinopoulos) takes up the largest part of the book – it is there that the study’s main proposal of a ‘new reading’ of the *Odyssey* is carried out.

In the first chapter – which clearly evokes the lecture theatre and the seminar room, but with the limpid style and light-handed touch that are the hallmarks of a gifted teacher – Oikonomou takes the readers through a presentation of myth and its multifarious interpretations. In tracing mythical origins and trajectories and highlighting affinities, contradictions and ruptures, Oikonomou trains the reader to discern the potential of myth for adaptation, suggesting that it is precisely this ambiguity of myth, its hybrid nature as both a tool for interpreting the world and a self-contained, narrative world itself, ‘permanently activated in the here and now’ (33) and its unceasing interaction with discourse, which account for its perennial popularity as thematic matter in literature, art, philosophy and critical theory. Oikonomou’s presentation does not aim to be a ‘synthetic prehistory of myth’; rather, she sets up ‘images of temporality’, in an attempt to bring down local and spatial limits, thus allowing entry at any point, in accordance with the openness and fluidity of myth (61).

The aptitude of myth to serve both as vehicle for the survival of tradition and as the space par excellence where tradition can be re-inscribed, subverted or parodied, made it particularly attractive to modernism. Given the revisionist or radical treatment of myth in general and the *Odyssey* in particular by the avant-gardes of the twentieth century, Oikonomou’s focus on the ‘poetics of subversion’, articulated mostly in seminal twentieth century narrative texts, literary or filmic, is hardly surprising. Modernism with its emphasis on the fragmentation of time and space, degraded subjectivity, irony, parody and the absurd, as well as its anxious stance towards tradition and renewal, recognized and embraced the inherent ambiguity and openness of myth, using it as a palimpsest on which to inscribe new interpretations and versions without privileging any one in particular; for, as Giorgio Agamben put it, ‘to search among them for an archetype or an original from which the others have derived would amount to misreading the Atlas’ (Agamben 2013: 14–5). In the cartography of modernist remakes of the myth as Oikonomou proposes it, the focus is not in locating origins but in detecting and identifying traces, layers, bridges and zones of proximity, or gaps and fissures, creating a fluid, dynamic and interactive field of myth, which is shaped by every new interpretation and shapes it in its turn (46), in a game of endless ‘repetition and difference’.

In the second chapter of the book – set up as a gallery of eight ‘images’ – Oikonomou presents various versions of the myth of the *Odyssey* and of the

character of Odysseus in western literature from antiquity to the late nineteenth century, showcasing the possibilities of interpretation and the malleability of myth – from the Homeric centripetal Odysseus who places *nostos* at the heart of the myth, to the centrifugal Odysseus of Dante, whose doomed journey beyond the edges of the known world foreshadows modernity. In charting also the allegorical, the exile, the Christian, the pedagogical, the translated and the bourgeois Odysseus, Oikonomou offers a substantial sample of the many adaptations of the myth. It might be worth adding to the medieval part of this sample a case of the strategic use of the myth in a major historiographical text – in Julia Kristeva's view, 'a historical novel' (2006: 21) – Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*, in which emperor Alexios I Komnenos is cast by the historian as Odysseus and his troubled reign as an Odyssey (Macrides 2000: 68–69).

The fundamental movement of myth, identified as repetition and difference, as unceasing passage from adaptation to adaptation, results in a 'doubling' or 'multiplying' of vision to encompass various versions of the myth beyond Homer (81); eventually the myth becomes a palimpsest or a web or a constellation of intertextual references, allusions, reiterations, palindromes and inversions, changing and dissolving into the dialectical tension that is 'programmatically embedded in the relationship between myth and modernism' (95). Joyce's *Ulysses* (which Oikonomou aptly dubs 'Odysseus Machine', suggesting an affinity with Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*) is a prime example of this dialectical fusion of the competing Homeric and Dantean traditions incorporating layers upon layers of mostly iconoclastic reception (106–07).

Out of the mass of myth material accumulated over the centuries Oikonomou salvages two symbols, the oars and the wings, to signal the subversive stance and antiheroic readings of modernity. The oars are metonymic devices for the character of Elpenor, the hapless companion of Odysseus who met his death after a drunken fall at the palace of Circe; in modernist reworkings of the myth, Elpenor represents all the unknown and the unsung, the ghosts of soldiers in the wars or the workers in the factories of the twentieth century. The wings, on the other hand, allude to the Sirens, the winged women whose alluring song would have led Odysseus to his death – or taught him wisdom; but their song has stopped and their silence reveals the naming crisis of modern times, the end of meaningful communication via language, the 'poetics of a poet who is suspicious of language' (234) – or it could be viewed as the silence of the subaltern, thus connecting the Sirens to Elpenor.

In Oikonomou's reading of canonical texts of the twentieth century in the final chapter, among which in poetry by Ezra Pound and Nobel laureate George Seferis, and the less well-known Takis Sinopoulos, these two symbols are set as examples of the paradigmatic shift in modernism, accelerated by new 'cultural technologies' such as photography or cinema, which introduced a new way of seeing and thus raised a new type of political consciousness, turning the cultural gaze on the anonymous, the insignificant and the voiceless. At the same time, this gaze, likened to the eye of the Cyclops, implies the dangers inherent in the interpretation of myth (170). Elpenor's emergence is linked to the modernist (and postmodernist) turn to the archive of history, literature and tradition, to the storeroom of memory, which becomes the equivalent of the *Nekyia* – i.e. the summons of the ghosts of the dead, made to speak and be heard. But memory is also connected with loss, turning the myth into a space of absence, a place for mourning. Thus, the myth of the *Nekyia* is seen both as an initiating passage to a new political and poetic pedagogy and as an evidence of the bankruptcy of European civilization (248).

Oikonomou's most important contribution in this book is tracing thematic threads and mapping out conversations between texts, literary or cinematic, to highlight affinities, complementarities or ruptures in their interpretations of the myth. For instance, in the penultimate chapter entitled 'The silence of the Sirens', Kafka takes the silence of the Sirens as ominous and poignant, whereas in Brecht's retelling of the same story, inspired by Kafka, the political Sirens are 'the strong and intelligent women' who refuse to sing for a philistine Odysseus, an unworthy recipient of an art he cannot understand and appreciate. These interpretations are then linked to Horkheimer and Adorno's view of the Odyssey as the 'bourgeois' precursor of the enlightenment and of modernity's new forms of power and domination.

Similarly, in juxtaposing the 'white square' in Godard's finale of *Le Mépris* (1963) (fifth chapter: 'Unpicking the myth') his cinematic interpretation of (or commentary on) the Odyssey and its ambiguous and subverting open-endedness with references to silence and to the end of myth, to the 'black square' in the opening of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) (sixth chapter: 'Odysseus astronaut') and its connotations of chaos, genesis and renewal – both of the myth and of the human species – Oikonomou makes a powerful statement on the potentiality of myth for dynamic cultural conversations while highlighting its intrinsic creative fierceness. One would have expected here a reference to Theo Angelopoulos and his *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995), in which Godard's white and Kubrick's black screens merge into the grey of memory, loss and violence, thus pulling together many of the threads of mythical interpretations of the Odyssey at the close of the twentieth century. But on the whole, and for the limited space of a book on a subject which could populate an encyclopaedia, *Wings and Oars* is a luminous, well-crafted and reliable map for scholars, students and alert readers.

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