MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

ETERNITY AND HISTORY: THE CINEMA OF THEO ANGELOPOULOS

July 8-24, 2016

Presented with support from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and the Hellenic-American Chamber of Commerce, and with the cooperation of The Greek Film Centre (Athens)

The Travelling Players (O thiasos)

Sunday, July 10, 2:00 p.m.

1975. 222 mins. 35mm print source: The Greek Film Centre. In Greek with English subtitles.
Written and directed by Theo Angelopoulos. Produced by Giorgis Samiotis. Photographed by Giorgos Arvanitis. Edited by Takis Davlopoulos. Music by Loukianos Kilaidonis. Principal Cast: Eva Kotamanidou (as Elektra), Aliki Georgouli (Elektra's Mother), Vangelis Kazan (Aegisthus), Stratos Pahis (Elektra's Father), Maria Vassilou (Chrysothemis), Petros Zarkadis (Orests), Kiriakos Katrivanos (Pyladis).

An essay by Peter Pappas, *Cinéaste*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Winter 1976-77):

The New Greek cinema is a reality. There can no longer be any doubt that there has been a profound revaluation and recreation of cinema values amongst Greece's new generation of filmmakers. Whether or not this is an organized 'new wave' is not the point; the point is that there has been a conscious rupture, a breaking with the past, and beyond that, an authentic emancipation of creative energies from the emotional, intellectual, and cultural constraints of the old Greek cinema. Indeed, the native cinema, which was until very recently the object of either indifference or scorn amongst most intelligent Greeks, has within a couple of years become the vanguard of the nation's culture; it has, to a very real extent, become the definition of the country's collective personality.

Nowhere has this bond between the new cinema and the national sensibility from which it springs, and which it seeks to reflect, been more evident than in Thodoros Angelopoulos's most recent film, *The Travelling Players* (Greek title, *O Thiasos*). It would not be an arbitrary judgment to say that this film has, in a little over a year's time, become a national affair, and to many, a landmark in the cultural life of the country. Many of Greece's most thoughtful film critics and filmmakers have spoken of Angelopoulos's work as a film that definitively divides the Greek cinema into pre-*Travelling Players* and post-*Travelling Players* periods. Perhaps this judgment is too extreme or premature but it is certain that *The Travelling Players* is a film of extraordinary significance. What makes it so, in the end, is not its function as a turning point in the development of a specific national cinema but the intrinsic value of its contribution to film aesthetics in general. *The Travelling Players* is an important film not only for Greeks but for everyone who is interested in the future of the cinema.

The Travelling Players, both thematically and structurally, is a film of extraordinary density. As a matter of fact, it is a film that does not lend itself easily to summary. Its subject is the entire history of Greece from 1939 to 1952, from just before the outbreak of the Second World War, through the war itself and the resistance to the Occupation, to the Greek Civil War and the final triumph of the monarchy and the Right (with the assistance of the American intervention following the promulgation of the Truman Doctrine). In Angelopoulos's own words, *The Travelling Players* is a "film reflection" on a specific historical period, an attempt not only to ascertain the general meaning of an historical age upon a nation and its people but more essentially, to define history itself, to discover its specific resonance, the significance it possesses in itself as the most elemental fact of human existence. Angelopoulos's film is not a work of historical reconstruction or recapitulation but of dialectical analysis, it is a work based on the assumption that there are no indiscernibles in the realm of human experience, that, in the end, for history to be significant it must not simply be retold as a story but dissected as the conjunction of thought and praxis that it is in reality. History, for Angelopoulos, is not a fairy tale but a fact. As such, it must be subjected to all the methods of inquiry. That is precisely what Angelopoulos does in his film. He subjects history to a varied but at all times systematic inquiry and in so doing creates a unique, multilayered tableau

resounding with all the complexity of human life and struggle — not a reenactment of history but history itself, with all the intentions and extensions that that fact entails.

Angelopoulos's film is not unilinear; it develops simultaneously on three parallel planes which, for the sake of concision, can be generally described as the cultural, the historical, and the cinematic. Though there is a constant development on three distinct planes, however, that does not mean that those planes are kept segregated from each other, that at times they do not intersect and, as a matter of course, develop almost symbiotically. Each element of the film is a segment of a larger relationship, each level works with another, or against another, to create a new level which, in its turn, will interact with and create new levels which will, in their turn, repeat the process. As opposed to the middle class aesthetic of investigation of particular moments and individuals, Angelopoulos refuses to segregate the separate elements of human existence. Consequently, though there are three different planes of development in *The Travelling Players*, that should not be understood as meaning diverging planes but simply, distinct planes. These levels of understanding, though each may be dealt with separately, are, in essence, all part of the same aesthetic tapestry, each one interwoven with the other to produce a complete image of the human condition.

Angelopoulos's film is about a troupe of actors who journey throughout the villages and cities of Greece. Their repertory is made up exclusively of one work, the nineteenth century 'dramatic' idyll, Golfo the Shepherdess, a pastoral play about the unrequited love of the shepherdess, Golfo, for the shepherd, Tasso. This play, which has been a popular entertainment in Greece from the time it was written, serves as one of the two constituent bases in the development of the cultural plane in *The Travelling Players*. The other constituent base is the actors themselves who relive, in a contemporary context, the tragedy of the House of Atreus. The story of Golfo and the myth of the Atridae are thus conjoined to create a new cultural entity, a new reality that, for Angelopoulos, comes much closer to the contemporary truth of the country. What is created in this manner is a tale that is much more immediate and much more intelligible to a modern Greek than the hoary tales told by Homer or Hesiod. The contemporary tale complements the older tales, however, it doesn't repudiate them; it simply makes them more sensible and recognizable to all those for whom the older legends have become arcane mysteries. In any event, the tale created by Angelopoulos in this way ceases, in reality, to be a tale; to use the Greek word, it is now no longer istoria in the sense of a story but istoria in the sense of history. The synthetic tale of the artist has, in essence, become as in Homer's case, the history of the nation.

This transformation of a 'story' into 'history' is illustrated precisely by Angelopoulos's use of the performances that the travelling players give of Golfo the Shepherdess. Four times throughout the film we witness the actors attempt to perform their play but each time the play is interrupted. First, during the fascist dictatorship of Metaxas in 1939, Pylades (all of the actors' names correspond to the characters of the Atridae myth), who is a communist, is arrested as he is performing on stage and taken away by the security police. A second time, the performance is interrupted by the bombs of the Italian invasion which will bring Greece into the Second World War. Much later, during the first round of the Greek Civil War in 1944, a performance for a group of English soldiers, led by the collaborator, Aegisthus, is interrupted by the gunfire of communist guerillas and finally, a little while after that, a last performance is interrupted when Orestes, by now a communist guerilla leader, jumps onto the stage and kills Aegisthus along with Aegisthus's lover—and Orestes's mother—Clytaemnestra. Each time the integrity of the performance is ruptured by the intervention of the real world, each time we literally become witnesses to history as the world fights its battles on a stage just a few metaphorical feet away from us. The idyll of Golfo the Shepherdess is violated repeatedly because the world does not recognize idylls. The development of human history does not allow for flight into artificial sanctuaries. The consistent interruption of the actors' play is a brilliant representation of the schizophrenic myth of Greece that the Greek ruling classes—aided and abetted by the international 'philhellenic' middle class—have perpetuated for well over two centuries: the myth of a Greece of luxurious calm and aesthetic proportion, a Greece of pastoral simplicity and unsuffering elegance. Of course, this Greece has never existed save in the comfortable minds of a few literati. The history of Greece is a history marked by exploitation, civil war, conquest, and endless bloodletting. Each time Greeks have attempted to realize their ideal—and idyllic—visions they have been drowned in blood. From the Peloponnesian Wars to the dictatorship of April 21, 1967, the history of Greece, as the history of every country, is a history buried in suffering. It is precisely that reason that has made Golfo the Shepherdess popular for so many years, the fact that it is a lie, that it never corresponded to any kind of world known by real shepherds or peasants or fishermen. Their world was—and is—a world of misery and powerlessness, a world of exploitation and terror that constantly intervenes in their lives in the same indifferent manner as the bombs or the secret police intrude on

Angelopoulos's players. Golfo the Shepherdess is a myth and when Angelopoulos has bombs fall on the stage where it is being presented, he is doing more than interrupting a performance, he is, to put it simply, exploding a myth.

This revaluation of the nation's cultural heritage is also at the center of Angelopoulos's transformation of the myth of the House of Atreus. In explaining his use of this legend, Angelopoulos has said the following:

Why use this myth? First, because it comes from the origins of Greek civilization. Second, because I have a score to settle with our Greek civilization. By introducing it into the account of those years (1939-1952), I take away its status as a myth: it becomes history, and thus comes down to a human level.

In other words, the myth is made accessible, in the same way it was originally accessible to the audiences of the Athenian festivals when Aeschylus presented his Oresteia. The story of the House of Atreus was originally a part of the historical fabric of a people. Later, with the passing of time, it became simply a story, a fairy tale, and much later, with the dawning of the modern age, and down to our time, it became eviscerated even further, it became part of a 'cultural tradition', a tale that every 'educated man' was obliged to know, if only to prove the extent of his learning. For the humble man, and for the common Greek, however, it became part of a social landscape he was not allowed to set foot on. The myth of the Atridae, as all the culture of the Greek classical age, became the private property of the ruling classes, of those who endowed the national theaters and read the polite literary journals. The cultural heritage of Greece, the very meaning of its history, was expropriated from most Greeks and handed over to a few merchants and genteel professors of classics. Its significance to the development of the national culture was lost, purposely hidden away in the dark corners of academies closed to the people.

The genocidal segregation of a people from its heritage is the 'score' that Angelopoulos 'settles.' He retrieves the myth of the Atridae from the long social obscurity to which it was relegated. Agamemnon now becomes a victim of the Asia Minor catastrophe and the expulsion of the Greek population in 1922; he is no longer a king returning from a great victory, still somewhat arrogant in his demeanor, but a refugee thrown into a world he doesn't understand, a man of democratic political and social convictions, a man who is simple, honest, and hard working. His wife, Clytaemnestra, is turned into a woman who aspires not so much to power or to love as to middle class respectability, a trait that will be inherited by her younger daughter, Chrysothemis. Aegisthus is a fascist and a collaborator (first with the Germans and then with the Anglo-Americans); Pylades is a communist. Orestes is a young man who, like his ancient namesake, only wants to do what is right both in his public and private life. In the end, he is executed for his leadership of the guerillas during the Greek Civil War. Finally, Electra marries Pylades and reorganizes the actors' company that, by the time the film ends (chronologically) in 1952, has been decimated by the violence of the intervening years

In essence, the myth has remained unchanged. It is still, as it was over 2500 years ago, the story of a tragic family whose suffering reflects the suffering of an entire nation. In fact, Angelopoulos's myth of the Atridae ends like Aeschylus's Oresteia, with a cleansing, with the foundation laid for a new beginning and a new society. However, whereas in Aeschylus that catharsis occurs through the intervention of a god, in Angelopoulos's film it is an act of human solidarity. Electra and Pylades will continue not only to perform but to struggle. The little theater troupe has suffered much, but it has been cleansed of its corruption and must proceed to the second phase of the struggle, the phase of reorganization and consolidation, the gathering together of not only those who have survived but those who are just coming of age, as in the case of Chrysothemis's son, who refuses to accept his mother's marriage to an American soldier and joins with Electra and Pylades. The saga—in the mythic sense of that word—closes with a cleansing and an affirmation, with the struggle of the little group of actors, and the nation they represent, not at an end but at a beginning, not with their defeat but with their victory, a victory, perhaps, only of survival but still a victory, one that reflects the fortitude and resilience of an entire people.

Outside the spheres of Greek culture and history, however, interest in Angelopoulos's enormous contribution to his own people's social self-understanding might be minimal if he had not contributed anything new to the art of the film. In *The Travelling Players*, though, Angelopoulos has expanded the aesthetic frontiers of the cinema, he has become a filmmaker of major significance by his extensive and, in a sense, fundamental revaluation of film language and syntax.

Thodoros Angelopoulos has developed a cinematic construction which can best be described as dialectical *mise en scène*. It is a film language the rudiments of which we know only through the work of Miklos Jansco but that Angelopoulos has now articulated much more completely. It is a language of visual penetration, of a çleep focus that is not merely technical but aesthetic and ideological, a language of cinematic perception through the steady unfolding of an image's, or an event's,

ramifications and resonances. It is, fundamentally, an attempt to articulate a revolutionary theory of image in and of itself. Angelopoulos's aesthetic is predicated on the assumption that the dialectical utility of cinema arises not simply from the possibility of external manipulations but from the inherent capacity of an image to visualize the ideational conflicts that are at the base of dialectical reason. If it is at all true or even feasible that an image is 'worth a thousand words', that, necessarily, must mean that an image is innately constituted of words, further, that it is constituted of a multiplicity of thoughts, sentiments, and ideational constructions. Angelopoulos's cinema is founded on the totality and completeness of the single image. As such, it seeks not so much to deny as to complement the classical injunctions of Eisenstein and the entire Russian school that only montage is fully capable of being the aesthetic instrument of dialectical hence revolutionary-cinema. For, as Angelopoulos correctly understands, the dialectical method is not so much a method as it is a unique perception of the function of ideas and the interrelationship between those ideas and men. It is not a mechanical process but an intellectual one and, because of that, is an innate property of man's mind and of the images that his mind creates.

It is this concern with vision, in the literal sense of the word, that gives Angelopoulos's film its singular quality. It looks like a film that was not so much filmed as painted; it is a film in which the individual frame invariably develops either into a tableau or a portrait, where color, space, and perspective—not only visual but historical—are inexorably blended to create an unrelenting sequence of aesthetically and morally massive images. The camera, under Angelopoulos's direction, assumes the psychological dimension of a painter's brush. It does not stop there, however, it progresses beyond the limitation of individual perspective, in the end, it undertakes to become, without compromise or remorse, the eye—and the voice—of history.

The attempt to create a historical film, as opposed to a film about history, to a great extent explains the external structure of *The Travelling Players*. While the film is just ten minutes short of four hours in length, it is composed of only eighty individual shots. The development and the meaning of history are not articulated through the 'clarification' of editing but through the exploratory perspective of the camera. History literally flows in front of one's eyes as, in one shot, the spectator is transported back and forth through the historical process. For example, the actors enter a town during the 1952 election campaign and walk to the town's square, arriving there in 1939; a group of fascists marches away from a 1946 New Year's dance, singing a martial air as it advances, and at the end of its procession arrives in 1952; a tricycle turns a corner and a Mercedes, bedecked with swastikas, drives into the picture, introducing us to the German Occupation in 1942.

History becomes a unity. It becomes an endless line of collective activity in which one point is separable from a previous or future point. It becomes meaningful only because of its total resonance, only to the extent that it is understood as one complete, inviolable tapestry, as the singular tableau of human experience. Angelopoulos's film does not unfold 'chronologically' because history itself does not unfold strictly chronologically but rather by backward and forward leaps. The consequence of a specific event may not betray itself until many years in the future while the significance of a present action may only be understood by its illumination of a past condition. History can only be correctly understood by the application of a critical distance. There is no such thing as historical distinction, regardless of the platitudes of politicians no one lives in a 'unique time' in history. On the contrary, history is a united and inseparable whole and to understand it one must understand the method by which it develops, and to understand its method requires not only a critical faculty but a specific sense of distance.

To Angelopoulos the screen serves the same function as the stage did to Brecht. It is not disguised as an integral extension of reality but is always clearly 'presented' as a discreet and separate entity. There is no organic unity between screen and audience. The screen is simply the aesthetic forum on which history will be analyzed and ideology clarified. The 'story' on the screen does not unfold cleanly but is constantly ruptured. There is absolutely no psychological seduction of the audience, on the contrary, the audience is compelled to become a critical commentator of what it observes. It is not asked to identify with what it sees but to be a witness to it and as thoughtful a witness as is possible.

The disjunction between spectator and spectacle is exemplified by a critical technique that Angelopoulos uses which can be called the 'historical soliloquy.' Three times in the film a character faces the camera and begins speaking. Each time, the soliloquy 'operates' on a multiple historical level. For example, just prior to the outbreak of war in 1940, Agamemnon addresses the camera, that is to say, the audience looking at him through the camera in the present, and speaks about the Asia Minor disaster of 1922. Another time, Electra, in 1945, speaks to the camera (present time) of the British massacre of the unarmed Greek population demonstrating for a popular government in December, 1944. Finally, after he has returned

from exile in 1950, Pylades describes his experiences, once again addressing the camera—thus the audience—in the present. Besides the apparent use of this technique as a further example of history as a dialectical process, Angelopoulos here is reasserting the Brechtian concept of alienation, of an actor taking a critical position not only toward his role but to the entire play—or film—in which he is performing, with the audience, of course, sharing in that critical distance. For Angelopoulos, as for Brecht, the audience is not a passive receptacle of ideological trash but a dynamic entity critically participating in a collective aesthetic and political judgment. To have a passive audience means to have a passive artwork and to have a passive artwork means nothing else than to have a work that is not only socially but also aesthetically insignificant.

The Travelling Players, however, is neither socially nor aesthetically insignificant, it is a film of tremendous importance. With this film, Thodoros Angelopoulos has proven himself to be a filmmaker of extraordinary dimensions and intelligence, a man who compels us to reconsider many of our previous judgments about the nature and structure of cinematic language. On a multiplicity of levels Angelopoulos brings a unique sensibility to the cinema. From his stunningly original use of music as a title to an era, a historical 'chapter', as it were, simultaneously both a point of historical identification and a point of historical conflict (specific mention must be made here of the brilliant contribution of the film's musical director, the composer, Loukianos Kilaidonis), to his enormous talent as a *metteur en scène*, a talent that is almost choreographic in its visual beauty and scope, Thodoros Angelopoulos has conceived a new kind of cinematic presentation, one that may rightly be called epic cinema. The comparison with Bertolt Brecht is a well-considered and legitimate one. Angelopoulos has scrupulously and correctly (one could almost say instinctively) translated to the screen the aesthetic formulations Brecht conceived for the stage. From his concern with the function of critical distance to his understanding of the dialectical relationship between dramatic and ideological presentation to his sense of dramatic rupture, Thodoros Angelopoulos has fully converted the injunctions of Brechtian theater to the specific needs of the cinema. This is not to say that Angelopoulos is, in any way, derivative, quite the opposite, it is only to identify his name with a cinematic accomplishment as renovative and as fundamental as the theatrical accomplishment associated with the name of Bertolt Brecht. [...]

The Travelling Players is a long, heavy, exceedingly difficult film—but it is an important film, one that bespeaks not only the resurgence of a new national cinema but the renovation of the cinema itself. It is a film that is not only beautiful but intelligent, not only to be seen but to be understood. It is a film that is concurrently glorious and humble, courageous and cruel, fraternal and 'vindictive, it is a film, in other words, as fundamental as its subject—the history of mankind's unceasing struggle for collective dignity.

Special thanks to Katerina Angelopoulou, Phoebe Economopoulou-Angelopoulou, James DeMetro, and the Harvard Film Archive.

ΙΣΝ/SNF ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΣΤΑΥΡΟΣ ΝΙΑΡΧΟΣ STAVROS NIARCHOS FOUNDATION
20 XPONIA | YEARS

AMERICAN-HELLENIC CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Museum of the Moving Image is grateful for the generous support of numerous corporations, foundations, and individuals. The Museum is housed in a building owned by the City of New York and receives significant support from the following public agencies: the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs; New York City Economic Development Corporation; New York State Council on the Arts; Institute of Museum and Library Services; National Endowment for the Humanities; National Endowment for the Arts; Natural Heritage Trust (administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation).