

## Theo Angelopoulos' *The Travelling Players* and the Transformation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*



### Introduction

Andrew Horton, describing the films of the Greek director, Theo Angelopoulos, claims that the “films are filled with echoes and fragments from Greece’s long classical past (...and that) the innovation of such a past suggests a contrast with a supposedly glorious ‘golden age’ (Horton (1997b) 33). In Angelopoulos’ last completed film, *The Dust of Time* (2009), the search for family and home associated with the crossing of boundaries thematically echoes *The Odyssey* as does *Landscape in the Mist* (1988), about two young children in search of their father with references to Telemachus’ journey. *Ulysses’ Gaze* (1995) is another explicit exploration of the ancient narrative of war and wandering and the modern history of the Balkans. In the latter, the protagonist, A. travels from Greece to Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, and Bosnia during the bloody war. Angelopoulos’ first film, *Reconstruction* (1970), about a guest worker who kills his wife and her lover upon his return to his Greek village, echoes the events in the *Agamemnon* of the consequences of war and return. The contrast between modern Greek history and ancient texts, according to Kosmidou (2013, 118), “are an intervention into this cultural forgetfulness... a kind of archive of the cultural memory and symbolic weaving of the Greek Civil War” and Greece’s most recent history.

Similarly, Angelopoulos’ complex film *The Traveling Players* (*O Thiassos*), follows a troupe of traveling actors, whose young hero, Orestes, and the configuration of the families within the troupe evoke the events of the complete *Oresteia* trilogy. The troupe brings the play, *Golfo the Shepherdess*, to various regions of Greece, and through their travels, are witnesses to political and military events during the period from 1936, with the rise of General Metaxas’ military dictatorship to the 1952 dictatorship of

Marshall Papagos. The troupe's participation as passive witnesses to the historical events and the audience's own passive participation in contrast to the agency of the Aeschylean actors highlights the irony of the film and its historical resonances. Indeed, Dan Georgakas (1997a) 30 argues that this film, in conjunction with *Days of '36* (1972), *The Hunters* (1977), and *Alexander the Great* (1980), represent Angelopoulos' "massive 12 ½ hour rethinking of contemporary Greek history, and at its core was the tale told in *Traveling Players*."

In this presentation, I examine *The Traveling Players* and its intertextual allusions to the *Oresteia*, the use of the long take to express narrative elision and metonymy, the contrast between the agency of the film characters and the ancient Greek representations, and the manipulation of time. I argue that Angelopoulos explicitly echoes the classical text and transforms the text into a powerful interrogation of the modern Greek political identity.

### **Film in general**

Angelopoulos filmed *Traveling Players* in 1974 and released it in 1975, which coincides with the end of the military junta (1975), and did not reveal the considerable historical components to the military censors at the time of filming. It is almost a four hour film and contains only about 80 shots; his reliance on non-linear, elliptical, intertextual long takes that elide time and space suggest Tarkovsky's approach to filmmaking (Samardzija, 2006). Roger Ebert has famously written about the nominees for the Cannes Film Festival: "along came Angelopoulos from Greece and Kiarostami from Iran, with their fashionably dead films in which shots last forever, and grim middle-aged men with mustaches sit and look and think and smoke and think and look and sit and smoke and shout and drive around and smoke until finally there is a closing shot that lasts forever and has no point" (May 21, 2003).

### **Events in a nutshell**

The traveling players move around Greece attempting to put on the play, *Golfo the Shepherdess*, a play star-crossed lovers, Golfo and Tassos, with political resonances for the Greek audience. Various political and military actions disrupt the play.

### **The players**

[Agamemnon] – Greek refuge from Asia Minor, collaborates against the Germans, betrayed by wife, executed by Germans in 1940

[Aegisthus] – collaborates with the Germans, replaces Agamemnon with Clytaemnestra

Orestes – fights on side of ELAS/ELAM, kills mother and lover during *Golfo* (on stage), arrested 1949, executed 1951

[Electra] – collaborates with Resistance

[Electra's sister] – collaborates with Germans, sides with British at liberation, marries an American

[Pylades] –Communist, exiled by Metaxas, joined guerillas, caught, released from jail 1950

***The Traveling Players through scene 7 (and final scene)***

Historical events	Narrative sequence	Elision of sequencing/ association
1. 1952 Marshall Papagos’ Dictatorship	1. Credits for <i>Golfo</i>	Curtain up
	2. November 1952	Traveling players at train station “We are tired.”
1936 April Metaxas’ military dictatorship	3. 1936	Troupe through town B  Announcement of Metaxas’ campaign  <i>Elision</i>
Eve of WWII	Autumn 1939	Announcement of Metaxas and Goebbels’ visit Troupe still in town B Differences only in number 1952 = 1936 POV of Electra watching Cly. & Aeg.
Invasion of Italian troops; 1922 expulsion from Asia Minor; Resistance groups (EAM, ELAS, EKKA)	4. Oct. 28-29, 1940	Agamemnon & players on train  Embedded narrative of 1922 exile/expulsion  Stair scene: Agamemnon to war/ Aegistus replaces him
Jan. 29 1941 Metaxas dies;	5. Jan. 1, 1941 New Year’s party	POV of Electra watching Italian soldier (Mulvey’s male gaze/ humiliation)
German Occupation	6. April 27, 1941  Autumn 1952	Germans in Greece  Traveling players walk to train station along shoreline

	Winter 1942	Same location as previous scene Germans question the troupe Agamemnon shot by Germans Pan of shoreline with Aeg. & Cly. & players
British worried; Sever ties to EAM/ELAS	7. 1943	Long line of people waiting for rations POV of Electra watching Pylades  POV of camera watching merchant & E's sister (seduction)  Curtain down
Ring composition	Last scene of film	Traveling players at train station "We were so tired."

### **Conclusion**

What has Angelopoulos' done and why has he done this?

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