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VITO ORLANDO

A New Cinema is Born:

O Thiassos (The Traveling Players), A Greek Film by Theodoros Anghelopoulos

This film, the most expensive ever produced in Greece (7,000,000 drachmas, approx. \$210,000), was released in the spring of 1975. It immediately became the second largest grossing film in Greek history and began building critical acclaim throughout Europe. It won the Cannes Festival International Critics Prize as *Best Film*, and in Europe Anghelopoulos is being hailed as the most important filmmaker in years. In the U.S., perhaps because of its demanding length and bold new cinematic style, it is still without a distributor. The director refuses to allow it to be cut.

The originality and daring of the artistic choices Anghelopoulos makes throughout this four-hour work are evident right from the opening shot. An overcast day. The red brick facade of a waterfront warehouse. Five men, four women and a little boy stand spaced apart by various items of luggage. All are unspeaking, staring ahead or to one side. Voice over: "*Aegion, 1939.*" Shot of street with same people walking abstractedly toward us. The walls of buildings show posters of the 1952 election campaign, a P.A. system informing us of the horrors to come if we do not vote for the royalist candidate. The desultory group are now entering the main square and the town crier, walking his bicycle, is announcing the arrival next day of the dictator Metaxas and the Nazi minister Goebbels. 1939 again. We have just fluctuated between the bounds of the time frame the film will be concerned with - the grim period 1939-1952. The rest of the film will fill in the multi-dimensional canvas - fascist dictatorship, foreign military occupation, resistance, civil war: 13 years in the history of a nation and eleven of its people, members of a players troupe who travel throughout Greece performing endlessly the 19th century melodrama *Golfo the Shepherdess*. Macrocosm, mi-

crocosm. Political, social, general realities impinging on personal, individual, specific. The last shot of the film repeats the first, giving the feeling of closure, completion. Or does Anghelopoulos imply a Nietzschean Eternal Recurrence?

With the sparest use of dialogue, with no trick cinematography, Anghelopoulos realizes completely his vision (which he has expressed in interviews) of cinema as Marxist dialectic, at the same time that he is developing a highly personal cinematic language and style. It is not that we have not seen similar technique employed, but rather that we have never seen it done in so integrated a way, so unobtrusively and so naturally.

In a film with so many innovations there is the reviewer's problem of which of these to write about. One has the feeling of continuous artistic re-invention taking place. Let us examine one of the most remarkable sequences: the mythic revenge killing of the mother and her lover by the brother and sister, re-echoing the ancient family saga of the Oresteia.

Like those great works of the ancient tragedians, and the film as a whole, this section builds to its climax with a slow, deliberate rhythm. The camera carefully pans along mottled walls to reveal a hidden door. We see the Electra character open it and walk into the courtyard of a ruined church and monastery. Slowly, bearded armed men begin appearing from behind buildings. The camera stops 15 to 20 feet in front of the darkened entrance of the church. Orestes is gradually revealed emerging into the light. It is the recognition scene. In the same middle distance we watch plans being made. Night and the deserted street, a long view, light from an occasional window. Electra is in mid-screen walking toward us. In the distance five or six rebels dash diagonally across from left to right, disappearing behind a hotel building from which sounds of a drunken party are heard -- harsh laughter, music. Electra continues walking. Explosions, shots, screams from the hotel.

The melodrama *Golfo the Shepherdess* is in progress in the town hall. Onstage are the Clytemnestra and the Aegisthos characters. We are watching it from mid-orchestra, part of the unseen audience. Orestes enters stage right with a gun. Shots. Mother falls. Shots. Lover falls. Gasps are heard, then applause. Curtain.

Electra walks into her dead mother's bedroom; gloating, contemptuous, she looks around, discovers the red dressing gown. Puts it on, wraps it around sensuously, lies on the bed. Close up of her face reveals supreme satisfaction - the deed so long contemplated finally accomplished.

The darkened courtyard of the hotel. A car pulls up outside the gate. Four men in suits walk quickly through the courtyard and into the building. The camera does not follow them up the stairs to the right, but lingers on the shabby, bare lobby. All the sounds are clear, however. The hurried footsteps growing fainter, doors opening, muffled screams, struggle, smacks, broken footsteps growing louder, coming back down the stairs.

Darkened hotel ballroom, dinner tables cluttered and in disarray. The party is over. Camera pans across tables and down to a corner of the room to reveal Electra struggling on the floor, held down by three of the men. The fourth is mounting her, interrogating her at the same time. *"Where are the rebels hiding?" "In the mountains,"* she lies. Movements suggesting rape. Electra continues to lie in response to the questions, but ceases struggling.

Morning, a river bank, mid-shot figure of prone woman in torn dressing gown. Electra, beaten, disheveled, slowly pushes herself up, dusts herself off. With a quiet look of determination and a new maturity she walks up to the camera and begins a descriptive monologue: *"We believed in a liberation. On Sunday, December 3, 1944, next to the statue of Kolokotronis a child was shot. Someone dipped a flag in the blood. We shouted: 'We want freedom!' They fired. Next day we went to bury the dead. Some wanted an armed struggle. The battle of Athens went on for 33 days..."*

There is no way to describe the density of texture and meaning within each shot; how, with incredible economy, we are at once aware of a multi-layered reality - historical, social, political, psychological, emotional, mythical. It is as if Anghelopoulos has found the cinematic Aleph allowing us immediate access to all the dimensions of human experience - in one shot.

One of the devices that bring about this magical immediacy is music. A sentimental 1930's ballad, the troupe's song and dance calling the villagers to the performance, a snatch of bouzouki song of the late 1940's, a stirring call to resistance by Mikis Theodorakis. Music is woven into the fabric so subtly and organically that often it passes unnoticed. But in one memorable sequence, the *stichomythia* (song competition) at a 1947 New Year's Eve party in an Athens taverna, music is the means by which we are made aware of the "multi-layered reality." The period is the height of the bloody civil war, which is being fought chiefly in the provinces. The polarization of the country is here symbolized by the taverna customers. Unsmiling pin-stripe suited men of

the right are watching dancing young men and women of the left. One of the seated men rises and requests the band to play a song to the king. While this is being played a female singer goes to the microphone and takes up the melody, but the words she sings are an off-color satire about the British occupation's General Scobie. The monarchists all rise and drown her out with another of their songs. Back and forth goes the musical attack and counter-attack. The whole catastrophe of the civil war is brilliantly summarized by this musical battle. Loukianós Kilaidónis is the inventive musical director.

Violence and tragedy, as with the ancients, are kept at a distance, with devastating effect. The reactions of the characters clue us in to many of the "actions" they see but we do not see. Faces, gestures tell everything: horror, rage, bitterness, resignation, frustration, determination, lust, shame. We are exploring most of the emotional possibilities of the human face. No since Carl Dreyer's silent masterpiece *The Passion of Joan of Arc* have we had the opportunity to examine our most expressive faculty so closely.

It is a miracle how the director and the actors working together could achieve such realism, for the acting is beyond praise. Naturalism that is perfect in its minutest attention to facial expression, voice, gesture, nuance. Especially wonderful is Eva Kotamanidou as Electra.



Grey fog in a provincial train station a little before the Metaxas dictatorship. The Players continue their tour

O Thiassos' cinematographer Yiorgchos Arvanitis has worked some miracles of his own. One of these is the marvelous mountain sequence filmed in the snow. We catch the troupe singing and dancing (to keep from freezing) up a steep mountain road. Half-starved, they reach the village at the top which appears deserted. They hear a chicken cackle, and all turn toward the noise. The camera slowly follows their gaze out over an expanse of white. There, some 100 feet away, is the chicken. The group, hunger evident on their faces, sinking several inches into the snow with each step, inch their way toward the fowl. They make a jump for the bird, expecting it to flutter away. But the wretched thing, exposed to the bitter weather, unmoving, submits to the famished players without a struggle.

The birth of a great cinema artist is to me an event of no small significance. So it was with mounting excitement that I watched the slow, rhythmic unfolding of this magnificent film. Still, it was not until several days after seeing it, when the intensely real images and sounds continued to assert their presence in my consciousness, that I fully realized Anghelopoulos's achievement. *O Thiassos* is a great film masterpiece, perhaps the the most important film of the seventies thus far. The Greek cinema, out of nowhere, emerges as the most dynamic and innovative in the world, and Theodoros Anghelopoulos is its guiding genius.

The Coffeehouse
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