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Tony Mitchell discusses the modern epic cinema of Thodoros Angelopoulos, maker of 'O Megalexandros'

ANIMATING DEAD SPACE AND DEAD TIME

'IF I WERE ASKED TO define my cinema,' Thodoros Angelopoulos has said—not an easy task for anyone when one lays the four hours of his latest film, *O Megalexandros*, against the four hours of *The Travelling Players* and three other transitionary films in the past ten years—'I would call it a cinema of dead spaces sandwiched between times in which things take place.' A deceptively simple account from a director who, with the award of the 1980 Venice Gold Lion for *O Megalexandros*, has consolidated a critical reputation established by *The Travelling Players* to be considered as one of the foremost European innovators of a film language of epically Marxist dimensions.

Angelopoulos, who was born in Athens, studied jurisprudence before leaving for the Sorbonne in 1960. He soon transferred to the Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques, but was expelled a year later after disputes with his lecturers. After a project for a short 16mm thriller fell through, he returned to Athens and became a film critic for the left wing paper *Dimokratiki Allagi* until it was closed down by the Colonels in 1967. In 1965 he had begun a 'musical thriller', *Formix Story*, featuring a pop group. Conflicts with the producer, however, delayed his directorial début until 1968, when he completed a black and white short, *I Ekpombi* (*The Transmission*), a kind of candid camera documentary with street interviews about a media competition. The film won a prize at the Thessaloniki Festival, as did his first full length feature, *Anaparastasi* (*Reconstruction of a Crime*, 1970). The latter also drew attention to the camerawork of Giorgios Arvanitis, who was to be Angelopoulos' collaborator on a further four films.

Anaparastasi was shot in black and white in twenty-seven days in Thalia, a village near Ioanina in Epirus, with a crew of five, a cast chosen from the locality, and a budget of £6,000, much of which came from a state grant arising from an obscure Greek law. It could be seen as one of Greece's first independent films. Based on an actual event, the murder of a Greek worker living in Germany by his barmaid wife Eleni and her lover, Christos, who falsify evidence of the husband's return to Germany but are suspected by a sister-in-law and eventually accuse each other of the crime, the plot bears a passing resemblance to the myth of the House of Atreus, which is used more extensively in the *The Travelling Players*. Here it provides only a point of cultural contrast, highlighting the poverty and desperation of the all but deserted village. From the opening shot, of the husband returning in a battered lorry which gets stuck in the mud and has to be freed by stones, the film establishes a physical focus on continual rain on stone which reflects the hardship of the village.

The reconstruction is that of the examining magistrate, whose inquiries are interspersed with sequences of the crime—although, characteristically, we are never shown the actual murder—and with a social documentary which a TV troupe (including the director himself) are making about the crime and the village. In this way a detached, non-sequential mosaic is constructed: the desperate principals are shown against the matriarchal background of the village, which is revealed as the real motivating cause of their crime. As the magistrate discovers, their affair was tolerated by the husband, yet the wife suggests cutting his body into pieces to hide it in a fox's earth, and is later seen calmly planting leeks over his fresh grave. The desolation of the village is contrasted with the comparative elegance and bourgeois luxury of Ioanina, where the couple furtively and feverishly make love in a hotel room while establishing their alibi. When their crime is revealed, Eleni is almost lynched by the old women of the village, who act as a kind of chorus, shown in a 360 degree tracking shot outside their stone houses on the cliff-side; and the film closes as it began, cutting back to the husband's return to

indicate an order which has been ruptured. With its poverty of means, this remarkable first feature presents alternately sharp and gloomy sequences of deprivation, while introducing what was to become a characteristic stylistic use of pauses and tracking shots.

The following year Angelopoulos persuaded Giorgos Papalios, the son of an armaments manufacturer, to produce *Meres Tu '36* (*Days of '36*), his first explicitly political film. In it his anti-dramatic, Brechtian idiosyncrasies of style—off-camera action, 'dead space', 'dead time', slow, panoramic tracking shots and long, wordless corridor sequences—are further developed, partly as a consequence of the threat of censorship from the Colonels. 'The dictatorship,' Angelopoulos has commented, 'is embodied in the formal structure of the film. Imposed silence was one of the conditions under which we worked. The film is about what is unspoken. If I had tried to express myself more clearly, I would have been censored, so I made the film in such a way that the spectator realises that censorship is involved.' In inviting the spectator to a detached assessment of events by way of lengthy, often static incidental details in 'dead time', such as footsteps, gestures, whispers, silent reactions amid the general bungling of a group of government ministers, the film risks tedium in confronting the frequently absurd predicament of political power under an autocratic but ineffectual régime.

Before the dictatorship of General Metaxas in 1936, a trade unionist is assassinated at a workers' rally (a long, pre-credit sequence, as in *Anaparastasi*) and a former police informer, Sofianos, is arrested and charged with the murder. The suspect takes a Conservative MP hostage in his cell and demands to be released, creating a delicate predicament for the government, who will lose the support of the Conservatives if they don't free the hostage, and the support of the democrats if they do. After a botched attempt to poison the prisoner, a marksman is called in to dispose of him, and order is re-established. The George Grosz-like caricature of the often grotesque government officials lends a farcical edge to the situation, as in the diplomatic reception for the British military officials and their wives, which takes place on a stony beach in blazing heat with warm champagne. Generally enclosed in the corridors of power to the point of claustrophobia (despite the fact that we never see inside the prison cell), the film also breaks out into long, panoramic tracking shots for rare incidents of group action, and the contrast is startling.

Three sequences in *Days of '36* emphasise Angelopoulos' use of a Brechtian, episodic form in which single complete scenes accumulate significance separately from the narrative context they are a part of—like knots in a piece of string. In one, an escape attempt by the prisoners, the camera pans round the exercise yard as they pass on a message, in a dance-like sequence recalling Jancsó's *Confrontation*. Then the guards move in and the prisoners overpower them, while three manage to escape over the wall, only to be recaptured almost immediately by guards on horseback (echoing Jancsó's *The Red and the White*). Back in the yard, the prisoners are placed against the wall while the three escapees are made to run up and down the yard with hands on heads. We then cut to the entrance hall, as the prisoners peel off from a long line and go

Left to right: 'The Reconstruction'; 'Days of '36'; meeting of the actors and the British army in 'The Travelling Players'; the accusing corpse in 'The Huntsmen'; 'O Megalexandros'.

Below: Angelopoulos at work on the scene from 'O Megalexandros' illustrated on the previous page.

'O Megalexandros': Tony Mitchell interviews Angelopoulos

You've described classical Greek antiquity as a millstone the Greek people are forced to bear. Is O Megalexandros *an attempt to draw on a more popular, political mythology?*

THODOROS ANGELOPOULOS: Greek people have grown up caressing dead stones. I've tried to bring mythology down from the heights and directly to the people, in both *The Travelling Players* and *O Megalexandros*. The title is not 'Alexander the Great', but 'Megalexandros', who exists in popular, anonymous legends and fables, and has nothing to do with the historical Alexander—he evokes a totally different personage. For this reason we have had difficulty finding a translation for the title. The legend of Megalexandros originated in 1453 under Turkish domination, and it has come down through oral tradition over the centuries. It embodies one of the deepest of Greek sentiments, that of waiting for a liberator, even a Messiah—he's a kind of Christ figure, and in the film is also identified with St George.

The film is based on two sources. One is 'The Book of Megalexandros', which is an account of the legend, and provides the general climate of the film rather than the storyline. The second, more concrete source is an actual event in 1870, when a group of aristocratic English tourists were kidnapped by Greek bandits at Marathon. The bandits held them to ransom and demanded an amnesty from the government in exchange for the hostages. The government botched the whole business, and the exchange never came about; so the tourists were killed and a scandal erupted. The British fleet blockaded the port

up two opposite staircases to their cells, and one of the men who escaped is finally brought in. The sequence is virtually uninterrupted in its sweep, though there are obvious time cuts. It illustrates how Angelopoulos' *plans séquences* can move through time as well as space, besides being a representation in microcosm of the central idea of the film—the re-establishment of order.

A more comic use of *plan séquence* follows Sofianos' request for music. A wind-up gramophone is carried into the yard, and the music proceeds until other prisoners begin banging their plates against the bars. A number of guards come into the yard and fire into the air; the noise stops, the music stops, and the gramophone is carried out of the yard. Here the tracking is less arabesque than precise, reflective and detached. The announcement of the 'kidnap' to one of the government ministers finds him ceremonially opening the foundations of a new Olympic stadium on a bumpy, arid piece of wasteland, around which he does a victory lap in a jeep. It is this sense of farcical discomfiture, made manifest by the sense of oppressive heat emphasised by the film's sharpened lighting, which animates the emotionless, often geometrical formalism. With the exception of the episodes mentioned above, and the final sequence in which three subversives are executed as a demonstration of the re-establishment of order, it needs continual reminders of the political situation the film reflects for one to fill in its disarming sense of emptiness.

If *Days of '36* leaves the impression of a sparse, minimal and monochromatic palette, *O Thiassos* (*The Travelling Players*, 1975), with its complex and crowded historical scope, is a far richer film in its explicitness. Like its predecessor, it deals in strong political terms with a period of history considered taboo by the Colonels, whose fall interrupted shooting for five months in 1974, and it was virtually smuggled into Cannes the following year since it also aroused Karamanlis' disapproval. In it Angelopoulos displays a persuasive mastery of his involved and idiosyncratic filming techniques, together with a sometimes bewildering dislocated montage.

The film is a study from a revolutionary standpoint of the turbulent period of Greek history between the fall of Metaxas in 1939 and the election of Papagos in 1952, as experienced by a travelling company of actors whose relationship is based on the family of the House of Atreus. But Angelopoulos is adamant that the Electra story is not intended as a superimposition grafted on to the historical events in any academic sense. The film as he sees it is a 'reckoning with Greek culture—an attempt to surpass the mythological area of tragedy by bringing it into modern life and modern history, thus destroying its mythological aspect.'

As in *O Megalexandros*, Angelopoulos is concerned with popularising myth and divesting it of its Olympian grandeur. Orestes is the only character actually named in *The Travelling Players*, and he is seen, together with the Pylades figure, primarily as a representation of the 1939 partisan maquis, the National Liberation Front, and the capture and exile it experienced. The mythological aspect serves more to anchor the diffuse historical roots of the film, and give continuity to its complex deployment of space and time. So the Aegisthus character who kills the company's leading man, a survivor of former struggles in Asia Minor

This is your third film in which British characters appear, albeit in relatively minor roles. In Days of '36 *and* The Travelling Players *they appear as caricatures to English eyes. Do you see them as paternalistic colonial oppressors? One critic even used the word 'xenophobic' about* O Megalexandros . . .

When I use English characters, they are not so much representatives of Britain as of all foreigners, from the point of view of the Greek people, or the common consciousness, which has regarded the British as a governing force operating from outside. After all, up to 1947 Greece was dominated by the British in the role of protectors. Stylistically, they are caricatures, and forceful ones, of the foreign coloniser, the exporter of capital from Greece. But if you caricature someone, it does also imply a certain affection, a sympathetic acceptance. The tourists in *O Megalexandros* are innocents, especially Lord Lancaster, who was related to Queen Victoria. He's an innocent, Byronic type, in love with Greece; but he is outside the responsibilities of power and has no real weight politically.

The long and drawn out process of editing the film would seem to suggest it is on a similarly epic scale to The Travelling Players. *Is it as complex in its dislocation of time and cross-references?*

The first thing to be said is that it's the most simple film I've made so far. Its progress is linear, and it hasn't developed its stylistic form in the course of editing like the other films. There are no chronological jumps—the film begins on New Year's Eve in 1900 and proceeds from there, except for the final sequence when the little Alexander becomes Megalexandros and goes towards the city. Which is a modern city—present-day Athens, in fact—in contrast to the rural, turn-of-the-century world of the rest of the film. When the little Alexander enters the city, he brings all the experience of the century with him. He has gained a total experience of life, sex and death, and he comes into the city at sunset, and over it there is a great question mark. How long will the night last, and when will a new day break?

Does this mean the film is more realistic than The Travelling Players?

On the contrary—it's more surrealistic. It doesn't describe real events, but their sense and meaning, and concentrates on political and sexual consequences. It's a more 'poetic' film, whereas *Travelling Players* was more concrete.

Eva Kotamanidou's role seems very complicated—she is Alexander's sister, daughter and mistress . . .

Her role is a result of the structure of the 'Book of Megalexandros', which intertwines a number of myths, such as Oedipus, but under different names. In the popular legend, which the film follows, Alexander's birth is a mystery; he is a 'child of fortune', so he adopts a woman from the town as his mother, and her daughter becomes his sister. Later he

in 1922, is a paradigm of the Fascist movement of 4 August 1936, and his attempt to collaborate with the Nazis is seen in one of the memorable fixed-camera sequences which illustrate Angelopoulos' treatment of the surge of historical events. The theatre troupe is captured by Nazis and about to be shot after Aegisthus has offered himself to the Germans as a 'comrade' and been brutally rejected, when a partisan raid off-camera interrupts the execution and the players make their escape.

The narrative is always subject to interruptions, which serve to enmesh the incidental players in the fabric of the events they unwittingly live through. The characters take various political positions (Electra's sister marries an American officer, while her mother collaborates in her adultery with Aegisthus; and Electra herself, in Eva Kotamanidou's striking performance, is shown constantly trying to come to terms with the traumas around her, seeing Orestes as the sole fixed point), but they are not treated in psychological terms. Rather, they are contrasting victims of the historical and political context which buffets them about and transforms them. The use of interruption by political events is particularly evident in the treatment of their play, a 19th century pastoral melodrama, *Golfo the Shepherdess*, their sole means of survival.

At the beginning of the Nazi occupation in 1941, we see Orestes and Pylades pursued across the stage during a performance, while in the same year, after hostilities have begun between Italy and Greece, a performance is drowned out by an air raid. Later, Electra's father is betrayed by Aegisthus and shot on stage by collaborators. The performance they give to the British soldiers who apprehend them on the beach in 1945 is ended by the death of one of the soldiers in a rebel attack; and finally Orestes kills Aegisthus on stage amid general applause.

The players provide a foreground continuity to the scrambled historical context; often in a literal sense, as in the memorable sequence (again with a stationary camera) in which the ebb and flow of the 1944 Battle of Athens between Monarchist and Allied forces and the Communist partisans alternates up and down a city street as the actors cautiously flee across the foreground. The film's formal dynamic sets up an interplay between the eruption of events into a stationary frame and panoramic tracks through space and time, illustrating the director's notion of movement within stasis. In the course of one only briefly interrupted *plan séquence*, six years elapse: on New Year's Eve in 1946 Fascists and Communists vie for the ballroom stage to sing their political songs (which include a hilarious anti-Skobby version of 'In the Mood'), observed by Electra who has come to see the troupe's accordionist. The camera follows the Fascists, who erupt into the streets singing, heading towards an election rally which we realise is for Papagos in 1952; such ellipses alternate with lengthy sequences of linear chronology.

A more overtly theatrical device, repeated in the use of a narrator in *O Megalexandros*, is the breaking up of the film into three parts by monologues delivered directly to the camera by the father, who recounts his return from Asia Minor in 1922; by Electra describing the arrival of the British prior to the Battle of Athens; and by Pylades relating his arrest and exile to the island of Makronissos in 1947. Within this framework, the players, the play and the historical events are meshed in what Angelopoulos has called a 'homogeneous aesthetic flux'. Unity and disparity of time and place alternate according to the camera technique within the edited sequence, avoiding emotional imagery and ordering a seemingly intractable sweep of material into multiple reverberations of political repression and the doomed revolutionary struggles arising from it. Like *Finnegans Wake*, *The Travelling Players* is circular; its end is its beginning and vice versa. It opens with the accordionist's voice over a 'family portrait' shot of the players: 'Autumn 1952. Aegion. We were tired. We hadn't slept for two days.' It ends with the same sequence, a return to 1939.

With *I Kynigi* (*The Huntsmen*, 1977), Angelopoulos became once again an independent film-maker, taking over production in partnership with his brother and aided, as in *O Megalexandros*, by an advance from the second channel of West German TV. *The Huntsmen* can be seen as the completion of a modern historical trilogy begun with *Days of '36*, and it shares with the earlier film a predominantly subdued use of interiors in which a bourgeois drama of discomfiture is played out. The theatricality of *The Travelling Players* is here muted into a stylistic allusiveness, through which the composition of the frame is made to suggest a stage on which the hunters are put on trial and relive their past guilt.

The time scheme of the film is here a confrontation between the present (the film is set on New Year's Eve, 1977) and the past. On an unidentified Greek island, the body of a partisan from the 1947 Civil War is discovered buried under the snow by the hunting party: a colonel and his wife (Eva Kotamanidou); an ex-prefect of police, now a publisher; an ex-partisan, now a wealthy contractor; a politician; a film actress who collaborated with the Nazis; a Monarchist noblewoman, and a chalet owner and his wife. Blood begins to flow from the wounds in the partisan's body, and the party carry it back to the chalet, where they are interrogated by an ex-colonel and forced to give an account of their actions since the Civil War. Their New Year celebrations are interrupted by partisans who sentence them all to the firing squad, but they waken to find it has been a collective nightmare provoked by the dead body of the partisan. This they duly carry back and bury again in the snow. The film places these various representatives of the post-war Greek right on trial, and brings the historical arguments of the previous two films up to the present, but

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sister becomes his stepdaughter. In the film, the story of this marriage is told by a narrator. On the wedding day, assassins hired by the landowners try to kill Alexander, but they get his wife/mother by mistake. Her bloodstained wedding gown remains beside the bed. It is all the daughter has to identify her mother with, and she wears it when Alexander has her executed.

Was your decision to cast Omero Antonutti as Alexander an attempt to give the film more of an international focus?

No. I'd seen him in *Padre Padrone* and was struck by his physical features, which seemed appropriate for the part. After all, the actor is only a vehicle in a film, which has to stand or fall on its own merits.

You have now taken over your own production. Is this due to distribution problems as well as the difficulty of finding a backer? The Huntsmen, *for example, has had very little European release, which was surprising after the success of* The Travelling Players.

I went into production because there was no Greek producer prepared to put up enough money for my films, which do need a big budget. I didn't want to produce *O Megalexandros*, but it was a case of necessity. I don't know why *The Huntsmen* had such restricted release; a possible, hypothetical reason may be that some critics saw it as a Stalinist film, which certainly isn't true, and is a very subjective and superficial reading.

You said recently in an interview that you see yourself as an isolated presence in Greek cinema, with little contact with other directors.

I think that other Greek directors don't have the same problems as I do. Being Greek, I am part of Greek cinema, but not in the localised, provincial sense; and as far as style is concerned, there's no meeting point. The catchphrase of the 1979 Thessaloniki film festival was 'Death to Angelopoulos'. I'm in a privileged position, being well known, and this perhaps causes communication problems for others with me, but not vice versa! But I do have rather a love-hate, father-son, psychoanalytical relationship with Greek cinema. Also I'm not a member of any political party, because I find that the Left in Greece now speaks a dead language.

You have said that you find it more difficult to make a film in Greece now than it was under the Colonels.

That's not a question of the Colonels being more cruel and repressive, but of my rapport with power. My films are very much about the problems of power, and they are political only in so far as the problems of power are political. Under the Colonels there was a clear antithesis; there was more cohesion among the people who resisted, and more coherence on the Left, whereas now it is scattered and in disarray. To give an example—the Colonels gave me permission to film inside the old Parliament,

suffers from an often repetitious, static, 'psychological' approach, punctuated once again by 'dead time'. It had a tepid critical reception at Cannes in 1977.

With *O Megalexandros* (see SIGHT AND SOUND, Spring 1980, and the interview below), Angelopoulos moves back to the first New Year's Eve of the 20th century, indicating again his concern with historical turning points, when repressive dictatorships are confronted with the hopeful dawning of a new socialist sensibility, within which there are further conflicts between Stalinist excesses, agrarian communalism and anarchism. In the legendary figure of Alexander, the 20th century cult of personality is examined through a historical lens under which his charisma is magnified; and in the muted, contained performance of Omero Antonutti—the father in the Taviani brothers' *Padre Padrone*—he becomes a hero analogous to Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible.

But the charisma, according to Antonutti, rebounds on Angelopoulos himself, in the long struggle to achieve a Greek cinema of resistance and dissent which has made him one of the few major European directors to have emerged in the past decade. 'Making a film with Angelopoulos,' Antonutti states, 'means working for five months instead of the scheduled two, living in hardship and freezing cold, dragging a 20 kilo costume around the mountains of Greece, and forgetting about personal problems. But it also means participating in an amazing adventure. Often Angelopoulos didn't show me the script until the last moment, giving me a sense of insecurity which created the right kind of tension for his tracking shots (one of which lasts for a full ten minutes). Often whole sequences were done without interruption, like a scene from Brecht. I identified with Megalexandros, but then I discovered I was mistaken; it was only a passing, instrumental identification. The real Megalexandros is Angelopoulos—perhaps some who see the film will realise it is autobiographical.' ■

'O Megalexandros'.

whereas now I can't get that permission. *Days of '36* is more successful now than it was at the time I made it because it conveys the sense of the silence of censorship imposed by the Colonels.

Your consistent use of tracking shots since Days of '36 *has caused critics to talk about the influence of Jancsó, who now seems to have dispensed with the technique. Do you see any danger of its use becoming too arid or mechanical?*

I deny that I have been influenced by Jancsó! *Plan séquence* has existed throughout the history of cinema—in Murnau's films, for example. The way that Jancsó uses tracking shots isn't real *plan séquence*; there is a fundamental difference between his use of it and mine, which I think is its real use. When I use *plan séquence*, it is to create a complete, finished scene, with inherent dialectical counterpoints. The scene is concluded, whereas in Jancsó's films there are *plans séquences* which are long, but they don't amount to finished scenes. His are lateral, and convey only one meaning. As for the technique being mechanical—you don't criticise a writer for having a particularly idiosyncratic, personal style.

Do you see plan séquence *as a way of arriving at a kind of alienation effect?*

Not in the sense that there is any manipulation involved. I've always been irritated by the way that montage is such an artificial process, dictated by a cinema of efficacy. For example, a man enters, stops and waits. In the cinema of efficacy, this waiting is conveyed through montage, whereas in my work there is no montage—the scene exists in a time scale which is not reduced for the sake of efficacy. There is a material, concrete sense of time; real time, not evoked time. In my films 'dead time' is built in, scripted, intended. Just as music is a conjunction of sound and silence, 'dead time' in my films is musical, rhythmic—but not the rhythm of American films, where time is always cinematic time. In my films the spectator is not drawn in by artificial means, he remains inside and outside at the same time, with the opportunity of passing judgment. The pauses, the 'dead time', give him the chance not only to assess the film rationally, but also to create, or complete, the different meanings of a sequence. As far as the question of influences is concerned, I draw techniques from everything I've seen, but the only specific influences I acknowledge are Orson Welles, for his use of *plan séquence* and deep focus, and Mizoguchi, for his use of time and off-camera space.

Have you any plans for a new film?

Editing *O Megalexandros* has been such a difficult and laborious job that I haven't had time for any future plans. I've had an offer from RAI, the Italian television network, to make a film about Magna Grecia, and also a number of suggestions from Germany about theatrical and operatic projects, which I find particularly strange, as I've never worked in the theatre before. ■