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## **Angelopoulos' *Ulysses Gaze*: Where the Old meets the New**

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*Ulysses' Gaze* starts with images from *The Weavers* a reel shot by the Manaki brothers, possibly in the 1910's. An old woman is weaving cloth. She stares at the lens not with astonishment but surely with the emotion of facing something new. But is it only her facing a new experience or is it that her image is also new for the contemporary audience? The grainy image has a sense of tangibility that together with the absence of sound provide the static shot with the dreamlike nature of a reality retrieved as if from another world. While these images unravel, a voice over asks: 'Is this the first Gaze?' We find out in the next sequence that there are, in fact, three more reels shot at an even earlier date than that of the film of the weavers. The voice over is that of A., a film director facing a personal and professional crisis who has embarked on a journey through the Balkans in the middle of the Yugoslavian war, in search of three lost reels shot by the Manaki brothers, two documentarists who worked at the beginning of the 20th century. The reels are the first filmic footage ever made in the Balkans. A.'s trip takes him through a double journey: a geographic one, through the Balkans at war with a bombed Sarajevo as its final geographical destination, and through a temporal one, revisiting his past, the history of the Manaki brothers and the history of the Balkan. Time splits open, with one vector pointing towards the future and other dwelling into the past.

In this essay I will attempt to outline how Angelopoulos deals with the concepts of time and memory through an approach that does not treat the image as a 'given' to be illustrated, but as an open field where questions on perception and representation are asked. This leads me to question the director's insistence on the use of long takes and their apparent function as an attempt to trace meaning in what the director sees as an era of confusion after the collapse of the grand narratives of the Left. Deleuze's concept of the time image comes as one of the useful terms to speak about the film in the attempt to trace its originality.

The film's first sequence, which stands as a *haiku* prefacing the rest, is also a remarkable illustration of the convergence of the director's approach with Deleuze's

reflection on film and time. The Thessaloniki tableau starts with a fade in on a tracking shot accompanied by a voice off screen: 'It was that winter of '54 when Yannakis Mannakis saw a blue ship moored in the harbour of Salonica. I was his assistant back then. He had a longing to photograph it as it sailed. One morning the ship set sail...' While we listen to the voice, the camera reveals an old photographer, dressed in fifties clothing, and his assistant (in contemporary clothes) who turns out to be the source of the voice over. A blue ship makes an entrance in the background, at sea, from the right side of the frame, and simultaneously, within the visual field of the photographic lens. At this point, Yannakis reaches for his heart. His assistant comes to his aid and calmly places the dying man on a chair behind him. He then starts walking towards the place where the camera started the tracking shot. The camera follows him while he is addressing someone off screen to the right. The tracking movement reveals the presence of A., who seems to have been watching all along from off screen to the right. A. moves to the left, passes the assistant, taking the camera's focus along with him, and 'forces' it to make a reversing movement. As he returns to the edge of the bay however, the old photographer's body is no longer there and neither is his photographic equipment. The camera captures the blue ship while A. is still framed gazing away at it. Karaindrou's non diegetic musical theme is introduced while the camera zooms in to isolate the ship, leaving A. out of the frame.

A time span of forty years is presented within a uniformity of time and space in the representational field, with one long take. The camera moves back and forth as if moving in time. Yannakis Manakis died in '54 and A. is standing in the same place in 1994, in the diegetic present. The assistant is standing by the old photographer yet he is himself old and dressed in the clothes of the present. His walk in the bay marks a passage in time. The camera starts with a fade in at a certain point in time, but it does not start from A.. Rather, it goes to him after we have seen the photographer, after the oral testimony of an eye witness. What we experience in this sequence is not a linear narrative where past present and future are segments that succeed each other on a horizontal scale. There is no division between subjective and objective points of view that would in turn authorise the external reality of establishing shots to include the subjectivity of the internal point of views.

A standard way of filming the sequence would be to connect the old photographer with the memory of either the assistant or A.. This would be designated by a break up of the sequence into a succession of shots that would form a flashback. The flashback usually refers to the subjectivity of a character that is experiencing a recollection. This is a hierarchical arrangement where the recollection is subordinated and bracketed by the objective shots of a character thinking or an objective present action that in order to progress needs an explanation from the past. In turn it serves as a break that verifies the organic movement of the plot towards the future. A flashback is usually designated by a dissolve or a fade in, for instance.

The Thessaloniki bay sequence, however, is not a flashback. The ship is seen simultaneously from the point of view of the photographer, A., and the point of view of the camera. The uniformity of the space through out the time span is not a designation of time launching forth to the future thus the palindrome movement. The sequence is a pure 'time image' where time is not integral to subjectivity but rather the opposite, consciousness is internal and constituted by time. This is Deleuze's reading of Bergson and this is what I believe that the Thessaloniki sequence reveals.

Deleuze, starting from Bergson's notion of the *durée*, describes a time crystal of an indivisible unity between an actual image and its virtual image where a non chronological past is preserved.

What is actual is always a present. But the present changes or passes. It becomes past when it no longer is, when a new present replaces it. But this is meaningless. It is clearly necessary for it to pass on for the new present to arrive, and it is clearly necessary for it to pass at the same time as it is present. [...] Since the past is constituted not after the present that it was but at the same time, time has to split itself in two at each moment as present and past, which differ from each other in nature, or, what amounts to the same thing, it has to split the present in two heterogeneous directions, one of which is launched towards the future while the other falls into the past. (*Cinema 2* 9-81)

A virtual image is not a psychological or a dream image, it is a mental image reconstructed in consciousness not *according to a chronological succession*, a new

image that appears without relation to the present it once was. So we have the present as the actual image and the past, which is contemporaneous as a virtual or mirror image. This can be experienced in everyday life in the moments of *déjà-vu* where perception and recollection happen simultaneously. This recollection does not belong to a past of a once actual present nor has it to be actualised in a virtual present of a personal recollection. Although the Thessaloniki sequence contains evident marks of historical time, it is the image of the ship that becomes an image of an objective virtual past contemporaneous with the present consciousness of both diegetic characters and the camera in extension. The ship cannot be placed in an actual historical present or past nor does it coincide with a singular point of view. Likewise, it makes an entrance until it is isolated by the camera only to pass quietly off screen to the left. The ship cannot be pinned down in time for it is in constant motion. The camera and the diegetic characters all share the same point of view in what I may describe as a *shared* subjectivity. It is this *shared* subjectivity of internal gazing that authorises the form of the film and makes a recurrent palindrome movement from past to present.

The two movements described in the quote above could be said to correspond to two vectors of the film: A. does indeed move towards Sarajevo in a horizontal line of chronological time which is subordinated to movement. Simultaneously, however, he moves alongside another (vertical or non-chronological) line that constitutes the *déjà vu* incidents where he takes the place of Yannakis Manakis. His quest for the reels that represent an age of innocence where cinema contained the dynamics of a new form and the hope that their acquisition will trigger a new beginning both personal and collective, bring him in absolute contemporaneity with Manakis, thus forming a *shared* subjectivity.

Angelopoulos follows the same rhythm, downplaying hierarchies among the sequences, throughout the film. A simple cut transfers A. to the past while he passes the Scopian border to Bulgaria. There is something uncanny about the sequence where he is arrested by the Bulgarian authorities. The policemen are dressed in early twentieth century clothing and we, as viewers, realise that A., as he faces the prosecutor who is reading him the accusations, is now Yannakis. Is the scene a hallucination? The cut as a means to break the sequence does not help to clarify the transition in time but rather blurs the borders between the real and the imagined, between a world, which is perceived as a

cause and effect system and a world of rupture where things are ambiguous. There is obviously a time lapse in the perception of the images. The audience can make out the transition only in retrospect, since the passage to the questioning room does not signify a time transition. It is only after the accusations are read that we realise that we are in the beginning of the century. The time transition is transferred from the cut to the *mise en scène*. The effect is to charge the image with the potential to be questioned. Instead of following the action the viewer is propelled to wonder about what it is that he/she is seeing 'now' and thus encouraged to be involved intellectually rather than as passive consumer of a driven action. And as the cause for the transition is not directed to a previous agent in the narrative, the question of its significance remains suspended.

It is as if the camera, by shifting its signification from the cut to the *mise en scène*, follows the same principle of an observer trying to make out what the situation is rather than illustrating a given story. In the Korytsa sequence the audience derives the sensation of an exile returning home only to face a second exile. It is a signification moving from the particular to the general, but the audience is not licensed with a full explanation. The image is not so much an intellectual image - although the arrangement creates an audio visual montage where the ascetic figure is contrasted with a wide open space surrounded by concrete and her silence gives way to the chanting of a *hodza* (Muslim priest) as signifier of the post communist return of religion in Albania. It provides a sensation of deprivation, a feeling of angst among the ruined houses. The sequence opens up to the world outside of the frame, outside of the fiction. Why is the woman at odds with the environment? Is it just because it is ugly? The image is bleak but the viewer is not privileged with an explanation connecting the scene with the history of the Greek minority in Northern Epirus. The image simply provides a sense of loss based on the documented reality. It implies its meaning but this is not superimposed on the viewer. The montage works internally. It is as if the real settings will speak for themselves the history that has been played out before them. The rendering of the truth is passed on from the uttered word to the recorded image. The audience starts off with an impression and the choice of moving to the particular concepts that this impression alludes to is left entirely up to them.

At a latter point in the narrative, the shot of the fragmented Lenin statue is given from a point of view that scrutinizes it starting from a detail of the broken pointing hand, then moving to the head and around the statue thanks to the circular movement of the boat that carries the statue. This evokes what Deleuze has called 'a pure optical and sound image' (*Cinema 2* 3). Deleuze uses these terms to describe the breaking down of an action driven narrative in which the image, in a given situation, presents the reaction of a character to a previous cause which is identifiable either by her or the audience. The optical image creates new signs and it is born, among other things, when the characters face situations where the ability of a logical response collapses. They turn from actors to seers. The image breaks away from the continuity of a developing plot, it serves no specific dramatic function, and its relation to the rest of the film is not one of cause and effect but one subordinated to an internal rhythm that brings the images together.

The image of the statue is not subordinated to an action in the way that a sequence of shots in, say, a Hitchcock film would analyse the act of signifying a murder (as in *Psycho* where 'the set of relations in which the action and the one who did it are caught' (*Cinema 1* 200) and interpreted). In a narrative of this kind the audience is usually not left with any questions on what the images signify. Conversely, the optical image of the Lenin statue stands for a new way of seeing, one that poses a question of what thoughts are designated while framing the fragmented statue of an order that has been so rigidly signified. A. is inside the boat with the statue but, it is as if the objective shot of the riverboat includes his point of view as well as if he is watching himself drifting along with the boat. Even the implied symbolism of the funeral, with people gathering at the banks of the river making the sign of the cross while the boat floats on by, carries secondary signification compared to the persistence of the autonomous recording of the physical matter. Is this secondary signification nostalgia? Where does the finger point now and if it still carries significance, does it relate to the direction of the disillusioned director inside the film? Maybe Lyotard is right when he claims that the modernist aesthetic fills the absence of meaning in the content by satisfying the Kantian pleasure principle through form (81). It seems for Angelopoulos that the portrayal of a world of alienation, where the signs of previous ideological regimes have collapsed, leaves his

main character to wander through a world that seems like a maze. One thing is certain, that the persistence of the internal rhythm of the long take and the static shot that Angelopoulos employs, carry traces of an early cinema like that of the Manaki brothers as we see in *The weavers*. It is a persistence that the director makes present not only as an attempted realist aesthetic but also as a form of resistance to an action driven narrative as a form of abbreviating time.

### **A new beginning?**

Antonioni claimed that now that the bicycle is no longer there, referring to De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, a new signification is at stake (*Cinema 2* 284). The worker in the *Bicycle Thieves* had a functional target. The bicycle was a means for living and for many, mostly outside the western world, still is. It becomes apparent though that in *Ulysses' Gaze*, A.'s quest for the reels is not of a practical nature. Rather, it takes the form of a vow, in the same way as a religious people would make offerings and a pilgrimage in the name of a saint. This ritual however, through the form of the film, does not follow a pre-existing order of cause and effect, for it is the autonomy of the elements shaping the narrative, which constitute assemblages breaking away from the plot like the stretches of dead time deprived of any dramatic action.

When A. is waiting for the Archivist in his subterranean office, or when the hospitalised in an asylum make their exit from the building in Sarajevo, what we are presented with is an optical image; the camera persists on a fixed frame until almost all the characters are out. There is no plot connected drive. A ritual presupposes a deliberate act of faith in a pre-existing order to bring deliverance. Accordingly, A. does not put forward the action, he rather seems to be recording, archiving so that many voices come to the foreground. As if the boundaries of past, present, and future or the real and the imagined, blend in his memory to form not a relative perspective or a hallucination but a new assemblage. This can be seen in the Kostanza sequence for instance, where the image of his mother entering the frame / his mind, leads him to the family congregation for the celebration of the 1945 New Years Eve in an almost Proustian, involuntary manner.

It is there that the character, in his present form, meets with his family from the past. This is not a conventional flashback because it is not a real break from the present. A. retains his present form throughout the sequence only to return as a child at the end. The whole sequence is performed within one long take. A greets all of his relatives and then recedes off frame. At that moment the shot is fixed, forming a tableau including the large hallway and the main exit. The shot is thus turned into a theatre stage and the representation turns from empirical realism to a Brechtian representation reminiscent of the New Years Eve sequence in *The Travelling Players*. The father returns among the New Year's well wishers in 1946 and then after a brief dance among the guests we witness the entrance of two Stalinist security officers who, while performing a grotesque dance, arrest A's uncle. As the three make their exit, uncle Vangelis wishes a happy 1948. The ball starts again until the officers' return together with another group in order to confiscate the property, and the guests wish a happy 1950 to each other before gathering for *the family picture*. The family are then about to immigrate to Greece. Everybody stands facing the film camera, posing, and calling for A. As the camera zooms to the photographed family, A makes his way into the frame and takes his position. Now he is a child again and the take ends with the camera slowly zooming in on his face.

As the title of Angelopoulos' first film suggests, the character is not in the past, in a clear cut segment of a reality that waits to be excavated intact. He is in a *reconstruction* where the past comes alive to form an assemblage build on a collective memory (the Greek Rumanian expatriates) from the viewpoint of a child, as if the Brechtian defamiliarisation of the actors' movement is here identified with the dream like gaze and the innocence of a child. Again the long take is used in order to make a passage in time, to form a link. The absence of post production editing that would transfer the point of reference of the gaze within the diegetic world, inevitably brings attention to the camera itself. A personal recollection opens up to a collective narrative that makes a link with history not as a background, but as an image that comes to the foreground through the grotesque dance. A period of three years that signifies the end of the Greek minority in Rumania and the arrival of the new Stalinist regime is reconstructed in one take. Time is compressed in a unified space through the wishes for a happy new year. As Jameson points out: 'Transitions in the modern must at one and the same time be organic and

radically arbitrary; they must document some deeper motivation at the same time that they ostentatiously exhibit their made quality, their seer artificiality' (87).

The final gaze of the child straight at the camera brings attention to the representation of the materiality of the film medium. The Kostanza sequence forms an autonomous tableau, meaning that its signification remains complete without reference either to the end or to another point in the narrative. The appearance of A.'s mother is arbitrary and so are the time transitions within the sequence but on the other hand, they are organically connected with rest of the film, not only as one recollection in the personal saga of a journey but as part of a system of representation that works with autonomous segments and refuses to give way to an all encompassing truth that justifies its order as the norm. And what else could its inner motivation be rather than Benjamin's dictum that 'History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now' (252-253). It seems that the new could just as well be forgotten in the past, the significance of which acquires a new meaning after its retrieval, like the reels that A. is hoping to signify hope for the respect of the 'other' as a universal ethical consensus in the face of terror. This new meaning is not a homogenisation of the past that leads to an inevitable present; it is not a force of a classical age that reduces the present inevitably to its decadent descendant. It is a reconstruction or a translation that contains the dynamics of the original, but its motion and significance starts from the 'now'.

The journey of a modern Ulysses, then, is not that of the return to the homeland, at least not one that is geographically placed on the map. The search for meaning and identity ends its diegesis in the burning Sarajevo. Similarly the reels of the film are burned leaving A. to face the camera in tears. The Manaki brothers started among the Balkan wars in the beginning of the century and now the human tragedy of war is acted out again. Does it signify the end of history? The fractured statue, the burned cinema in Monastiri, the executions of the people in Sarajevo, and finally, the burned foot reels suggest an actual image of a present terror but its virtual image of the interconnected gaze sustains the image of the child as a sign of hope in pure recollection. As Deleuze points out 'it is in pure recollection that we remain contemporary with the child that we were as

the believer feels himself contemporary with Christ' (*Cinema 2* 92). It is this contemporaneity that connects a personal world view with History that sustains the seed for the rise of a new collective image. The film's original treatment of its content through an episodic narrative, moving from the particular to the general, providing space for the viewer to produce his/her meaning, thus works as an extension of a theory of autonomy and cooperation against a dominant master code fixing the gaze, fixing time.

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