

# MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

## ETERNITY AND HISTORY: THE CINEMA OF THEO ANGELOPOULOS

July 8-24, 2016

### ***Landscape in the Mist (Topio stin omichli)* and *The Broadcast (I Ekpomp)***

**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)**

Friday, July 8, 7:00 p.m.

#### ***Landscape in the Mist***

1988. 127 mins. 35mm print source: The Greek Film Centre. In Greek with English subtitles. Directed by Theo Angelopoulos. Produced by Angelopoulos, Eric Heumann, Amedeo Pagani, and Stéphane Sorlat. Written by Angelopoulos, Tonino Guerra, and Thanassis Valtinos. Photographed by Giorgos Arvanitis. Edited by Yannis Tsitsopoulos. Music by Eleni Karaindrou. Principal Cast: Michalis Zeke (as Alexandros), Tania Palaiologou (Voula), Statos Tzortzoglou (Orestis), Vassilis Kolovos (Truck Driver).

#### **Preceded by *Broadcast***

1968. 22 mins. 35mm print source: The Greek Film Centre. In Greek with English subtitles. Written, produced, and directed by Theo Angelopoulos. Photographed by Giorgos Arvanitis. Edited by Giorgos Triandafyllou. Principal Cast: Theodoros Katsadramis (as The Ideal Man), Lina Triantafyllou (Reporter), Mirka Kalatzopoulou (The Star), Nico Mastorakis (Reporter).

An essay on *Landscape in the Mist* by Kathleen Murphy, *Film Comment*, Vol. 26, No. 6. (November-December 1990):

Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) begins in darkness, inside a movie projector, where he makes us see the possibility of a kind of *deus ex machina*. A spark of white fire incandesces the arc lamp, and the force of the director's vision rhymes that mechanical "Let there be light" with the Creator's ignition of the world and man into being. In that mythic light, Bergman reels out a genealogy of images, each of which advances the idea of cinematic evolution: blank leader, rickety cartoon, silent film, primal montage, sound narrative. Finally, we attend the reluctant awakening of a prepubescent boy, who puts on a pair of glasses, glances at a book, then turns his gaze directly into the camera. Reaching out to move his hands over the screen/film we are watching, he startles us out of complaisant witnessing; when Bergman cuts to ally our POV with the boy's, we are complicit in his effort to identify the blurred figures in or behind that white expanse.

Born of camera and projector, Bergman's celluloid child is already on the track of the form(s) that framed him into life- the dead or distant progenitor who, once racked into focus, might name him and

his experience into significance. Artist and audience alike share that profound desire for legitimization. Borne up by the power of the Word or the Image, we imagine a way out of anonymity and irrelevance, a way home. Such yearning is a primum mobile of myth and art. Propelled by parental death or disappearance, searchers as diverse as Oedipus, Hamlet, Hemingway's Nick Adams, and the siblings in Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* embark on often terrible journeys of self-discovery.

Bergman's melancholy boy might well be a northern cousin of the two grave children in Theo Angelopoulos' *Landscape in the Mist* (1988), a brother and sister who doggedly head for Germany in quest of their father, with only dreams, a fallen angel named Orestes, and a trinity of apparently empty frames of film as Baedekers. (Orestes plucks the film fragment out of some overturned trash; holding it up against a nearly blank billboard, whitely lit by a streetlamp, he jokingly queries, "There...behind the mist...in the distance...can't you see a tree?")

Like Bergman's lost son, Voula (Tania Palaiologou) and Alexander (Michalis Zeke) come from nowhere, without history, running out of a dark cityscape to first face the camera as though it, not the train just

across the street, were their best and only means of transportation. Troy's Cassandra might have had the vatic beauty of Voula's thin, high-cheekboned face, the visage at once of child and woman and crone. The night before they embark on their trek, the girl stories her little brother to sleep: "In the beginning was darkness and then there was light. . . ." She names the riches of Creation- "animals and flowers and trees"- all that will be conspicuously debased or dying in the desolate landscapes she and her brother must traverse before they reach the border between Greece and Germany.

That Voula and Alexander are illegitimate, the father a fabrication, that Greece shares no border with Germany, are realities very much to Angelopoulos' point: such absences and omissions become gravid in yearning fictions. This children's crusade aims to reconsecrate, not some literal holy—or fatherland, but that breeding-ground of potent dreams, the tabula rasa of the movie screen- screen having replaced stage as the polis ' most accessible theater.

*The Beekeeper*, a 1986 and film despair by Angelopoulos, alienation and despair have so metastasized in the protagonist (Marcello Mastroianni) that he's virtually one of the walking dead. Toward his end, he takes refuge in an abandoned cinema called the Pantheon. There, mocked by the sterile white screen above him, he tries- and fails- to bring himself to life in the flesh of a young hitchhiker, as enigmatic and aimless an angel as *Landscape's* Orestes. That passionate consummation similarly eludes the strange band of travelling actors whom Voula and Alexander periodically encounter during their walkabout. Orestes (Stratos Tzortzoglou), the troupe's ineffectual point man, explains that they are "ravaged by time," forced to wander through Greece performing the same play over and over. What play that might be is a puzzlement: these aging folk amble around in distracted circles, intoning fragments of recent Greek history, the raw stuff of unrelated dates and events unshaped by dramatic poetry. They are like sad echoes of the singleminded souls who "remember" the classics out loud in *Fahrenheit 451*. Though at one point Orestes takes off on his motorcycle to book them into the Pantheon, it's clear that these gray figures, exiled from a theater-home, are destined to drift forever on village streets and beaches, shades from some longlost Golden Age.

In *Persona*, Bergman explores his actresses' faces- their masks- in merciless close-ups, mining for something like the soul. He finds nothing, in flesh or film, that can stand up against the prolonged assault of the deconstructing intellect, the modern failure of faith in mythologizing form. Nothing is sacred in

*Persona*: Elizabeth Vogler (Liv Ullmann) is onstage, performing as Elektra, when she is paralyzed and struck dumb, the galvanizing circuit between player and poetry burned out. Midway through the movie, the film itself appears to melt.

In contrast, Angelopoulos generally eschews the power of the close-up as he leads us to witness, frequently at some remove and at long length, selected places and events, his road movie's mystery plays. His camera eye discovers prosceniums in train stations and village squares, on beaches and highways; and it seems to fall upon the human dramas framed there as accidentally and fatefully as the glance of a god in mythic narrative.

His images must bear considerable weight; for when I use the word "witness," I do not mean anything like the cursory attention accorded the kind of film/comic-strip-plasticene pictures pulsing briefly, inanely, between staccato cuts—that is currently accelerating epistemological decomposition on the grand scale. This unfashionable director demands that we sit still in what feels very like real time, to contemplate the screen long enough that we may come to see a scene ripening from the ordinary into rite or sacrament. In *Landscape*, he deliberately starves us of the expected fix, refusing to let us run away from boredom or anxiety or horror by escaping into the next shot, or shootup. The result of this enforced fasting can be a heightened, occasionally hallucinatory focus that draws mystery out of the mundane, recalling the Bressonian metaphysics of *Mouchette* and Rossellini's blend of the documentary and the numinous in *Viaggio in Italia*.

Their first night on the road, Voula and Alexander fetch up in the dark, snow-rutted expanse of a deserted town square. Music and light leak out of a nondescriptly modern building that bulks up in the background. The camera slightly overlooks the two children while they watch, from frame-left, as a weeping bride flees the building. She travels rightward across the square, pursued by a uniformed man who catches up to and embraces her, finally leading her back indoors. A yellow tractor drives from right to left through the bottom of the frame, dragging what appears to be a dead white horse. As the tractor disappears from view, the rope breaks, dropping its burden in midsquare. The animal kicks weakly, and Voula and Alexander run up to it. The creature's head rises into and falls out of frame as it struggles stubbornly with death. The children attend its passing with intense formality, though the little boy sobs inconsolably as the horse's head comes to rest for the last time, its shaggy, emaciated body continuing to shudder for some while. Beyond the children, the wedding party dances out in a line, holding hands; they are mostly black silhouettes, but the bride is a white blur. Cut to

an uncharacteristic close-up: of Alexander, still crying, who places his hand across his eyes in a strangely hieratic gesture, and turns a little away from the fallen horse and from the camera. The shot dissolves- very slowly- into darkness.

In this outdoor theater-in-the-round, Angelopoulos evokes resonant rites of passage by means of rhyming images and events. Several orders of innocence intersect, are violated and lost, on this wintry stage. After the dance of life - and death- has been celebrated, Alexander signs the lowering of a sacerdotal curtain over these mysteries when he covers his eyes and darkness slowly fills the frame. It is possible to analyze the significance of this scene—almost a plan-séquence—in linear prose, but repeated viewings confirm that its shattering power resists conventional naming. Angelopoulos' great gift is for re-mythologizing the wasteland, without special effects. He offers, if we can bear it, the restoration of an innocent eye, like that of a pagan or a primitive. The white horse and the white bride are not symbols as we've come to think of them -things that stand for something else, and are mostly lies- but are irreducibly themselves, immanent with unsweetened truth and beauty. Angelopoulos has made a temple of a village square, that lost Pantheon in which all the gods can stand revealed.

Make no mistake: these revelations and observances are not without cost. During Voula's rape by a truck driver, we are locked just outside the back of the truck parked alongside a busy highway, facing the tarpaulin that veils the brutal act from view. Exacerbated by the awful duration of this shot, our helplessness and horror become almost unendurable. Seeking relief, our eyes dart away to what little of the world is visible outside the confines of the tarp's dark screen.

As is usual in *Landscape*, this world is tinted in the wannest hues of brown, gray, and blue—weak washes further diluted by the persistent rain. Nothing grows in the muddy earth flanking the road's concrete, and the skeleton of a half-built bridge lies across the horizon. For a moment, when a car pulls off on our side of the highway, and a driver—and faint music—spills out, we imagine rescue. But another car stops, the drivers confer, then drive on, oblivious to the terrible sacrifice a stone's throw away.

After a long time, the trucker crawls out and disappears around the side of the van. As Voula's legs drop out from under the tarp, the camera approaches tentatively, moving closer still to see the whole child revealed, her hands held loosely between her legs, her little-girl's white knee-highs dirty and down about her ankles. For a beat, nothing happens. Then wine-dark blood flows thickly

through her fingers, down her thin thighs. Raising her hand to register the proof of her deflowering, Voula turns to mark the wooden wall of the truck with her blood. The gesture recalls those prehistoric cave-artists who laid painted palm to stone in commemoration of some potent rite, or perhaps simply as a defiant signature of selfhood.

In *Persona*, actress Elizabeth Vogler obsessively examines a picture of a ghetto child, one of many Jews herded along by grim-faced Nazis: he looks into the camera, his face a white blur of bewilderment, as though he'd like to know how he has gotten framed into this particular drama. Vogler can make nothing of the shot, cannot penetrate its tragedy; she is as dead to visions as Angelopoulos' beekeeper. In contrast, though we are not permitted to witness Voula's defilement firsthand, Angelopoulos compels our pity and terror in the presence of a transformation as unspeakable as the mysteries in the village square.

At the end has of *Persona*, the god in the machine has failed Bergman's boy. The film/screen before him remains impenetrable; the movie simply runs back the way it came, trapping him on a treadmill instead of gifting him with a mythic path. *Landscape in the Mist* also finds its final destination in its origins. But the accumulated power and momentum of the children's quest (and Angelopoulos' vision) reverses almost every element of their genesis, confirming the film as a redemptive vehicle that finally transports them across the border into Germany.

Literally incarnated in darkness, Alexander and Voula leave us in light. In the beginning, we saw the two frozen at track's edge, a frame-filling train wiping away the world, so that the legacy of its passage was a black void. At film's end, we witness their recreation in a medium of purest white. As the luminous mist clears, brother and sister run joyously up a hill to embrace a tree thickly crowned with foliage. It may be that Voula and Alexander are dead (border guards fired at them as they crossed over in the night), or dreaming, or have been transubstantiated into the stuff of fiction or myth. I like to think of them as children of a kind of paradise. They've made their way home into the fragment of film Orestes gave them so long ago, and there found a father in the anchoring, organic form that flourishes in its fertile soil.

About *Broadcast*:

Angelopoulos' first completed film, begun in 1966 and completed in the wake of the 1967 coup that established a military dictatorship in Greece, *The Broadcast* is a subtly absurdist and deadpan satire about a group of television journalists who conduct a poll to determine the attributes of "the ideal man"

and then try to find someone to match those characteristics. At a time when many of the filmmakers of the Greek New Wave, who had made their first features in the early and mid-1960s, were fleeing government crackdown, Angelopoulos

managed to sneak this slyly and gently subversive film past the censors. Angelopoulos would come to regard *The Broadcast* as an experimental homage to the "free cinema" of the period.



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