

## THEO ANGELOPOULOS' ANTHROPOLOGICAL GAZE IN *ULYSSES' GAZE*

### *La mirada antropológica de Theo Angelopoulos en Ulysses' Gaze*

Ddo. Agustín-Julián CANDADO ALONSO

Universidad de Salamanca. España

E-mail: [agustinc@usal.es](mailto:agustinc@usal.es)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6408-8406>

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#### RESUMEN

*La Mirada de Ulises* es una película de 1995 dirigida por Theo Angelopoulos. En ella, el director griego nos invita a seguir los pasos de A. un ¿ficticio? cineasta griego que busca unas bobinas sin procesar de los Hermanos Manakis. A pesar de la simple premisa, pronto descubrimos cómo la película se convierte en un ejercicio profundamente autoconsciente de tintes antropológicos y filosóficos sobre cuestiones como la identidad, la memoria o el sentido de la experiencia.

En este trabajo evaluaremos la competencia antropológica de la cinta a través de una metodología comparativa entre el lenguaje poético y cinematográfico del director griego y el andamiaje propio de la antropología. Así, analizaremos secuencias específicas del filme que abordan temas antropológicos y reflexionaremos sobre las conclusiones o preguntas lanzadas por Angelopoulos con su película.

Como resultado, descubriremos que, no solo este ejercicio cinematográfico supone un interesante ensayo etnográfico, sino que lo que comúnmente denominados como obras de arte lleva implícito un interesante trabajo de campo antropológico.

**Palabras clave:** Antropología; arte; identidad; memoria; archivo; performance.

#### ABSTRACT

*Ulysses' Gaze* is a 1995 movie directed by Theo Angelopoulos. In this movie we follow the footsteps of A., a ¿fictitious? Greek filmmaker who is looking for undeveloped reels that once belonged to the Manakis brothers. Besides the simplicity of the premise, we soon discover how the movie turns out to be a profound and self-conscious philosophical-anthropological reflection on identity, memory or meaning.

In this work we will assess the movie's anthropological competence through a comparative methodology between Angelopoulos' poetic language and anthropology's conceptual tools. Hence, we will analyse specific sequences of the film that tackle anthropological issues to reflect on Angelopoulos' conclusions or ideas.

As a result, we will discover that not only this cinematographic undertaking offers an interesting ethnographic essay, but what we commonly call artworks are, in fact, anthropological field work.

**Key words:** Anthropology; artworks; identity; memory; archive; performance.

## 1. Introduction

*To Vlemma tou Odyssea (Ulysses' Gaze)* is a 1995 movie directed by Theo Angelopoulos. The plot is simple: A., a widely acclaimed Greek filmmaker, returns to his motherland looking for undeveloped reels that once belonged to the Manakis brothers, but are presumably lost.

However, this adventure will unfold as a dense reflection on different aspects of the Balkan and Greek identity, meditating in a profound way on the experience of reality, its symbolic dimension and what we call 'identity'.

The aim of this work is to recompose this thoughtful process using the tools of anthropology in an eager attempt to prove, not only how artworks are suitable elements for this discipline, but how are, in fact, anthropological works.

With this in mind, we will put forward a theoretical framework to examine certain anthropological concepts which will serve us as the basis for a comparative methodology between anthropology's language and Angelopoulos'. Finally, and after a thorough analysis of different filmic aspects, we will assess the convenience of cinema as an anthropological tool.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In the beginning, anthropologists held a restricted vision of what art was: there were those who thought that any aesthetic dimension was epiphenomenal (Morphy and Perkins, 2006) and, therefore, to be discarded; and those who held an ethnocentric approach that denied any thought on context (Price, 2005). However, some anthropologists, such as Boas, maintained a broader vision of culture (Faeta, 2013, p. 22) that was uncomfortable and defiant to anthropological vertigo (Duranti, 1993, p. 214).

This was not a problem exclusively for cultural anthropology, given that linguistic anthropology also neglected all empiric and inferential processes in favour of grammar. The later reconsideration of this approach allowed the linguistic turn (Faeta, 2013, p. 20) that put forward that it was not a man against nature scenario, but the man with nature hand in hand (Montani, 2016, p. 16).

From this point is easy to follow the steps that, in other areas, enabled Danto's historicist analysis and Bourdieu's focus on institutionalization; but it was Foucault's, Derrida's or Jameson's thinking that proved that ethnography was, in fact, narrative fiction (Freedberg, 2013, p. 32): the anthropologist does nothing more than to interpret as it was suggested by Geertz. In response, many criticisms arose questions upon the legitimacy or the ideology of colonialist agendas of previous anthropologists such as Evans Pritchard or Radcliffe-Brown (Gell, 2016, pp. 21-22); but also, against a logocentric or textualist view of anthropology, provided the broad spectrum of activities carried out by researchers beyond writing their texts and reports.

But what is crucial for us is that this criticism highlighted the intrinsic hermeneutic nature of the anthropological work, that was not alien to art's own way of seeing. If anthropology were to approach anything related to any artwork, critical thought must assess any previous prejudice about what art is, and then proceed with its own methodology: whether it be the relationship between creator and spectator (Bourdieu,

1972, p. 33), a focus on the artistic experience (Montani, 2016, p. 13), or the assessment of its value as a commodity (Appadurai, 2001, p. 17-18).

This, however, turns out to be an arduous work if we consider the nature of experience and expression (Bruner, 1986; Turner, 1986). We do not refer only to the symbolic value (Morphy and Perkins, 2006) of artworks –whether it is a reified version of art or culture (Díaz de Rada, 2012) that individuals use to understand its own experience– but to the fact that artworks are metacommentaries of a society (Bruner, 1986, p. 14) that bring up a way of being in the world, anthropology's main object of study.

At the same time, since artworks are made through experience and expression, it is evident that we can question them as tools ready to be apprehended and staged. The dramatic or performative nature of culture renders them a repository of ways of being (Bruner, 1986, p. 6) that is ready to be interpreted and fertile in meaning, and no questions upon its truth, morality or accountability are asked (Turner, 1986, p. 35).

In this sense, we can understand why it is said that «los artistas contemporáneos se comportan como etnógrafos más preocupados por los procesos de constitución de identidades que por los de producción» (Cabello, 2013, p. 7), because in their grasp of reality, artists might act as anthropologists. Furthermore, the opposite can be said too: that anthropologists, in their hermeneutic narrative fiction, act as artists, hence making us remember of that Geertz's idea that «el arte y las aptitudes para comprenderlo se confeccionan en un mismo taller» (Geertz, 1994, p. 144).

It's essential that we emphasize here that if «artists 'might act' as anthropologists» and «anthropologists 'act as' artists» it's because of their shared curiosity and sensibility for otherness, and not because their works –that differ greatly from method and epistemological points– are equal, although they can be of mutual help. Gell (2016), for instance, was clearly against a humanities-anthropology that prioritized aesthetics and hermeneutics (the linguistic or symbolic turn), and emphasized on the scientificity of the social sciences, focusing on systems of agendas and social action.

Still, after having aligned anthropology's work to that of an artist in a sense that they both share sensibility for the otherness and can maintain a particular gaze, we must address the 'identity' issue and why art or culture seem to appear so intertwined. Firstly, it is necessary to understand that any commodity –and here we understand 'meaning' as a post-material commodity– is valued on the premise of scarcity or, in this case, as an object that resists to be possessed (Appadurai, 2001, p. 17). Meaning appears to be the main ingredient of 'identity' or vice versa; but what is important is to comprehend that the dialectic process (Dacosta, 2017, p. 208) of identification –and not 'identity', because that would imply the mystical reification of the process– is fundamental to an individual.

Provided that feelings –as in experience– of belonging (e.g., nationality or exile), language, or any cultural expression are key elements in the process of identification, we must understand that 'nationality' or 'race' appear to be cultural artifacts (Anderson, 1994, p. 21) and discursive elements (Hall, 2019, p. 80-82) that are in no way different to what we commonly refer as artworks.

What we affirm is that one's experience and expression of identification as discourse, reified as 'identity', is nothing but a continuous staging of cultural elements in relation to the political power (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 211) which results in the creation of borders and otherness (Hall, 2019, p. 80-81), from where 'us' and 'them' hatches in the heart of others' staged feelings of belonging (Dacosta, 2016, p. 19). And what is

more, this archive of available ready-to-stage elements –experiences or memories– is the spring of imagined communities (Anderson, 1994, p. 23-24) that permeate into soil and sprout imaginary geographies (Hall, 2019, p. 96-97).

The relevant consequence of this process is that, as we have seen, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘art’ or any similar concept appears to work analogously: both appear in the process of identification and are susceptible of being performed or read; both are composed by smaller recognition signs that are used conventionally by an ethnic community in their cultural performance (Bourdieu, 1972, p. 47; 2011, p. 26-27). As a result, we discover that in their social action, individuals act as artists and anthropologists in relation to certain symbolic elements; and that in their social action they create a cultural memory or archive that is crucial in their effort to survive any historical-cultural hardship, such as dictatorships or genocides.

It is also clear, in conclusion, that all these readings, stagings, and interpretations are cultural artifacts and, therefore, fall under Gell’s category of artwork: any object that possesses agency and acts as an agent (Gell, 2016). This very idea contains all the concepts we have developed up to this point.

### 3. Methodology

Once we have outlined our theoretical framework, we have observed how these artworks transcend the imagined frontiers of museum and academia assessed ‘Art’ and reach each individual’s daily life, playing a fundamental role in their understanding of reality.

All these artifacts –travel, culture, memory, identification, ethnics– are the main topics of *Ulysses’ Gaze* and are explored through Angelopoulos poetic-anthropologic lens to unearth its own hermeneutic self-consciousness.

Our aim, as we have said previously, is to discover Angelopoulos’ anthropological approach, and to do so we will compare these two languages while focusing on four key elements: Ulysses as a figure; the relation between time, space, and artworks; the dramatic nature of reality; and finally, ‘identity’ as a hypertext.

### 4. Analysis

#### 4.1. *Ulysses, anthropologist*

First of all, it is necessary to highlight Ulysses’ ubiquitous character as a discursive element in what is known as Western tradition. Many works from many artists, such as Dante, Goethe, Poe, Pessoa, Seferis, Kavafis or Angelopoulos himself, take over the hero from Ithaca to convey different stories and ideas (Stanford, 2013, p. 25) and, in doing so, they create an «intertexto mitológico-literario-histórico» (Boitani, 2011, p. 14).

Not only this, even some historical figures, such as Columbus or Vespucci, embraced Ulysses’ figure as part of this process of identification that we went over earlier. What comes clear is that Ulysses served as an arché for fiction and meaning (Boitani, 2011, p. 146), provided its enormous plasticity and prefigurational richness, from an Auerbachian perspective. The classic hero is, in conclusion, an archive of forms of being.

Even further, Ulysses himself behaved as an anthropologist numerous times: a man that crossed the boundaries of the known world, curious about the behaviour of the cyclops, and fated by Tiresias to wander the Earth until he finds people that do not know what a paddle is; he was also portrayed as a clever man who often used disguises to successfully achieve his goals.

Does that not sound roughly similar to what an anthropologist is used to doing? Moreover, would that interest not be any different from what A. says were the Manakis brothers' interests: «landscapes, weddings, local costumes, political changes, village fairs, revolutions, battles, official celebrations, sultans, kings, prime ministers, bishops, rebels [...] all the ambiguities, contrasts, conflicts» (Angelopoulos, 1995)?

In our film, A. seems to embody an heir of Ulysses' anthropological pulse, inspired by the ethnographic work of the Manakis brothers and, instead of searching for a Cretan gaze (Stanford, 2013, p. 283), a Balkan gaze is sought. Hence, A. appears to be doomed to wander forever in the same manner Ulysses was fated to find the paddleless people.

Lisón Tolosana in his reflection on the anthropological curiosity expressed:

«Si el antropólogo no siente la pasión de la alteridad, y si no goza del don camaleónico de transformarse en plurales Otros, nunca experimentará la vivencia de lo ajeno y, por consiguiente, no logrará la aprehensión originaria de la otredad ni podrá regalarnos muestras de humanidad» (Lisón Tolosana, 1983, p. 124).

This is exactly what A. undertakes in our film: a journey through the Balkans, in that impulse that «le lleva a cruzar fronteras para alcanzar la otredad que, nótese, puede estar también entre nosotros» (Lisón Tolosana, 1998, p. 219-220) and, as consequence, re-enacts Ulysses' affairs within the Odyssey while also bringing up the Manakis' memory.

In conclusion, Ulysses is a great figure on which to build an anthropological character, provided his interest in otherness, his cultural self-consciousness, and his ability as a great storyteller or a «poeta de la etnografía» (Lisón Tolosana, 1983, p. 133).

## 4.2. *Time, space and meaning*

After discussing the anthropological subtext of Angelopoulos' film, we will compare our previous outline of anthropology's approach to art to Angelopoulos' in this film. As we have said before, we will use Gell's broad concept of artwork.

Almost every idea, concept, sequence, or object seen in the film is brimming with meaning, as Angelopoulos uses cinema «to explore complicated questions of identity and memory» (Serban, 2019, p. 137) thereby turning his films in an «instrumento de investigación alrededor de la historia y de cómo esta afecta al individuo, trazando así un mapa emocional que reflexiona sobre el estado de las cosas desde la experiencia sensorial» (Gómez Montero, 2016, p. 127).

This is the main idea behind the will to grasp a Balkan gaze: it is true that as a Greek person, Greek history can be processed through diaspora and conquests (Alberó, 2016, p. 275) that sublimate from the soil as an imaginary geography, and that the feelings of melancholia and despair that plague the director's maritime landscapes serve as the objectification of the sense of cultural identity loss (Gómez Montero, 2014,

p. 288-290); but this form of understanding the surroundings is common along the Balkan psychosphere.

However, Angelopoulos' film seems to be aware of the impossibility of 'identity', hence raiding into northern Greece and the Balkans, demystifying the land once pinned as the cradle of Western civilization, the origin of democracy, and the land of gods and heroes; Greece, with its desolated landscapes and its grim beauty, is also the scenery of civil wars, dictatorships, and historical hardship (Pomeroy, 2011; Gómez Montero, 2014).

In fact, two landscape elements reinforce this idea emerging above the rest in condensing and conveying meaning: borders and ruins. On the one hand, borders are nothing but deeply political land art in its two dimensions, as a dispenser of meaning and an otherness-maker; but also, as key elements to interpret soil.

For instance, we can think of the old lady in Korçë that is not able to recognize the city, but the best examples are the temporal digressions in Bitola and the Bulgarian border. While it is evident that borders are space-dimension elements, their hermeneutic aspects trigger a proper reflection where our protagonist examines his archive, memories, and experience.

When A. reveals to the border agent that he plans to travel to Philippopolis, he is embodying or staging the memory of Yannakis Manakis. Despite referring to the same space, Plovdiv and Philippopolis carry implicitly different meanings, interpretations, and memories. Whereas the former would imply a Bulgarian gaze, the latter would imply a Greek one and, therefore, might contain differences and similarities on their approach to the region's ottoman legacy.

On the other hand, we find the importance of ruins in Angelopoulos' poetic landscaping. Two examples illustrate their importance: the sequence that follows Lenin's statue dragged across the Danube and the siege of Sarajevo.

Lenin's statue entails a reflection on the material dimension of cultural artifacts as things (Appadurai, 2001) thereby allowing Angelopoulos' anthropological task in capturing its social life while recording local's response to its sight. This cinematic field work is homologous to that of Sarajevo's siege, depicting everyday life and tasks such as collecting water, stocking up on food, or running for shelter.

In fact, the ethnography-like sequence of the foggy days is what is absolutely interesting. Angelopoulos portrays here how a city devoid of any daily meaning due to the hardship survivors endure, flourish in some kind of popular celebration where cultural and social expressions take the streets. Nevertheless, this occurs under a macabre layer of meaning: the fog prevents snipers from shooting civilians.

With these two examples, we have seen how Angelopoulos' anthropological gaze exposes our relationship with any artwork: borders, city names, flags, ruins, hardships of the past and daily death. The meaning taken from or deposited in these collective cultural artifacts preserve them and enables the possibility of staging them, which in turn might create new meanings, experiences and, therefore, realities. In his approach to this Balkan experience, Angelopoulos' seem to be presenting in a cinematic manner his field notes of what he considers a Balkan culture.

### 4.3. *The dramatic nature of art*

After addressing how individuals might relate to such cultural artifacts, an interesting question might arise: what are then, these cultural artifacts? While this question would inevitably overwhelm our modest study case, we can, however, state a minimalist definition: they are palimpsests.

In the same way conquerors and revolutionaries renamed cities, re-established, or redrew borders, refurbished spaces, and repainted flags –in the film, all these activities are actively taking place in the background– any human being does so with its surroundings. That is exactly what allows these cultural artifacts to become cultural archives that are susceptible to being read and staged to produce meaning and a discourse which we usually name ‘identity’.

What is important is that the construction of this archive is a process that appears to be unnoticeable, although we are greatly aware that there is some kind of process. For instance, the main reason that would explain why two neighbours would or would not get along might remain unknown, thus making these two people to choose any random explanation because they are aware that there must be a ‘why’. While this train of thought will lead us to our final ideas on ‘identity’, we still must address the gap between experience and expression.

If we turn back to our movie, the temporal digression on A.’s way to Bucharest appears to illustrate our point perfectly. After arriving in 1944’s soviet occupied Constanza after the coup of King Michael, Angelopoulos introduces us to A.’s family and takes advantage of the scene to depict Romanian history between 1945 and 1950.

This does not only tackle the Balkan issue of the film, but also puts forward the idea that any action or staging carries history and meaning that might resonate with others: would that not be the case of the Romanian, Greek, Armenian, or Bosnian genocides? (Alberó, 2016) The same dance, music and building is surrounded on the outside by an ever-changing history that profoundly affects the family members and shapes their experience and, as consequence, their reality.

In a similar fashion, the women of the film stir similar feelings, especially if we notice that every one of them –except for A.’s mother– are portrayed by the same actress. Is there any more genuine proof of the dramatic nature of life, art, and the so-called-identity? All these women also have their *Odyssey* counterpart (Pomeroy, 2011, p. 214) but what is interesting here is our protagonist’s reaction when meeting all of them, deepening the film’s self-consciousness.

Similarly, to the events in the Homeric poem, A. struggles in his encounter with the many women of his travels: on the one hand, his love for Penelope serves as a mould for any kind of love, therefore he must love them in the same manner that he loves Penelope; on the other hand, these other women are not Penelope, hence resulting in dissatisfaction.

The main idea behind this point is that any love story –as archive– in Ulysses or A.’s experiences might resemble their love story with Penelope –as experience–: the gestures, the craving, the words might be similar, but they are not staged –as expression– in the same manner, because they are not the same people, nor the same interpretations and meanings. They are, in short, staging a love story as actors.



A poem by Borges, *La Dicha* (1981), seems to capture something so complex with stunning simplicity:

«El que abraza a una mujer es Adán. La mujer es Eva.  
Todo sucede por primera vez.  
[...]  
Nada hay tan antiguo bajo el sol.  
Todo sucede por primera vez, pero de un modo eterno.  
El que lee mis palabras está inventándolas»

Every time Ulysses/A. loves a woman, he is loving her as if she were Penelope. When A. crosses the Bulgarian border, he is experiencing that as if he were Yannakis Manakis. When A. travels to Constanza, he is remembering his past as if he were his younger self. But every time these characters do «as if», they are overwriting the palimpsest of their memories all over again: deepening, enriching, making their memory-archive more complex, more nuanced. And, in doing so, their expression of their own lives serves as inspiration, legacy or archive, to the human that comes after.

It is undeniable that they might not be completely aware of this complex process, like the two neighbours of our earlier example, but their immediate existence claims a necessary 'why' that alleviates the burden of meaning. The strange familiarity between A. and Ivo Levy's daughter, for instance, serves as this reason; profound knowledge of a historic figure might make their biography feel as personal as our own; homesickness for our birthplace might spark memories that would impregnate actual events with new meaning.

Regrettably, an immediate lack of 'why' might make it easy for our two neighbours to blame their language, skin colour, ancestry, or any cultural expression as the reason of their good or bad relationship; however, these expressions are not exclusive, individual nor well defined, as we have seen. In addition, by relating to a long string of experience and expression that might not be linked in any form to their forms of being might cause unavoidable misinterpretations. Moreover, that might lead them to believe that this reason is a permanent and universal truth: this is exactly why it always has been.

#### 4.4. *Identity as a discourse, identity as a hypertext*

It is undeniable that the discourse individuals perceive as 'identity' is nothing more than a hypertext built from other hypotexts, a relation implicit in how the cultural archive works. Despite being a temporal performance and not a timeless truth, it is perceived as real because of the recognition signs that are spread into the archive. Staging a memory or an experience becomes identity as long as different individuals «join the dots» of recognition; in other words, they see 'structure'.

However, if we really consider the dramatic nature of reality and the complex process of identification and the dialectic process of experience and expression, we will discover movement, blurred limits, reinterpretations, factoids, half-memories, half-experiences, and mobile expressions. We will find 'process'.

This is part of the *mise-en-scène* of Angelopoulos' film: it is hard to capture a proper Balkan gaze because it is beyond the borders, the ruins, the empty spaces. It might



appear as a «spectacle of a timeless, incomprehensible, mythical cycle of passions» in Žižek's words (Chouinard, 2016) but what is evident is that to define the Balkans is a complex task involving a wide array of topics (Todorova, 2009).

In short, there is no Balkan gaze as in 'identity', but what there is, is a form of being that might be shared among those who identify with some recognition signs that are classified as 'Balkan': a withering culture made unavailable or forbidden through fragmentation, wars and genocides that cannot be expressed besides the no-places or the no-time (Gómez Montero, 2016, p. 217).

To close the circle, Ulysses appears once again as the perfect metaphor of this particular portrait of Balkanism: he is the eternal wanderer that is unable to return home, as the many human beings portrayed in the film. This is Angelopoulos' sleight of hand in *Ulysses' Gaze* last scene. A. will never find the first glance –the undeveloped reels– because there is none: any vision, interpretation, reading, explanation, or perception is made necessarily from otherness; it is deeply interwoven in the cultural archive. Hence, to know thyself –the maxim beyond the *Alcibiades I* quote that opens the film– is a task with no end, an endless cycle, a journey full of nostalgia but without ending.

The passion of A.'s impetus to find the undeveloped reels is the vector for everyday individuals that feel that their own experience is slowly disappearing into oblivion. It is easy to understand how, consequently, some cultural artifacts would seem like lifeguards to these people; but the impossibility of retrieving them is the equivalent of the impossibility of any identity as an ontological entity.

## 5. Conclusions

In this work we have discussed Theo Angelopoulos' anthropological gaze in his *Ulysses' Gaze*. As we have proved, the mere fact of proposing Ulysses as the hypotext of the main character involves a great understanding and self-consciousness of the anthropological issue of meaning, art, and identity.

In this sense, Ulysean qualities appear fertile to anthropological themes and illuminates the profound 'meta' aspect of the field of study. In response, Angelopoulos takes advantage of this situation and guides his own Ulysses through the Balkans to make him wonder what these borders, ruins, desolated landscapes, and out-of-time wastelands are, and what we make out of it.

However, the anthropological pulse of the film does not end there. With this poetic landscaping, symbolic time digressions, cryptic dialogues and superb direction, the Greek filmmaker conveys the very same ideas that last decades' anthropology has already been discussing in the academia about identity, art and meaning.

By presenting memories, spaces and ideas as palimpsests, the director can tackle many key aspects of our social action with a language that, while being absolutely different from that of the social sciences, is convincingly analogous to it. Furthermore, the mere possibility that any of these ideas presented here are not exactly in the film, but are a product of interpretation, is proof of the idea itself beyond the film and strongly upheld by cultural anthropology.

In conclusion, we might say that *Ulysses' Gaze* is a film with a vast number of layers of meaning, including a non-academic anthropological pulse –and in no case a naïve one– that puts forwards some themes that are both discussed in the academia

but also in daily life, including those of belonging, identity, art, and so on. However, the deep self-consciousness of the film that resonates with anthropological thinking must not make us think that the film is anthropological work per se, but it does highlight its importance as an archive ready to be consulted by the anthropologist.

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