

Andrew Horton's First Takes on Angelopoulos's New Film, Trilogy: The Weeping Meadow



© Andrew Horton

The Jeanne H Smith Professor of Film Studies
University of Oklahoma

Theo Angelopoulos's first film in six years, *Trilogy: The Weeping Meadow* (*Trilogia: To Livadhi Pou Dhakrisi*) has premiered earlier this year at the Berlin Film Festival and most recently in a re-edited (and shortened) version, at the Cannes Film Festival in May, 2004. Details are not available yet for release dates for the film in Europe or the United States, but those who appreciate Angelopoulos's unique position in Greek and world cinema are clearly eager to see this his latest and, in many ways, most ambitious project.

Angelopoulos has explained that *The Weeping Meadow* is, "structured like a Greek tragedy?the Lavdakides family?which consists of Oedipus, the Theban cycle myths and Antigone. So Actually it's a trilogy within a trilogy" (Vaucher). Part two of the trilogy which has not yet been financed or planned for a shooting schedule, will start in Uzbekistan in 1953 after Stalin's death and move through the Soviet Union and Europe and end in New York City in 1974. And the final episode, according to Angelopoulos, will be shot entirely in New York covering 1974 to the present in a form of "cinema fantastique" (Vaucher).

I was fortunate to see the film in May before the Cannes screening at an excellent conference on Angelopoulos organized in Finland at the University of Jyväskylä with Angelopoulos and his wife Phoebe in attendance. Impressions are still too fresh to attempt a "review" of this first part of an epic vision of the whole 20th century, but I did want to simply share a brief overview as we all await its commercial release.

Much is familiar for those acquainted with Angelopoulos's films and yet there is new territory being explored as well. The overall familiar touch is the desire to cover a large span of modern Greek history through the lives of a small group. *Thiasos* (Traveling Players), of course, immediately comes to mind as it sweeps from 1939 to 1952 in a non chronological odyssey through wars and temporary peace. Similarly *The Weeping Meadow* as part one of the proposed trilogy embraces 1919 to 1949 seen through the life of a little girl, Eleni (well acted by newcomer Alexandra Aidinni) arriving in the beginning with fellow refugees from Odessa fleeing the Russian Revolution and by film's end is a troubled wife and mother who has suffered through everything from World War II to the beginning of the Greek civil war.

The Weeping Meadow is Angelopoulos's most elaborate and demanding production yet as he created a whole village in a valley north of Thessaloniki that becomes flooded in one of the most memorable scenes of the film, and he also built a crumbling village of over two hundred houses near the waterfront in Thessaloniki which I actually got to visit two years ago before production began. Never has so much "set design" been used for a Greek film!

Long story short, the film is well worth viewing most immediately for these spectacularly "orchestrated" long scenes, which include the arrival of the refugees from Russia in the film's opening and the flooding of

the village later on. Another highlight is the acting of Yorgos Armenis who plays Nikos, the Fiddler, a musician with a conscience who helps out the young Greek Romeo and Juliet--Eleni and Spyros's son (Nikos Poursanidis, also a newcomer actor) as they deal with the horrors and difficulties of changing politics and Balkan wars.

Angelopoulos fans will in many ways find the film an anthology of Angelopoulos shots that one can have fun referencing back to previous films in the same spirit that, say, *Shrek 2* winks to us about at least 25-30 famous Hollywood works! Yes, there is the dance hall scene used in a political way and of course the whole film is shot in dark colors and threatening weather. The first run of critical response has not been entirely favorable in part for this "we've seen it before" reason. Derek Elley in *Variety*, for instance, notes, "Even some of Angelopoulos' arthouse coterie may find this one hard to defend passionately" (54).

In a cinematic age of too many films that depend more on special effects than human tales ranging from *Matrix* even to the digitally added armies in *Troy*, I thoroughly enjoyed marveling during my first viewing of *The Weeping Meadow* at a filmmaker who uses real locations with real armies of extras to fill the screen. That said, the film does not leave us with an emotional punch such as the ending of the "close up" tale of *Eternity* and *A Day* of an old dying poet and a young Albanian orphan.

WORKS CITED

Elley, Derek, "Trilogy: The Weeping Meadow," *Variety* February 2004. p. 54.

Vaucher, Andrea R., "Famed Greek Helmer Sets Trilogy," *Variety*. September 16-22, 2002. p. 21.