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Orestes as the fighter of the resistance movement, or the myth of the Atreides in Theo Angelopoulos's film *The travelling players*

The *Travelling Players* of 1975 is an example of how Theo Angelopoulos uses Greek mythology, the threads of which are present in the entire filmography of the Greek director. Although he has never set his storylines in mythical times, antique stories and legends exist in his works in a way both expressive and complex. The elements of mythical tales were incorporated by Angelopoulos in order to demonstrate the reflection on the history of Greece and the world in general. The director treated a myth as a collection of archetypal patterns: historical situations, individual attitudes, interpersonal relationships, imperatives of action. Mythical stories were a paradigm of culture for him – an unchanging model adopted in variant cultural contexts and historical realities. Therefore he understood a myth as constant and timeless contents, reconstructed continually in history and still defining the relationship of a human being with the world (cf. Syska, 2013b, p. 48).

Such thinking about a myth was taken by him from the structural anthropology by Claude Lévi-Strauss whose lectures he attended (Syska, 2008, p. 21), but this concept also shows high affinity with Jungian archetypes. Both scholars represent the same orientation of research that ["seeks the origin of a myth, its sources and justifications, and the way it manifests in socio-cultural life and in individual life in the nature of a very person, and more specifically in the properties of his or her mind"]¹ (Wadowski, 2013, p. 15).

¹ If not stated otherwise, all the translations in square brackets are done by the translator (Joanna Modzelewska-Jankowiak).

In such an approach, myths are fixed and inalienable elements of culture and the result of common biological heritage of people. They are ones of permanent patterns arranging human life, which, despite the variantivity conditioned by cultural contexts, retain their constant nature. Their uniformity is caused by "universality of mythical thought" that results in the situation where ["myths are more correlated with humanity than with specific forms of culture, moments of individual and collective lives, or with historical circumstances"] (Wadowski, 2013, p. 23).

Lévi-Strauss, examining mythology, placed the significance of myths in their structure built on the pattern of language structures. He stated that a myth, similarly to a language, consists of units that are in some relations one with another, and these very relations, and not only the components of mythical stories, determine their importance in culture. He transferred the methodology developed on the basis of semiotics to structural anthropology, and referred to the findings made by Ferdinand de Saussure: his principle of arbitrariness of linguistic signs and the distinction between *langue* and *parole*. He claimed that myths combine the features of *langue* – language and *parole* – act of speaking, i.e. an individual expression of a system of signs, so they have got both historical and ahistorical structure at the same time:

[A myth always relates to the events of the past, »before the creation of the world« or »during the first centuries«, and, generally speaking, »long ago«. But the internal value assigned to a myth results from the situation that the events which are to develop in some moment of time, create also a long-lasting structure that simultaneously refers to the past, the present and the future. (...) This dual structure, historical and yet ahistorical, is explained by the fact that a myth may simultaneously belong to the field of individual speaking (...) and the language] (Lévi-Strauss, 1970, pp. 288–289).

Karl Gustav Jung, finding the similarities of myths existing in different cultural contexts, justified it with the fact that they belong to a common core – a type of the primary matrix. It was backed up with the belief about the relationship between mythology and archetypes which he defined as ["»prototypes« of original existential experiences of a person"] (Stabryła, 1992, p. 8) and typical behaviours of this person. ["Archetypes constituting the biological equipment of the entire humankind"] (Jung, 1998, p. 49) are engraved in the collective unawareness and have universal nature. In turn, myths are the expression of this content encoded in a human being, and their similarity results from the fact that they are the projection of nature common to all people.

Angelopoulos's works are the artistic effect of the combination of the structuralistic thinking about myths and culture in general with the inspired by Jung interpretation of essential contents in the cultural reality. In the vision of history emerging from his works, Greek myths appear as *langue*, always updated in the historical narrative like Saussure's *parole*. The films by the author of *The travelling players* shows a myth as a basic historical structure, the effect of which is cyclical nature as a principle which rules the history of the world. History in his interpretation is not therefore of evolutionary nature, but its character is repetitional – is a set of continuous repetitions and reinterpretations of timeless patterns. Therefore the director embeds mythical motifs in the reality much later than the ancient reality, often in the 20th century. His films, however, are not a simple transfer of ancient history into the contemporary context. As Rafał Syska, the researcher of his works, writes: ["Angelopoulos does not modernise a myth, he rather sees the invariability of certain mechanisms, attitudes and passions driving us to commit malicious acts, which in ancient Greece were described in a masterful form of divine and heroic saga"] (Syska, 2008, p. 36). Its objective is therefore to illustrate that archetypal situations developing in the particular socio-cultural contexts, although subject to modulations, in their deep structures they remain unchanged always and forever.

In Angelopoulos's films mythical situations take place therefore in the contemporary history of Greece, and, moreover, they are combined with elements distant from the classical tradition. The plots of films are most frequently set in the northern part of the country, where instead of sunny and bright towns with the ruins of ancient temples we can see cold and gloomy villages cut off from civilisation. The director portrays not only the places other than those associated with Greece, but also a distinct tradition – Byzantine and therefore Orthodox (see Syska, 2008, p. 83). In addition, the authentic facts from the country's history become the background of events. All these result in the situation that the reality presented by the director seems to be far from the ancient one. However, the use of the elements of myths – most frequently of the Atreides and the return of Odysseus – is in his works clearly visible. Taking out the myths of their organic contexts and setting them in others is used to present the reflection on the universality of historical events and individual human fates. Angelopoulos's cinema is the historiosophical cinema – it contains the reflection on transhistorical and transnational processes – in which the history of Greece and the experiences of heroes are only examples of universal situations and processes. The director presents historical events embedded in ancient patterns so as to say that the history of

humankind is only the continuous reconstruction of archetypal situations. Therefore his deliberations are concluded with a very pessimistic observation that a person remains under control of powerful and permanent mechanisms in the same manner in mythical times as today. In Greek myths it was the doom and the will of gods, in the contemporary world – inexorable historical processes. As Syska notes: ["In films the determinism of fate, the helplessness of people in confrontation with (...) anonymous power of processes are usually highlighted"] (Syska, 2008, p. 42).

It is similar in *The travelling players*, where the heroes of the myth of the Atreides become witnesses and participants of the events in the history of Greece of the 1940s and the 1950s. Interestingly, the very work on the film was closely linked with the myth of Orestes. The image was created during the bloody government of the Regime of the Colonels and Angelopoulos had to remove the majority of political references from it, although he intended to create a truly political picture and it remained visible. *The travelling players* is a critical statement about the times in which the action is set, and the times in which the film was shot as well as in the broader approach – a statement on any dictatorship and forms of terror. The creation of the work of such overtones at the time of intensive censorship was possible thanks to assuring the censorial commission that the contemporary adaptation of *Oresteia* by Aeschylus is being made (Grammatikopoulou, 2008). The myth of the Atreides house became therefore a kind of alibi for the crew working on the film (Grammatikopoulou, 2008). The heroes of *The travelling players* are a group of actors travelling across towns of northern Greece and putting on one play in very dangerous and bloody times. The title journey will take them as many as thirteen years, which in the history of Greece were consecutively the years of: the right-wing regime, the German occupation and the civil war. Although the plot covers the period from 1939 to 1952, and the members of the troupe usually are not named, we can easily identify them with the characters of the mythical story, because their mutual relations and actions are the reconstruction of the mythical pattern. Another emanation of the members of the Atreides family in history are as follows: the leader of comedians, Agamemnon, serious and full of dignity; his wife Clytemnestra, having an affair with Aegisthus²; their children – uncompromising and tough Electra, and Orestes, a rebel full of energy; their friend Pylades. The only character with an ancient name is the Atreides duke. The decision to grant the name just to this character, thus marking this character with

² Two versions of this name are in use: Aegisthus and Egistus (translator's note – J.M.J.)

the apparent connotation with the mythical archetype, was probably caused by the director's attitude to this hero – Orestes was for him the symbol of noble rebellion and fidelity to ideals. Angelopoulos said: "For me [he] is a concept more than a character: the concept of the revolution so many dream of (...) Orestes is the only one who remains faithful to himself and his goals, and is willing to die for them." (Demopoulos, Liappas, 2001, p. 18).

The relationships between the characters, their actions and the sequences of events in which they take part, remain the same as in the myth: a betrayed husband returns from war and is murdered by his wife and her lover; his daughter is filled with hatred and waits for the return of her brother; Orestes murders the lovers; from this moment the Erinyes persecute him. The myth is however reproduced with the modifications which are the effect of setting the history of actors in a particular time and space. The most important events of the mythical story are transformed as a result of a contact with the tissue in modern history. Therefore the war on which Agamemnon sets off, is the Greek-Italian war, and after his return he will die at the hands of the German firing squad. The "father" of the group of actors is not killed by his wife's lover – with her silent complicity he is denounced by her lover to the Nazi authorities and shot dead by the Germans. The myth is interwoven with contemporary and historical events, and, moreover, the historical context has a major influence on the mythical events. The situations which are the repetition of those from the classical story are shown as an effect of the intervention of history. Furthermore, Angelopoulos ["updates the characters and attitudes of the heroes"] (Syska, 2008, p. 66), directly connecting the mental qualities of the comedians with the historical situation. ["He portrays Clytemnestra as a passive and infantile victim of history, Aegisthus – as a coward, collaborator and informer, (...) and Electra as a left-wing idealist"] (Syska, 2008, p. 66). As the author of the film said himself: "History affects them, changes and transforms them" (Demopoulos, Liappas, 2001, p. 18).

Mythical roots of the actors' stories are still evoked by means of small signals. When Agamemnon is caught by the Nazis in the presence of the entire troupe, furious Electra throws herself at Aegisthus, calling him a traitor. Locating this event on the stage recalls the association with theatre context in which the myth originally came into being, as well as the slightly artificial and effusive expression of Electra, who is breaking out of the embraces of the group members. In the next scene Agamemnon standing before the firing squad says to the soldiers: "I came from the sea, Ionia, where are you from?", thus recalling the place from where Agamemnon returned – the coast of Asia. Also the dream that Clytemnestra tells to

Orestes, about her son who has returned to the bosom of hers, recalls the nightmare that the mythical Atreides queen dreamt – about giving birth to a snake. However, two scenes of violence that remind us most clearly of the ancient tragedy are: the murder of the mother and her lover by Orestes and the capture of Electra by the representatives of the authorities. The myth and its functioning in the tradition of theatre are evoked in the same scenes and as a result of their direct consecutive occurrences in the film narrative.

The murder of the couple of traitors takes place in the same place where Electra cast her accusation against Aegisthus – in the space of the stage. Orestes – now a fighter of the resistance movement – forces his way onto the stage with a gun during the performance which is delivered by the troupe in another town. After a momentary hesitation, he shoots, killing his mother and her lover. The re-location of the event on the stage draws our attention to the affinity with the theatrical tradition. It is also stressed by the fact that the murder is committed during the show and unaware spectators perceive it as a natural element of the performance. The audience starts to applaud and the curtain is drawn. The ancient theatre tradition is recalled here and ostentatiously disregarded, because the principle of decorum is breached here – violence is revealed. The opposite happens in the scene of the capture of Electra. The woman is caught by the representatives of the authorities who want to force her to disclose the place where her brother is staying. The brutal halt of the actress takes place out of view of a spectator – only acoustic effects full of noises of scramble, blows, and sudden moments of silence bring information about what is happening. Therefore the theatre version of the myth in this scene is recalled by the fidelity to the principle of decorum, and within the sequences – by contrasting these two scenes and diametrically different formal solutions applied in them. Moreover, during the halt of Electra and later, when she is raped, the faces of torturers are covered with masks: they are wearing them while entering the building where the woman is staying, and they are wearing them all the time during the gang rape. This *mise-en-scène* element is in fact a direct reference to ancient plays using such stage props.

The reference to theatre tradition are also long speeches of the heroes directly to the camera, on the pattern of monologues in theatre: Agamemnon telling his history, Electra giving an account of the events in the country after the German occupation, and Pylades speaking about being imprisoned on the island of Makronisos. "With the camera fixed and focused on the actor's face (...) the narration obtains the gravity of a historical testimony, without avoiding a slice of theatricality, if we consider the fact that this kind of

monologues are common in theatre", Christina Grammatikopoulou (2008) says. Of course, also the profession of the heroes, numerous scenes of playing fragments of the performance and the fact that in private situations the comedians quite often address one another using the lines of their characters, draws the spectators' attention toward a theatre.

The thing that seems to be the most interesting in the question of presence of the myth of the Atreides in *The travelling players* are two alterations in relation to the ancient original, particularly in comparison with the version of Aeschylus. The first one occurs at the level of the storyline, the other one concerns the drama of the story. In Angelopoulos's film, Orestes, after the homicide of his mother and Aegisthus, is absent from diegesis for some time – he returns to the group of partisans and appears only towards the end when he is caught. The victims of revenge of the Erinyes, in some sense in place of him, are two other characters: first his sister and then his friend. Electra is raped by the workers of the service which seeks partisans, then is intruded by them, harassed, and intimidated. In turn, Pylades takes over the role played by Orestes in the performance, which is the signal to transfer the mythical symbolism on him. Then he joins the fighters of the resistance movement, is captured and tortured, and his torments are personified by the mythical Erinyes. The goddesses of vengeance change in the Eumenides and the man is released, but he pays a very high price for it – he has to renounce his ideals by signing an anti-communist declaration. As Christina Grammatikopoulou notes:

In other words, the "Eumenides", are nothing but such; in contrast with Aeschylus' work, where they are transformed with the power of persuasion, here their change demands a very important exchange from the hero: the denouncement of his beliefs. Echoing once more the Greek Mythology, the tortures of the exiles in Makronisos are presented as the torture of Sisyphus: they carry stones up on a slope just to let them role – a torture that he has to go under until his liberation day (Grammatikopoulou, 2008).

The other alteration is of structural character. For the transfer regards a basic dichotomy organising the narrative of the myth in the versions by Aeschylus and Euripides. In their interpretations, the royal siblings – and, above all, Orestes who kills – are in a quandary of moral and emotional nature. The internal dilemma occurs as a result of the confrontation of two major forces: *philos* (love) and *aphilos* (hatred). All the feelings which are the response to the situation derive from them: a desire to avenge his father and a desire to clear the family's name of shame; the abhorrence of matricide, which is contrary to the natural order, and the personal moral sensitivity; the fear of punishment from people and gods. The heroes of

Sophocles do not feel ambivalence and strong mental discomfort related to it, because in his version they are only a tool of the will of gods and the problem of their internal attitudes is not presented by him at all. In *Electra* by the tragedian of Colonus, Orestes ["like his sister, does not face any choice, his act is almost a mechanical fulfilment of the god's order and Electra's fate and words are his motivation: the conflict between his love for his mother and the necessity to avenge his father does not exist in his mind, and, moreover, he does not feel any fear of the Erinyes of the mother – the pricks of conscience that led Aeschylus's Orestes to insanity"] (Stabryła, 1992, p. 216). Therefore in *Choephoroi* by Aeschylus and *Electra* by Euripides two antinomic forces are the principle in accordance with which the tensions between the characters and the fluctuations in the internal dynamics of events are built. Angelopoulos brings this central contradiction to the ideological level, highlighting the discrepancy between various political trends and different world views of the heroes. Thus he gives an additional dimension – an ideological one – to the conflicts of the characters. Electra hates Aegisthus equally for being her mother's lover and her father's murderer, and for the fact that he collaborates with the authorities which she is fighting. Therefore the motivations of the siblings in *The travelling players* gain a political dimension. At the same time there are no aspects of the family revenge in them (a duty to revenge was the foundation of family bonds in ancient Greece), while this aspect can be found in the interpretations of the mythical situation presented by great tragedians.

The characters of two sisters, Electra and Chrysothemis, also have got ideological marks – the former is portrayed as bold and uncompromising, the latter as indifferent and opportunist. Interestingly, this description applies both to the heroines of *The travelling players* and to *Electra* by Sophocles, and in both cases it is built on the principle of opposition. In Angelopoulos's work, the contrast of the women's attitudes concerns the involvement in the political situation in the country, and in Sophocles's work it is based on their relation to the situation in their own home. In the tragedy Chrysothemis renounces the revenge and lives with her father's murderers, while Electra – ["her opposite of character and ethics"] (Stabryła, 1992, p. 215) – remains uncompromising in her hatred. The same fidelity to the ideals of one and the moral indifference of the other defines these characters in Angelopoulos's film, but in relation to the ideological sphere: Electra is a member of the resistance movement, she renounced her personal life, her sister, in turn, is not involved in any form of protest – instead of this she goes on dates with soldiers.

We may interpret the tensions of sexual nature appearing in the relations between the characters in the context of ideological conflicts, as the director himself did:

The sexual element is integrated in the characters. Clitemnestra's affair with Egisthus and Electra's reaction are all based on their respective personalities. There is however a point when these relations stop being only personal. (...) Electra's rape is a political act as well. I believe that at the origins of every act of violence there is some kind of sexual impulse. Since Electra is raped in interrogation, the act becomes automatically political. (...) Chrysotemis is a prostitute who later marries an American soldier. This kind of marriage may solve a certain problem, but at the same time it represents the bankruptcy of moral values. The sexual element is therefore transferred to a political-ideological level (Demopoulos, Liappas, 2001, p. 23).

In the case of the murder committed by Orestes we can also observe a kind of a transfer. In all three works of ancient tragedians, the murderer taking vengeance on the faithless couple acts on the order of Apollo. ["A divine command – as Stanisław Stabryła writes in his essay *Elektra i Orestes* – not only justified matricide (...), but it also gave matricide a sanction of religious duty"] (Stabryła, 1992, p. 212). For Angelopoulos's Orestes, the murder of Aegisthus has ideological implications, but it can be concluded that not only his personal attitude towards the collaborator and informer is concerned, but also the decisions of the organisation to which Orestes belongs are also taken into account here. The suggestion that the murderer acts on the order of the communist hit squad is present *implicite*, clearly enough, however, to suggest the analogy between the murderer – a tool of the will of gods, and the murderer – a tool of the will of his superiors.

In the *The travelling players* Angelopoulos placed therefore the reflection on the constancy of historical mechanisms, models of situations and human attitudes, which are described in the archetypal fictional-narrative structures – myths. The unchanging pattern according to which they are reconstructed results from the cyclical nature of history where constant processes are updated in changing historical and cultural contexts. The thesis on the cyclical nature is seen in the film by the Greek director thanks to the applied fictional and narrative solutions. The elements of the ancient story appear in *The travelling players* in different moments of the action lasting thirteen years, therefore they are set in different historical realities. What is more, there are sometimes violent leaps of several years forward or backward in the narrative. These measures as well as showing events out of sequence and the use of fictional frame help present ["(Angelopoulos's – note by I.Ł.) belief of the cyclical

nature of experiences"] (Syska, 2013a, p. 46). It sounds with a particular strength at the end of the film when the rebellious son of Chrysotemis takes over the role of the deceased Orestes in the play, and the last scene of the film at the iconographic level turns out to be the reflection of the scene with which the film begins. The group of actors is standing again in front of the station in Eigon, and, moreover, the end of the film appears to be chronologically earlier than the beginning. The action moves from 1952 to 1939. Therefore the historical moment changes, but everything goes back to the same point, because history is only the continuous repetition of certain initial situations.

The incorporation of mythical situations into the story which is set in modern times makes the history of comedians universal, giving it a timeless dimension (Grammatikopoulou, 2008). The characters gain the same value also thanks to the specific structure. The heroes of *The travelling players* are deprived of the characteristics which individualise them more than it is necessary to identify the mythical characters in them. They are only the emanations of some primary structures – attitudes, models of activities and sets of emotions. They are subject to the powers ruling human life, like the archetypal characters of the myth. In the case of the ancient heroes it was inexorable fate or cruel orders of gods, and for the troupe of actors it is a merciless mechanism of history, heartlessness of historical processes. ["The royal Atreides and poor comedians are different regarding the origin and social status, but what links them is their helplessness towards the mechanisms of politics and history, the powerlessness against fate or gods"] (Syska, 2011). The actors of the myth, like the actors in Angelopoulos's story, have no other choice but to submit to the forces much powerful than they are, and play their roles.

Translated by Joanna Modzelewska-Jankowiak

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Orestes as the fighter of the resistance movement, or the myth of the Atreides in Theo Angelopoulos's film *The travelling players*

Abstract

The paper examines the use of the Atreides myth in Theo Angelopoulos's film *The travelling players* (1975) in the context of the director's interpretation of the phenomenon of myth. Angelopoulos treated myth as a set of archetypal situations and patterns of conduct constantly reproduced in the history of the world. He intertwined elements of classical stories with the history of Greece and the Byzantine tradition, thus showing their universal character. In *The travelling players*, Angelopoulos used the story of betrayed and murdered Agamemnon, who is avenged by his children: Orestes and Electra, but he moved it into modern times, setting the film in Greece of the 1940s and 1950s. The myth is reproduced with modulations: the most important events take place as a result of interventions of History, not fate or decisions of the gods. Moreover, the characters' conflicts are enriched with a political dimension, as Angelopoulos portrays the discord between their ideological stances. But the members of the acting company are as helpless in the face of events as the family of the king of Argos.

Keywords:

myth, Orestes, Theo Angelopoulos, Greece

Orestes bojownikiem ruchu oporu, czyli mit Atrydów w filmie *Podróż komediantów* Theo Angelopoulośa

Abstrakt

Artykuł jest analizą sposobu wykorzystania przez Theo Angelopoulośa mitu Atrydów w filmie *Podróż komediantów* (1975) w kontekście dokonanej przez niego interpretacji zjawiska mitu. Grecki reżyser traktował mit jako zbiór archetypicznych sytuacji i wzorów postępowania odtwarzanych nieustannie w dziejach świata. Elementy antycznych opowieści splatał w filmach z historią Grecji i tradycją bizantyjską, ujawniając ich uniwersalny charakter. W *Podroży komediantów* wykorzystał historię zdradzonego i zamordowanego Agamemnona, który zostaje pomszczony przez swoje dzieci: Orestesa i Elektrę, ale przeniósł ją w czasy współczesne, portretując Grecję lat 40. i 50. XX wieku. Mit zostaje zreprodukowany z modulacjami: kluczowe wydarzenia następują w wyniku interwencji historii, nie fatum czy decyzji bogów. Ponadto konflikty między postaciami zostają wzbogacone o wymiar polityczny, ponieważ Angelopoulos ukazuje rozdźwięk między ich postawami ideologicznymi. Jednak członkowie trupy aktorskiej pozostają wobec wydarzeń tak samo bezradni jak rodzina władcy Argolidy.

Słowa kluczowe:

mit, Orestes, Theo Angelopoulos, Grecja