



A MOVIE WITH THE STRUCTURE OF BYZANTINE LITURGY: MEGALEXANDROS BY THEO ANGELOPOULOS

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Theo Angelopoulos is indisputably the most remarkable Greek director of all times. His films are famous for their meditative slowness and beautiful scenery. In recent years, they have been much discussed and analysed in academic studies. Typically, critics and scholars have focused on two levels. Firstly, much attention has been paid to his distinctive technical solutions such as long shots (up to ten minutes!), 360-degree rotating (circular) shots, prolonged pacing,¹ and the use of off-screen action and dead spaces. These lead to questions related to his conception of time,² such as the presence of different time layers, even inside one shot. Secondly, a great deal has been written about the social and political aspects, which is not surprising, given the leftist moods and symbolism present in his films, not to mention his concern with human rights and victims of political events, including refugees.

Nonetheless, the most essential characteristic and dominant feature of Angelopoulos's films is the peaceful flow of extremely beautiful and elegant settings. His visual narratives are slow and peaceful but not without dramatic tensions and thematic depth, and consequently, his work has been labelled "a cinema of contemplation."³

Matters related to Orthodox and Byzantine aesthetics, however, have not been thoroughly discussed in studies on Angelopoulos, though they are often mentioned in passing. His most Byzantine film is obviously *Megalexandros* (1980), a three and half hour mystical epic full of obscure narration and peculiar symbolism, much of which more or less Orthodox.⁴ It was filmed mostly in Dotsiko, a tiny and remote village in the mountains of Northern Greece.

¹ In films, "pacing" signifies the rhythm (flow) of the scene in conjunction with the overall sequence; in the case of Angelopoulos, this rhythm is exceptionally slow and dramatic.

² Richard Rushton, "Angelopoulos and the Time-image," in *The Cinema of Theo Angelopoulos*, ed. Angelos Koutsourakis & Mark Steven (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 235–48. Asbjörn Grönstad, "Nothing Ever Ends': Angelopoulos and the Image of Duration," in *The Cinema of Theo Angelopoulos*, ed. Angelos Koutsourakis & Mark Steven (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 264–274. Sylvie Rollet, "An 'Untimely' History," in *The Cinema of Theo Angelopoulos*, ed. Angelos Koutsourakis & Mark Steven (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 219–30.

³ Andrew Horton, *Theo Angelopoulos: A Cinema of Contemplation* (Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁴ For a synopsis with discussion, see Lefteris Xanthopoulos, "Τραγωδία και μύθος. Θόδωρος Αγγελόπουλος," in *Theo Angelopoulos*, ed. Irini Stathi (53rd Thessaloniki International Film Festival, 2012), 230–33. English translation in 234–7.

In interviews, Angelopoulos himself stated that the film is “structured like a Byzantine liturgy.”⁵ What this means and implies has not been analysed in film studies, even though Angelopoulos openly admitted the influence of icons, Byzantine aesthetics and Orthodox culture on his work.⁶ This being so, this paper aims to outline those structures and solutions in *Megalexandros* that can be seen as “Byzantine” and “liturgical.” The visual narrative of the film is analysed in the light of Angelopoulos’s interviews and recent scholarship, with the aim of outlining some liturgical characteristics in the structure of the film. The Orthodox liturgical tradition⁷ serves as a loose subtext with the help of which I aim to distinguish a few explicit and implicit parallels between the visual narrative of Angelopoulos and the “liturgical”.

In analysing cinematic narration, it is essential to note that Angelopoulos himself believed in plurality of meaning: one sense does not exclude the other. He consciously aimed to create polysemy that allows for multiple readings and leaves space for interpretation. His idea was that the interpretations of audiences from various cultures and backgrounds complete and conclude the “process of synthesis” for the plurality of meanings.⁸ In that sense, we all are as if invited to participate in, and contribute to, the semantic signification process of his visual imagery. Furthermore, Angelopoulos firmly opposed the idea of having a dichotomy between content and form. For example, if a given scene has a highly aesthetic and poetical character, this does not exclude political meanings in it.⁹ These principles apply to religious interpretations as well: they represent a dimension of their own without challenging leftist or other interpretations. It is clear, however, that in the case of *Megalexandros*, spiritual or national-religious interpretations are especially relevant.

In many of Angelopoulos’s films, there are evident parallelisms with Orthodox iconography. It is characteristic for his aesthetic vision that he aimed to create “mythical landscapes” that portray people “in a dialectical relationship with space.”¹⁰ This aim is parallel to Byzantine iconography with its mystical landscapes full of signifying details; moreover, the dialectical aim serves to provide some semantic plurality to the scene itself. In this paper, however, I shall deal with the allusions to iconography very briefly and concentrate on the “liturgical structures” instead.

THE IDENTITY OF MEGALEXANDROS

For Angelopoulos, cinematic landscapes are “primarily projections of an inner space”, and therefore he aimed to design and construct mythical landscapes.¹¹ In this particular film, the mythical landscape is a very complex one. To begin with, perhaps

5 Gerald O’Grady, “Angelopoulos’s Philosophy of Film,” in *Theo Angelopoulos Interviews*, ed. Dan Fainaru (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 72–3. See also ITA (documentary film).

6 Andrew Horton, “National Culture and Individual Vision,” in *Theo Angelopoulos Interviews*, ed. Dan Fainaru (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 86–7.

7 For those unfamiliar with the Orthodox liturgy, there exist many works explaining its structure and contents from the traditional theological and spiritual standpoints. Of the contemporary Greek works, the most recommendable introductions are Hieromonk Gregorios, *The Divine Liturgy: a Commentary in the Light of the Fathers* (Mount Athos: Cell of St John the Theologian, Koutlomousiou Monastery, 2011) and Emmanuel Hatzidakis, *The Heavenly Banquet. Understanding the Divine Liturgy* (Columbia: Orthodox Witness, 2008). In order to grasp the intent of this article, however, one should go to the church and observe the liturgical atmosphere, instead of reading about its discursive meanings.

8 Theo Angelopoulos, “Synthesis in Cinema,” *Scroope: Cambridge Architecture Journal* 18 (2011), 22.

9 This was his response to some criticism from the political left regarding his somewhat mystical use of red flags in the most iconic scene of *The Hunters*. Angelopoulos, “Synthesis in Cinema,” 14.

10 Angelopoulos, “Synthesis in Cinema,” 18–19. He seems to imply that “space” is not only a circumstantial background for the actual storyline but plays a role in itself and contributes significantly to how the actors are perceived and the overall content constituted.

11 The aim shows in settings Angelopoulos, “Synthesis in Cinema,” 19.

the most essential and most astonishing element of *Megalexandros* is the use of a collective subject. Even though at the outset the movie appears to be about a super hero, ultimately this is not the case at all. Consequently, the film has been seriously misinterpreted – or even “disinterpreted”, for the best books on Angelopoulos’s films¹² more or less skip the whole film, on account of its difficulty. One scholar even defines the approach used in the film as “esoteric format.”¹³ The leading authority on the Greek cinema, Vrasidas Karalis, misunderstands the film from the very beginning and reads it like a Hollywood film, taking it as a story of an individual hero and his personal development. In the end Karalis views *Megalexandros* as a film that explores “power and its corrupting influence on charismatic personalities” and relates how an individual hero becomes corrupted: “power makes him cruel, inconsiderate, and tyrannical”.¹⁴

The failures in understanding this film are largely due to the fact that the whole idea of a collective subject is in absolute contradiction to the principles of Hollywood films that have taught us to watch simple stories with simple solutions achieved by simple heroes. It is only recently, decades after the film was released, that several scholars have analysed the peculiar emphasis on the collective in *Megalexandros*. Murphet even calls the film a “supreme apotheosis of group cinematography.”¹⁵ In short, Angelopoulos is not depicting a hero but the collective soul of Greek villagers. The story is not about a super hero but about collective yearn for a redeemer, and ultimately, about the lack of one. The collective *hērōs* reflects the “Greek soul”, which is not a simple or homogenous concept but something extremely complex indeed: a mixture of layers and eras.¹⁶ Given that the category of collective is the driving force in the traditional Greek village life, it is only consistent and natural to use it as a principle of interpretation.

This being the case, the Alexander figure is *not* Alexander the Great or his reincarnation, in spite of the prevailing misunderstandings on the issue. The subject is a complex synthesis of divergent aspects from various historical layers and substrates. One may differentiate five main layers.

First, Alexander is fundamentally a figure of mediaeval Christian lore. Historically, “Megalexandros” is a messianic figure whom Christians under Islamic rule expected to appear from Constantinople in order to redeem them from the Islamic yoke. The roots of this lore originate from the seventh century Syriac-speaking Christians of the Middle East,¹⁷ but the legend soon became popular among Greeks, and after the Ottoman conquests, it continued to grow in Greek popular culture. In spite of the

12 The collection of essays edited by Horton in 1997, as well as Horton’s monograph (1999) analyse the other early films thoroughly in their chapters, but *Megalexandros* only briefly and cursorily.

13 Dan Georgakas, “Megalexandros: Authoritarianism and National Identity,” *The Cinema of Theo Angelopoulos*, ed. Angelos Koutsourakis & Mark Steven (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 136.

14 Vrasidas Karalis, *A History of Greek Cinema* (New York & London: Continuum, 2012), 191.

15 Julian Murphet, “Cinematography of the Group: Angelopoulos and the Collective Subject of Cinema,” in *The Cinema of Theo Angelopoulos*, ed. Angelos Koutsourakis & Mark Steven (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 168.

16 Similarly, in Angelopoulos’s movies there is a tendency to create collages of Greek identity by presenting processes of transformation: a market turns into theatre, a theatre into refugee camp (*Weeping meadow*), an empty unfinished building into a mortuary chapel, and a church into a place of execution, as in *Megalexandros*. For discussion, see Caroline Eades, “The Narrative Imperative in the Films of Theo Angelopoulos,” in *The Cinema of Theo Angelopoulos*, ed. Angelos Koutsourakis & Mark Steven (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 186.

17 The earliest source is so-called Pseudo-Methodius, the Greek text of which is published in Pseudo-Methodius, *Apocalypse: An Alexandrian World Chronicle*, ed. Benjamin Garstad (London: Harvard University Press, 2012). Pseudo-Methodius was widely read in Europe during the Ottoman siege of Vienna, but was later forgotten.

popularity and importance of this lore in mediaeval times, it was forgotten in the West, which alone makes the movie rather esoteric in Western eyes.

Secondly, the figure literally carries some symbolism from Alexander the Great: in particular, his famous helmet. This is historically interconnected with the previous level, given that the traditional Christian Alexander lore was initially inspired by Alexander the Great. The so-called Alexander Romance was popular already in early Eastern Christendom, circulating in several languages and in different versions.¹⁸ Subsequently, in the Christian literature of the Islamic era he became a kind of archetype of the victorious emperor expected to arrive before the end of time to liberate Christians in their traditional areas such as Syria, Turkey, Egypt, and above all, Jerusalem.

Thirdly, there are elements from the myths of ancient Greece. The story contains elements from the tragedies of antiquity, such as an array of relations between certain characters. However, these appear only randomly: elements from the myths of antiquity are merged into the main narrative and its collective urge. One may also note that the use of singing and chanting in the film seems to bear some resemblance to the role of choirs in the plays of classical antiquity. The choirs and their dialogues loosely personify fate and its turns.

Fourthly, the subject also appears in the role of St George, the sacred protector of Christians. Traditionally, he has been especially popular wherever Christians have been subjugated and deprived of full rights, as was the case under the Islamic law. As a mythical archetype of a salvific protector, St George represents the very same archetypal function as the Alexander of mediaeval lore.

Fifthly, there are some modern layers, which serve as the setting for the story. The basic idea of the plot bears resemblance to certain events from 1870,¹⁹ though Angelopoulos has set them into the year 1900,²⁰ which plainly symbolises the turn from the mediaeval to the modern. Furthermore, there appear modern phenomena such as communism,²¹ Italian anarchism, even tourism. All these are utopias of their own kind, which answer to people's collective yearning.

In total, the layers constitute a symbolic personality who embodies ancient and modern mythologies. In the words of Georgakas, the "webs of identity and relationships are so complex and ambiguous that the viewer must accept the characters not as individuals but as generations of characters."²²

The use of a collective subject in a film that apparently seems to be structured around an individual hero is certainly a brave and ambiguous solution. Some critics, such as Horton, consider the film less successful for the reason that Angelopoulos tries "to cover too much territory in one work."²³ Perhaps Horton in this case failed to see the wood for the trees, which indeed may easily happen with this film, but it must be admitted that the scenery is exceedingly complex and heterogeneous, at

18 To begin with, see David Zuwiyya, *A Companion to Alexander Literature in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

19 In 1870, a group of Englishmen was kidnapped by Greek bandits from Marathon, but *Megalexandros* is set at 1900, at the turn of the new century, symbolising the change from the mediaeval to the modern.

20 See discussion in Dan Georgakas, "Megalexandros," 130–31.

21 "[I]n *Megalexandros* the nineteenth-century mythical figure of the Greek bandit and the Byzantine myth of the legend of *Megalexandros*, who saves the Greeks from Turkish domination, delineate the drama of the failed early twentieth-century socialist experiment taking place in the film's fabula; still these mythical references are formulas used to comment on the present, and in particular, on the political impasse of the Greek Left and the Eastern Bloc of the period." Angelos Koutsourakis, "The Gestus of Showing," in *The Cinema of Theo Angelopoulos*, ed. Angelos Koutsourakis & Mark Steven (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 74.

22 Georgakas, "Megalexandros," 134.

23 Andrew Horton, *The Last Modernist: The Films of Theo Angelopoulos* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1997), 64.

least for the big audience. Even Angelopoulos himself in his later films returned to “individual subjectivity” in which the focus is on the leading protagonist and his individual experiences.²⁴

ST GEORGE FAILING

The film is full of ambivalence of powers and tension of values between poles such as modernism and traditionalism, east and west, poetic and banal, sacred and profane. The ambivalence culminates in a bizarre scene in which Alexander appears as seen by the eyes of tourists, as kitsch of a kind. The *hērōs* literally poses against a cheap iconic background, on a white horse, playing the part of Saint George. The *hērōs* himself is absent-minded and silent, but carries out a task that remains unvoiced and unexplained.



IMAGE 1. *Megalexandros* posing as St George.

This puzzling scene seems to indicate that the *hērōs*, expected for centuries, is no more than the trivial kitsch that he had *de facto* turned into among the people, and this makes him unable to fill the original function of a saintly hero. In other words, the world has changed so much that it transforms the *hērōs* into its own likeness, so that he is unable to live as he did in the chants that used to herald his arrival and praise him.

It is telling that the folk hymn referring to Alexander as St George (during his triumphal entry and Eucharistic scene: see below) appears pure and archaic, but it seems to come from the past and refer back to the past. In our modern world, St George’s holiness seems to fade and does not carry him to heroic deeds; the Great Alexander is no longer able to rule or conquer.

Overall, Alexander is characterized by inner ambivalence. The Greek saviour figure overwhelms with inner contradictions, because he carries in himself the mythical ingredients of antiquity, Alexander the Great, Byzantium and Post-Byzantine village culture, as well as the modern myths of communism, and even bizarre demands of tourism. Because of this enormous collective burden, he is helpless and dysfunctional. Ultimately, he manages to function only *post mortem*,

24 For discussion, see Eades, “The Narrative Imperative,” 178.

after having left the worldly life and returned to the world of intangible ideas, as the very end of the film shows. He leaves behind no body but a detached head of a statue (see image 5); a dead stone is invulnerable and invincible.

Given that the film does not portray an individual but collective yearning for salvation, it is ultimately this yearning which is ambivalent and heterogeneous and therefore dysfunctional. Correspondingly, the village is internally divided and outwardly surrounded by troops, but the real enemy is invisible. In the words of Georgakas, “the authoritarian monster is as much an inner demon as an outside villain.”²⁵

LITURGICAL STRUCTURES

Now we may proceed to locate the actual “liturgical structures” in this peculiar work. First, we may note that the film contains a few explicitly iconic or sacramental scenes. When entering the village in the beginning of his mission, Alexander is cheered in a messianic way, reminding one of the atmosphere of Palm Sunday. Then he is shown to pour water on the heads of children like St John the Baptist, constituting an explicit baptismal scene. Moreover, there is a classical Eucharistic scene à la Da Vinci. All these appear with no explications or clarifications.



IMAGE 2. Eucharistic scene à la Da Vinci.

The iconic scenes are dramatized with epic folk singing performed in a dramatic fashion and somewhat chaotic tuning, which creates a mystical impact and an archaic semi-liturgical impression. The chant about a saintly hero explicitly identifies Megalexandros with St George, revealing the composite character of the subject:

*Holy the bread, holy the wine,
 holy the hay for the horse.
 Alexander the Great, you are the wind
 and St George, slayer of the dragon
 Holy the silence, holy the sound,
 holy the great word.
 Alexander the Great, you are the sun
 and St George, slayer of the dragon.²⁶*

25 Georgakas, “Megalexandros,” 139.

26 Translation used in the film (42:20–44:28).

The opening line of the chant seems to have a peculiar ironic leftist side-taste, for it corresponds to Feuerbach's conclusion on the essence of Christianity, well known to Marx.²⁷ This is an astonishing example of Angelopoulos's ability to create scenes that may serve different, even opposite perspectives: one may take the scene as a solemn expression of the mystical essence of Christianity, or as a parodic mockery of its degenerateness.

However, even such explicitly sacramental or iconic references are not yet enough to make a film "liturgical", details as they are. Liturgical structures rather have to do with the general flow and narrative manoeuvres of the film. What exactly did Angelopoulos mean with liturgical structures in this sense, and how did he understand the "liturgical"?

Even though Angelopoulos sympathised with the political left, he admitted that the Orthodox Church was an important part of his cultural – "if not religious" – life and openly admitted its influence in his aesthetic touch.²⁸ For this very reason, however, his perspective on liturgical life seems to have been that of an outsider. This means that liturgy appeared to him not as schematic structure of theological units (anaphora, epiclesis etc.) with certain meanings and functions, but rather in a "phenomenological way", as a specific mode of being. In other words, the "liturgical" refers to the content of mind and consciousness during one's presence in a liturgical space and setting. Thus, the crucial question is: what is it like to be in a liturgy? How does an outsider construct his experience of liturgical presence into one whole? And finally, how is this structured into a film?



IMAGE 3. A ritual scene in *Megalexandros*

The answer starts to unfold from the most ambiguous and opaque parts of the movie. The film contains several ritual and ceremonial scenes that serve to create magical moods. The men in the village suddenly unite into a slow circular movement that is suggestive of some mystical ritual. What occurs is not explained or commented

27 "Holy the water, Holy the Bread, Holy the Wine" See Rudolf Schlesinger, *Marx: His Times and Ours* (New York: Routledge, 2011, the first edition 1950), 33–4.

28 Interview made by Horton 1992, in Fainaru, *Theo Angelopoulos Interviews*, 86–87.

on in any way; the action simply takes place. An unexplained flow of ceremonial occurrences is of course very characteristic of liturgical action.

Artists seldom give interpretations or meanings for the symbolism they have employed, but Angelopoulos in one interview did explain this very circle, which served to explain what he meant by the Byzantine liturgical character of the film:

There was even the notion of the circle within the film. The concept also used to mark a place of privilege. A place where everything happens. It's the place where the village is located, a place viewed as a circle.²⁹

In this way, Angelopoulos presented the age-old flow of village life in the form of a symbolistic circle and ritualistic movement. His intention was to use "slow and fast internal rhythms" in long shots in order to create a ceremonial element, which exists "in the form of a theatrical gesture that needs to be completed in a specific timing".³⁰ In other words, the movement and its timing is "liturgical", since it functions in a liturgical way, even though its reference is in the earthly life.

Furthermore, the film employs at certain times communication with off-screen recipients who are not shown. This device is unusual in films, but corresponds to the basic flow of liturgical activity. In the Orthodox worship, the reciter, priest or choir may be out of sight, but the voice and the events keep on flowing nevertheless. Ultimately, the whole idea of liturgy is to serve the unseen and to address the invisible – the "Great off-screen recipient".

Even more importantly, the main character of the film appears to act in a way that has noteworthy parallels with procedures of the leader of the liturgical action, as they appear to those in the Church. First, *lack of emotion* is a striking feature, especially in the case of the main figure. Indeed, "lack of a strong individual identity deprived the film of emotional energy", as Georgakas observed.³¹ This is an essential "liturgical" feature in the narrative flow, for the stressing of emotions or emotionality has no place in the Orthodox liturgy or liturgical thinking.

Moreover, the odd *impersonality* of the central figure has a clear parallelism with the liturgical experience. In the liturgical action, the leader and his personality is not emphasised, and he does not speak his own words. On the contrary, the liturgy goes on regardless of whether the leader is seen or unseen, what he is thinking, how he is feeling. In that sense, the liturgical atmosphere appears quite fatalistic: it goes as it must go, and there is no way to change it by individual means. Indeed, the only words that Alexander speaks during the whole movie are "It had to happen."³²

The Alexander figure seems to act and make effect in the midst of his community merely through being present, instead of ordinary communication. In that sense, he is like a leader of liturgy, concentrated on what must happen. A silent character, Alexander does not lead by his words, but by his presence and position, and ultimately, by the expectations of the community. He seems tired, somewhat overweight, partly sad, non-dynamic, non-innovative, and the events simply whirl around him. Many of these characteristics may apply to bishops that one sees in pontifical liturgies. Liturgical rituals proceed in their prearranged course, regardless of what kind of personality there is inside the "Byzantine figure" leading them.

29 "Interview with Theo Angelopoulos" (documentary film).

30 O'Grady, "Angelopoulos's Philosophy of Film," 72-3. In this very context, Angelopoulos stated that *Megalexandros* is "structured like a Byzantine liturgy".

31 Georgakas, "Megalexandros," 137.

32 The words are said in a dramatic context, as an explanation for a murder. We may note here that the actor was not Greek but Italian, Omero Antonutti (1935-2019).

In other words, Alexander leads his community in a way that is analogous to the way in which a bishop leads a liturgical event: he is an epicentre of the flow of events, but cannot make any actual personal contributions to their course. This is of course very much unlike Hollywood heroes – who, in this sense, represent the “aesthetics of evangelical preachers,” in the case of which the dramatic turns created by personal feelings and wordings are decisive.

Moreover, the scenes repeatedly develop a strong sense of the presence of sacred, almost unparalleled in the world of cinema. This is created not only by mystical, ceremonial or slow movement, but perhaps even more so by the specific use of music.

THE USE OF MUSIC IN MEGALEXANDROS

For Angelopoulos, the most important musical element was silence. In *Hunters* (1977), he told the actors to count numbers in their minds in order to make the silent sequences long enough. Expanding on this, he affirmed that “silence needs to function in an almost musical way, not to be fabricated through cuts or through dead shots but to exist internally inside the shot.”³³ Even silence was not an individual category, however. Groups in his films are “uniquely sustained by a prodigious silence amongst themselves,”³⁴ as Murphet defines.

In his three first movies, Angelopoulos had used music in a very restricted manner: there was no systematic use of background music, only a few specific pieces that were a part of the actual plot and performed by the actors. *Megalexandros* was the first Angelopoulos film in which music played a decisive role. The archaic music has unusual functions in the narrative, in which it serves to invigorate, dramatize, and ultimately, turn the course of events. Angelopoulos in fact called the film “completely a Greek Orthodox or Byzantine work” for the very reason that it is “constructed on many elements of the Orthodox liturgy, combining music, ritual,” in addition to the role of the icon.³⁵ In short, he used non-liturgical music in a liturgical way, raising a strong wall of sound with a folk chorus resembling a Byzantine male choir:

I started with Alexander the Great where music is used in a different way. The music is structured like film... made around the concept of... a Byzantine Mass. And we had to use the solos, the chorus, basso-continuo, as well as the human voice. We had to construct a musical universe which would relate to a mass.³⁶

The idea was to create a wall of sound, tinted with certain “eastern” roughness and discordance, which breaks the silence and starts a new phase in the narrative. This parallels to the liturgical moment in which the people sense how the ordinary turns to the musical in the Greek rite; monotonic reading comes to an end, and the *ison* (drone) sound creates a feeling that now something is beginning to happen: a new phase that is something mysterious, powerful, archaic, and very Eastern. Angelopoulos aimed to create similar effects with different components:

Since the structure of the film is that of Byzantine liturgical music, I chose very old folk music played on antique instruments and used them in the liturgical tradition, alternating between solos and ensemble pieces.³⁷

33 Angelopoulos, “Synthesis in Cinema,” 72.

34 Murphet, “Cinematography of the Group,” 169.

35 Interview made by Horton 1992, in Fainaru, *Theo Angelopoulos Interviews*, 86–87.

36 Interview with Theo Angelopoulos (documentary film).

37 The interview in Dan Fainaru, *Theo Angelopoulos Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 138. Angelopoulos seems to mean having used instruments “in accordance with the musical conventions of liturgical tradition:” they are used as if they were human voices.

In the liturgical flow of the narrative, a powerful “semi-liturgical”, Byzantine-styled chant or music appears in certain key scenes in order to create mystical moods and senses of mystical presence before the turn of events. No singers are shown, not even when the singing is heard by the characters; the voice belongs to the collective. It is a communal and timeless echo, voiced by the whole community, by all generations. Both the sound itself and its utilisation in the visual narrative are characterised by the sense of timelessness brought by the resonances of the past. The function of the voice in the narration is to arouse mystical awe and create an extraordinary yet undefined presence that appears to be a presence of the sacred, but also that of the vanished past.

In Greece, the sacred and the vanished past are almost the same, for the latter means above all the Byzantine commonwealth, known for its thoroughly Orthodox character. For Angelopoulos, Byzantine music was something coming from the east, from the lost world (in view of the fact that Byzantine aesthetics developed and flourished mainly in the Middle East), and the present Greece is between East and West.

As a matter of fact, in this film I used two types of music – the Byzantine and that of the Italian anarchists who had their own songs. In a way, it is the juxtaposition of the Orient and the Occident. With Greece, of course, in the middle.³⁸

The tragedy in *Megalexandros* is that Western and Eastern melodies are incommensurable and they cannot be synchronized. The Greek soul is tuned in a way that cannot be synchronized or harmonized with Western tuning. On the explicit level of the story, the Western and Eastern melodies and ways of singing end up in conflict on two occasions. This very conflict finally leads to the slaughter of the western hostages, which constitutes nothing less than the key turn in the plot. Even this is not explained with a single word, which is again a liturgical characteristic: liturgy contains no explanations.

This all bears some relevance also in relation to the historical context. The *Megalexandros* story is set in the era when Western influences arrived in Greece in music and the other arts, producing endless discussions on what is “Greek” and what is not. One of the most famous authors of that time, Alexandros Papadiamandis (1851–1911) described the setting as follows:

Byzantine music is as Greek as it needs to be: We neither want it to be, nor do we imagine it to be, the music of the ancient Greeks. But it is the only authentic [music] and the only existing [music]. And for us, if it is not the music of the Greeks, then it is the music of the Angels.³⁹

In addition to the paraliturgical chanting, the film includes one traditional liturgical hymn, the Troparion of the Cross,⁴⁰ which appears in the narration as a power that seems to function by itself. This is a striking example of how the category of the

³⁸ The interview in Dan Fainaru, *Theo Angelopoulos Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 138.

³⁹ Alexandros Papadiamandis, “Excerpts of Thoughts,” *Apanta*, vol. 5, 240; quoted and discussed in Anestis Keselopoulos, *Lessons From a Greek Island: From the “Saint of Greek Letters,” Alexandros Papadiamandis* (Protecting Veil, 2011), 174.

⁴⁰ Σῶσον Κύριε τὸν λαόν σου καὶ εὐλόγησον τὴν κληρονομίαν σου, νίκας τοῖς Βασιλεῦσι κατὰ βαρβάρων δωρούμενος καὶ τὸ σὸν φυλάττων, διὰ τοῦ Σταυροῦ σου, πολίτευμα. “Save, o Lord, your people and bless your inheritance, granting to the Emperor victory over the Barbarians, protecting the commonwealth with your Cross.” (Ἀπολυτίκιον τοῦ Σταυροῦ, Ἦχος α΄.) Similar pleas occur in the hymnography of the Sunday vigil and other liturgical contexts, some of them probably written by St John of Damascus. It is essential to realize that such verses were not “military hymns” from Constantinople but pleas of freedom from the Orthodox Christians under Islamic rule in the Middle East. For this very reason, the use of the Troparion in *Megalexandros* fits perfectly with the Christian Alexander legend.

collective has a dominant position in the narrative. Specifically, the hymn is first sung by fake monks whose singing is openly shown; it yields no real results. Then it is sung by the invisible collective subject, and it is their singing which is more powerful than that of individuals. Though the singers are not shown, their chant has the power to turn the course of events. This again corresponds to the liturgical experience in which singing is perceived, and may elevate the listener, even if the singers are not observable, as is often the case in Orthodox churches. Likewise, in liturgical life the collective voice of the Church is the dominating one; the songs of individuals are fake songs.

The original historical context in which the Troparion of the Cross emerged was the same milieu in which the Christian Megalexandros legend arose: the Christian Middle East of the seventh-eighth centuries. The hymn originally expressed the hope of liberation from the Islamic yoke, which during the centuries became more and more utopic, as Christians slowly turned into minorities throughout the Middle East and Asia Minor. After the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, the hope became even more unrealistic. In that sense, the hymn expresses a central motif in the collective psyche of mediaeval Greeks, and its traditional uses throughout history constitute a collective echo in the liturgical experience, even today. When it is sang at a victorious context, as in *Megalexandros*, it creates a sense of an ancient utopia being fulfilled – for the time being.

It is not only sounds but also the lack of them that appears to have parallelisms. Namely, liturgical experience consists of an unceasing flow of voice, and a period of silence gives rise to a restless feeling that something may be wrong. Correspondingly, in *Megalexandros* silence functions also as a sign of absence that may constitute a threatening element. In one silent scene, a man enters an empty monastery, as if he were trying to make contact with something, but the mystical timeless voice never appears, and this failure results in his sudden death.

GRAND FINALES

Because of the presence of several time-layers, the film also seems to have several endings in a row. Even this phenomenon is present in the liturgical expression of the Orthodox Church. In both cases, the plurality of endings results from the presence of different time-layers in one act.

Firstly, the story ends and culminates in *theophagia*, “God-eating”. The village, functioning as one collective, silently surrounds and devours the Alexander figure, thus absorbing the messianic character into themselves. Angelopoulos himself stated that one of the reasons why *Megalexandros* is “completely a Greek Orthodox or Byzantine work” is that it culminates in “catharsis through blood”.⁴¹ The mythic leader, anticipated for centuries, is absorbed by the same people from whom he had come. “The cinematography of the group can go no further”,⁴² as Murphet remarked. In addition, however, Eucharistic connotations are obvious: the liturgy of *Megalexandros* culminates in participating in the redeemer figure through absorbing him.

41 Interview by Horton 1992, in Fainaru, *Theo Angelopoulos Interviews*, 86–87. The notion of course applies also to the calm acts of murder that seem to serve some unvoiced purpose in the film.

42 Murphet, “Cinematography of the Group,” 169.



IMAGE 4. *The death of Alexander.*

Ultimately, what the villages devour into themselves is not an individual but the collective past. More practically speaking, when the Greeks leave their villages and enter the cities of the new era, they have this fragmentary past with its confused utopias and yearnings in themselves. In 1980, Greeks were just one generation from village life, and the collective identity was characterised by “the brutality and beauty of village life” that represented an organic continuity with the distant past, as Georgakas observed.⁴³

The second ending is constituted by the encounter with the memory of the deceased hero. Leaving behind only a head of statue, Alexander is reborn as a relic of antiquity. He is no longer vulnerable, no longer of this world; he has returned to the world of myth and enclosed in its sacredness. This is how the myths live: the people gives birth to its heroes, eliminates and devours them, and continues to live with their remembrance, which in turn shall generate for the hero new incarnations in novel forms.

The death of the hero by being absorbed by the villagers, and the mysterious disappearance of his body, is the most extreme and most intense example of the presence of the sacred in the film. The sense of sacredness is intensified by the use of music. A dramatic and mystical wall of sound intensifies in the background, and the sense of growing awe in the scene is so strong that even the soldiers must ultimately flee. Here one may identify an association with the soldiers at the sepulchre of Christ.⁴⁴ Overall, the scene is impressive indeed; it is telling that some scholars mention the death of Alexander as the “single greatest sequence” in Angelopoulos’s career.⁴⁵

43 Georgakas, “Megalexandros,” 134.

44 Mt 28:4. In liturgical terms, the movement backwards echoes certain liturgical acts such as the procession in the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, one of the most mystical moments in the liturgical year.

45 Murphet, “Cinematography of the Group,” 169.



IMAGE 5. *The mythical remains of Alexander.*

The scene also crystallizes the view of history represented by the film. Karalis estimated that Angelopoulos in his previous films had aimed to reconstruct the past, but in *Megalexandros* he aimed to visualize how the past events lose their historicity and are transformed into legends and epic stories.⁴⁶ But is this a positive or negative development? For Karalis, it was a most negative one and thus he defined Angelopoulos as a revisionist who wrote *against* the mythologization of history. The interpretation of Karalis is rather “Western”, for the very same transformation can also be seen in positive terms. This is certainly an Orthodox reading: when facts become legends and myths, it is not a pitiful loss of truth but a solemn sanctification, transfiguration and, eventually, canonization of the original phenomena.⁴⁷ That is, Alexander passes away from mortal life and is resurrected in the realm of myth and mythical truth.

Finally, the third ending in *Megalexandros* shows a child of the village riding slowly to modern Athens, carrying in himself the complexities of Greek history and myths, dreams and failures. Alexander is taken into our time. All the time-layers he carries within himself constitute the Greek soul.

RECEPTION

Megalexandros won a number of prizes. In the home field, it dominated the Thessaloniki film festival, being awarded not only with the Gold Award for the best film but also with awards for Best Photography, Best Scenography and Best Sound Recording. Outside Greece, however, the film was considered an exotic oddity. Nonetheless, at the Venice film festival (1980) it was awarded with the Golden Lion for the best “experimental film”, as well as Award of the International Film Critics (FIPRESCI). Overall, however, it seems that enthusiasm was restricted to small circles of film lovers.

It was exactly the matters related to the “Byzantine structure” that were indefinite enough to guarantee that the movie was not understood in full. Even in Greece, the overall reception of *Megalexandros* was rather negative in the politically turbulent situation of that time. Leftists considered the movie inappropriate because

⁴⁶ Karalis, “Theo Angelopoulos’ Early Films and the Demystification of Power,” in *The Cinema of Theo Angelopoulos*, ed. Angelos Koutsourakis & Mark Steven (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 128.

⁴⁷ As noted earlier, Angelopoulos himself welcomed all readings. However, the use of music in the final scenes suggest that he aimed to create solemn and sacred contents for the mythologization process.

of portraying leftists as cruel and unrealistic.⁴⁸ For conservatives, the mere option of highlighting a revolution was intolerable. For some on the left, even the depiction of Alexander on a white horse was a mockery of Aris; for many in the church and in the right, it was a plain mockery of St George. The escaping prisoners that ruined a revolution were disturbing for left and right alike in the situation when the Communist Party had only just been legalised and exiles allowed to return. The bourgeois British lords seemed to represent the American allies of Greece, and the Italian anarchists corresponded to extra-parliamentary groups of the New Left in Italy. Overall, to read the film merely as an allegory for contemporary politics essentially trivializes the narrative.⁴⁹

In short, the world did not understand the film, and Greece largely misunderstood it. Therefore, it is all the more noteworthy that the recent academic literary interest dealing with Angelopoulos has struggled with the film a great deal, and it has been greatly analysed more than thirty years after its release. This shows the greatness of the film: it was perhaps not ahead of its time but quite literally *above* time. This, again, is also among the basic aims of liturgical action.

CONCLUSION

Megalexandros is the most Orthodox and most Byzantine work in Angelopoulos's *oeuvre*, and indeed, one of the most "Orthodox movies" of all times, if there is such a term. Certainly, it is the only movie structured in the form of a Byzantine liturgy, in the words of the director himself. Nevertheless, Angelopoulos himself welcomed all kind of readings, and attempts to define one correct meaning at the expense of others were in his eyes awkward, so there is no need to suggest that the present conclusions should be taken as his definite stance. Yet what he himself said about the movie points compellingly in the same direction.

Overall, the structure of Byzantine liturgy can be discerned on three levels. First, the visual settings of scenes contain some explicit *iconic settings* related to baptism, the Eucharist and St George, in addition to a few more obscure ones such as the Entry into Jerusalem and some "semi-iconic" posing in a few scenes. The influence of Byzantine icons and frescoes is obvious.

Secondly, the *soundscape* creates effects and impressions that have obvious parallels with Byzantine liturgical singing and its effects, even though the music mostly consists of religious folk songs rather than actual liturgical hymnody. The singing displays the way in which the ecclesiastical spirit was at the heart of traditional Greek village culture, but it also exemplifies how the film constitutes a secular application of certain liturgical principles. Moreover, there is a very particular use of a liturgical hymn, the Troparion of the cross, which seems to function as symbol of power, or perhaps more precisely, the will to power – again, in the collective sense.

Thirdly, the structural elements of the narrative function "liturgically" in a phenomenological sense: they create turns, shifts and moods that resemble the state of mind when one is present in Byzantine liturgical settings. In particular, Alexander leads the village very much in a same way as a bishop leads the liturgy. This applies to the visual elements of the narrative on the one hand, and their reception on the other. The result is something that may look mysterious but *feels like* Byzantine liturgy.

48 Angelopoulos remained sympathetic to the left, since it aimed to represent the poor, but he was also aware of its essential problems and dysfunctionality. Thus, he chose to show the beauty of the socialist dream (in movies such as *The Hunters*) rather than promote it any practical sense.

49 Georgakas, "Megalexandros", 135.

The article is dedicated to the memory of the actor Omero Antonutti (1935–2019), aka Megalexandros, who sadly passed away during the process of the writing of this article, on 5 November 2019, at the age of 84. May his memory be eternal.

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