



Ulysses' Gaze

Director: Theo Angelopoulos

Country: Greece

Date: 1995



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A review by Janet Maslin for The New York Times:

Theo Angelopoulos, the Greek director of "Ulysses' Gaze," had the temerity to envision a Homeric voyage through the Balkans and surround his film's main character, a world-weary film director known only as A., with the self-conscious aura of a mythic hero. When his film won the Grand Jury Prize at the 1995 Cannes International Film Festival, Mr. Angelopoulos cemented his reputation for chutzpah by expressing disdain for what was basically only second prize.



Top honors that year went to Emir Kusturica's blustery "Underground," which happened to have much in common with Mr. Angelopoulos's more graceful and dreamy magnum opus. By chance, both films were colossally ambitious three-hour meditations on the fall of Communism and the tragedy of 20th-century Balkan history. Since then, the combined effects of running time and subject matter have conspired to keep these grand behemoths from finding theatrical release in the United States.

Now the Anthology Film Archives in the East Village provides a welcome showcase for Mr. Angelopoulos's vision in all its exhausting majesty and strange, desolate beauty. A work of true poetry as well as whopping hubris, it stars the fearless Harvey Keitel as a man doomed to wander the Balkans in a rapt existential trance. Along the way, he must convey a sense of epic destiny and spout dialogue that is made unimaginably stilted by its classical pedigree. The star is able to deliver lines like "If I should but stretch out my hand I will touch you and time will be whole again" with an admirably solemn face.

(The film maker has recalled that when Mr. Keitel was approached for this role, the actor said: "Right. I was in the Marines; you can't scare me.")

Giving a brave performance attuned to the film's fluid, hypnotic style, Mr. Keitel plays a man in search of the past. A Greek film maker who has long lived in American exile, A. returns to his home near the Albanian border and embarks on a mission. He seeks three lost film reels made in the early years of cinema by two Greek brothers. Their images, he believes, hold the key to lost innocence and essential truth. "All the ambiguities, the contrasts, the conflicts in this area of the world are reflected in their work," A. says by way of explaining his quest.

"Ulysses' Gaze" aspires to comparable towering importance of its own. And Mr. Angelopoulos achieves it in some of the starkly imposing images created in the course of A.'s long journey. As the film moves mournfully past Albania, Romania and parts of the former Yugoslavia, sometimes slipping



smoothly and disconcertingly into the past, it finds a landscape of spectral figures and broken dreams. The whole voyage, like the classic journey on which it is loosely modeled, conveys an overwhelming sense of loss.

Among the film's most spectacular touches is its Ozymandias-like vision of a ruined Lenin. Gliding forward at its stately, sleepwalking pace, the film watches fragments of a huge statue being loaded onto a barge. And as the likeness of Lenin's disembodied head is moved through the sky by a crane, the camera looks on in wonder, and "Ulysses' Gaze" truly lives up to its Homeric pretensions.

A. then glides downriver along with the pieces of the statue, which are assembled so that Lenin lies shattered on his back, his arm raised commandingly as it points toward nothing. At such moments, Mr. Angelopoulos inspires awe for his profound visual eloquence and constitutional inability to think small.



At other times this long, circuitous film tests the stamina, as when it drifts too freely or forces Mr. Keitel to say things like "a frightened lizard slithered into hiding under a tombstone." Yet the overall effect is genuinely entrancing, with a sense of tragic inevitability that gives meaning to the film's maddeningly attenuated rhythms. With its taste for cryptic silences and deserted places (and an eerily effective score by Eleni Karaindrou, the film maker's usual composer), "Ulysses' Gaze" has a sorrowful, wordless beauty that finally justifies its self-importance. Still, patience is required.

A handful of other actors figure significantly in A.'s journey, though none alter the fact that any Ulysses is fundamentally alone. Maia Morgenstern, a lovely Romanian actress, plays the film's symbolic female figure and turns up strikingly in several roles: a widow, a mother, a chain-smoking romantic redolent of the French New Wave. Erland Josephson appears late in the story as A. comes close to fulfilling his purpose and his geographical destiny. In its search for an understanding of Balkan history, the film passes through Salonika, Skopje, Belgrade, Bucharest and many rural settings before finally finding its heart of darkness in Sarajevo.

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