

# Thinking Through Translation with Theodoros Angelopoulos

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In this paper, I propose to examine the question of journeys, borders, and translation in Theodoros Angelopoulos' Trilogy of Borders: *The Suspended Step of the Stork* (1991), *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995) and *Eternity and a Day* (1998), winner of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. It is my aim to contribute, in a small way, to the ongoing discussion about the role of translation in creating understanding, using as a case in point the work of a major contemporary poet of the screen who created his own aesthetics of the journey and whose films are vehicles of discovery, taking the viewer across many borders, on a fabulous—but often unsettling and perilous—voyage which challenges long-held assumptions about self, others, and translation.

**Keywords:** translation, borders, journey(s), Theodoros Angelopoulos, Trilogy of Borders

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## Introduction

In this paper, I would like to revisit the topic of odysseys—personal and collective—in the work of Greek director Theodoros (Theo) Angelopoulos. This will allow me to engage, in more ways than one, with the question of what translation means, and does.

A number of years ago I spoke<sup>1</sup> about the question of languages, of plurilingualism in the films of Theo Angelopoulos, and discussed some of the films as “Key Cultural Texts”, containing—to use Walter Bryce Gallie's (1956) term—“essentially contested concepts”, among which the concept of ‘border’. In our volume entitled *Key Cultural Texts in Translation*, Kirsten Malmkjær, Fransiska Louwagie and I explain that “[i]n every literate culture, texts of many types, genres and forms (textual, audiovisual and visual) play central roles in presenting and representing the culture to itself and in defining its cultural others (people, places, and customs)” (2018: 1); we called such texts “Key Cultural Texts”.

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<sup>1</sup> Oral presentations at the 7th Congress of the European Society for Translation Studies (“Centres and Peripheries”, Gernersheim, 2013) and at the international conference “Traduction, plurilinguisme et langues en contact : Traduire la diversité” (Université Toulouse-le-Mirail, 2012).

Undoubtedly, several of Angelopoulos' films, if not all, are Key Cultural Texts, and the Greek director is a major contemporary poet of the screen.

I would now like to examine Angelopoulos' work, in particular the three films known as the Balkan Trilogy or the Trilogy of Borders, in terms of what they can tell us about translation<sup>2</sup>. In her essay "The Contemporary Logos" (part of the book entitled *The Wedding Dress: Meditations on Word and Life*), American poet, novelist and filmmaker Fanny Howe explores the parallel between translation and "poetic language" and explains that "the language of translation, as [Walter] Benjamin perceives it, is like poetic language because of its fusion of a literal reading of the word with the freedom of a second look." (Howe 2003: 80). It is such a second look or, rather, a third look I am attempting, and I shall start with the question of borders.

### **Journeys and border crossings**

According to Andrew Horton, author and, respectively, editor of two volumes devoted to Angelopoulos, the Greek director's films matter precisely because

they dare to cross a number of borders: between nations; between history and myth, the past and the present, voyaging and stasis; between betrayal and a sense of community, chance and individual fate, realism and surrealism, silence and sound; between what is seen and what is withheld or not seen; and between what is "Greek" and what is not. (Horton 1997: xi)

In what was the first monograph in English to focus on Angelopoulos's cinematic vision, Horton emphasised the quintessentially Greek nature of the filmmaker's work. He situates Theodoros Angelopoulos in the context of thousands of years of Greek history and culture, whose impact on European, on Western civilisation as a whole is considerable. As Horton reveals, Angelopoulos is a poet and a thinker with the camera, using film to explore complicated questions of identity and of memory. In his work, he draws on ancient epic and tragedy, on Greek mythology, also on Byzantine iconography and liturgy, Balkan history, modern Greek culture—for instance, bouzouki music—, and on shadow puppet theatre, among others.

Angelopoulos never seems to betray his sense of history. While he always remains anchored in his country of origin—Greece—within its geopolitical context—the Balkans—, he raises repeatedly the question of borders and that of exile which, in his films, is, above all, a feeling one has inside, the feeling that one is a foreigner and a refugee everywhere

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<sup>2</sup> This research made the object of an oral presentation at the conference "Translation and Cultural Sustainability" (University of Salamanca, 2018).

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(*xenitis*). I need to refer here to Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky and, in particular, his film *Nostalghia* (1983), in which Tarkovsky also explores the question of physical and inner exile. *Nostalghia* was made when Tarkovsky was away from his country of origin. He was in Italy at the time and, in the film, as in a *mise en abyme*, he shows the peregrinations through Italy of a Russian poet, Andrei Gorchakov (Oleg Yankovsky), accompanied by his interpreter Eugenia (Domiziana Giordano). This gives the filmmaker the opportunity to make his characters discuss translation, in a scene in which they are waiting in the lobby of a hotel, as in a limbo of sorts. The exiled poet in the film tells his interpreter, who is reading a book of Russian poetry in Italian translation, that it is impossible to translate poetry, and that she should throw the book away. This leads the two characters—predictably perhaps—to the question of borders, of their nature and their existence. Also to the question of languages, and the (im)possibility of communication. After all, it is perhaps when communication is non-existent, or is broken, that borders come into being, or become rigid, ossified structures.

Like Tarkovsky, Angelopoulos developed a cinematic style characterised by meticulously composed scenes and a very large number of extended long shots (sequence shots). This of course goes counter the current trend of fragmentation and fast-paced montage, and it is one of the reasons why Andrew Horton (1997) suggested that, in an age of decreasing attention spans, Angelopoulos offers the viewer a “cinema of contemplation” which appeals to some, challenges many, and might repel a large number of potential spectators.

When Theodoros Angelopoulos died on the 24th of January 2012 in a road accident in Piraeus—the main port of Athens and the largest in Greece—he was making a film entitled *The Other Sea*. The sea is a constant presence in Angelopoulos’s cinema. Many of his characters cross it, as their Greek ancestors once did, and one cannot fail to remember that, in Greek mythology, dying itself is a journey by water, a passage to another shore, in a boat. The sea is an infinite opening and also a border, because not everybody can undertake to cross it and thus there are people who must remain on land, or they do undertake the crossing but the water becomes their tomb, the grave of their hopes, longings, and ambitions.

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Illustration 1. The sea in *Eternity and a Day*



Illustration 2. The sea in *Ulysses' Gaze*

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The three films belonging to the Trilogy of Borders were all made by Angelopoulos in the 1990s, and they come after the Trilogy of Silence. The films are: *The Suspended Step of the Stork* (1991; the Greek title is *To Μετέωρο Βήμα του Πελαργού*), *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995; *To βλέμμα του Οδυσσέα*) and *Eternity and a Day* (1998, *Μια αιωνιότητα και μια μέρα*), for which the filmmaker was awarded the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival (Angelopoulos himself made no secret of the fact that, in his opinion, it is for *Ulysses' Gaze* he should have received the Palme d'Or.)

Political concerns are present in the films which, as Horton points out (1997: 71), are interventions in the debate on asylum, immigration and borders in Europe. Interviewed by Gabrielle Schulz in 1998, Angelopoulos said:

In *Landscape in the Mist* the little boy asks his sister at one point: 'What is the meaning of borders?' In the next three films, I tried to find an answer to his question. *The Suspended Step of the Stork* deals with geographical borders separating countries and people. *Ulysses' Gaze* talks about the borders, or one could say the limits, of human vision. *Eternity and a Day* discusses the borders between life and death. (Schultz 2001: 117)

As I have already noted, Angelopoulos' challenging, visually sumptuous work is quite literally situated under the sign of the journey. "The first thing God created was the journey", the spectator hears in *Ulysses' Gaze* (and "then came doubt, and nostalgia"). Sometimes the journey takes place through the medium of words or, on the contrary, in silence and contemplation. And the destination may not be a geographical location but the depths of another human being, with whom one tries to relate. Or the depths of one's own soul.

The examples of journeys, of personal and collective odysseys, are numerous: the peregrinations through Greece of the actors in *The Travelling Players* (an older film, which came out in 1975), the return to the mother country of the communist exile in *Voyage to Cythera* (1984), Spyros' inner quest in *The Beekeeper* (1986), the journey of the children in *Landscape in the Mist* (1988), looking for a father they have never met, who is supposed to work in Germany, or A.'s epic crossing of the war-ravaged Balkans in *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995).

The preoccupation with borders is, then, a constant in Angelopoulos' work, even before the Trilogy of Borders. In *The Suspended Step of the Stork*, one of the characters asks: "How many borders do we have to cross to reach home?" In the same film, a wedding takes place across a natural border, a river, with the bride and her family and friends on one bank, and the groom and his family and friends on the other.

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Illustration 3. The river in *The Suspended Step of the Stork*

In the beginning of *The Suspended Step of the Stork*—and this is where the film gets its title from—a journalist follows a Greek army officer towards a border which is in the middle of a bridge over the river in Illustrations 4 and 5. The border is a line drawn across this bridge, itself a human-made overpass and, as such, a symbol of communication: broken, interrupted communication, in this case, but which could nevertheless be restored at some point (this possibility is in fact suggested at the end of a film, when the spectator sees workers repairing telephone lines at the border).

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Illustration 4. The line on the bridge in *The Suspended Step of the Stork*

In this quite extraordinary scene, the officer asks the journalist: “Do you know what borders are?” (The question the little boy asked in *Landscape in the Mist!*) His interlocutor makes no reply. “This blue line is where Greece ends. If I take one more step, I’m elsewhere or I die.” An armed guard approaches from the other side, as the officer lifts one leg and, for a moment, it is impossible to guess if he will carry out the forbidden act (which comes with the threat of death, in this particular context) or step back (this is what he does). For a few seconds, he adopts the suspended step of the stork, he is neither here nor there, and perhaps he himself does not know what he will do next. At the end of *Voyage to Cythera*, the old exile, Spyros (Manos Katrakis) and his faithful spouse Penelope also find themselves in-between, trapped, immobilised in international waters, in a liquid landscape of sea and sky—without borders, but which looks very much like a prison, a new exile, a floating limbo. After all, there is no Cythera for the protagonists.

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Illustration 7. The exile and his wife, reunited

Being trapped is what happens to the characters in Angelopoulos' films when they cannot cross material or inner thresholds. In *Voyage to Cythera*, Spyros, comes back from the Soviet Union to find that his country of origin, Greece, has now also become a land of exile, a changed world he cannot embrace; his own children are complete strangers to him. In *Eternity and a Day*, the dying poet, Alexander, has the certainty he has lived his entire life in exile—in his home country, Greece.

The border in the middle of the bridge in *The Suspended Step of the Stork*, presented to the viewer as a flimsy, arbitrary, and yet highly dangerous line of separation raises the question of whether Angelopoulos militated for the abolition of all man-made borders. There certainly is, in his work, denunciation of their randomness, and condemnation of borders' ability to create fear, and lead to excruciatingly difficult and, at times, preposterous situations such as the wedding I have mentioned, which is not, however, devoid of beauty and of hope. In her exploration of borders and border-crossings in Angelopoulos' oeuvre, Wendy Everett (2004) takes the view that borders are always negative phenomena (she refers to their "stasis and negativity"). Yet borders seem to me a precondition for crossings which, in turn, are necessary if journeys are to take place in the first place. And, without journeys, life would be quite meaningless, since hope itself would be banished if there is nothing worth struggling for to attain. True, crossing one border means one will, sooner or later, encounter another, and then another, like a mathematical

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infinite series (this is one of Everett's observations), which means the journey may be interrupted, or stopped (for example, when somebody dies) but is never finished, and the destination is never truly reached. Unless, that is, one takes the view that the journey itself is the destination, envisaged as a series of passages, or translations, with occasional moments or longer periods of rest in places where hospitality is granted. Repose, yes, but always in the knowledge that the time will come for another call to adventure to be issued, and that, when it does, one would better be ready to leave behind any sense of cozy security. This brings me to the question of liminality.

### **Translation and liminality**

The concept of 'liminality' was introduced in anthropology in 1909 by Arnold van Gennep, in relation to the middle stage in ritual passages. Van Gennep's work remained relatively ignored until Victor Turner brought it to the fore in the 1960s. Today, the notion is used in social and political science in order to conceptualise occurrences where the relationship between structure and agency appears to be problematic. I am not aware of any attempts so far to link liminality and translation; associating them makes sense to me. Given that, in translation, there is always a tension between the permanent (or perceived as such) source text and the potentially infinite number of retranslations, it seems sensible to consider the relationship between liminal experiences and the establishment of permanent structures, in other words the lasting effects of extra-ordinary moments and the extent to which structure or, to put it differently, order, are born in liminality.

According to Turner,

[L]iminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise. (1967: 97)

He points out, with reference to Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*, that liminal individuals are perceived by others as polluting and, consequently, as dangerous. They have "no status, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position" (Turner 1967: 98), and own nothing they can call their property. Turner defines liminal entities as "neither here nor there; they are *betwixt and between* the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony" (1969: 95, my emphasis).

Liminality is different from marginality (and being marginal is not synonymous to being an outsider). In Theodoros Angelopoulos' films, there are characters who are depicted as marginal, inferior, while others are outsiders; finally, some are liminal. Marginality does not promise resolution, but liminality does; it is a temporary state.

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In their contribution “Syncope and Fractal Liminality” to the volume *The Cinema of Theo Angelopoulos* edited by Angelos Koutsourakis and Mark Steven, Nobus and Pouli suggest that there is in Angelopoulos’ cinema

an argument for the installation of the border as a littoral—a space where the meeting point between two separate entities is always in flux, much like the way in which the constant ebb and flow of the seawater makes it impossible to establish where the land ends and where the ocean begins. (2015: 203)

This is not unrelated to Lacan’s idea of the moving shoreline between inside and outside epitomised by writing, by the letter—hence by literature and, in Angelopoulos’ case, the cinematic imagination.

An interesting issue to consider in relation to Angelopoulos’ outlook and, at the same time, the challenges of translation is, I would like to argue, that of freedom and of the (im)possibility of exercising choice. The two are related. The freedom of movement of the liminal is superior to that of people who have made their home in order, in structures. The counterpart is the lack of stability. The more stationary I become, the more I lose my liminality, while gaining in stability. The structures I inhabit and maintain become increasingly solid, I take them for granted, and I want to defend them against intruders as well as against change I do not feel I should have to embrace. They are my *oikos*: the house, the hearth, in ancient Greek, from which the words ‘economy’ and ‘ecology’ are derived (in fact, *oikos* designates three distinct, although related, concepts: the family and family line—the fundamental social unit—, the family’s property, and the dwelling).

“The first thing God created was the journey, then came doubt, and nostalgia”. There is something haunting about this statement made in *Ulysses’ Gaze*, which also contains a puzzle. Could the reasoning that led to this Genesis-like pronouncement be flawed? Surely I embark on a journey *from* my (permanent or temporary) home *to* somewhere else, and perhaps at some point I may want to return? But if the journey itself comes first, does this mean its very purpose is to enable me to *find* a home, a new home or an old but forgotten one? Furthermore, if I do not start from a place I can call home, what will my nostalgia be directed towards? The word ‘nostalgia’ comes from *nostos*, which is the return (by sea). Ulysses returns to Ithaka; Achilles, on the other hand, has no *nostos* and he knows it, because he himself made the choice between a limited set options given him, basically two: live a long, anonymous life, or to die a glorious death in battle. In Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Nostalghia* the poet in exile, Gorchakov, longs for his home in Russia. But perhaps Russia is only a sign, pointing somewhere beyond itself?

In today’s world, some people are staggeringly mobile without necessarily being liminal; their virtually unrestricted movement begs the question of whether they—we—are travelling towards something, or running away from it. Is persistent (safe, comfortable)

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voyaging an odyssey of sorts, or the very opposite of one? Perhaps something that is too accessible loses part of its meaning for the people it is accessible to, precisely because there is no real journey, or quest, no waiting, no nostalgia, and voyages have become objects of consumption to be sold and purchased, as indeed translations also are?

I would like to quote a few lines from the poem “Ithaka” by Constantine Peter Cavafy (Konstantinos Petrou Kavafis), in a 1992 translation by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard<sup>3</sup>. What better illustration of the importance of the journey in Greek culture, of which Angelopoulos is heir:

As you set out for Ithaka  
hope the voyage is a long one,  
full of adventure, full of discovery.

[...]

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you are destined for.  
But do not hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you are old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.  
Without her you would not have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.  
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

## Concluding remarks

I am drawing to the end of my essay and I have said little about translation, in an explicit way. But I do believe *everything* I have touched upon concerns it. The vocabulary of the quest, the problem of borders and the question of border crossings, hospitality or lack thereof, adventure, fear, transgression, lines that separate and lines that connect, thresholds,

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<sup>3</sup> The Official Website of the Cavafy Archive, <http://www.cavafy.com/poems/content.asp?id=74> [Accessed 15 January 2019].

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exile, hope, order and chaos, being immobilised or, on the contrary, moving through a “betwixt and between” which is full of promise if not devoid of danger. Perhaps, above all, the idea that the odyssey can never end—it may indeed be arrested, but not completed, and this is, simultaneously, a source of nostalgia and also of gratitude for the gift of the journey.

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