The death of Greek filmmaker Theo Angelopoulos

“I no longer deal with politics, with generalisations. I have stopped understanding them.”

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The Greek film director Theo Angelopoulos, 76, died on Tuesday of injuries sustained after he was hit crossing a road by a motorcycle. At the time of the accident he had been filming in Piraeus, the port of Athens.

Angelopoulos is regarded as a leading European *auteur* filmmaker, who developed his own special cinematic aesthetic and retained a large degree of control over the production of his films. He had an enthusiastic core of supporters amongst film critics in Europe, but his work is less well known in the US. His film career stretched back over forty years and he worked with some of the world’s leading actors, including Marcello Mastroianni, Harvey Keitel, Willem Dafoe, Bruno Ganz and Jeanne Moreau.

Born in Athens in 1935, Angelopoulos lived through many of the major social upheavals which characterised the twentieth century. He was one-year-old when the retired royalist general Metaxas disbanded the Greek parliament and established an authoritarian regime based on Mussolini’s Italy. As a six-year-old, Angelopoulos witnessed the invasion of Greece by German soldiers. Then, as a young man, Angelopoulos defied his parents, broke off his studies as a law student and took off to Paris to study film in 1964.

He attended France’s chief film school, the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques. Expelled from film school for criticising his teachers, he worked as an usher at the celebrated Cinémathèque Française to earn money (and see more films).

He returned to Greece in 1967—the year of the US-backed coup carried out by Greek generals. Angelopoulos aligned himself with the political left and began writing film reviews for the left-wing daily *Allagi* until it was closed down by the military junta. The filmmaker asserted that his political radicalisation in Greece was influenced by being struck down by a policeman’s club at a demonstration.

Angelopoulos finished his first two films under the military junta. The main character, Eleni, in his first film, *Reconstruction* (1970), reoccurs in his late work *The Weeping Meadow* (2004). Eleni (Helen) is also a famous character, of course, in Greek mythology. Shot in black and white, *Reconstruction* deals with a Greek migrant worker who returns from Germany and is murdered by his wife and her lover. His second film, *Days of ‘36* (1972), was based on real events, and deals with a man arrested for the murder of a trade unionist. The arrested man takes a politician hostage in his cell and threatens to kill him if he is not released.

As a left-leaning artist working under a dictatorship in the 1970s, Angelopoulos was forced to find ways of translating the political content and critique of his films into forms that would pass military censorship. In part, this explains his turn towards employing mythical, transcendental themes in his work. Artists in Stalinist-controlled countries often did something similar and developed “Aesopian” metaphors to be able to speak to the like-minded over the heads of the apparatus blockheads and censors. The necessity to “cloak” the message of a piece of work dealing with social and political issues often resulted in increased attention to the formal and purely aesthetic aspects of a work of art.

Given the restraints of the junta, Angelopoulos first two films were courageous efforts to draw attention to social prejudices and obliquely criticise the bureaucracy of the junta. It is in fact in his subsequent films, after the fall of the junta, that Angelopoulos’ predilection for developing mythical themes emerges more strongly.

Angelopoulos followed up *Days of ‘36* with two other films, *The Travelling Players* (1975) and *The Hunters* (1977), dealing with modern Greek history. In collaboration with his longstanding cinematographer Giorgos Arvanitis, Angelopoulos began to develop his own pronounced cinematic style.

There are few close-ups in films by Angelopoulos and many pans of up to 10 minutes in length. Often we observe the action with the backs of his principal characters in the foreground. The director deliberately refrains from psychological effect, in order

to establish a distance between the camera/audience and the action of the film itself. In this respect, the director has referred on a number of occasions to his alleged debt to Bertolt Brecht, who developed his own "alienation effects" for the theatre.

With his carefully orchestrated camera pans, great attention to detail (Angelopoulos often waits weeks to get the rainy, downcast weather that he favours in many of his films) and well-rehearsed set pieces, Angelopoulos is able to produce certain memorable, even captivating images, on screen—on occasion resembling the cinematic recreation of the old masters.

Although Angelopoulos was able to develop his cinematic technique, the content and story line of his films degenerated in line with his own growing political disillusionment and disorientation. Along with his recurring themes—war, exile, alienation—Angelopoulos increasingly featured disenchanted left-wing political activists and/or artists of his films in the 1980's and 90's (*The Beekeeper 1986*, *Ulysses' Gaze 1995*, *Eternity and a Day 1998*).

In *Ulysses' Gaze*, the filmmaker depicts what he regards to be the end of socialism in one scene where a barge transports a huge broken statue of Lenin along the Danube on its way into the possession of a rich German businessman. (The image obviously had some fascination for filmmakers. A similar scene takes place in a film by Yugoslav director Dusan Makavejev, *Gorilla Bathes at Noon*, and reoccurs in the recent German box office hit *Good Bye Lenin*.)

In an interview given in 1985, Angelopoulos expressed his disillusionment with left-wing politics and preference for a turn toward inner values: "There is always a political interpretation to everything, but one should not overdo it.... Since the normalisation [in Greece] set in, we are looking for new approaches, and I have the feeling we are coming to a kind of existentialism.... The world is a chessboard on which man is just another pawn and his chance of an impact on the proceedings, negligible."

A few years later, in another interview following the collapse of Stalinism, his view of the world (like his films) was even gloomier: "History is now silent. And we are trying to find answers by digging into ourselves, for it is terribly difficult to live in silence."

When asked in 1997 about the tendency towards pessimism in his films, Angelopoulos responded in post-modernist manner with a statement, which amounts to a declaration of personal intellectual bankruptcy: "The battle is always the battle of the self, the self against everything that is unusual, unjust and incalculable. The individual must always fight against everything in this life, because there is the illusion that there is a meaning, a goal. But there is no meaning, no usefulness. The battle is life itself. I no longer deal with politics, with generalisations. I have stopped understanding them."

Politics and social problems, which continually feature in his later films, are only a side-show for what he regards as the only genuine human concerns, the inevitability of death and the lack of any profound meaning to human existence. *Eternity and a Day* is a rumination on death, featuring Bruno Ganz as a terminally ill writer who undertakes a journey to find answers to vast imponderable questions. At the end of *The Beekeeper* the main character—a disillusioned leftist played by Marcello Mastroianni—lies down on the ground in order to be consumed by his bees. All of this morbidity is rather shallow and contrived, in fact, the line of least resistance.

Political events are also dealt with in *The Weeping Meadow* (2004). We witness a Communist leader addressing a trade union rally that is broken up by police. In another scene, left-wingers defy the police to spontaneously assemble to play music and dance. Such events, however, bear only tangential relation to the development of the story or characters. They are merely links connecting Angelopoulos' set pieces in which he presides over the action and his figures as a dispassionate chess master. In the final analysis, his storylines are hackneyed and predictable—i.e., typically the world-weary, left-wing poet who has to decide whether he wants to go living or not.

The Dust of Time (2009) travels the globe, spans virtually half of the 20th century and features snapshots of major historical episodes of the century, e.g., Nazi concentration camps, the death of Stalin, and the fall of the Berlin Wall. In line with Angelopoulos' own outlook, however, such events are merely part of a recurring historical cycle, the decorative and topical backdrop for Angelopoulos' main concern: the crisis of creativity experienced by an American film director (played by William Defoe) as he prepares for his new film.

Many of Angelopoulos' films of the last two decades recall the atmosphere of resignation, decay and gloom that characterised the later work, in emigration, of Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky. (In 1983 the two men met in Rome and spent most of their time arguing over the roots of the word "nostalgia.")

Under conditions where social conflicts and major historical issues have returned with a vengeance, with Greece once again at the eye of an economic and political storm, Angelopoulos' unwavering focus on personal destiny and tragedy floating free from any sort of social and historical anchor appeared increasingly complacent and self-indulgent.

In many respects, Angelopoulos expressed the artistic and political crisis of a generation of left intellectuals who tragically failed to come to grips with the traumas of the past century, especially the significance of the rise of Stalinism, and the extraordinary social and intellectual challenges of the new.