GEOGRAPHY AS UTOPIA. FROM THE RIGAS PHERAIOS MAP TO THE DIVISION AND ESTABLISHMENT OF BORDERS IN THE BALKANS. AN INTERCULTURAL ITINERARY THROUGH THE GEOGRAPHY OF ULYSSES' GAZE.

Irini Stathi¹, Eleftherios Tsouris², Nikos Soulakellis³

Abstract: The aim of the present project is to produce a map emulating the itinerary of Theo Angelopoulos' film "*Ulysses*' *Gaze*" through the Balkan Peninsula. We will try to visualize this route by reading the "Great Charta" by Rigas Feraios and the cultural "sacred geography" of the Balkan people.

After the completion of the map, a comparison will be made between the region defined by Rigas Velestinlis (Feraios) in his "Charta" and the map derived from the intercultural itinerary of Theo Angelopoulos' film. Our aim is to show how the map of Balkans is registered in the mentalities of its people and how it is defined from its current borders. Through this process we will search for the "internal borders and limits" (cultural, ethnic, religious) and their dissolution. This search is based on the way History is written in people, the way people perceive History based upon their "inner compass", the function of History and the transformations it causes in relation to the geography of real borders. This geographical approach may explain the great utopia for the Balkan condition through the centuries.

Keywords: Geography and Utopia, borders and internal borders, map as unified culture, Balkans and culture, ideal geography and cinematic language.



Map 1.: The Rigas Feraios Charta (1797).

1995. after his film Ulysses' Gaze was awarded the Grand Prix de la Jury at the Cannes Film Festival, director Theo Angelopoulos gave an interview to the Balkan Review, where he spoke about the Balkans, war, borders. the Balkan-Mediterranean culture, well Rigas Feraios' as utopian proposal for cultural and historical union of the Balkans, through his famous Charta.

"I believe", said Angelopoulos, "that I am the one who has attempted to cross borders, trying, if only at an abstract level, to find that map of Rigas Feraios, some kind of spiritual unity in the Balkans, which is the only way for peace in this region instead of all the problems there are now" (Angelopoulos, 1995: 14).

It is quite clear that Angelopoulos' original

¹ Irini Stathi, Assistant Prof., University of the Aegean, Department of Cultural Technology and Communication.

² Eleftherios Foteinos Tsouris, PhD Student, University of the Aegean, Department of Geography.

³ Nikos Soulakellis, Associate Prof., University of the Aegean, Department of Geography.

interest in making this film was geographical, but it is also certain that he is considering the territory of the Balkans as an intercultural field, as a possible terrain where a common spirit for the Balkan people may be individuated, as well as a common history and a common political, cultural and economic future.

But why does Angelopoulos' itinerary coincide with Rigas' map? After the film was shot and during its official presentation in Cannes, the distribution company made a Press Book, wherein was shown a map of such itinerary, which obviously appears very similar to Rigas' map (*Map 1*.).

"Films are places, landscapes, routes and roads, skies and deserts. They *are*, not only *represent* (Canova 1996, p. 17); "the 'topologic loveliness' of films merits a place in human geography, because cinema is a hyper-place, the place of the places, the space of the spaces" (Brunetta, 1996, p. 25).

Where does the idea for this map spring from? "Rigas' proposal", as Angelopoulos notes, "was as utopian as that of the [Eastern European] left". It is, however, a proposal with a political and historical origin: the very important influences Rigas received from the French Revolution and the imminent revolution of the Greeks against the Ottoman Empire. That proposal is well hid under the aspect of a map with obvious cultural and geographic references, corresponding more to the kinds of maps and designs drawn by intellectuals and artists who usually accompanied the travellers in exploratory missions, than to a geographical map with definite scientific territorial representation interest. Rigas' exact aim in making the Charta should be examined from the point of view of cultural or human geography, and we ought to approach the Angelopoulos' geography, in *Ulysses' Gaze*, in the same way as well.

Rigas' geography represents, on the one hand, a utopian outlook, as we will analyse in the following pages. On the other hand, it represents more of a wishful thinking than an attempt to be precise. As Christian Reichard notes, "Rigas doesn't pay the adequate respect to the precision of geographical places and the representation of the soil". (Melas, 1999: 20). Reichard continues to criticize the "untruth born of confusion due to the fact that, in the Charta, there is a miscellaneous geography from multiple historical periods, while a geographical map, as well as a painting, does not permit any anachronisms". While Reichard insists on precision, another geographer, Johann Christian von Engel, admires Riga's Charta and indicates the importance of the fact that the locations are nominated by both ancient and new names, adding that such a

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Map 2.: A map, contemporary to the Rigas' Charta, representing as Graeciae the territory of the Balkans from the Danube down.

work should be accepted from both the politicians and the philologists. (Melas, 1999: 20).

In that sense, the explorer or viewer (voyeur), who is looking for something more than the proper impression of the geographical position of a territory, becomes a kind of artist. When this particular viewpoint joins a different one, in a different epoch, under different historical circumstances, the interdisciplinary approach and the intercultural exchanges create a strong meaning.

On the other hand, the geography that Angelopoulos represents explicitly poses questions of fact and truth, document and significance, and links them to both a notion of the visual and the

photographic-cinematographic practices of geography. These practices are seen as ambiguous in nature. On the one hand, they posit a naturalist and positivist element: the *cinematograph* as documentary, as fact. On the other hand, they posit a subjective and relativist element: the *cinematograph* as perspective, as a moment

of time. The notions of the visible and of visibility, as related to the phenomena of movement and perception, are central in the films of Angelopoulos. Cinematographically, these notions are often linked to War, but they also connect with geography. War is an exercise on a real map, a map containing living figures of people, living institutions, voices, real life. One of Angelopoulos' conceits, in this case, is to photograph the world from the point of view of the simple people, not from the official point of view. This removal from the official position, this view through history and the effects it has on the evolution of socio-political and cultural relationships in a certain territory, is a subjective approach, particularly evolved in the work of Angelopoulos and of other filmmakers who focused on similar topics.

The geography of *Ulysses' Gaze* is very similar to what the Science of Geography's claim of being a social science equal to the physical sciences, attempting to treat the field of the subjective as evidence of its discursive scientificity. Cinematography, in that sense, is not only the instrument of science, but the very essence of scientific method (as recording, as observation).

For me, as a film theorist and filmmaker, there exists practically no boundary between documentaries and fiction films. Ideally, all the great fiction films tend towards assuming a documentary aspect, and all the great documentaries tend towards assuming a fictional aspect. The cinema, an art producing a double, an *eidolon* of reality, is already a transition from the real world towards the imaginary. Anthropology, the science of the systems of thought of the Other, is permanently at the crossroads of the conceptual universe of the Other, in a kind of acrobatic balancing act where losing one's footing is but the least of risks.



Map 3: Itinerary, borders and places nominated by A. during his travel in the Balkans (Ulysses' Gaze, 1995)

The presence of the observer is never neutral. Whether he wants to or not, he is integrated into the general movement. Even his most minimal reactions need to be understood in relation to this system of thought.

Angelopoulos' film, like Rigas' map, is a type of ethnographic travelogue, where observer and observed. subject and narrator object, and narrated, fiction and document, truth fantasy, and thus identity, are not only placed in a state of crisis, but have positions their very reversed. We will try now to point out where the utopian Charta meets the utopian voyage Angelopoulos' Ulysses in Balkans. Angelopoulos' Odyssey is definitely an Odyssey of

the gaze, and we will try to prove that the territory that Rigas proposes to the viewer is a gaze as well. Our map of Ulysses' itinerary represents the most important stages and passages through today's borders. From the Greek province of Florina to Koritsa and, through the border, to Skopje. From there we move to Plovdiv (Filippoupoli) and through the Bulgaro-Romanian border, to Costanza, back to Beograd through the Danube, arriving, at the end, in Sarajevo. The furthermost northern limit of Balkan Greekdom is clearly traced: the Danube (*Map 3, Map 4.*)

Ulysses' Gaze features, in lieu of an introduction, one of the oldest films ever made in the Balkans, made by the Manakis brothers under the title *Ifantres* (*Weavers*). The interest of this short film is that it represents the first registered gaze on the Balkans by the cinematic image. Angelopoulos is calling us to attend the human

voyage, discovering a space and a time connected with visual experiences and sensations. "Vision is the emblem of our relationship with the world". (Tinazzi, 1996: 35).

There is an experience more important than any other for filmmakers, due to its pure visual value: the voyage. Very often, the voyage is indispensable to geographers, as well. If, as Proust says in his À la



Map 4: The peninsula of Balkans according to the Rigas Charta.

recherche du temps perdu "the real voyage doesn't urge us to create new places, but to adopt a new gaze", if the world exists in the eyes of those who watch, then we have to start travelling. Cinema is voyage par excellence, but in the same time, it is a synthesis of the entirety of civilisation, as well as the most complete expression of the twentieth century, due to its capacity to operate within the field of 'symbolic processes' and processes" 'social (Casetti, 1996).

In cinema, the act of gazing, as a procedure of making sense, is more or less like it is in reality. The reading of film sequences, like the reading of landscapes, is very often a process of the imagination and the real at the same

time. Usually, such a contact with reality and representation can create a kind of a utopian approach, which is suggested by the characteristics of the premise we are watching.

The *voyeur* cinematographer or cinematic viewer and the *voyageur* geographer meet each other through the means of the gaze. Both of them entrust vision, in the name of knowledge principally, but also in the name of the consciousness of the facts that knowledge leads to. Angelopoulos' film inscribes, step by step, the process of the attainment of knowledge and consciousness undertaken by Ulysses through his visual experience of the voyage in the Balkan countries. The geographical places contain the cultural aspects of this voyage. The necessity, after all, to read images which are schematic, synthetic, and significant, has mobilized our gaze. Vision seems to be a moral act. The myths and legends which Angelopoulos absorbs in his cinematic context are in a perfect harmony with each other and tend to convene with what Rigas considers necessary and aims to render visible in his Charta: a diachronic, historical culture, which descends from myth and survives *into* and *by* history. From the Orpheus and Ulysses myths, evident in *Ulysses' Gaze* as a pattern of descent into the Underworld, to the visibility of the antique elements in Rigas' Charta, the gaze's dominion coincides with territorial dominion. The gaze's absence is the risk to lose the territory as well as to lose the clarity of seeing in history. At the end of the film, Ulysses' blindness, as a metaphorical situation, poses once again the big question of what the Balkans will be after this new turn of history. (*Ulysses' Gaze*, scene in the mist).

Angelopoulos proposes his film as a map, just as Rigas proposes his map as akin to a painting or an encyclopaedia. Both are trying to integrate the external voyage within an internal one. The external voyage is a geographical itinerary through the Balkans, through cities, names of cities, facts and events located in Balkan territory. People and images of a real world are visible and tangible. On the other hand, the same voyage becomes an internal experience, connected with the historical and mythological past, as well as an internal conception of different cultural levels, like language, religion, music etc (Angelopoulos, 1995: 15)



Figure 1.: Episteme on throne in Rigas' Charta

However, film (like a map) has become a kind of literary model and reference for a journey to a place which unifies the present and the past, what is lost (or apparently lost) and what never existed, in other words, the *u-topos* (the spiritual aspect of a place) unified with the topos (the geographical position). In this sense, the term Utopia emerges a second time in our research, under the form of a wish expressed by Rigas in 1797. We think it is now important to underline the main aspects of that wish in the terms the map itself suggests.

According to a very popular and frequently occurring conviction (Melas, 1999: 10-11), the strong and conscious stimulus for the Greeks' revolution in 1821 was provided and multiplied by the cartographic representation of the territory where the Greek civilisation emerged and flourished; this stimulus developed even without a revolutionary text accompanying it (except Rigas' own revolutionary poem, the Thourios). The representation (meaning the visualisation of Balkan territory as a space which concentrates the whole spirit of ancient and modern Greece)

offers to the people the possibility to conceive the reason and object of what they had to fight for. It also helps them acquire a deep knowledge and memory of the past, which make clear the importance of their ethnic identity. That knowledge, far from being an ideological thought or expression of idealism, came, on the other hand, very close to the composition of a synthetic image, of a gaze on the whole meaning of Greekness. The Charta managed to be proposed as a visual sign, and this seems to have been Rigas' true aspiration. There are those who have a different opinion, believing that Rigas proposes a political project for Balkans, according to which Europe, feeling the ottoman pressure strongly, shall create a free access to the East, opening the old roads through the Balkan Peninsula. The way the Charta is made permits the synthesis of some very important symbols, all of them with direct reference to the ancient world. In that sense, the map concentrates on three instances, which we believe are very strongly connected to the cinematic language:

- a. Painting: the map as "visual" writing concrete, material, lucid and precise that was revolutionising mapping, just as painting was revolutionising the field and possibilities of vision.
- b. Art and Fiction: Rigas uses art as a social document rather than as an artistic object; for him, there exists no distinction between document and art. When Rigas' concerns touched areas of myth and fiction, as happens very often in Angelopoulos' work, all artistic, fictional, and philosophical remarks, all existential and subjective reactions, all quotations, all literary citations, all political comments, all reflections on the current situation, all these become the canvas on which we paint and narrate History. These are accumulated in such a way so as to blur distinctions between the personal and the objective, between ethnography and fiction, science and experience, description and memory. These categories, and the category of time itself, converge, a fact also evident in the narrative maps or the art of the voyage in the works of Riga and Angelopoulos, respectively.
- c. Literature and Narration: The similarity between the structure of Rigas' geography and the structural linguistics of Angelopoulos' film is a narrative one. In my opinion, equally extraordinary and yet, perhaps, also to be expected, is their similarity to the structure of Proust's À la recherche du temps perdu. After all, Angelopoulos' narrative techniques revolutionised the representation of space and time in cinematic

discourse and, at the same time, summarised the literary elements through the centuries of Greek culture and literature.

What element of the Balkans voyage fascinated Angelopoulos as well as Rigas? The answer probably is that sense of literary *darkness*, of the thickness of plot. This, on the narrative as well as the phenomenological level, involved not simply the dissolution of the boundaries of document and fiction, or the intrusion of the personal voyage into fictional forms, but also a double narration, an embedded story which mirrored the story of its own production. *Ulysses' Gaze* and Rigas' Charta are the story of a journey whose significance and outline remain blurred and uncertain.

It is evident that Rigas' Charta contains all those instances, from the moment he decided to "draw" the territory and decorate it with artistic literary and narrative elements, using the same practices of composition a storyteller uses. The co-presence of Episteme, the Colossus of Rhodes, the Acropolis, the Olympic Games, Hercules, Alexander the Great, etc, composes a very dense context of meanings and intentions, which have permitted researchers to point out the central position of Utopia and ethics in Rigas' proposal (*Figure 1*.).

While it is common to dismiss utopian thought as misplaced idealism, academics from many disciplines find inspiration in utopian literature and experiments. If ethics can be construed as a study of 'what ought to be', then utopias may be viewed as an inherently ethical enterprise. Although the scope of utopian studies is wide, much of the work is, at some level, geographical. The meaning and variants of 'utopia' (as defined by Thomas More) contain a couple of intriguing tensions. Utopia can be used to signify both a non-place and an ideal society located in time and space, a good place (eu-topia) and a bad one (dystopia) (Schaer, 2000; Sargent, 2000). It is an important area of inquiry, because utopian thought presents a critique of existing social geographies and develops possible new geographies, just as the cinematic landscape should be doing. But what have we done, what have we gained, and what is left to do in the cinematic study of utopias?

Horton (2000: 196), suggests the solution to the contradiction in utopias is to develop a dialectical utopianism, which can 'operate in relation to both space and time. From such an idea comes out the materialist problems of authority and closure'.

A geographical analysis of utopias allows a more in-depth analysis of culture and philosophy of life, and could be very helpful for a cinematic approach too. Porter and Lukermann (1976) argue that utopias hold interest for geographers as 'philosophies of nature' that include geographic problems of boundaries, size, location, resources, technology and employment. Finally, Vance (1990) describes how utopian social ideals shaped the geography of Puritan New England, from dispersed family farms to clustered family suburbs.

If we attempt to retrace or reconstruct (in the sense of reconstructing its meaning) Angelopoulos' itinerary through the Balkans – in terms of an utopian voyage in the crucial historical moment of the so-called "end of ideologies", or a real geographic approach, reconstructing today's viewpoint (map) – we will observe that the image we will receive is approximately the one the Balkan citizen has registered into his soul during the past centuries. The same travel, the same passages from one city to another, the same stages. The only difference is that, now, he needs to stop before new boundaries: borders, limits, different languages, division. But deep down, there still exists a common memory, expressed by the presence of the figure of the woman, who appears with a different aspect in every episode; this woman, who disappears or becomes multiplied, lamenting and regretting, is the different faces of the individual and collective dream of the territory, she is a shape, a form of every Balkan family, of the ever-so complicated "Balkan families" that Ulysses is part of. Those Balkan families picture Vance's conception of clustered families, which compose the utopian social ideal in a new composed society, the only form to keep the union between the members.

We consider absolutely necessary, at this point, to refer to the losses Angelopoulos alludes to in his film: the most important seems to be the loss of language. Both Ulysses and the woman are the subjects of that loss. The first loses his mother tongue, while the woman maintains the ability to speak but cannot be understood, except when she is chanting. Language, music, place, landscape, narration, everything suffers under the heaviness of the war, everything blurs under the denseness of the mist.

Ulysses is the man who steers us into becoming conscious of political and ideological changes in the Balkans, as well as the situation of deep division – if we accept, of course, that the previous socialist form of government was a state of real unity and not of horrific alienation. In that sense, the adventure of movement and the metaphoric Odyssey of the gaze meet in front of the Rigas Charta, as a poetic prospective, according to which Balkans are something we have not definitely lost, but recognize as something impossible to see integrated again.

A central insight is the contradiction, inherent in any utopia, that can lead from freedom to exclusion and repression. Moreover, Harvey contends that there is a contradiction between social process and spatial form in utopian thought (Harvey, 2000: 179–180). He states: "Utopias of spatial form get perverted from their noble objectives by having to compromise with the social processes they are meant to control. We now see

that materialised utopias of the social processes have to negotiate with spatiality and the geography of place and in so doing they also lose their ideal character, producing results that are in many instances exactly the opposite of those intended (e.g. increasing authoritarianism and inequalities rather than greater democracy and equality)".

It is important to explain that such an aspect remains void of meaning, as utopia is something impossible to apply, impossible to exist and to function. If, from the beginning, we know the inapplicability of a proposal, if we know that our proposal is a utopian one, and if we propose it, that means we are anguishing over things that risks not being done. If there is a kind of authoritarianism or inequality in Rigas' Charta from a political point of view, in that case, this map may contain many more inequalities than can now be contained in any divided equality between borders and alienation.

If Rigas' Charta contains a spatial utopia, the cultural aspect is not utopian at all. In the same way, Angelopoulos seems to care for the relationship between space and time and the way in which it affects the evolution of social changes. In reality, both are interested in a kind of "new humanism" in the Balkans, which will restore communications with the world or epoch already lost. According to Harvey, "the problem is that without a vision of Utopia there is no way to define what port to which we might want to sail", (Harvey, 2000: 189). We think there are three possible cultures in every human life, which are conditioning our destinations as well as our destinies: a national culture, imposed since our birth, an individual culture, which contains the family's and our personal existence and influence and, finally, a culture of affiliation, a kind of power which manages to compensate for our breaking into pieces: a "discovery of relationship that we believe had disappeared or were lost", relationships between human beings and society, folks and religions, nations and humanity, machines and technology, the visible and the invisible, as well as between languages, categories and artistic expressions. (Stathi, 2000: 99)

All this considerations constitute a reflection on descent, or if you prefer a deep immersion on problems of descent through genealogy, the human encyclopaedia of the past. In genealogy, as Foucault notes, it is indispensable to proceed by eliminating the different shape in order to reveal the principal identity of everything (Foucault, 1994: 141). It is quite clear that Angelopoulos' film, as well as Rigas' Charta, from this point of view, can be converted into a kind of genealogy of Greece, in an arc of time of some centuries, having as reference the study of the reasons which impeded the Greek people – or a greater geographical area, like the Balkans – from accessing freedom. Thus, Angelopoulos claims that the socialist imagination can be rekindled by including a utopian sensibility with a concern for capacity building (*Ulysses' Gaze*, scene from Lenin's statue on Danube).

Lenin's statue, travelling on the waters of the Danube, is the petrifaction of the collective social dream, the dead collective imagination for that dream. The Danube is the extreme border of the Balkans in Rigas' map as well as in Angelopoulos' film; it is the limit between the utopian proposal for a common existence of the Balkan people and the utopian prospect of socialist society. The Danube is the line which divides and in the same time unifies the two different aspects of the so-called 'balkanicity': the cultural and the political; the religious and the ethnic. The people, in an attempt to synthesize the different experiences of the last decades, start making the sign of cross in front of Lenin's statue.

The multiple aspects of the Balkan people and the multiple meanings of its expressions, ideological, cultural, political, religious, are now composed in the shape of the greatest socialist symbol floating on water: Lenin's statue, poised on the water limit (the way to death's realm, according to mythology), towards oblivion. Once more, myth meets geography through its incarnation in the cinematic image, which adds a metaphysical, magical dimension to real space.

There is a less sanguine thought about utopian meaning, suggesting that 'if the notion of utopia is to have force, it could only be as a way of interrogating the present which unlocks its dominative logic by discerning the dim outline of an alternative already implicit within it' (Eagleton, 1999: 34). We may add that there is one more aspect, the ethical flesh to the socialist argument for utopia. Socialism has always been utopian, 'a distant land, another moral universe'. Socialism needs to embrace an alternative ethics of 'the duty of care' to develop what we call 'a minimum utopia'.

Cinema is the written language of reality, and it should not be distinguished from it, because it draws from reality as well as it becomes the reflection, the mirror of reality which succeeds in shaping an image, a vision of the world, even if it isn't a scientific one or based on mathematic calculations. In that sense, cinematic image becomes cartography, or as Farinelli (1992, p. 68) says, a "reflection of reality", a "mimetic product". Reading the film, we increase our capability to interpret Rigas' map; cinema is offering us new visions and new eyes and it is just the appeal to cinematic sources, which are privileged testimonies of our time (Brunetta, 1996), which clarifies Angelopoulos' choice to speak about territory, interpreting the past.

To summarize, in both Rigas' map and the Angelopoulos film, the historical past cannot be represented like the objective materialisation of the facts. The past is transformed in a manifold field which is related with the importance of the primitive scene and the tension created between historical sense and the field of myth.

The map and the film become history and encyclopaedia, an artist's work reflecting the historical locus, as a topographic design (geographical topos). Film becomes history; the map becomes encyclopaedia. Cinematic images, reality and the image of reality considered being virtual equivalents – each had a place in the encyclopaedia, which the encyclopaedia assigned to it in advance. The Rigas map, like the Angelopoulos film, is not nostalgia for something lost, but evidence of something existing, still alive. *Ulysses' Gaze* and Rigas' Charta are the story of a journey, whose significance and outline remain blurred and uncertain. They are evidence of a world about to disappear, to become ruin, under the urgency of history in Rigas' era, under the pressure of politics in the times of Angelopoulos. And behind that evidence of coming ruin was the evidence of the advancing progress which would cause the ruin to occur.

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