Narrative structures for the European identity crisis: Antiplot in *Ulysses' Gaze, A Talking Picture* and *Our Music*

María Noguera & Miguel Muñoz-Garnica

Abstract

This article studies three European films by renowned authors: *Ulysses' Gaze* (Theo Angelopoulos, 1995), *A Talking Picture* (Manoel de Oliveira, 2003), and *Our Music* (Jean-Luc Godard, 2004). They share a vision of Europe in a state of identity crisis caused by its recent past of war and brutality. They show a gap between an uncertain present and a past rich in culture and mythology. This breach forces filmmakers to push the boundaries of plot linearity, favouring strategies of opposition and superimposition of temporal and reality layers, in a narrative form that McKee named antiplot. This notion guides the analysis of the three films. We consider that the break with the Aristotelian narrative canon implies the use of antiplots as a logical consequence of a cultural identity crisis. In *Ulysses' Gaze*, the journey of the protagonist merges with several layers of time, memory, and History, which, through their juxtaposition, manage to create a cohesive story. In *A Talking Picture*, a sea voyage runs in parallel to the reconstruction of the European past glories, to the extent that the secondary storyline determines the meaning of the former. Finally, *Our Music* emulates the tripartite division of Dante's *Divine Comedy* to explore, through an apparent separation of its parts, the truncated dialogue with the foundational values of Europe.

Keywords

Narrative structure, antiplot, european identity crisis, Angelopoulos, Oliveira, Godard

Biographical note

María Noguera teaches History of Cinema and Film Criticism in the Universidad de Navarra (Spain) since 2006. In the same institution, she has been Head of Master's Degree in Screenwriting (2015-2018). Her research and academic interest focus on European cinema. She has written extensively about realistic theory traditions in cinema and their connection to film directors such as Roberto Rossellini, Joao Botelho or Manoel de Oliveira.
mnoguera@unav.es
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7780-6422

Miguel Muñoz-Garnica teaches Film Criticism and Foundations of Narrative in the Universidad de Navarra (Spain). He completed a doctoral thesis about the image of family in Japanese cinema and its relevance in the films of contemporary filmmaker Hirokazu Koreeda. He has released several academic writings related to Japanese and Asian cinema. He also works as a film critic at the online Spanish magazine El Antepenúltimo Mohicano.
mmunozg.2@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3158-6035

1. Introduction

This article explores the narrative structure of three films, each made by a renowned European filmmaker, which address the idea of Europe in crisis. These films are *Ulysses' Gaze* (*To Vlemma tou Odyssea*, 1995) by Theodoros Angelopoulos (Greece), *A Talking Picture* (*Um filme falado*, 2003) by Manoel de Oliveira (Portugal) and *Our Music* (*Notre musique*, 2004) by the French-Swiss director Jean-Luc Godard. The three films coincide on two fundamental aspects that justify the approach of a comparative study:

1) They were made at a stage of creative and personal maturity by their respective directors: Angelopoulos filmed his at the age of 60, Oliveira at 95 and Godard at 74. Besides, at the time of each release, the recognition and extensive professional careers of these directors had made them patriarchs of a kind in European cinema history, giving special importance to the reflections on the decadence of the so-called 'Old Continent' with which each invests his film.

This label of "European patriarchs" that we propose is due to the fact that we are not only talking about national directors who are more or less relevant in each of their countries of origin, but also about filmmakers who are very used to transnational co-production formulas and dialogues in multiple languages. The very nature of the three titles we are analysing is a good example, given that they are stories that take place in multiple European geographies, languages and actors. Also across multiple funding countries. *A Talking Picture* is produced in Portugal, France and Italy and is spoken in five languages. *Our Music* is a French-Swiss film with six credited languages. *Ulysses' Gaze* is spoken in nine different languages and has no less than nine other funding countries involved. Its critical significance and distribution throughout Europe ran accordingly.

It is clear that the three films were produced during a particularly difficult decade for European consciousness, in the transition from the 20th to the 21st century, under the shadow of the Yugoslav Wars, which are in fact at the heart of the footage of *Ulysses' Gaze* and *Our Music*. As for *A Talking Picture*, although the armed conflict does not permeate the images, it does resonate in the anxieties of the main characters.

2) With regard to narrative structure, it is remarkable how these three films eschew what could be regarded as a more or less traditional canon. Their plots play with the opposition and superimposition of temporal layers and order their events by favouring memory, evocation, history and segmentation, rather than linearity. They fit the narrative form that McKee (1997, 43-58) calls antiplot.

In his study of the different types of cinematic structures, the author poses a narrative triangle and at each vertex he places a type of plot. At the first vertex is the archplot or canonical narrative, where the protagonist: a) pursues his desire in a continuous time; b) within a coherent and causally related fictional reality; c) until a closed ending of absolute and irreversible change. At the second vertex is the miniplot, which reduces the classical design to its essentials, proposing a simpler and more structurally economical story. The third vertex is the antiplot. McKee establishes concomitances between the antiplot and some literary movements such as the antinovel or *Nouveau Roman* and the theatre of the absurd. As he explains, it is a type of structure more typical of post-World War II European cinema, characterised by a strong self-consciousness in its construction, such as *Un chien andalou*, *Blood of the Poet*, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *The Running*, *Jumping and Standing Still Film*, *Last year at Marienbad*, *Persona*, *Weekend* (by Godard himself) or *That Obscure Object of Desire*. The antiplot is a way of arranging events in the time of the story that is less a simplification of the archplot in the manner of the miniplot, and more a way of reversing it by "contradicting traditional forms to exploit, perhaps ridicule the very idea of formal principles" (1997, 46).

McKee's concept of antiplot is the most appropriate categorisation for the three films explored here, whose plots resist more conventional classifications. As McKee explains with regard to the antiplot, and as our analysis shows, all three films are notable for the fragmentation and non-linearity of time; coincidence as opposed to causality; and the arbitrary or incoherent jumping between different realities. Regarding this last aspect, the author adds that, likewise, the characters do not behave according to a recognisable psychology: they are "deliberately inconsistent" or —as in the case of the protagonists of the three films— "overtly symbolic" (1997, p. 55).

Their narrative structure does not fit the categories proposed in most popular screenplay manuals. To give two representative examples, Snyder (2005, 25-26) proposes ten basic types of stories and Chion (2009, 293-322) an all-encompassing list of narrative procedures. In both cases, these formulas serve both to provide models for the film writer and to categorise a large number of films. But their case studies often take examples from commercial cinema that assume certain canons of classical narrative. Thus, their limitations are revealed in that they are not valid to analyse the films of Angelopoulos, Oliveira and Godard.

As for Truby, who does take up the notion of antiplot, he adds that in it plot digressions are frequent, "a form of simultaneous action and sometimes backward action. They are organic if and only if they come out of who the character is" (Truby 2007, 264). Although it is true that the three chosen films have numerous plot digressions, Truby is slightly simplistic in reducing the

disruption of the story to a single way and in trying to justify it from the character's psyche, when the cases we study have more atmospheric, essayistic or spatial than psychological approaches.

As with the other authors cited, Truby refers to the narrative conventions of the Aristotelian canon to determine what is "organic" and what is not. While remaining a narrative in themselves, the films of Angelopoulos, Oliveira and Godard challenge issues that Truby takes for granted, such as the centrality of character in the story, or the concept of character itself —the alleged main character in *Ulysses' Gaze* provides a clear example.

McKee's view of antiplot is rather dismissive, as can be seen from his description of it: "The Antiplot-maker is rarely interested in understatement or quiet austerity; rather, to make clear his 'revolutionary' ambitions, his films tend toward extravagance and self-conscious overstatement". In his study of *Last Year in Marienbad* (*L'Année dernière à Marienbad*; 1961, Alain Resnais), Armes (1994, 106-121) explores how the use of antiplot serves to break with the Aristotelian structure continued by classic American cinema (what McKee calls archplot) and to open up narrative possibilities that are more emblematic of cinema as an art and contemporary thinking. Armes recounts why the novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet, theorist and founder of the *nouveau roman*, became interested in film writing and developed the script of *Last Year in Marienbad*: "He was in no way interested in creating a novelistic form in film making. As he later put it, 'the two languages, film and book, have in fact so little in common [...]'. What attracted him to cinema were those creative possibilities not open to the novelist" (Armes 1994, 108). Robbe-Grillet's ideas bring us closer to the creative universe of Angelopoulos, Oliveira and Godard, since their break with the Aristotelian canon is not capricious, but the result of a conviction that cinematic narrative cannot merely be a continuation of literary narrative. Hence, the concepts used to theorise the latter cannot be applied *tout court* to the former.

Following Armes, Robbe-Grillet was above all interested in the immediacy of the cinematic image. In the words of the screenwriter: "The universe in which the whole film takes place is characteristically, that of a perpetual present which makes any recourse to memory impossible. It is a world without a past, which at every instant is self-sufficient, and which obliterates itself as it goes along" (Armes 1994, 109). In addition, Resnais' main concern was to explore multiple levels of reality and time within the same film.

Everything said so far concerning antiplot can be extrapolated to the three films analysed below: in them, the storylines that drive the film have as much narrative weight as the multiple temporal and reality folds contained in its images. Thus, these storylines, very localised in space and time, are easy to identify: the journey of a director in *Ulysses' Gaze*, a mother and daughter on a cruise in *A Talking Picture* and a meeting of intellectuals in Sarajevo in *Our Music*. All of them give rise to immediate images, to characters living in a present. However, in no case do they serve to satisfactorily explain the plot of these films. The long shadow of the past that falls across these experiences appears to destructure them, making room for the echoes of history through ruptures in temporality or in the notion of protagonist (*Ulysses' Gaze*), through

the strong charge of intertextualities that overflow the central text (*A Talking Picture*), or through hypertextuality and the addition of different levels of reality (*Our Music*). Our purpose is to detail each of these approaches in the sections below.

The past that weighs so heavily on the images presented in all three films may be summarised in the notion of the crisis in European identity, in an awareness of its political, social, cultural and artistic collapse. As the three films convey, the twentieth-century history of war, barbarism and destruction has left a fatal wound in the heart of the 'Old Continent'. There is a tension between the uncertain present faced by European civilisation and a past rich in progress, science, art and mythology. This tension tests the limits of narrative in the three films and precludes their inclusion within the Aristotelian canon. The argument set out in this article is that, far from the empty and self-indulgent rupture McKee attributes to it, the use of antiplots is a logical consequence of a crisis in cultural identity. In other words, narrative is destructured in these films because, in the thinking of their makers, Europe's own identity structures no longer hold.

2. The end of Europe

Among the thinkers who have reflected most acutely on the decline in self-awareness across European civilisation is George Steiner. His speech on the essence of what it means to be European entitled *The Idea of Europe*, published in 2004, is a classic reading of the troubled time the continent is going through.

In his essay, Steiner lists and glosses the five features he considers to be defining characteristics of European identity. They are as follows:

1. Europe is a café full of people and words.
2. Europe has a geography that can be walked on, tailored to the feet.
3. Europe is conceived as a place of memory.
4. Europe has its roots in a double tradition, that of Athens and that of Jerusalem.
5. Europe is destined to disappear.

These five aspects can be found in the chosen films (Noguera and Muñoz-Garnica 2019, 205-227). For example, in the emphasis on conversation in the title of *A Talking Picture*; in the pilgrimage of the protagonist of *Ulysses' Gaze*; or in the differing readings that *Our Music* enables through the contrast it draws between culture and ruin. Our intention here is to pay attention to the fifth feature, since the purpose of this article is to elucidate how the notion of the end of European civilization shapes the (anti)plots of Angelopoulos, Oliveira and Godard's films.

Steiner (2015, 62) talks about an "eschatological self-awareness" that he considers exclusive to the European world. He relates it to both the Christian apocalyptic belief and to popular syncretisms in past centuries inspired various prophecies that aimed to divine the date of the end of the world. Steiner also detects this eschatological self-awareness in the

intellectual and artistic world: in Hegel's theories and in Romantic painting, for example. He also defines the paroxysm of this self-consciousness as a result of two World Wars. According to Steiner, warfare, famine, ethnic cleansing and death camps practically made it a "moral obligation" to become aware of Europe's end, as a consequence of the failure of its concept of civilization.

3. Narrative structure analysis

Steiner's idea of the failure of European civilisation is articulated in the internal structure of the three films through the use of different narrative approaches, analysed in detail below.

3.1. *Ulysses' Gaze*

The protagonist of *Ulysses' Gaze* is a film director, simply called A. He takes a journey through the Balkans, from Greece to Sarajevo, to recover the first three film reels shot by the Manaki brothers, pioneers of Greek and Balkan cinema. The present time of the journey (coinciding with the besiege of Sarajevo) merges with other temporal layers that come from memories other than A's. Despite what one's expectations might be, the juxtaposition of present, past memories and history yields a compact story. Present and past do not appear as isolated spheres, but rather as a continuum.

Ulysses' Gaze's main narrative line coincides with the main character's journey through Greece, Albania, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina until he reaches Sarajevo in the middle of the Yugoslav Wars to find the lost negative of the Manaki brothers' film reel. To it are added:

a) different temporal digressions that fracture the linearity of the story and deconstruct its temporal and causal logic, and

b) other pre-existing stories of historical and mythological nature which, first, end up de-personifying the story and, second, amplify its meanings, drawing a parallel between the experience of destruction and death that A encounters on his journey and the destruction of Europe.

Alberó (2016, 275-276) points out two of these pre-existing stories. On the one hand, the life-story of the Manaki brothers, marked by the exile and persecution they suffered due to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the consequent civil wars in the Balkans and the two World Wars. And, on the other hand, Ulysses' return home, alluded to in the title of the film. To these two stories we can also add the Yugoslav Wars of the late 20th century, the devastation of which A sees everywhere around him as he approaches Sarajevo.

We have created a diagram (*fig. 1*) which aims to illustrate the structural complexity of the film. The continuous black line shows the geographical, linear journey that A makes. The broken black lines indicate the digressions that progressively alter the structure of the film. The broken grey lines mark some of the intertextual relationships the film sets up with *The Odyssey*.

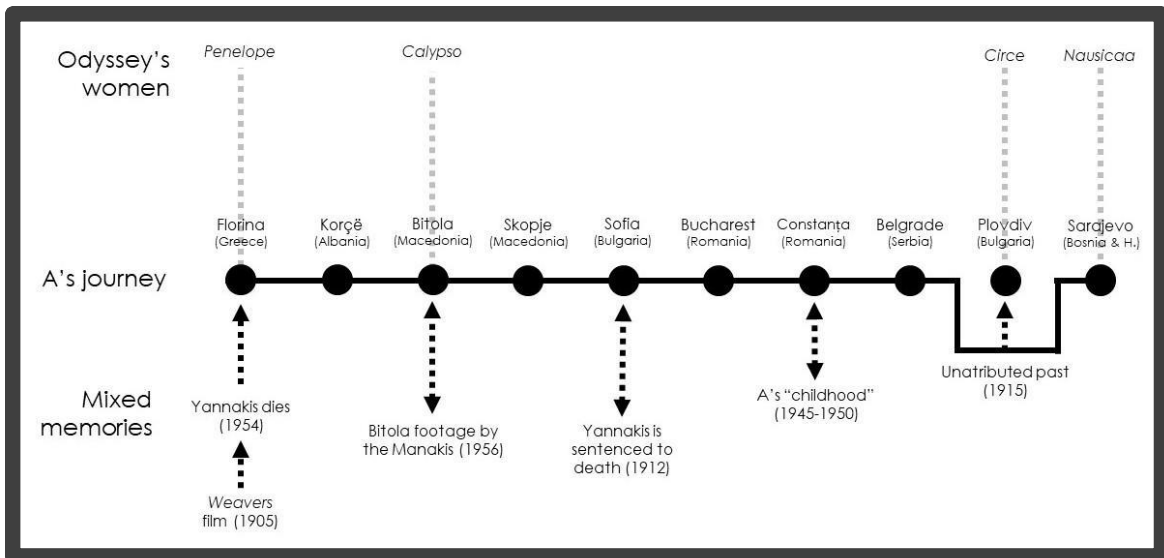

Figure 1. Narrative structure of *Ulysses' Gaze*

The film begins with an old footage: *The Weavers*, traditionally regarded as the first film by the Manakis, and therefore the first image of Balkan cinema. But the protagonist wants to look even further back. The film reels he is looking for would be a footage prior to *The Weavers*. That is, the first thing Angelopoulos shows us is a supposed first gaze that A wants to transcend. The "first image" enunciates the desire for a previous image.

Then we see a man who dies while filming a ship at sea: he is Yannakis, the oldest of the brothers, in 1954. Then, within the same shot, we jump to the present time. The voice of an old man, who later appears in the shot, recounts the death and the existence of three undeveloped reels previous to *The Weavers* —a revelation that prompts A's journey. This old man is Yannakis' assistant director. As he speaks, he lifts up the body and moves to the edge of the shot until we no longer see Yannakis. Then, A appears listening to the old man's testimony (*fig. 2*). Angelopoulos is here blurring the boundaries of temporal representation. According to a conventional representation of time, it would be natural to see the image of Yannakis in the harbour as a flashback, and the words of the old man as a narrative voiceover. Nevertheless, a temporal digression within the same shot is implied via several indicators. First, we see that the aged appearance of the assistant director does not correspond to his age at the time of memory. Second, black and white suddenly gives way to colour. And third, we see A entering the scene.

Figure 2. Frames from *Ulysses' Gaze*

Furthermore, this temporal digression is preceded by a film image (the weavers) that conveys the desire for another one. In just two short minutes, Angelopoulos has set the "rules of the game": the life and work of the Manaki brothers, and A's journey are interwoven.

If we follow the black line of the diagram (*fig. 1*), we see that other similar digressions follow. In Sofia, for example, A is arrested by the police, sentenced to death and amnestied at the last minute. But even though it is A who embodies these events, it is an episode from the life of Yannakis that happened in 1912.

Another noteworthy digression takes place when A goes from Bucharest to Constanța. Until then, he has travelled by train with a woman he has met on the way and who is based on the character of Calypso in *The Odyssey*. At the station in Bucharest, A looks out of the train, and the setting he sees is dissociated from his temporality: the scene, as we see primarily in the costumes, is suddenly set in the 1940s (*fig. 3*). Calypso disappears from the scene, without explanation, and A's mother, looking young, enters the train.

Figure 3. Frames from *Ulysses' Gaze*

A then travels to Constanța accompanied by his mother. There, they arrive at a house where their family celebrates New Year's Eve 1945. Although A retains his adult appearance, the other characters treat him as if he were a child. This party scene is also important because it encapsulates more than five years of historical time in a single ten-minute shot. The characters cheer congratulations on the advent of 1945, 1948 and 1950, although they act as though it were a single, unchanging party. Successive historical events come into the picture: Antonescu's dictatorship, the end of the Second World War, the proclamation of the People's Republic... Although it is true that these are milestones in the history of Romania, they can be extrapolated to the historical dynamics of other Eastern European countries.

The establishment of communism, for example, is recreated by partisans who plunder the furniture of the house. The family, in the foreground of the frame, observes the entrance of the partisans, who cross the background and ascend the stairs to the upper rooms. This continuity of view between background and foreground seems to be broken when the party keeps going on as if nothing had happened. The dancing in front of the camera is performed as if it were an action unrelated to the plundering in the background, until the partisans burst into the foreground to seize the piano. Then, the music ends, the characters stop singing and silence is imposed (*fig. 4*). This is a very powerful expression of the intrusion of politics into the domestic sphere.

Figure 4. Frames from *Ulysses' Gaze*

Thus, Angelopoulos finds a way to narrate that is possible only in cinematic terms. Without the shot continuity that accompanies these distinct temporalities, the effect of perception would be very different. Horton describes this typical procedure of the Greek filmmaker:

> Angelopoulos' combination of long continuous shots with nonchronological time forces the viewer to be actively engaged in the process of "reading" the images that flow before him or her, both for their narrative importance and for their historical significance. Angelopoulos presents narratives that foreground the politics, wars, and conflicts of the times (Horton 2016, 58).

In addition to its treatment of time, the New Year's Eve party scene is of interest to us because it illustrates another essential point: the difficulty of identifying to whom the memory belongs. We do not know if it is a memory from A's childhood or from Yannakis' life, although several clues are given. For example, the scene shows a father returning home after the war. The shot composition stresses the importance of this homecoming: the rest of the family is placed on one side of the frame and all their eyes turn towards the opposite side, where the face-to-face encounter occurs and A's embrace with this father, who identifies him as his son (*fig. 5*). This father-figure could well be Yannakis, since we know that he was mobilized and that his family was severely affected by the communist revolutions.

Figure 5. Frames from *Ulysses' Gaze*

If so, we may conclude that A is looking for a paternal allegory in the founding figure of the Manaki brothers. That is why the Ithaca to which A longs to return is not Florina, his native town in Greece. This setting appears at the beginning of the film and A returns there many years later. But he realizes, in his own words, that "he hasn't come completely back". There he is reunited with his own Penelope (the name Angelopoulos gives the character), an old love, only to separate from her again shortly afterwards. So, if there is an Ithaca in *Ulysses' Gaze*, it is not a geographical space but an image: the Mannakis' lost reels. Angelopoulos has begun the film articulating the desire for a lost image, positioning the images of *The Weavers* as a frontier. Further back, there can be two things: a lost gaze, or a never-existing gaze. There may be no Ithaca for A, just as there was no Ithaca for the wandering Manakis.

In Sarajevo, where A reaches the end of his journey, he does not manage to find that lost image: only the horror of war. The blazing ruins of the Bosnian capital are the last landmark of a European 20th century plunged into barbarism, a new episode that continues the endless sequence of conflicts that so greatly scarred the lives of the Manaki brothers. Thus, Angelopoulos

stages an odyssey that instead of home culminates in ruins, an irrecoverable Ithaca in the form of an image and a Penelope who is likewise beyond reach. So, rather than being an adaptation of the Homeric text, *Ulysses' Gaze* enacts the impossibility of replicating it. One of the great founding myths of European culture is presented with the latter's own self-destruction. Following the qualities of Mckee's antiplot mentioned above, the film has a non-linear narrative and a depersonalised main character, who brings together several characters at the same time. This is how Angelopoulos conjures up diverse historical, mythological and biographical memories, in order to contemplate the end of a civilisation.

3.2. *A Talking Picture*

Oliveira's film depicts the voyage of a mother and daughter across the Mediterranean and beyond. They go on a cruise from Lisbon to Bombay. The stopovers are used by the mother to instruct her daughter about the most glorious events in the history of Europe. Although this narration of old splendour is not given direct visual representation, it does determine the route of the ship. Hence, the main narrative line describes a geographical journey and there are no digressions of any kind. In this case, the structural complexity is shaped by the intertextual relationship between Europe's present and past.

In the diagram created here (*fig. 6*), we see how each stopover during the cruise is represented by a vestige of the past in the form of a monument, and how each monument stands for one of the great civilizations that have forged European culture: ancient Egypt as the origin of the Jews; the Greek, Roman and Byzantine empires; and the Portuguese conquests as part of the modern European empires. So, if the voyage constitutes the main narrative line (the unbroken black line in the diagram), the intertexts allow us to reconstruct a second (broken grey) line of an historical nature, which emerges from the ruins of European civilization, from its beginnings in Ancient Greece, evoking their tales. Salvadó i Corretger (2009, 84) identifies this same procedure in *A Talking Picture*, two parallel lines that she calls *retraction* ("an idea of pure time, which emerges through the fulguration of past images in the present") and *unfolding* ("the recollection of past episodes of history [...] that unfolds in the course of a physical or temporal itinerary").

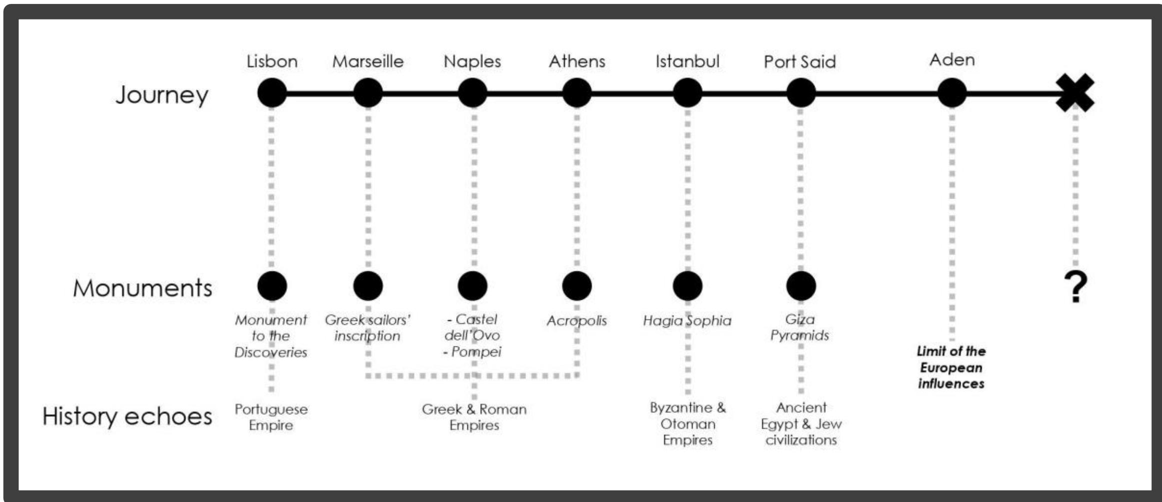

Figure 6. Narrative structure of *A Talking Picture*

Furthermore, Oliveira renders the existence of these two parallel lines in very visual terms. One of his recurrent frames consists of showing the mother and daughter speaking in the foreground, and in the background, visible due to the wide focal length, the monument they are visiting (*fig. 7*). Thus, there are two levels of frame depth, and two levels of discourse. What is in the background, the *retraction*, requires our attention as much or more than what we see in the foreground, the *unfolding*.

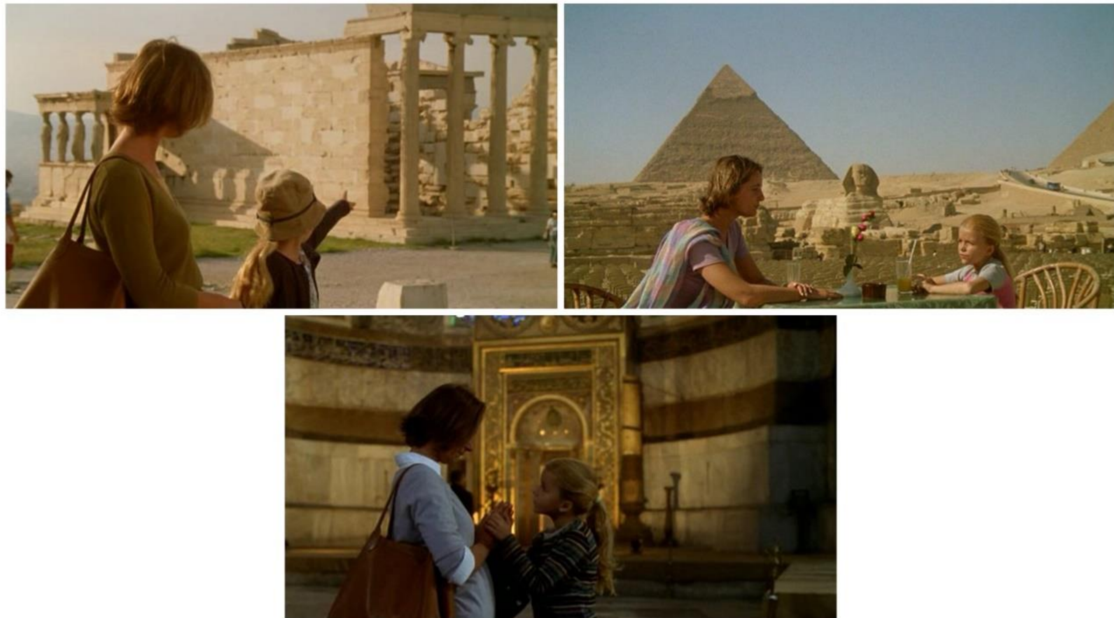

Figure 7. Frames from *A Talking Picture*

There is a turning point in the journey that also transforms the dynamics of the story. It occurs when the ship crosses the Red Sea, in the opposite direction to Moses during the Exodus. That is, the characters and the camera cross a cultural frontier, a boundary that separates the space encompassed

by the biblical tale from the one outside its influence. This latter sphere of influence is European culture. The next stop is Aden, which, as the mother recalls, was a failed conquest for the Portuguese. European civilisation never made it there, so its traces cannot be found.

Until then, *A Talking Picture* is sustained by the stopovers on the cruise and the didactic conversations between mother and daughter. From Aden onwards, the film is confined to the ship and the conversation is now structured around two long discussions that take place inside the boat between the captain and three women: a Greek, a French and an Italian woman. While the talks between mother and daughter were about the origins of Europe, the women's discussions are about its end. In these discussions, the eschatological self-awareness of the end of civilization is unleashed, which the Greek singer even prophesies:

> Greece is a civilization that has been forgotten. And with it, brotherhood, human rights, all those utopian ideals of the French Revolution that America later adopted and reinforced. But it is about to collapse, like the other continents, like Europe.

Thus, the departure from the (geographical and mythological) frontiers of Europe seems to spur this awareness of its end. "The cruise goes to the ruins of vanished civilizations and wonders about the future of Europe, shown as a broken, dismantled continent. [...] Oliveira situates Europe in a direct continuity of the disappeared civilisations of the Mediterranean and predicts the same future for it" (Leutrat et al. 2014, 39). *A Talking Picture*, therefore, stresses that what remains of these missing civilisations are nothing but ruins. For example, the basilica of Hagia Sophia visited by mother and daughter is not a literal ruin, but a relic of a former time: a temple dedicated to Greek wisdom and seized by the two great monotheistic religions, which is no more than a museum when they visit it –a space, therefore, solely dedicated to the cult of itself.

The connections between the main narrative line and the historical intertexts are transformed at the end of the film, when, in the vicinity of the Persian Gulf, the ship is blown up by a terrorist attack. The last shot, which Oliveira leaves frozen under the "the end" sign and credits, is the frozen facial expression of the captain (*fig. 8*), the eyes that witness the destruction of the cruise ship with the mother and daughter still aboard. It is a shot without a reverse shot; that is, a line of dialogue that receives no reply. This ending not only concerns the tragedy of the death of the two protagonists, but also the tragic fate of Europe losing its links to its own history, cultural tradition, art and mythology. It is the loss of all the ties on which the formal and narrative construction of the film has depended.

Figure 8. Frame from *A Talking Picture*

The unseen reverse shot is a burning ship; that is, the image of destruction wrought by terrorism. Faced with the fire of barbarism, Europe no longer recognises itself. As we see in the diagram (*fig. 6*), the sudden end of the journey no longer creates an intertextual relationship with history, but poses a major question: what is Europe now?

This is what makes *A Talking Picture* an interesting use of antiplot: an implicit and finally truncated dialogue (the *retraction*) of an essayistic and historical nature, which is much more important because of its interpretation rather than the explicit dialogue between the main characters (the *unfolding*). In this regard, the journey undertaken by mother and daughter fulfils the characteristics of McKee's archplot (causality, linear time, coherent reality). But the real dialogue of the film is articulated between present and past through resonances of diverse temporalities, realities and ungraspable causes, which leads us to understand the narrative in terms of antiplot. of diverse temporalities, realities and ungraspable causes, lo cual nos empuja a entender la narración en términos de antiplot.

3.3. *Our Music*

Godard's film connects with the two earlier ones. With *Ulysses' Gaze*, it shares the setting of Sarajevo and the scars of the Yugoslav Wars; with *A Talking Picture*, its appreciation of intellectual dialogue. Interestingly, Godard's next film, *Film Socialisme* (2010), also deals with the European identity crisis and does so by depicting a cruise trip and its stopovers. According to Jean Narboni: "I think that [*Film Socialisme*] is not only a parallellism [with *A Talking Picture*], but a criticism of it. In Oliveira, Europeanist, fiercely occidental, the bomb comes from Aden and the ship explodes, while here it's the destruction of Europe and the 'decline of the West'" (Ganzo 2014, 113). All this shows Godard's concern for the fate of European civilisation in the 21st century, although, as we will see below, his approach to this matter is very different from that of the other two filmmakers.

Our Music has been defined as "a polyphony of sounds, texts, images, story and history, past, present and future" (Tarín and Vilageliu 2005, 151).

The film, which combines fiction and documentary, emulates the tripartite division of the *Divine Comedy*. It begins with an opening entitled "Hell", then continues with a segment named "Purgatory", and finally has an ending called "Paradise": each section has a different nature in its continuity of time, space and level of reality (*fig. 9*). The most extensive part, "Purgatory", is set in the context of a real event: the European Book Meetings (*Rencontres européennes du livre*) held in Sarajevo in 2002. Godard films the conversations of a range of intellectuals (including himself) talking about politics, borders, art, poetry and war. *Our Music* traces the recent wars in Europe and shows the impossibility of returning to the founding values of European culture, which seems destined to vanish like the library of Sarajevo or the bridge of Mostar.

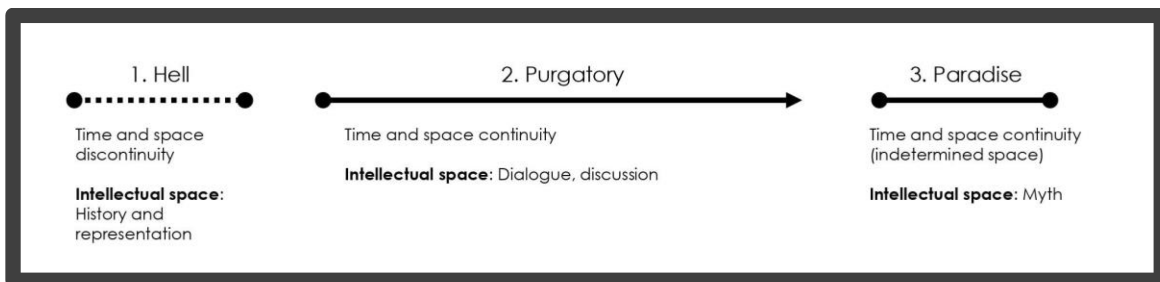

Figure 9. Narrative structure of *Our Music*

"Hell" is a thematic montage based on multiple images of war that come from both archives and a number of fiction films showing armed conflicts. It is therefore hypertextual, and enacts total complete spatial and temporal discontinuity. While Oliveira and Angelopoulos' depictions of (recent or remote) history were conjured through manifestations that arose in the storylines, Godard chooses here to compress history into his hell, to separate the war events from the narrative and to conceptualize them. Or, rather, to convert the concept of war into a narration with its own separate being. The director has pointed out that *Our Music*'s opening comprises four parts that show a narrative progression: "The images of 'Hell', it's all wars, then the machines, then the victims, then two or three things about Sarajevo, to make the connection with the second part" (Kaganski 2004).

In that way, and again unlike Angelopoulos and Oliveira, Godard does not deploy the burst of self-awareness on the end of civilization as an outcome; rather, this concept underlies the very approach of the film. War, barbarism, is an already achieved reality that "Hell" narrates. After it, the film becomes a cinematic essay on the possibility of retrieving European civilization from the ruins. Godard sets his "Purgatory", precisely, in the ruins: those of Sarajevo, an especially blatant manifestation of Europe's failure. The question that remained after the final blackness of the other two films arises from the debris: what now? This is the question that seems to inspire all the participants in the encounter among intellectuals, including Godard himself.

The characters Godard gives voice to are the victims and the defeated of major world conflicts. American Indians and a Palestinian writer embody the defeated, that part of history that has not been incorporated into the epics

of the Conquest of the West or the Promised Land, for example. The hypertextual quality of “Hell” reflects the film’s distrust of the capacity of audiovisual fiction to represent the true scope of horror: war is not depicted through a cohesive narrative, but is conceptualized through an accumulation of previous representations. Now, in “Purgatory”, this distrust of textual constructions is discussed. In a line of thought similar to that of the Palestinian writer, who understands the mythological tradition as a textual account devised by the victors, Godard refuses to represent history. In his “Purgatory” he merely shows what remains of the Sarajevo scenario after the wars – that is, the ruins – and subjects the very nature of the historical text to intellectual discussion. Thus, his disavowal of fiction prompts a dialogue within the film, a reinvented conversation:

> In *Notre musique*, Godard shows the vanquished (Red Indians, Palestinians, European Jews, Trojans) as historically specific subjects expressing a real predicament through poetic language, not to express connections between things, but to convey something that is neither the divine word nor what we call language or communication, but a *conversation*, through language emptied of discourse. In this film, Godard makes a plea for a simple conversation (*juste une conversation*), rather than a ‘just, impartial and reasonable’ conversation (which has been the misleading premise of reconciliation and forgiveness in the Balkans and the Middle East) between the past (the extermination of the European Jews), the present (Sarajevo, Palestine), the distant past (the redskins in North America, the Trojans) and the future. (Emmelhainz 2014, 82)

Given the above, it would seem easy to categorize “Purgatory” as a documentary exercise. But, as so often with Godard, such classifications prove useless. In addition to speeches by intellectuals, this section also features a character named Olga, a young Russian of Jewish origin living in France, a character with a markedly pan-European character who personifies all the guilt inherited from the continent’s recent bellicose and colonialist past. She is the one who links “Purgatory” with “Paradise”, the conclusion of the film. Olga, tormented by this guilt, tries to commit a pro-Palestinian revolutionary act in Jerusalem and is shot by the police. She then appears in Paradise, whose representation takes place in spatial and temporal continuity, but which involves a leap in the level of reality in relation to “Purgatory”.

Godard inserts marks of ambiguity in the way he represents this unearthly space. For example, the voiceover is Olga’s when she arrives there after her death, but her words seem to be those of someone else, who is not present in the picture. And we see soldiers guarding the fences that frame “Paradise”. In other words, armies and borders, reminiscent of the war conceptualized by “Hell”, show up in “Paradise” (*fig. 10*).

Figure 10. Frames from *Our Music*

This ambiguity in the depiction of “Paradise” follows the same strategy of distrusting textual constructions described previously. In this case, the myth shared by many faiths of an Arcadia awaiting mortals after their earthly lives. But there is a difference: Godard refused to represent history before, but now he sets out to represent a paradise. However, he depicts it as a space on which the marks of war or “Hell” encroach. In other words, when faced with the prospect of a civilization that is self-aware of its ultimate destruction, Godard ends on a faint note of transcendental hope, a hope that the film does not make its own, but that it does offer as the only promise of escape.

In light of the antiplot concept, *Our Music* is particularly challenging. Compared to other Godard’s works from this century, there are enough elements of narrative to detect plots in it. But none of these plots serve to thread the film together, as is the case in *Ulysses’ Gaze* or *A Talking Picture*. Instead, we have multiple narrative digressions that respond to differing levels of fiction: the hypertextual nature of “Hell” creates an abstract tale of war, the encounters in “Purgatory” portray an encounter among intellectuals using a documentary approach, Olga is a fictional character as well as a personification of European guilt, and “Paradise” is a representation based on religious or transcendental grounds... All these digressions branch off from the central body of the film and blend into each other, but they are enough to prevent us from labelling *Our Music* non-narrative cinema.

4. Conclusions

The three films convey a common sensibility in relation to Steiner’s concept of “eschatological self-awareness” regarding the end of Europe. This cinematic reflection on Europe in crisis crystallizes in the creation of antiplots, heterodox narrative structures that build dialogue between present and past. Firstly, *Ulysses’ Gaze* is distinguished by its structure based on time digressions. Angelopoulos fractures narrative linearity by incorporating pre-existing tales or memories, of an historical (the 20th century in Europe), biographical (the life of the Manaki brothers) and mythological (*The Odyssey*)

nature, which de-personify its protagonist and broaden the scope of its central plot. This combination discloses the impossibility of replicating a foundational myth such as Ulysses' journey. The protagonist's Ithaca, which is an image of lost innocence and not a place, is revealed as unreachable in the devastation of Sarajevo. As far as Oliveira is concerned, he fills his film with intertextual references to generate a dialogue between the present and the ruins of European culture, which is finally cut short by an act of terrorism. The disruption caused by this attack confirms the idea of the end of civilisation, and establishes as insurmountable the distance from the glorious past evoked in the conversations between mother and daughter. Finally, Godard seeds his film with numerous subplots without a central narrative, so that the main cohesive element is found in its tripartite structure which resembles the *Divine Comedy*. These subplots, which intersect and are merged together, constitute fragmented narratives of a diverse nature: fiction, documentary, representation of transcendental spaces, conceptual abstraction... The common thread is that the traces of war are filtered through them all: in the ruins, the foundational values of European culture seem doomed to extinction.

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