

IDYLL WORSHIP

A scenic landscape photograph showing a valley with a town and mountains in the background. The foreground is filled with green trees and foliage. The text 'IDYLL WORSHIP' is overlaid in large, white, serif font across the top half of the image.

In the years before his death in 1992, avant-garde filmmaker and American expatriate Gregory J. Markopoulos refashioned his life's work into a single, eighty-hour film, *Eniaios*. Last June, film historian P. ADAMS SITNEY was on hand to witness the inaugural screenings of the opening segments of Markopoulos's epic masterwork at the Temenos, an open-air theater the filmmaker had devised in the hills overlooking the remote Greek village of Lyssaraia.



For three nights from June 25 to 27, between one and two hundred spectators gathered in a field outside a small village in Greece to view the premiere of the first three of twenty-two cycles of Gregory J. Markopoulos's *Eniaios*. Markopoulos (1928–1992) was of the one of the key figures in American avant-garde cinema between 1947 and 1967, when he emigrated to Europe and withdrew his films from circulation. He spent the last decade and a half of his life reediting the sixteen most important of the twenty-eight films he had made during his American career, and incorporating dozens of films he made subsequently but had not exhibited, into this vast summa, which will run about eighty hours when it is finally printed and shown. If the whole work, whose title means both “unity” and “uniqueness,” is consistent with the small portion of it we saw in June, it will be the most uncompromising and perhaps most demanding film ever made. It will also be one of the most rewarding.

In the early '80s Markopoulos decided that there was only one place in the world to see his films as they were intended. That was near Lyssaraia, a village high

in the mountains of Arcadia in the Peloponnese, from which his father had emigrated to Toledo, Ohio, where the filmmaker was born. (It should be said, however, that the foundation dedicated to the restoration and exhibition of his films has also authorized screenings of the original versions in several museums and film festivals internationally.) Alluding to ancient Greek religious traditions, he called the place he had selected for his theater a *temenos*—a sacred precinct, literally a place “cut off” and dedicated to a divinity, where usually an altar, a temple, and a cult image would be erected.

The pilgrims who visited the Temenos in 2004 found instead a large screen, a powerful freestanding projector, and, of course, the filmic image. A few benches and remarkably comfortable beanbag cushions defined the theater. Nothing in the simplicity of the setup would prepare us for the splendor of the event, aside from the beauty of the surrounding landscape; for it was here in Arcadia that the urbane poets of the Greek and Roman world imagined shepherds inventing and refining poetic language. The first two and a half cycles of *Eniaios*, as seen in the Temenos, turned out

Spread: View of the Temenos, Lyssaraia, Greece, 2004. Photo: Mark Weber. This page: The Temenos projection area, 2004. Photo: Jeanette Munoz.

to be as astonishing a revelation of cinematic power as anything I had seen over the course of my nearly five decades in active pursuit of extraordinary films.

I hadn't been able to attend any of the Temenos sessions held annually between 1980 and 1986. The early September screenings always conflicted with the beginning of the academic year and my teaching responsibilities. Initially these Temenos events were free, alfresco projections of completed films by Markopoulos and Robert Beavers, his companion since 1965, a great filmmaker himself and the remarkably devoted organizer of the Temenos since Markopoulos's death.

During the years he and Beavers were holding Temenos screenings, Markopoulos was preoccupied with the monumental reorganization of his oeuvre into the cyclical *Eniaios*. He stripped his films of their often complex sound tracks. Excluding the few black-and-white films he had made before 1960, he reedited almost everything else, from *Psyche* (1947) through *Sorrows* (1969). He embedded short fragments, sometimes just single frames, from these works in rhythmically organized stretches of blank film. He also included sixty-five previously unseen films (mostly portraits and films of places—many sacred: Delphi, the Aesculapium of Kos, Chartres Cathedral, the Theater of Dionysus) in the twenty-two cycles. With sublime confidence in his new achievement he threw away the rest of the originals, even though he never got to see any of *Eniaios* printed and projected. In fact, it wasn't until 1997, when Beavers printed the reediting of 1963's *Twice a Man* and permitted the New York Film Festival to screen it, that it was possible to get any sense of Markopoulos's new conception of his life's work. Yet that glimpse hardly prepared us for the Temenos exhibition. The isolation of the event, the sense that the serial film had been created in harmony with the natural environment in which it was shown, the amassing rhythms stretched over three nights of more than ten hours of projections, and the internal intricacies of *Eniaios* gave it an extraordinary cumulative force.

Both the scale and the internal dynamics of *Eniaios* belie the impression created by the reedited, silent *Twice a Man* (which will be divided into four parts and incorporated in the as-yet-unseen cycles four, eight, fifteen, and nineteen). The dedication and the first cycle, which Beavers decided at the last minute to screen over the first two nights rather than in an initial five- or six-hour stretch, turned out to be among the most taxing film sessions imaginable. The first three-quarters of an hour of *Eniaios* introduced the work as a whole, with scattered flashes of white frames and glimpses of ancient stones from the supposed funeral pyre of Hercules. There are no titles or formal breaks in the film; therefore, despite a reel change, this

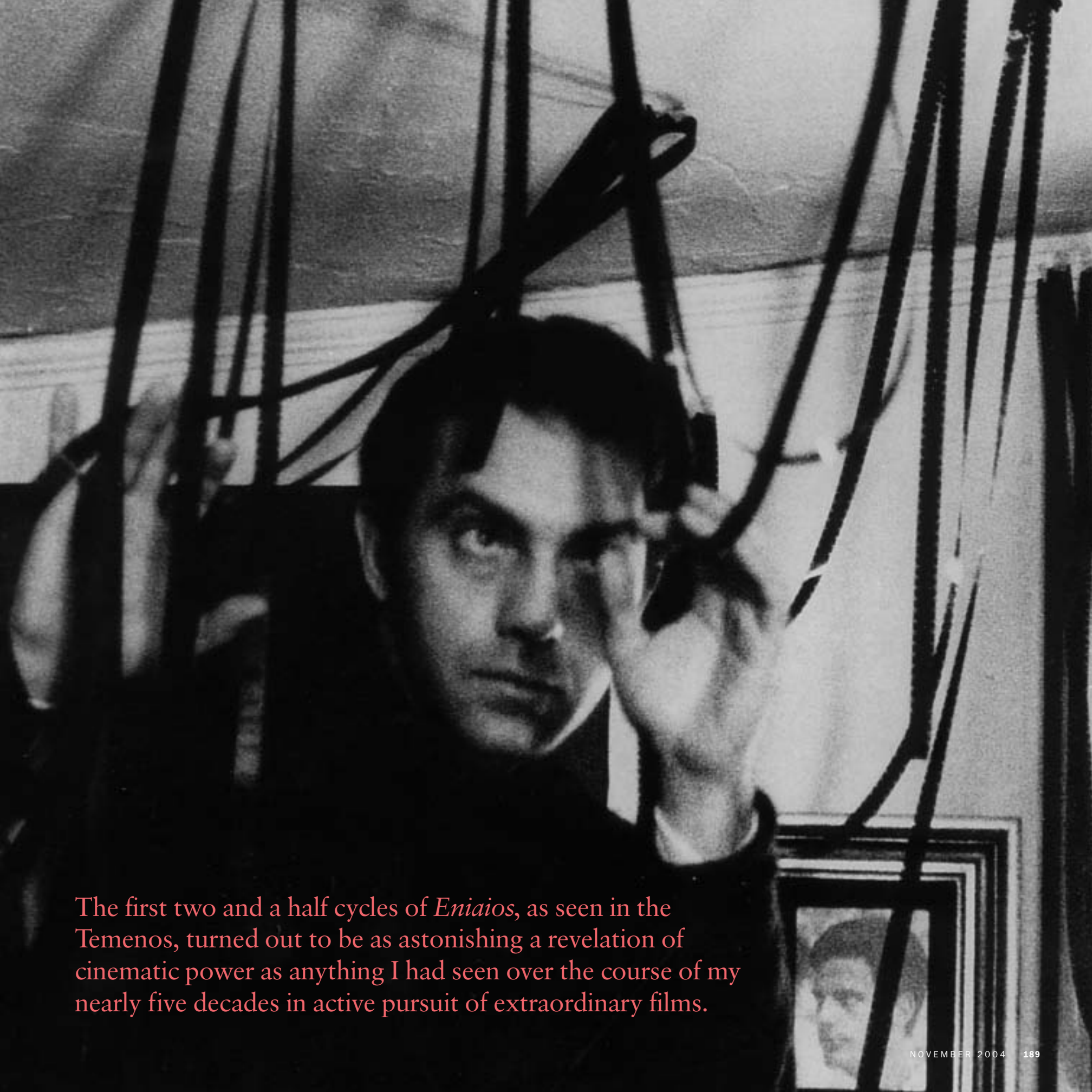


“dedication” seemed to continue as an equally minimalist revision of *Psyche*, the film that had established the reputation of its nineteen-year-old maker. He reduced it to very short flashes, often just single frames, of the originally lush adaptation of a Pierre Louÿs novella; it was now divested of its narrative logic and even of its illusions of movement. Fragmentation brought the imagery to the brink of stasis, so that after some hours hovering around that threshold, the image of a couple walking into a Japanese garden had the breathtaking effect of the reinvention of cinematic movement. As we all recalibrated our expectations and adjusted to the unfamiliar rhythms of *Eniaios*, it became apparent that Markopoulos was pacing the dedication and the first cycle for the long haul of the eighty-hour work. Not even Andy Warhol's most static films so firmly insisted on establishing an unexpected and expansive temporal scale. *Eniaios* both fascinated with its elusive yet intricate rhythms and severely resisted absorption. The minimalization and persistent interruption of the images permitted us to see the screen as an object, trembling with projected light, under the night sky as the moon rose and set, and as the septet of Ursa Major, under which the screen stood, imperceptibly swung a giant arc. The tension between the rapidity of the montage and the slowness of its thematic or imagistic evolution encouraged the double consciousness of a unique film meticulously articulating its own frame of reference and of all films, or rather the cinema itself, hieratically declaring its fundamental elements, making the screen an altar at the edge of the night sky.

Not until the second night would we know that Markopoulos didn't extend the radical minimalism of the opening hours consistently throughout the cycle—or the whole work, for that matter—because some minor refinements of the projection apparatus delayed the start of the session, making Beavers's initial plan to show both the dedication and the first cycle the first night (which would have been by far the longest) impracticable. There was a communal, festive, even carnivalesque spirit within the Temenos grounds during the wait: Despite competition that night from the Euro 2004 soccer match (in which Greece would unexpectedly advance to the semifinals), perhaps a hundred villagers from Lyssaraia and nearby towns were in attendance.

The next day, discussions of Markopoulos's work and attempts to make sense of the first screening fueled the camaraderie of the pilgrims during the daylight hours. A persistent question was whether it was

This page: **Gregory J. Markopoulos**, *Eniaios*, n.d., stills from a color film in 16 mm, approx. 80 hours. From *Psyche*, 1947. The Man (George Emmons) and The Girl (Ann Wells). Opposite page: **Gregory J. Markopoulos**, 1964. Photo: Jerome Hiller.



The first two and a half cycles of *Eniaios*, as seen in the *Temenos*, turned out to be as astonishing a revelation of cinematic power as anything I had seen over the course of my nearly five decades in active pursuit of extraordinary films.



an advantage to have seen *Psyche* (or any of the other elements of *Eniaios*) in its original version. The great majority of the spectators were able to encounter the work freshly in its final form. I may have been the only one there who had studied repeatedly and written on the films Markopoulos released before emigrating to Europe. It was a young audience. I don't think more than a handful of us had ever met the filmmaker; certainly no one there knew him longer than I did. We met and became close friends in 1961, although that friendship was troubled after his emigration. I mention this because my personal relationship to Markopoulos and to his early films was inextricable from the overwhelming charge I felt watching the end of the first cycle the second night.

For more than forty years I had considered his first trilogy, *Du sang, de la volupté et de la mort* (1947–48), consisting of *Psyche*, *Lysis*, and *Charmides*, a sequence with diminishing success. The first installment, a narrative of the troubled love affair between a man and a woman, struck me as a work of genius; the second, an autobiographical poem edited in the camera, was fascinating and often brilliant; but the third, also edited in the camera, merely left me puzzled. I had questioned the aptness of the titles of the latter two, taken from early, deliberately inconclusive dialogues of Plato—



Fragmentation brought the imagery to the brink of stasis, so that after some hours hovering around that threshold, the image of a couple walking into a Japanese garden had the breathtaking effect of the reinvention of cinematic movement.

Lysis, on the nature of friendship between young men, and *Charmides*, on temperance inspired by the physical beauty of the eponymous adolescent. That the young Markopoulos was pointing to the homoerotic foundations of Platonic discourse was evident, and perhaps even that he identified with the objects of Socrates' attention. Freighted with my memory of the earlier film versions and with periodic readings of Plato, my response to the second night turned out to be quite different from the puzzlement later expressed by many of my fellow pilgrims who did not recognize material from the earlier films or even know their original titles.

As at past Temenos screenings, there was an elegantly printed program—sixteen pages in a 16¼ x 11¼ inch format—distributed free to the spectators. It contained two articles by Markopoulos with Greek titles, “Entheos” (Inspired, or Full of the God) and “Eikones Auton” (Images of Selves). Like all of Markopoulos's essays these are poetic texts: elliptical, sometimes baffling, seemingly hyperbolic in their claims. But it has been my experience that what may appear inflated at first turns out to have considerable cogency and originality on careful reading. It is a shame that no edition of his writings is currently available in English.

In “Entheos,” he wrote of the work of “Time, Patience, and most of all Reflection” in the Temenos experience, dismissing educators, historians, and polemicists of “the New.” “Eikones Auton” claims that “the creative man seeks to give the Spectator those parts of himself which allow him, the creative man, to be creative.” As he often did, Markopoulos calls his goal “film as film.” The essay culminates thus: “A pulse when the placement of a series of frames, independent of each other predominate, and, are cast towards each other; and, against one another. Therein establishing the beat to the pulse. *This is the ultimate aspect of the film as film.*” I took his encouragement of the spectator's reflection, his confidence in the pulse of microinstants to generate the matrices of meaning, to justify the ineluctably personal character of my thoughts and emotions throughout the long, chilly second night's screening.

My experience that evening reminded me that one of the tutelary deities of the Temenos is the physician-

god Aesculapius. In pagan Greece patients would make pilgrimages to the shrines of Aesculapius as if to a sanitarium, where they would sleep and have their dreams interpreted as part of their cure. Markopoulos and Beavers conceived of the Temenos, and the pilgrimages necessary to benefit from it, as a cure for media pollution. The Temenos experience would reunite film as film to the landscape of ancient poetry. It asserts its own time frame and requires the patience that makes creative reflection possible. Never have sidereal and cinematic time been so viscerally integrated.



Somewhat adjusted to the temporal dynamics of *Eniaios*, marveling at the nuances of pulsation within the first cycle—the fragments from *Lysis* seemed longer than those of previous night and the shots derived from *Charmides* seemed to me much longer still, although very quick by conventional standards—I found myself wondering if it were indeed possible that the nineteen-year-old Markopoulos had had a profound understanding of Plato’s texts. The fragmentary images from *Lysis* seemed to resonate with new beauty. The reediting stripped the trilogy of its genres, investing individual images with new weight and dignity. Markopoulos was enacting an aesthetic version of the apophatic theology of the Greek Orthodox Church in which he had been instructed as a child: A state of ecstasy and a process of deification accompany the denial of positive attributes to God. As manifested in *Eniaios*, “film as film” is a repudiation of the conventional attributes and genres of cinema.

Following trains of thought stimulated by the isolated images drawn from *Lysis* and *Charmides*, I realized that the spectators gathered in the Temenos were joined in bonds of friendship abundantly manifested in various ways among the foreign pilgrims. Had the young Markopoulos noticed that although the definition of friendship eludes Socrates and his interlocutors in the dialogue the discussion itself creates and reinforces friendships? How deeply had the filmmaker read in *Charmides* the tension between the physical appeal of a young man and the spiritual ambiguity of his acts, now brilliantly lucid in the reedited frames “cast towards each other; and, against one another”? The isolated images of a college campus and a young man holding the small figure of a horse with a missing leg clarified the polemic against university education and the moral damage it can cause adolescents that had always been implicit in the film. Its seriousness and depth hit me, as did an insight into the disappointment, bordering on a sense of betrayal, that my own career as a professor and the consequent academization of my critical prose in the ’70s may have caused Markopoulos and clouded our friendship. This train of thought ended when suddenly there appeared kaleidoscopic rhythms of *The Illiac Passion* (1967), the filmmaker’s intricate compendium of mythological themes inspired by Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*.

The third and final night of the Temenos was the longest. The whole second cycle and half of the third were screened, at which point Beavers decided it was

Opposite page: Gregory J. Markopoulos, *Eniaios*, n.d., stills from a color film in 16 mm, approx. 80 hours. Clockwise from top left: From *The Illiac Passion*, 1967. Prometheus (Richard Beauvais). From *The Illiac Passion*, 1967. Prometheus (Beauvais). From *Galaxie*, 1966. Parker Tyler. This page: Gregory J. Markopoulos, *Eniaios*, n.d., stills from a color film in 16 mm, approx. 80 hours. From *Psyche*, 1947. The Girl (Ann Wells).



necessary to halt the projections, under pressure from the Lyssaraia firemen who had been on duty for seven hours that night to keep an eye on the gasoline-driven generator. It was also the most sensuous and spectacular of the projections. Opening with images from *Ming Green* (1966), an exquisite evocation of the filmmaker’s New York apartment, the cycle featured a series of portraits: Parker Tyler (from *Galaxie* [1966]), Mark Turbyfill (from *Through a Lens Brightly: Mark Turbyfill* [1967]), and four previously unseen portraits from *Political Portraits* (1969, reedited ca. 1976). Markopoulos generally posed his subjects sitting or standing still as if for a painting or a photograph. So the very brevity of the shots of these figures or of the rooms, when flashing on the otherwise blank screen, kept the second cycle at the threshold of stasis we had experienced in watching the first cycle of the film, even though images were apparently longer, richer in color, and more varied. In this context the second manifestation of *The Illiac Passion* again marked the moment of maximal internal movement. Other incorporations were largely of films with little movement within the frame: *Eros, o Basileus* (1966); the first half of his previously unseen film of Delphi; and *Sorrows* (1969), a study of Wagner’s house. This allusion to Wagner early in *Eniaios* implicitly acknowledged the debt of the film and the Temenos project itself to the *Ring* cycle and to Bayreuth.

The double portrait of Gilbert and George (*Gilbraltor* [1970]) that opened the third cycle was the wittiest passage we saw in the three nights at the Temenos: Markopoulos emphasized the self-parody of their formal stance by gradually moving from shots of their shoes and clothes to the full figures of the artists. It was followed by *Genius* (1970), perhaps the most complex of the filmmaker’s portrait films, interweaving studies of David Hockney, Leonor Fini, and Daniel Henry Kahnweiler. The unscreened portions of the third cycle were four additional portraits, the first of four divisions of *The Mysteries* (1968), and another portion of *The Illiac Passion*. The suspended cycle confirmed the centrality of portraiture (and the irrelevance of narrative) in Markopoulos’s work.

We left the Temenos a few hours before dawn. In the following days and weeks, I have continued to be stunned by the success of Markopoulos’s radical enterprise; for the cultic conditions of the screenings and the apophatic reduction and temporal expansion of his oeuvre made the opening cycles of *Eniaios* a celebration of the primal magic of cinema. The Temenos Foundation’s heroic efforts have demonstrated the vitality of Markopoulos’s final vision and aroused an appetite for further revelations. □

P. Adams Sitney, professor of visual art at Princeton University, is the author of *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2002).