

# Cinema Arcadia



## The late Gregory Markopoulos's mammoth lifework lives on. By Jeffrey Stout and Noah Stout

The initial cycles of Gregory J. Markopoulos's 80-hour *Eniaios* premiered in Greece on June 25-27. The filmmaker, who died in 1992, spent his last years combining fragments from his earlier work with new footage, integrating them into a single whole. His collaborator, Robert Beavers, a prominent filmmaker in his own right who has spent a decade preparing the prints for viewing, presided serenely over the screenings. Those who attended were privileged to see a portion of a truly major film, displayed in an utterly unique way, and with an uncommon goal: curing souls.

Beavers refers to the screening site as a *temenos*, which in classical Greek religion means an area surrounding an altar, intended for purification and sacrifice. No admittance fee was charged. (Getting there is another story.) Attendees were meant to enter hallowed space and time, as far removed as possible from movie houses, film festivals, and the quest for prestige and money. The theater was to be a sacred grove.

The setting was a mountaintop in Arcadia, less than 40 kilometers from Olympia. Most of the people in the audience had to first make a pilgrimage to Athens and then to the central Peloponnese, where they were housed in the village of Loutra. After gathering there on Thursday evening, a day before the screenings began, we drove up the mountain to the village of Lyssaraia, and enjoyed a communal meal prepared by the local women.

On each of the following three evenings, we made our way

back up the mountain and then out to the *temenos*, arriving in time to see the sun set above the screen. The atmosphere on Friday was festive, with some 200 people seated on pillows or benches, and others standing behind them. Photographers and small-gauge filmmakers made full use of the dwindling light. One fellow did a headstand while his shadow played on the screen by flashlight. Scores of bemused villagers kept up an ironic commentary well into the night.

The prefatory 45-minute segment, alternating black-and-white leader, was occasionally punctuated by images of the pyre from which Heracles, according to myth, ascended to Olympian immortality. As the movie ran, we were mainly in darkness, able to contemplate the setting moon to our left and Ursa Major hovering wondrously above the screen. In what became an increasingly discernible rhythm, the white flashes would stun our eyes and bathe everyone in the *temenos* with light. The people closest to the screen discovered how Thorwald felt in the climactic scene of *Rear Window*. The flashes were rumored to have signaled a dedication to Heracles in code: one frame of white for alpha, two for beta, and so on.

(Meanwhile, a villager listened to a European championship soccer match on the radio. At one point he said, in Greek, "It's Greece 1, France nil." Another villager replied, also in Greek, "Up here, it's still 0-0.")

Then came the beginning of the first cycle, which lasted



deep into the night. The rhythmic alternation of black leader with single- and several-frame images continued, but now they depicted a male-female dyad in various poses. Near the end of this segment, a female character ran through a grassy yard: the shot lasted for only one or two seconds, but it was the first glimpse of sustained movement within a frame. Color, though present, was muted. The ratio of running time to visible information was high.

It would be hard to exaggerate the demands—physical, intellectual, and spiritual—placed upon us. Everyone admitted to finding the experience extraordinarily challenging. The film's opacity, its absolute dedication to

the power of the single frame, and the paucity of information it conveyed drew the pilgrims into a floating symposium and bound them together in an unanticipated friendship. Some novice viewers wondered whether their lack of familiarity with Markopoulos's work made it harder for them to understand *Eniaios*, but Beavers assured them that they represented the ideal audience.

On Saturday, the remainder of the first cycle was screened. Fewer villagers attended, but the atmosphere remained festive. The flashing images now depicted a solitary man in various locations. Color, long a Markopoulos preoccupation, was still relatively muted. As our desire for visual information became increasingly palpable, we received only slightly more, just enough to intensify the mystery and, for some, a sense of frustration. The high point came during a sequence of shots of a young man on and around the Brooklyn Bridge, the beauty of which, after such a dearth of imagery, was deeply satisfying, if fleeting.

The next morning, some viewers expressed faith in the filmmaker's genius, while others voiced concerns. The contrast between the first cycle's dyad and the second cycle's monad surely meant something. But what? One disciple argued that the monad's isolation drew attention—by way of contrast—to the network of friendships being formed during the event. What those flashes of light illuminated, he argued, was the community of those who were ritually gathered in the *temenos*.

Others wondered whether the separation of the solitary male from the male-female dyad suggested a transcendence of relationships with women. What god, they asked, was being worshiped here? What attitude were we meant to take toward Markopoulos? Did the film deify its maker? Was its genius marred by self-indulgence?

On Sunday, having struggled to keep our van on the

gravel road the night before, we decided to leave the vehicle in Lyssaraia and hike to the *temenos*. This proved the ideal way to appreciate the natural beauty of the site. When we arrived, the crowd was down to 100. Many Athenians had returned to the city. Most of the locals, for whatever reason, stayed away. But those who remained began to realize that the meaning of *Eniaios*, of which we were to see only a fraction, would remain elusive. Exhausted, some confessed a hunger for something more than further purgation of their souls.

Then, however, as the first reel of the third cycle started, Markopoulos began to deliver in marvelous abundance what he had so ascetically withheld until then, flooding us with images, information, and color. There was layer upon layer of dancing superimpositions and multiple exposures as the film cut furiously between images. The impression of movement and energy was created not by characters in the frame but by a masterfully kaleidoscopic use of fragments.

What we normally expect from cinema is a steady flow of visual information that relies on the illusion of movement created by the projection of motionless images in rapid succession. *Eniaios* first denied this flow, revealing the screen as primarily a dark object. Then, having disrupted expectation, the film suddenly satisfied it in an unexpected way, without trading on the secret that had been exposed. During a break after the reel was finished, a college student threw his arms around a young filmmaker, exclaiming, "Something happened!" Something had indeed happened, something exhilarating and unforgettable. The effect was as powerful as any that can be acquired from watching light projected onto a screen, all the more so because of the prolonged process of self-emptying that had prepared us for it.

We made it through much of the third cycle before Beavers decided that we'd all had enough. He alone knows what the climax of the cycle holds in store. At 4 a.m., we made our way down the mountain one last time, and dispersed the following morning.

Beavers has hinted repeatedly that the key to the spiritual significance of *Eniaios* is the mythic figure of Asclepius—the god of healing, the one to whom Socrates orders the sacrifice of a cock the moment before his death. Markopoulos was no less serious about administering therapy to the soul, no less unshakable in his refusal to compromise himself by accepting payment, and every bit as intent on shaping his life into a work of art. The full religious significance of that art, like the remainder of *Eniaios*, is yet to be seen. But the aesthetic brilliance and spiritual ambition of his final masterwork can hardly be doubted by anyone who attended.

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