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Gregory Markopoulos's *Eniaios* at the Temenos

Eniaios was supposed to be the supreme realization of the filmmaker's cinematic principles.

By Del O'Brien





The location of the screening site within the landscape. © Mark Webber 2022.

Gregory Markopoulos, a heavyweight of American avant-garde cinema from the late forties through the sixties, stole to Europe in 1967. Itinerant, he worked there on an opus until he died in 1992. He passed away with this final film, *Eniaios* (2004), finished but unseen. Markopoulos had messianic ideas about the movies. *Eniaios* was supposed to be the supreme realization of his cinematic principles. The serious filmmaker's task, he thought, is to find a poetics articulable through—and only through—"every particle of raw film stock." If achieved, this synthesis would herald something like an aesthetic apocalypse. "The greater universe [would be] pieced together through the editing of *film as film*." Cinema's stakes being so high, Markopoulos theorized an ideal setting to facilitate *Eniaios*'s revelatory effect, situated in his father's rural mountain hometown deep in mainland Greece. It would be called the Temenos: "the sustaining spirit of motion pictures," as Markopoulos imagined it, a "sanctuary where one may approach Understanding."

Since 2004, devotees have brought the Temenos to fruition five times, in each instance screening about an eighth of *Eniaios*, which is eighty hours long. In June, I schlepped to

the Peloponnese to watch, with two-hundred strangers, ten hours of *Eniaios*'s most recent run. The whole thing felt less like “the sustaining spirit,” though, than a social experiment. A bunch of nerds champing for an aesthetic experience were transplanted to an economically depressed province of a country foreign to almost all of them to watch a challenging, arcane film; navel-gazing, not transcendence, ensued. The Temenos failed to deliver on its world historical claims. This failure was more than just a hubristic programming flop. It was an artistic failure, in terms of what he called its “total form,” of Markopoulos's masterwork.

Eniaios is soundless and constructed out of three distinct elements: empty black frames, empty white frames, and footage reworked from Markopoulos's American oeuvre and the many formal studies and portraits he shot during his decades in Europe. The black frames are most numerous, followed by the white. Least common are frames of footage, which are often positioned one at a time between dozens of pure black or white frames. Black, then, is the film's substrate, through which you wait for occasional strobes of blinding white. When brief bits of moving image come—sometimes in blinks, more often with empty seconds or even minutes between them—they come like drops of water from a leaky faucet that, for some reason, someone has installed in the middle of the desert you've just wandered into.

Markopoulos squeezed a trickle of subtle effects out of his film's lithic structure. Given its rigidity, it was stunning how supple and varied *Eniaios* continually revealed itself to be. Every slight variation on how an image would flash between blank frames, or be intercut with empty space, or butt up against another unlike frame, or recur or fail to recur, seemed like an innovation of Griffithian proportions. Markopoulos knew that the meaning of films doesn't come from the appearance of their images, or from the techniques through which their images are thrown into relation. Films mean by virtue of the way these two aspects interpenetrate. Films are good when there's harmony between what they show and how they show it. *Eniaios* is great because, at its best, it unfolds like a steady interlocking of the visual potency of its images within the huge logic of its design. It is pure film—“film as film”—because it has created a sense of order unique to itself. It doesn't need to borrow from any reality other than the one it has cultivated within its own precise structure.

But how does a work of art that is so self-sufficiently ordered as to appear cut off from our world come, in the end, to impinge upon it? How could *Eniaios*, which presents itself as hermetically complete, effect the epochal change to human understanding that

I 🌞 kopoulos thought it would?

The notion of purity in art contains a contradiction. When any work starts achieving immanent unity (“the great merging which is to regain Meaning,” per Markopoulos), the purity that this implies must start breaking down. *Eniaios* was intended as the consummate work of autonomous art: for film to be film, it can’t be anything but. But obviously *Eniaios*, as does all art, exists in a reality apart from the one it creates within itself. The whirl of the projector, scoring the otherwise silent film, was one indication of this. Another was the aleatory texture given to the projection by the moths that swarmed the white screen. These externalities of the film shaped and often enhanced our experience of it; once, a well-timed moth elicited whoops and cheers from the crowd.



From the back of screening space. © Mark Webber 2022.

Externalities, however, are inadmissible to autonomy. Markopoulos, I believe, devised the Temenos as a sly artistic device to metabolize for his film the tension between aesthetic purity and the world’s randomness. The Temenos was like a conceptual frame built around his precisely constructed work of art. It suspended contingency on the threshold of the film’s form, giving things like moths and moonlight an air of intentionality while deflecting them away from *Eniaios*’s conceit of purity. To a point, it

did this remarkably well.

On the third night of screenings, though, rain sent us from an open field, where the projections usually happened, to a schoolroom charmingly converted into a theater. The greater brightness and closer quarters let me study the up-crooked necks and attentive faces of the people all around me. I was reminded that Markopoulos's ultimate goal was social: to reinvest people's lives and relations with a meaning as coherent and complete as his film's.

But on this very point, the whole expansive order of his work's "total form" started to buckle. None of us, it seemed, were Markopoulos's "ideal spectator." Instead, we were the cream of the crop of people who like weird movies. It felt like we each had something to prove. The academics and the film freaks were in a cold war over just how to be a cinephile. Conversations were strained, reputations suggested, current projects teased. The fear of misreading the film made people reticent about it. We were all a bit on edge. Our presence as uncertain pilgrims was implied, by the fact of the Temenos, to be more than just the presence of spectators that's necessary for any work; in theory, it came closer to being the activating presence of a nun masturbating before a picture of Christ. But it lacked fervor and belief.

We'd all spent literal thousands on this chance to gather for the profoundest film ever made, and it felt like we were coming up short. We recognized the film's greatness, and also some of its faults; we commented, sometimes smartly, on particularities of its form and the degree of their success; we were philosophical, and we generally communed about film. But the "ideal spectator," for Markopoulos, was a transcendent being, someone through whose perceptibility *Eniaios* would enact a literal utopia. *Eniaios*, despite all we'd gone through to see it, was really just another film.

Eniaios's most daunting externality, the one it needed most to incorporate and transform into art to make good on its promises, was the social microcosm created by the meccan fact of our being there to see it. The persistence, even in Arcadia, of all the bootlicking and grandstanding that aesthetes can't help but get up to grated against the film's aspirations for total unity. It seemed like the one thing—the most important thing—that the Temenos couldn't incorporate into the supreme logic of *Eniaios* was its spectators' means of relating, through it, to each other. *Eniaios*, then, is a work of tragedy: it proves the task of remaking the world in art's image to be infinitely larger than even the most capaciously rendered work of art.

