

## Los Angeles Times

### Review: Like its subject, Chris Marker's 'The Owl's Legacy' stands the test of time

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Elia Kazan in the 1989 docu-series "The Owl's Legacy." (Icarus Films)

First aired on European television in 1989, "The Owl's Legacy," a 13-part docu-series by the late French filmmaker Chris Marker, aspires to make the ancient relevant for a world in interminable upheaval by dissecting the influence of Greece on its modern descendants and humanity at large.

Each episode is a multitude of canonic feathers carrying within their dense intellectual DNA a choral interpretation of the founding philosophical pillars on which Western civilization stands. Unavailable for decades, Marker's expansive, audiovisual sculpture to timeless knowledge became itself a lost piece in the ruins of the broadcast medium. Its layered wisdom now soars again, remastered and accessible stateside on communal and handheld screens. Never mind the geopolitical conflicts, social movements and evolution of thought in the interim between original release and our era, since like its subject, the show has aged well — the human condition remains just as flawed 30 years later.

Chiseled from hours of talking head-style conversations with a multinational roster of historians and artists, this symposium of the mind is fundamentally a confrontation between an idealized, textbook-ready version of Greek contributions and a hyper-analytical autopsy of the concepts mankind perpetually upholds as basic truths.

In prolonged segments, which are admittedly verbose, Marker's passionate speakers unspool Mediterranean antiquity with non-reverential insight, controversial enough to get "Owl's Legacy" banned in the very land it examines for almost two decades. Deemed too critical of the country's history, the launch on Greek soil didn't take place until 2007.

The Olympics as misconstrued paradigm for the Nazis' self-imposed lore, democracy as unachieved utopia, mathematics as the inextricable link between philosophy and science, music as a metaphor for the soul, and nostalgia as the longing for an unreachable homeland, are among their fascinating theorizations. Noteworthy above the rest is a necessarily scathing chapter exposing them as a phallogocentric society where misogyny thrived.

Language arises recurrently throughout the enlightening episodic work. The topic is discussed both as a bastion of identity that withstood Ottoman conquest and enslavement, as well as a vehicle to decipher the mysteries of existence in the form of mythology and tragedy.

Writer George Steiner argues that the Greeks understood that language has given us "the lethal gift of being able to tell stories." The absence of this capability would push us into darkness. "Stories saves us from despair," he continues. And yet, its existence simultaneously condemns us to question the gods' unsatisfying answers and our own motivations.

The late director Theo Angelopoulos, a notable storyteller himself, appears, saying that, as a child, he was reluctant to learn about his distant ancestors, but came around to appreciate their dramatic prowess as he embarked on his cinematic odyssey. "We come from ancient Greeks. We give our children their names. It's a continuation," the auteur says about how language bridges the gap between past and present. Angelopoulos' lauded film "The Traveling Players" is inspired by the Atreus myth.

Deployed as ambassador of the diaspora, Oscar-winning Hollywood moviemaker Elia Kazan (Greek by blood, Turk by birth, and American by migration) similarly unpacks his Anatolian Greekness via cinema, focusing on his family's escape from the old continent, depicted visually in clips from his 1963 film "America America."

Though Eurocentric by design, Marker's appraisal takes on more global connotation when addressing Japanese culture's adoration of ancient Greece. The Asian nation's praise best manifests in the evident parallels connecting Kabuki and Noh theater to the seemingly ephemeral, yet staggering theater performances of tragic tales in Athens and across the Greek territory.

"Crafted for eternity," says scholar Oswyn Murray, referring to the confection of those productions that engross the Japanese, an arrogant but adequate evaluation applicable in full measure to most classic Greek intangible inventions. Most should prevail as they have, others must be viewed and objected through 21st century lenses, which hopefully are at least slightly clearer.

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### 'The Owl's Legacy'

In French, Greek, Japanese, Russian, and English with English subtitles

Not rated

**Running time:** 5 hours, 36 minutes

**Playing:** Part 1, episodes 1-7, May 31, 7:30 p.m. and June 1, 4 p.m.; Part 2, episodes 8-13, June 1, 7:30 p.m. and June 2, 4 p.m., Ahrya Fine Arts, Beverly Hills; also available on Amazon