

HANNA PAULOUSKAYA

Mythical Beasts Made Soviet: Adaptation of Greek Mythology in Soviet Animation of the 1970s

“To call this cartoon *The Story of Perseus* is somewhat misleading: it uses only one episode of the original Greek legend, and even this is condensed and simplified into a moral fable for young folk”, so states Margaret Ford’s review of a popular Soviet animation for *Monthly Film Bulletin* in January 1976 (40). The critic does not acknowledge the movie to be an adaptation of the Greek myth at all and she puts into question the cartoon’s value. What was the reason for such a negative opinion? What idea of the authors was so unacceptable for the British viewer? In this chapter, I would like to try to answer these questions and to examine this and four other movies from the series “Legendy i mify drevnei Gretsii” [Legends and Myths of Ancient Greece, 1969–1974] by Aleksandra Snezhko-Blotskaia and Aleksei Simukov,¹ and to find out what techniques were chosen by the authors to make Greek myths familiar for a Soviet audience. I wish also to confront more difficult and important questions: did the authors intend to pass down to their audience only Greek myths or certain contemporary ideas as well? How did the cultural or political context influence their interpretation of the myths? How did it effect the representation of mythical beasts and monsters in the movies?

Returning to the review and trying to answer what may be so unacceptable for the British observer in *The Story of Perseus*, in the first instance one may think about its didacticism, so common for Soviet cinema, especially cinema for children. Another peculiarity of the cartoon, which might seem awkward to the reviewer, is the reference to folktale convention by the filmmakers. In my opinion, the animation is based not only on the tradition of classical Greek art, but also on Slavic folklore imagery. The choice of the myths and of the creatures for the cartoon was, at least to a certain extent, due to the familiarity of the

¹ Transliteration of Russian names is given according to the system of the American Library Association and the Library of Congress with minor modifications: I omit diacritic signs and use “-sky” for “-skii” endings. Well-known Russian names that have their traditional spelling are written according to it.

motifs and their closeness to Russian fantastical tales. These folktales would have already been transformed by Soviet ideology, thus they might be used as a mediator for introducing Greek myth into Soviet popular culture.

While addressing the above research questions, I wish to focus on the representations of the mythical creatures, as well as specifics of the narration, comparing these with traditions of fairy tales in Russian and Soviet art and cinema, and to explore ways of introducing Greek mythology into Soviet popular culture. My special interest concerns mythical beasts in animation, how they were appropriated by Soviet filmmakers and whether they connect with fairy-tale creatures already known to wider audiences. I will base myself on the conclusions made by Vladimir Propp (1895–1970) in his structural analysis study of Slavic folklore. His works are especially important as they were written in the Soviet Union from 1928 on, and so they naturally (consciously or not) include a perspective on the contemporary Soviet reality together with scholarly analysis. I would like to start with a presentation of the animation series and an introduction of the cultural and cinematographic context of the USSR of that period.

The Debut of Mythical Creatures in Soviet Animation

The first creatures from Greek and Roman mythology appeared on Soviet screens as late as the 1960s. This was due to an order from the Ministry of Education that Soyuzmultfilm (the largest animation studio in the USSR) launch a series of five animations on mythological themes in 1969 (Bogdanova 2008, 233). It seems that, before then, a world full of gods, semi-god heroes, and mythical beasts was perceived as even more dangerous than a “normal” fairy-tale universe. The first magical tale movies in Soviet Russia were made in the mid-1930s, after a great debate about the harmfulness of fantasy and fairy-tale literature for Soviet children had been held in the late 1920s (Hellman 2013, 354–363; Dobrenko 1997, 175–177).² Nevertheless between the 1930s and 1969, when the first cartoon of the series about ancient mythology was released, over thirty years had passed, and during this time fairy tales had obtained a prominent place in animation and cinematography for children. Furthermore, Soviet culture of the late 1960s was no longer young or seeking an identity. Even the Thaw was already over, and the period of “détente” (or “stagnation”, in Russian terminology) had set in. It was at this time when the gods of Olympus and mythical beasts appeared on screens, looking for their place in Soviet culture, changing the shape and the style of imagery.

The director of all these movies was Aleksandra Snezhko-Blotskaia (1909–1980) and the screenwriter was Aleksei Simukov (1904–1995). In memoirs they

² Compare also Lisa Maurice remarks on the genre of fantasy in Israeli literature (2016).

mention that they undertook the commission with great enthusiasm (Bogdanova 2008, 233; Simukov 2008, 314–315).³ At that time both of them were already mature and respected creative individuals. Snezhko-Blotskaia had made many movies on fairy-tale themes, while Simukov was a prominent screenwriter and a lecturer at the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute. In the period that interests us he worked also at the Theatre Department of the Ministry of Culture of the USSR (1964–1971), where he had an influence on the repertory of theatres in the country.

The animations under investigation here are connected with five famous mythical heroes (actually four heroes and one Titan) and four important mythological cycles. The first movie is dedicated to Hercules and is called *Vozvrashchenie s Olimpa* [The Return from Olympus, 1969]. The story of Theseus and the Minotaur is presented in the movie *Labirint – podvigi Teseia* [Labyrinth: The Deeds of Theseus, 1970–1971]. The third animation, *Argonavty* [The Argonauts, 1971–1972], retells the myth of Jason and his band in search of the Golden Fleece. Perseus and his fight with the Gorgon Medusa is the subject of the fourth movie *Persei* [Perseus,⁴ 1973]. The last film is called *Prometei* [Prometheus, 1974] and it tells about the theft of the sacred fire and its being brought to Earth, and also about the punishment of the eponymous Titan. It seems that the authors wanted to present all the most important heroic demigod figures of Greek mythology, as well as Prometheus, the most “revolutionary” among the gods, who could not be omitted from Soviet cinematography for obvious reasons. Three of the myths have a plot quite similar to fairy tales themselves (Propp 1976, 149). This might have been an additional argument for selecting these topics.

Each cartoon lasts around 20 minutes and they were first shown in cinemas, either separately or together as a full-length movie. Afterwards they were regularly broadcast on television. The films are brightly coloured cell animations. Their common style of drawing supplemented by solemn music and narration created a specific style of “classical mythological” animation of the USSR.

Fairy Tales on Soviet Screens

In the 1960s Soviet cinema had developed a distinctive culture of representation of fairy tales and imaginative beasts in animation and live-action movies. The main place was given to Russian folklore and famous texts of Russian and

³ For more about the creators of the movies, see my paper Paulouskaya (2017).

⁴ The English review mentioned at the beginning of the article translates the title of the movie as *The Story of Perseus*.

European authors, especially Alexander Pushkin,⁵ Hans Christian Andersen,⁶ Charles Perrault,⁷ and the Brothers Grimm.⁸ Thus, the choice of the main literary fairy tales corresponds with the Western corpus of popular tales, which John Stephens (2000, 330) numbers as 10 to 15. However, many movies were based on Soviet interpretations of the tales: for example, *Zolotoi kliuchik, ili Priklucheniia Buratino* [The Golden Key, or: The Adventures of Buratino, 1936] by Alexey Tolstoy is an interpretation of *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883) by Carlo Collodi, and *Volshebnik Izumrudnogo goroda* [The Wizard of the Emerald City, 1939] by Aleksandr Volkov is based on L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) and so forth, but a special didactic message was added and the texts were purged of bourgeois or capitalistic influences (Balina 2005, 110–113).

The presence of live-action films in the USSR based on fairy tales is due in great measure to Aleksandr Rou and Aleksandr Ptushko (Balina and Beumers 2016, 128–130; Paramonova 1979), who had already made their first movies in the 1930s (Ptushko, *Novyi Gulliver* [The New Gulliver, 1935] and Rou, *Poshchuch'emu velen'iu* [At the Pike's Command, 1938]). As Marina Balina and Birgit Beumers put it:

In the 1930s, the very act of creating a film based on a Russian fairy tale was courageous, since the genre had only recently returned to the arsenal of literary works approved by Soviet censorship. (2016, 128)

Preferring to shoot in open nature, Rou introduced Russian landscapes into fairy-tale movies and he was successful in adding a patriotic message to it. Ptushko made animations and live-action movies, as well as combinations of both, for example in his *The Golden Key, or: The Adventures of Buratino* made in 1939 and based on the afore-mentioned Tolstoy's novel.

Animated fairy tales were even more popular or, at least, more numerous. The first animated folktales were produced in the late 1920s (*Skazka o solomennom bychke* [The Tale of a Straw Bull], dir. Viacheslav Levandovsky,

⁵ *Skazka o rybake i rybke* [The Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish], dir. Aleksandr Ptushko, 1937; dir. Mikhail Vol'pin, 1950; *Skazka o pope i ego rabotnike Balde* [The Tale of the Priest and of his Workman Balda], dir. Mikhail Tsekhanovsky, 1930; dir. Panteleimon Sazonov, 1940; dir. Andrei Karanovich, 1956; *Skazka o tsare Saltane* [The Tale of Tsar Saltan], dirs. Tatiana Basmanova, Zinaida and Valentina Brumberg, 1943, etc.

⁶ *Devochka so spichkami* [The Little Match Girl], dir. Iurii Zheliabuzhsky, 1919; *Diimovochka* [Thumbelina], dir. Leonid Amal'rik, 1964, etc.

⁷ *Zolushka* [Cinderella], dirs. Nadezhda Kosheverova, Mikhail Shapiro, 1947; *Kot v sapogakh* [Puss in Boots], dirs. Zinaida and Valentina Brumberg, 1938, etc.

⁸ *Mal'chik-s-pal'chik* [Tom Thumb], dir. Olga Khodataeva, 1938; *Bremenskiye muzykanty* [Town Musicians of Bremen], dir. Inessa Kovalevskaya, 1969, etc.

Odessa, 1927; *Skazka o Belke-khoziaiushke i Myshke-zlodeike* [The Tale of a Squirrel-Housekeeper and a Villainous Mouse], dir. Viacheslav Levandovsky, Kiev, 1927; *Tzar Durandai* [Tsar Durandai], dirs. Ivan Ivanov-Vano, Valentina and Zinaida Brumberg, Moscow, 1934).⁹ However, the real turn to fairy tales in Soviet animation, not without Disney's influence (Pikkov 2016, 22), took place after WW2, when they became the main trend in animation for children (Pontieri 2012, 44–50).

By the 1970s, fairy tales were commonly present in Soviet animation and live-action cinematography. This was the period of the development of television broadcasting in the USSR,¹⁰ where fairy tales established their place in Soviet screen culture. In 1964 a daily programme for children was initiated on the Central Television of the USSR channel with short animations as part of it. It was called *Spokoinoi Nochi, Malyshei* [Good Night, Little Ones] (Roth-Ey 2011, 212) and was broadcast just before the main news programme *Vremia* [Time]. Full-length fairy tales had their time in the programme *V gostiakh u skazki* [On a Visit to Fairy Tales].¹¹ At the same time animated and live-action fairy tales were shown in cinemas, “palaces of culture”, and schools. There were special screenings for children and even special movie theatres for children, often travelling ones, such as a bus refurnished as a cinema. In my childhood, a children's movie theatre in my city (Hrodna, Belarus) was set up in a real old airplane situated in an amusement park.

Animations of Aleksandra Snezhko-Blotskaia

Snezhko-Blotskaia made her mythological series after she had completed many animations based on Russian folklore and that of other nations while employed at the studio Soyuzmultfilm. At the beginning of her career she served as assistant director of the afore-mentioned Ivanov-Vano, with whom she created animations on Russian folklore: *Koněk-gorbunok* [The Little Humpbacked Horse, 1947], *Gusi-lebedi* [The Magical Geese-Swans, 1949], and *Snegurochka* [The Snow Maiden, 1952]. Working independently as a director she made adaptations of tales from various peoples: the Russian *Verlioka* (1956), Lithuanian *Iantarnyi zamok* [The Amber Castle, 1959], Burmese *Drakon* [Dragon, 1960–1961], Kazakh *Chudesnyi sad* [The Magical Garden, 1962], and Chukchi *Doch' solntsa* [The Daughter of the Sun, 1963]. She also filmed stories of Rudyard Kipling, namely *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi* (1965) and *Kot, kotoryi gulial sam*

⁹ More on the early history of Soviet animation see Ginzburg (1957, 70–162), Ivanov-Vano (1967).

¹⁰ For more on Soviet TV broadcasting, see Roth-Ey (2011).

¹¹ The programme was broadcast from 1976 till 1992 on the Central Television of the USSR channel. Its time slot was on Fridays, Saturdays, or Sundays in different periods.

po sebe [The Cat that Walked by Himself, 1968], and Alexander Pushkin's *Skazka o zolotom petushke* [The Tale of the Golden Cockerel, 1967].

In their visual aspect, Ivanov-Vano's animations and some of Snezhko-Blotskaia's films resemble the style of Disney. This is visible in the round outlines of the human characters and the specific way of depicting animals, although both directors aimed to base their style primarily on Russian traditional art (Pontieri 2012, 40; Pikkov 2016, 20–24). This likeness is well grounded, as the Disney studio had a great impact on Soviet animation at the beginning of its history (Roshal' 1936, 6–7; Pontieri 2012, 38–42). Soyuzmultfilm emulated Disney's technological process (the "Disney assembly line") after several Russian animators from the studio made a visit to the USA in the early 1930s. However, afterwards the "Americanization" of Soviet art was condemned and the artists were called to base their work on Russian traditions and not to imitate a capitalistic example (Ginzburg 1957, 139; Ivanov-Vano 1967, 53; 1974, 28 and 31).

Snezhko-Blotskaia's series on ancient mythology differs from her previous works and shows the least similarity to Disney movies. These films have a less detailed and contrasted background, a slighter presence of animal characters and they lack singing parts. However, all the movies from the series have a common style. This may be characterized by a similar colour palette in warm sunny tones (common for depicting the Mediterranean region) and a solemn and calm music accompaniment. The dialogues are made in the style of Homer's poems and Russian retellings of Greek mythology by Nicholas Kuhn (*Legendy i mify drevnei Gretsii* [Legends and Myths of Ancient Greece]), first published in 1914 and highly popular in the USSR.¹² This influenced the language of the movies, making them sound archaic and grandiloquent, a quality which lends them a stateliness typical for epic, and thus puts these works in the context of this genre's tradition as well.

The films in the series are quite similar to one another, especially the stories of Theseus, Jason, and Perseus. The specific quality of the Hercules movie might be due to its pioneering character (this movie opened the series) – it seems that the authors were in search of an appropriate form for presenting Greek myths. This animation is much more ideological than the other films and it contains a great deal of propaganda elements. The last movie, *Prometheus*, varies due to the different character of the story – it retells a myth dedicated to a Titan, not a heroic cycle of myths. The plot of the movie is much more coherent and it contains the fewest digressions. At the same time, the first and the last movies pay greater attention to Greek gods than other films. The three other movies correspond to fairy tales in greater measure.

¹² About the popularity of Kuhn's mythology, see Ermolaeva (2016, 243).

The Fairy-Tale Character of Snezhko-Blotskaia's Myths

A typical plot of a fairy tale tells of a main hero who has to achieve a goal by resolving smaller tasks. If the protagonist is male, the goal may be connected with saving a woman (often a princess). The plot usually includes a journey by the main hero through a magical world. As a rule, the action takes place in some distant past, one left undefined by the tale, though often interpreted as the medieval or early modern era. Contrary to the Disney tradition, where the main hero is "generally a member of the aristocracy or an extraordinary person, unfortunate and liable to be persecuted" (Zipes 2016, 8), Soviet cinema preferred heroes of peasant origin. As a result, even the "unfortunate princess" is often transformed into a peasant girl.¹³ In the movies filmed during or just after WW2, this woman-figure is interpreted as Mother Russia who is in need of saving (Balina and Beumers 2016, 125 and 129).

The myths of Theseus, Perseus, and Jason and the Argonauts correspond to a traditional magical-tale schema. Propp even calls the Argonauts' plot "a classical fairy tale" (2012, 24). The scholar emphasizes that the difference between myths and folktales is in their "social function" or "in how people approach them" (Propp 2012, 24). Myths, contrary to folktales, were perceived as true stories and were connected with religious ritual and belief, but myths' composition or form of narration may be very similar to folktales. In contemporary culture, neither fairy tales nor classical myths are an object of belief. On the other hand, both of them create certain patterns of thinking and ways of perceiving reality for their audience, so they still act as myths (Stephens 2000, 331). Joseph Campbell in his revolutionary works on mythology and religion combines a fairy tale with a myth and a religion's founding story, finding similar patterns in all the narratives and looking for archetypal roots for this phenomenon. He uses a knowledge of fairy-tale structure to gain an understanding of mythical narration. Campbell also underlines the supreme role of the hero and his adventures, understanding it as a story of initiation and transformation of the hero (2004, 45–227).

Soviet culture, as shown above, had a long tradition of retelling fairy tales. As a result it produced its own ideological substitute for the fairy-tale messages, adopting fables for its own needs. In my opinion, it also used this modified pattern as a mediator in introducing Greek myths for the Soviet viewer, making a chain of reception in Charles Martindale's terms (1993). Consider the following statement by Simukov taken from his application to serve as a screenwriter for the *Theseus* movie:

In this story I propose to create a lively, attractive image of Theseus, a defender of the people, a fighter against evil, which is so vividly represented in the image of the Minotaur, half man, half bull, who symbolizes the lowest elemental forces of

¹³ Cf. the fairy tales directed by Rou highly promoting peasant culture, especially of the Russian people.

mankind. Of course, much of the content of the ancient myth will be rethought to make it clearer and more intriguing. (Simukov 1969–1970, 1)¹⁴

This description may be compatible with any of the films of the series, as well as with nearly any fairy tale filmed in the Soviet Union. An image of a “defender of the people”, a hero who embodies a nation and fights “evil” understood as some cosmic incarnation of “the lowest forces of mankind”, is common to Soviet interpretations of fairy tales, at least in its ideal form. A closer look at the animations will help us see what elements of fables proposed by Propp are present in them and how they are used (Propp 2012, 147–178).

The Opening and the Closing of Narration

As fairy tales usually exist in an oral form and are performed, it is common for them to have a narrative framing. A typical beginning for a Russian folktale would be “v nekotom tsarstve, v nekotom gosudarstve” [in a certain land, in a certain kingdom] or “zhili-byli” [once there lived]. However, a folktale may also have a longer introduction called a *priskazka* [foretale], announcing that a fable will start (Propp 2012, 151; Mayenowa 1979, 269). The framing is used also in literary or cinematographic retellings and helps to identify the genre. In four of his films, Rou even presents an old woman¹⁵ who is telling the story from the windowsill of a wooden house, and opens and closes the shutters at the beginning and the end of the story.¹⁶ We may find a similar approach in the animations that concern us here. The Greek myths, of course, would not use folktale formulas, but the composition of the films is often complex and contains a framing story.

The closest to a fairy tale is the framing in *The Argonauts*. The movie starts with two young Greek boys playing on the seashore. They notice a wrecked ship and an old man sitting nearby. The man appears to be Jason and he tells them the story of the ship *Argo* and of the Argonauts. The movie ends with the same characters. Jason praises and thanks Zeus that the *Argo* will be restored, and he asks Athena for her blessing for new journeys to come. During the prayer, Jason falls into a hole in the deck and dies, but the prayer does not end here. It is continued by the boys. The younger boy asks the older if he believes in the story and if he is not afraid. The older confirms his fearlessness, and we see an image of a future *Argo* on the waves. This episode is rooted in a description of the Argonauts’ myth by the brothers Lev and Vsevolod Uspensky (1941, 98–102), where it is added to the final part of the narration. In contrast with the book, the animation puts the scene also in the beginning and this makes the framing. It also

¹⁴ Hereinafter trans. H. P., unless otherwise stated.

¹⁵ She was played always by the same actress, Anastasiia Zueva (1896–1986).

¹⁶ For more on female tellers of folktales, see Melikyan (2006, 194–201).

includes a storyteller, though he does not address the viewer of the movie but the characters inside it.

The Return from Olympus also has a framing narration, but one that resembles less a storytelling situation. The movie tells of the return of Hercules to Earth, during which he recalls some of his old labours (e.g., the apples of Hesperides and the freeing of Prometheus). The occasion for telling the stories are the frescoes presenting the Twelve Labours of Hercules seen in his sanctuary on Earth.

The movie *Labyrinth: The Deeds of Theseus* also starts and ends with the same heroes having a dialogue, but these characters belong to the story itself. In the beginning of the movie the centaur Cheiron sends Theseus on a journey and in the end he comforts him after the death of his father. We cannot consider this construction to be a framing narration. However, in the first version of the script written in 1969 the centaur addressed his final speech to a young man and woman, who would probably represent the audience. His words were: “Don’t be sad, kids. It is not easy to be a hero. Theseus has new, even more glorious deeds before him. He will find consolation in them” (Simukov 1969–1970, 20). Such a speech might be understood as an address to a listener by a storyteller, but it does not appear in the final version of the movie.

Introduction of the Main Hero

Propp states that in the beginning of a fairy tale we usually meet a young and an old character, a “herald” in Campbell’s terms (2004, 47): “Characters of the older generation usually take care of sending the hero away from home; the younger generation leaves home, in various forms and with different kinds of motivation” (Propp 2012, 152). The scene of *The Argonauts* presented above contains a sort of intergenerational meeting, but the episode does not belong to the story itself.

We can find a more traditional beginning in *Labyrinth: The Deeds of Theseus*. As was mentioned above, the movie starts with a dialogue between the old centaur Cheiron and Theseus. Cheiron explains that he has given to the young man all the knowledge he possesses, and he shows a stone with a sword and sandals hidden underneath. In raising the stone Theseus fulfils his first task and he obtains the hidden objects. The centaur makes a farewell speech, advising Theseus to use his strength only for good and promising him a life full of great deeds. He sends the adolescent to Athens and tells him that Aegeus is his father. This dialogue, along with the fulfilling of the first task and the taking the objects, starts the narrative proper.

The choice of a centaur for this scene is interesting. The most obvious source of the myth for Simukov and Snezhko-Blotskaia, the mythology of Kuhn that was written on the basis of Plutarch’s *Theseus*, says that it is the hero’s mother Aethra who shows him the stone and sends him to his father (Kuhn 1954, 183).

A similar situation can be found in Plutarch's text, which was also available to the authors (Plut. *Thes.* 6.2, ed. Markish and Sobolevsky 1961, 7). Cheiron appears as a teacher of Theseus in *Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopaedic Dictionary* (entry by Kurbatov 1901, 763), the most influential such reference work in pre-revolutionary Russia,¹⁷ but there is no scene of farewell there, and the description of the myth is very short. It could be that the authors of the animation used few sources and decided to choose Cheiron to make the ancient Greek setting more clear for the viewer. The beginning of the screenplay by Simukov seems to confirm this idea:

Oak groves in ancient Attica... A stream curiously winding near a rocky road, intricate piles of rocks, in short the landscape that in the imagination of the ancient Greeks was inhabited by fairy-tale creatures: nymphs, satyrs, as well as beings half human and half horse who entered mythology under the name of centaurs [...]. And also now, among the trees we hear the clatter of hoofs, light footsteps, and before us there are two persons: the old grey-haired centaur Cheiron and a handsome youth, striding easily next to the centaur (Simukov 1969–1970, 2).

A centaur was also a proper teacher figure as proves Edith Hall in this volume (301–326). On the other hand, the scene of the farewell, though it belongs to the myth, is built on a typical fairy-tale pattern and Simiukov includes it in the script. At the same time, Plutarch's and Kuhn's telling of this scene contains an episode of a failure (or a refusal) to follow advice, also typical for fairy tales: Aethra tells her son to go to Athens by sea, the safer way, but Theseus ignores her entreaty and takes a more dangerous way. A prohibition and its violation is also a necessary element of a fairy tale (Propp 2012, 153), however this episode is omitted in the case of the animation under consideration.

The hero of the last animation, Perseus, does not meet an old man, but he does encounter Hermes, who speaks with the adolescent about the task of getting the head of the Gorgon Medusa. The god is a typical Campbell "herald" mentioned above, but he may be also interpreted as an omniscient elder. However, Perseus has already been sent to fulfil the task and the god only gives him clues how to do it, he does not initiate the hero's journey. He does nonetheless give necessary information for us who watch the movie and for whom the story is just beginning.

¹⁷ More on Antiquity in *Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopaedic Dictionary* see Filimonov (2012).

The Journey of the Hero

According to Propp, “the fantastical tale’s composition is defined by the presence of two kingdoms” (2012, 157) and the main hero leaves his land and goes to some unknown, distant land. This other kingdom may represent a land behind the border of the human world and stay for a type of Underworld. The journey to this land is full of danger, which gives the hero a possibility to show his strength. The journey is central to Campbell’s understanding of myth as being also a path of initiation (2004, 45–233).

Theseus as well as Jason and the Argonauts sail to distant lands. Colchis presumably is the most magical land in the myths under consideration, though the animators depict it as the familiar Georgian landscape, with recognizable mountains and architecture, adding such elements as traditional Georgian dress and furniture. The connection of the myth with the Georgian landscape was probably an additional motivation for including this story into the series, because from this point of view the myth was Soviets’ “own”, “native” myth.

A journey to Crete is presented in the movie about Theseus. The island is painted in black, brown, and red colours. After it is announced that a sailor is approaching Crete, we see a red radiance that casts light on the ship (08:57).¹⁸ Only then does the perspective change and we notice the island itself, presented as a small mountainous landscape with a castle at the top. The castle is drawn as a cube-shaped monumental building with columns inside. It resembles a Constructivist building. However, a structure made of huge blocks is also associated with Minoan architecture. The interiors of the palace are painted in the same range of colours, adding more grey tones of concrete. It looks like a dark building, though it has open spaces and joyful plant ornaments on the walls or the famous frescoes of the Crete palace.

The Labyrinth is situated underneath the palace being the only underground place in the cartoons. Its entrance is depicted as a portal looking like a gigantic head in the style of the entrance to the Temple of Moloch in the famous movie *Cabiria* (1914) by Giovanni Pastrone. The Labyrinth is dark. It is a multi-level space, separated by iron barriers with a huge double-bitted axe, the labrys. Thus, the Labyrinth is situated in the human world and symbolizes the evil created by man. It has a strong political connotation. The double axe known from the Minoan culture was in the twentieth century used as a symbol of Greek fascism (the National Youth Organization of the Metaxas regime) and of Italian post-war neo-fascist organization Ordine Nuovo. The red lights are similar to representations of the fires of war. Earlier, in the scene in Athens where youths are sent as an offering, we see an old woman crying over her son. She is drawn in a way typical of the representation of soldiers’ mothers on Soviet WW2

¹⁸ For the convenience of the reader, I note the time that film passages begin in the format (minute: second).

posters or in the movies after the war. Including antifascist propaganda in fairy-tale movies was common for early Rou productions (*Vasilisa Prekrasnaia* [Vasilisa the Beautiful, 1939]; *Kashchei Bessmertnyi* [Kashchei the Immortal, 1944]). In an even more obvious way it is present in *The Return from Olympus* where Hydra metamorphoses into a swastika and the Stympthalian Birds into fighter planes. A black man beaten by a soldier alludes to Prometheus bound, referring thus to anti-war and anti-colonial discourse, especially topical in the context of the Vietnam War.

The Gorgon Medusa in *Perseus* is said to live in a magical land too. Firstly, we see her island as a small, dark, and rocky land. When the hero flies to it, the island is brownish-red and evidently has a volcanic origin (09:31). Among the mountains, Perseus sees dead heroes that have been transformed into grey stone figures. However, when the young man finds Medusa, she is lying on a sandy beach sunbathing, looking like a beautiful girl. This representation reveals the Gorgon as a human, and the island as a kind of resort, at least for Gorgons.

Gift Givers and Magical Objects

Another important element of a fairy tale is the presence of magical objects that help the hero to triumph (Propp 2012, 158). In the beginning of the *Perseus* we see the main hero walking along a road. Suddenly he sees a bird drowning in a lake. He helps the bird, falling into the water himself. He strokes the bird and lets it fly away. Doing a favour to an animal in need is very typical for a fairy tale. It is one of the possibilities for the hero to encounter a “donor”, one who will give a magical object to the hero (159). The animal may ask the hero to free it (a pike, a golden fish, etc.), or the hero may help it by his own initiative, and then have the favour returned. The bird in our animation does not perform the donor function. It never appears in the movie again. The animators use this episode only to display the kindness and empathy of the main character. However, already in the next scene Perseus does receive magical objects from a different person, and the fairy-tale scenario returns.

Perseus is granted a sharp sword and a polished shield by Hermes and is sent to the Graeae to obtain winged sandals (*talaria*) and a “magic bag” (*kibisis*). According to other versions of the myth, the hero encounters further persons and receives other magical objects. For example, in Kuhn’s mythology he receives the shield from Athena (as in Lucan’s *Pharsalia* 662), and the Graeae only show him the way to the Nymphs, who give him the winged sandals and the *kibisis*, as well as the helmet of Hades (1954, 103–104). Kuhn’s description of the Nymphs corresponds with the version of Pseudo-Apollodorus (*Bibliotheca* 2.4.2–3). In the *Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopaedic Dictionary* (entry by Nikolai Obnorsky 1898, 355) as well as in a note to the Russian translation of Pseudo-Apollodorus (*Bibliotheca* 2.4) by Vladimir Borukhovich (Apollodor 1972, 145, n. 7) the helmet is called the “cap of invisibility” (*shapka-nevidimka*), a popular object in

East-Slavic fairy tales. Its presence would have made the narration even more akin to a fairy tale, however Perseus is not presented with this artefact in the movie.

The second gift-givers of the animation *Perseus*, the Graeae, are depicted in the style of fable characters, similar to the bony and grey-haired Baba Yaga. At variance with the myth, they are presented as grateful donors. Perseus, counter to the usual version of the myth (Kuhn 1954, 103–104) and the advice of Hermes in the animation, does not cheat the ladies nor does he steal their only eye. In contrast, he helps them to find the eye (06:00) and even brings them flowers as a sign of gratitude (07:50). Thus, Perseus is not a “mischievous fellow”, as would be typical for a fable. He is rather an ideal Soviet man, kind to the elderly, consciously following moral values. At the beginning of the animation he states: “My mother told me that we should believe in good” (01:55). Perseus echoes a hero that was sought in Soviet children’s literature of the 1970s. Compare the description of Ben Hellman in his portrayal of Soviet literature of the period:

Voices were raised for a return to the principles of socialist realism, as when in 1969 the critic Vladimir Nikolaev asked for strong-willed, combative and idealistic heroes, inspired by civic awareness, instead of all the apolitical dreamers and weak outsiders that threatened to take over children’s literature. (Hellman 2013, 535)

While watching the cinematic fables of Rou, it is difficult to deny that these folk heroes resemble an ideal communist of Socialist Realism. Kira Paramonova emphasizes that the director used to deliberately destroy some of the magical objects (the cap of invisibility is stolen by a kite, the magic carpet falls into an abyss), in order to show that “in the end heroes overcame the enemy not due to fairy-tale wonders, but thanks to their courage, steadfastness, wit and friendship” (1979, 44). Perhaps this was the reason for omitting the cap of invisibility in Snezhko-Blotskaia’s movie?

Saving a Girl and a Subsequent Marriage

An ideal finale for a good fairy tale is “a marriage and crowning of the hero” (Propp 2012, 171–172). Rescuing an unfortunate person may be even the main reason for the hero’s adventures. The myths of Perseus, Theseus, and Jason also contain the love motif, and it is emphasized in the movies. Not all these stories end with weddings, not all the protagonists were happy in the later stages of their lives, but the viewer does not know this on the basis of these animations alone. In the Snezhko-Blotskaia movie, Medea is taken as a bride to her husband’s land and Jason says nothing about their future life together as he tells his story as an

old man.¹⁹ Ariadne is stolen back by Dionysus and does not come to Athens, but still she is in love with Theseus and it is mutual. However, these two women were helpers, not an object saved by a hero. A proper love story we can find in the myth of Perseus and Andromeda.

Perseus sees a chained girl from above as he flies over Ethiopia. “A girl! She is chained to a rock!” the youth cries. In contrast to typical mythological version, Hermes follows the hero in his adventures and is present in this scene. The god acts as the voice of reason and responds: “This is no time to think about girls!” (15:37). Nevertheless, Perseus unchains the girl and she tells him that she was shackled at the gods’ command to save the land of her father from a sea monster. Andromeda does not mention Cassiopeia and the preceding events known from Greek mythology. She agrees with her role as an offering and bears no resentment against her father. She resembles Nasten’ka from Rou’s *Morozko* [Jack Frost] fairy tale (1964), who, being left in a frozen winter forest, makes no complaint (Paramonova 1979, 88–89). As Balina and Beumers put it in the context of Soviet filmed fables of the 1960s, “[m]ost important [...] is the stress on intrinsically Russian moral values of self-sacrifice, humility, and meekness to achieve a victory over evil forces” (2016, 132). Such features of Andromeda are appreciated by the male hero and he falls in love and saves the girl from the monster. Perseus uses the last glance of Medusa’s head to stone Cetus. The young man gently proposes to Andromeda that she go with him. His last words to Hermes are: “I have found my happiness”. The god answers: “Farewell. Love is not my province” (17:58). Thus, the movie transforms into a typical love story. Romantic music starts. Perseus kneels to put one of the winged sandals on the girl’s leg. She soars up into the sky first and Perseus teaches her to fly holding her by hand. The picture resembles the famous Marc Chagall painting *The Promenade* (1918). It is interesting that this film was finished in the middle of June 1973, at the same time when Chagall had come to visit the USSR for the first time since 1922. He held an exhibition at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and reappeared on the country’s art scene. In the end Perseus and Andromeda flew even further and became constellations in outer space, combining pride of contemporary space achievements (flight into cosmos)²⁰ with the Greeks’ knowledge of the stars and constellations.

¹⁹ Contrary to the version of Uspensky, according to which Jason firstly thinks that he meets his and Medea’s children (1941, 100).

²⁰ Similar motif was also present in one of the version of scenarios for the movie *Prometheus*, where space achievements are understood as continuation of the gift of Prometheus (Snezhko-Blotskaia and Simukov 1973, 73).

The Beasts

The most important feature of a fairy tale is the presence of a fantastical beast that must be defeated by the hero. Animation allows the presentation of the most unthinkable creatures. Already in the first movie of the series, *The Return from Olympus*, we see Nereus, the old man of the sea, who may change his shape. In the movie, we see him as an old man of green colour with webbed toes, but being caught by Hercules he transforms into a huge blue-red fish, a green snake, a big bird, and again into a man (06:14). In my opinion, the episode of Nereus may have been chosen purely due to the possibility to show his transformations through animation.

I have also mentioned above some other mythical creatures present in the animations: the Nymphs, the centaur Cheiron, the Hydra, the Stymphalian Birds, the Graeae, the Gorgon Medusa, the sea monster Cetus, the Minotaur. There are also the Crommyonian Sow, the Sirens, and the dragon guarding the Golden Fleece. Most of them have iconic representations in art and these were used by the animators to some extent. However, some of the beasts were radically modernized. The most striking example is the transformation of the Stymphalian Birds and the Hydra into military Nazi symbols in the first movie of the series. At this point I would like to look at ways that fantasy creatures are depicted and to find possible connections with the cultural context of the times of the animations. “Monsters are our children”, repeats Susan Deacy after Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in the chapter in the present volume, exploring connections between culture and monsters that are created by it (177).

The most notable feature of the animated Soviet monsters, in my opinion, is their “un-scariness”. The monsters are not frightening. They are big, they are monstrous, and they produce loud sounds, but they are not as scary as they might be. It was a principle of Rou to show evil in his film tales in such a way that it would cause laughter together with fear (Paramonova 1979, 13). It seems that the animations also follow this rule. As a result, some of them (*Perseus*, *The Argonauts*) achieved a 0+ age categorization on the *Kinopoisk* database.²¹

Another characteristic of the beasts in the movies under discussion is that many of them are dragon-like figures. These are the Hydra in *The Return from Olympus* (its first appearance is made at 15:54), the dragon that guards the Golden Fleece in *The Argonauts* (13:51), the sea monster Cetus (16:46), and the Gorgon (02:40) in *Perseus*. The dragon is the most popular evil beast for many mythological traditions, Slavic mythology included. In East-Slavic folklore the dragon is called *Zmei Gorynych* (literally the ‘snake from mountains’), which emphasizes its snake-like nature. The dragon is a chthonic figure and is connected with the four elements of fire, water, earth, and air (also rain and the

²¹ This is an equivalent of IMDb for Russian-language cinema – see the entry on *Argonavty* and the entry on *Persei*.

tempest), and originally it was the lord thereof (Propp 2015, 348; Ivanov 1991a, 1991b).

The dragon is also often present in epic narratives, especially in East Slavic traditions. Propp says that in the Russian epic it may be understood as an enemy of the Motherland, being a typical mythical enemy (2015, 344). This feature was used by Rou for presenting a fairy-tale dragon in *Vasilisa the Beautiful* or the army of Kashchei the Immortal. The dragon from the animation *Mezha* [The Border, 1967] by Viacheslav Kotionochkin is an enemy of the simple folk, it demolishes their land and houses and upturns the usual order of life. It is called a *basurman* (an adherent of a different creed, which usually was understood as ‘Muslim’) and it flies with enormous speed like an aircraft. It acts together with the tsar and his army. Snezhko-Blotskaia also made a movie about a dragon earlier, on the base of a Burmese folktale (*Dragon*, 1961). The dragon here is depicted in the Chinese style, but he also represents an authority that oppresses people for hundreds of years through insufferable taxes. Let us finally observe that the fight with a dragon has a strong tradition in the Christian religion, though this was omitted in Soviet-era representations.

Perseus also contains allusions to the Russian *bylina* (a traditional East Slavic oral epic poem) in the depiction of a flying monster. The appearance of the Gorgon is preceded by black-brown clouds that darken the screen (02:45). We then see a flying, fire-breathing person. Let us compare with a fragment from a *bylina*:

Как в ту пору, в то время
Ветра нет, тучу наднесло,
Тучи нет, а только дождь дождит,
Дождя-то нет, искры сыпятся, –
Летит Змиище-Горынище,
О двенадцати змия о хоботах,
Хочет змия его с конем сожечь. (Propp 2015, 349)

At that moment, at that time
There is no wind, a cloud was carried past,
There is no cloud, but the rain rains,
There is no rain, sparks are pouring.
The great dragon is flying – Gorynishche
Besides the dragon with twelve trunks.
The dragon wants to burn him and his horse.²² (Propp 2012, 216)

²² The original version is quoted by Propp on the base of the collection of Russian songs edited by Pavel Rybnikov. The translation of Propp’s volume is made by Sibelan Forrester.

Medusa flies over the city and we see compositions of fossilized men and women left in her wake. However, they look beautiful, akin to ancient statues. Hermes also remarks that Medusa believes she gives immortality to people through her acts. She takes on even more human features when we see her sunbathing as was mentioned above. Sleeping on the beach, using her wings as an umbrella, she resembles images of a beautiful Medusa in the style of the *Medusa Rondanini*. In this case, it would be her womanly power that makes men afraid.²³ “Yet it is less the horror than the grace / which turns the gazer’s spirit into stone”, to follow famous Shelley’s words (1824, 139). This aspect is underlined in her speech to Perseus. Once awoken, she tries to get the youth’s attention and flirts with him:

‘Why don’t you look at me, my boy? I want to admire your face. Look at me. You are too nervous, my dear. Look at me. The best condition is complete rest. Look at me. Do you want to become immortal? Look at me.’ (10:51)

Perseus does look at her, but only by means of his shield. Here, the beautiful face of the evil woman framed by the oval of the shield-mirror echoes the Wicked Queen from *Snow White* (made by Disney or Soyuzmultfilm²⁴). The young man fights with Medusa in the air, on the sea, and on land, which brings us again to the dragon character of the beast. She frightens Perseus with all the heads of her snake, being in this sense a multi-headed monster.

Another dragon in the same movie is the sea monster Cetus. We first see the monster coming from the water akin to a huge serpent (16:55). Then, it stands on two legs and, due to its great size and figure, resembles Godzilla from Ishirō Honda’s movie (1954). It is especially similar to the Japanese prototype before it is turned to stone by Medusa’s glance (17:15). In this fight, Medusa’s head acts again together with all her nine snakes. So, we see a dragon killing a dragon. This solution is contrary to the popular version of the myth, where Perseus slays the monster with a sword and uses the head of Medusa to kill Phineus and company, who did not want him to marry Andromeda (Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 2.4.3–4). In the entry by Obnorsky in *Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopaedic Dictionary* (1898, 355) Perseus uses Medusa’s head to kill the sea monster, Phineus and his friends, and also Polydectes and his guests. The movie has a minimum of terrifying episodes from this list, which is natural for the animations addressed for children. It is worth adding that Perseus holding Medusa’s head in the animation imitates the great sculpture (1545–1554) of Benvenuto Cellini.

²³ For more on this and other reasons for fearing Medusa see Kaplan (2013, 63–78).

²⁴ In the USSR the film adaptation was based on Pushkin’s variant of the fairy tale *Skazka o mērtvoi tsarevne i semi bogatyriakh* [The Tale of the Dead Princess and the Seven Knights], dir. Ivan Ivanov-Vano (1951).

Slavic dragons often have three (six, or nine) heads, which makes them similar to the many-headed Hydra (usually with nine heads, but sometimes fifty or a hundred). In *The Return from Olympus* we see the Hydra as first a one-headed snake, which transforms into a three-headed crawling dragon (15:54), which is then to be transformed into a four-headed swastika inside the ruins of a Greek temple. Before the moment of change, the sky is again covered with clouds, resembling dragon as well as war motifs. The allusion reaches its peak with a symbolical transformation. A comparison between the Nazi swastika and a serpent is common in Soviet antifascist posters. The very popular slogan *Smert' fashistskoi gadine!*, known as "Death to the Fascist Monster!", should be rather translated as "Death to the Fascist Reptile!", where the term for reptile (*gad*, *gadina*) refers to the serpent from the Garden of Eden, as well as a monster or a dragon. The slogan appeared on posters with snake-swastikas, for example on one made by Aleksei Kokorekin in 1941 with the same title (Bonelli 1997, 221).

In *Perseus*, the dragon guarding the Golden Fleece has no war connotations. It is a typical dragon of fable that guards a treasure. It is huge with big white teeth and blue eyes, and it tries to bite Jason like an animal. It is very similar to a dog, especially when Medea comes with a bunch of poppies and sprinkles it with the flowers' latex. The dragon calms down and falls asleep like a pet (13:55).

Even more animal features we see in the last monster to be described in this chapter, the Minotaur from Theseus' cartoon. Firstly, we hear about him from Aegeus who despairs of sending young men as an offering to the beast. Afterwards, already on Crete, we hear his roar and see the fear of Ariadne. The girl appeals to heaven to send somebody who could kill the monster. We see the Minotaur only the third time. In montage his image alternates with the figure of a scared and running girl, which makes him more terrifying according to the theory of the Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov.²⁵ However, the creature himself is not so frightening. He looks like a man with a bull's head. He has huge white fangs and a red mouth, formed into a clownish smiling style. The head of the Minotaur resembles a mask put on an ordinary human. In the next sequence, we see him running after the girl, and now we can notice that the Minotaur is huge and dangerous. Theseus fights with him like a toreador. When the Minotaur attacks, he raises his paws, akin to a wolf from an animated fairy tale. Afterwards the monster and Theseus wrestle. One of the other Athenians gives a weapon to Theseus. The Minotaur loses because his horns get stuck in the double axe of the Labyrinth. Theseus takes advantage of this moment and strikes him with a dagger. The Minotaur roars like a wounded wolf and falls, scratching the wall with his claws.

²⁵ The theory of montage developed by Kuleshov in the 1910s and 1920s attached great significance to the sequence of shots, when one shot changes the perception of the following shot in the mind of the viewer. The Kuleshov effect had a great influence on early Soviet cinema.

Thus, the Minotaur is shown as a monster, an animal, and a man. As it is typical for many monsters, initially he is unknown. There are stories about him, we may hear his voice, but we may see him only with time. He lives under the palace, and this is the place that is evil. We see fascist symbols here, it is dark and frightening. The Minotaur itself acts like an animal: a bull (chasing or being chased) and a wolf (frightening and suffering). This wolf once again comes from a fairy tale. However, there is a moment in the movie when we may see that the Minotaur is but a tool used by other agents. In the dialogue between Ariadne and Minos (09:50) the king calls him “our support” and says that they need the Minotaur because he provides security for their country; he makes everybody afraid of them. Thus, the Minotaur is also a victim in this story, though this is not highlighted in the animation. Theseus has no doubts about killing him, and the young man is perceived as a hero who saves a nation or even nations, a hero to be imitated.

Conclusions

To go back to the beginning of this chapter where I quoted the review of the *Perseus* film by Margaret Ford, I would like to note that it is presently the only review of a movie from the series printed outside the USSR known to me. Internal discussions on the movies and scripts during their production confirm that the studio highly appreciated *Perseus*. Fyodor Khitruk, a famous Russian animation director known for his adaptation of Winnie-the-Pooh stories, stated during a discussion in Soyuzmultfilm in 1973 that he had concerns about the style and the dialogues of the series, but it was the *Perseus* movie that had persuaded him that those movies might succeed (Snezhko-Blotskaia and Simukov 1973, 81). Perhaps this was the only movie of the series that was exported abroad.

The late appearance of myths on the Soviet screen and the peculiarities of the movies confirm the complex attitude to Antiquity in the USSR. The use of the old-style literary language proves the understanding of Greek culture as elevated and distant from contemporary life. On the other hand, references to the folktale tradition make the mythology more familiar and nativized for the creators and for the audience. Allusions to concurrent ideological propaganda may make an understanding of the movies easier, bringing them within the cultural context of the USSR. At the same time, all these advantages were hardly to be appreciated for audiences outside the Soviet Union.

War was one of the most popular themes for Soviet cinema over its existence. It also entered the fairy-tale universe from the first movies of the series. A hero symbolizing a nation fought with a beast that embodied that nation's enemy. Such an understanding was especially important in a wartime or post-war period. War references gave a possibility to reveal the greatness of the heroism of a human being. Quite naturally it entered the animated world of the Greek myths.

Hercules, Jason, and Theseus are warriors, who intently look for monsters to defeat. Hercules, who was the first to appear on Soviet screens, is openly depicted as the brave hero (*bogatyr*) of Russian *byliny*. He shares the values of peasants and looks like them. On his way to Olympus he notices the Hydra with the words: “And there! Look! It still moves!” (16:03). He behaves like a person returning from war, who cannot readapt to peacetime life.²⁶

The images of the beasts in these animations usually bear a symbolical meaning. Their characters are not developed, we do not know their back story. Usually, they are just monsters to be defeated, and it is the image of a dragon that is used most often to represent a beast. However, the monsters in the animations are not frightening. These ancient dragons had been vanquished even before the Slavic dragons. Neither the Greek heroes nor the viewers are afraid of them. We may even feel pity for the beasts, who look like pretty women or familiar animals.

At first sight the ancient myths in the animations are simplified and the mythological messages are clear and openly pronounced. However, even in these simple stories, where many threads are omitted, there are plenty of allusions and connotations, on the visual or verbal side of the movie. These animations were shown on Soviet television channels until the very end of the Soviet Union. Very often they were the first encounter that child viewers had with Greek mythology. Their epic style narration assumed heroism of the characters and glorious victory. Fairy-tale conventions made their apprehension easier. The stories do not represent a variability of plots or interpretations of ancient myths, they do not pose unsolvable tragic questions, but they do make the stories connected with tales known from the earliest childhood.

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²⁶ For more see in my paper, Paulouskaya (2017).

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