

OUR MYTHICAL CHILDHOOD

# OUR MYTHICAL HOPE

The Ancient Myths  
as Medicine for the Hardships  
of Life in Children's  
and Young Adults' Culture

Edited by  
Katarzyna Marciniak



# OUR MYTHICAL HOPE

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PART IV

# Hope after Tragedy



## TURNING TO MYTH: THE SOVIET SCHOOL FILM GROWING UP

Soviet cinema for children was dominated by films set in schools.<sup>1</sup> The school as a model of society provided an opportunity to portray challenging issues and relationships in the world at large. A new wave of school cinema in the USSR came in the 1980s with controversial films that presented a terrifying image of childhood, full of cruelty and danger. Some of these productions draw upon classical mythology. I shall analyse here two very important films of this genre that have classical underpinnings. They are *Чучело* [Chuchelo;<sup>2</sup> Scarecrow] directed by Rolan Bykov (in two parts, 1983, screenplay by Vladimir Zheleznikov) and *Дорогая Елена Сергеевна* [Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna; Dear Miss Elena] by Eldar Riazanov (1988, screenplay by Liudmila Razumovskaia). It seems that in the late Soviet period these film-makers turned to Classical Antiquity consciously, hoping to find there ideas which would help them discuss complex issues related to growing up.

The works of Bykov and Riazanov are far from being typical “mythological” productions, especially in comparison with peplum films or Hollywood and European adaptations of classical texts, since the tradition of peplum films did not take root in Soviet cinema.<sup>3</sup> The influence of the great Hollywood productions

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express special gratitude for help during my work on this article to Elizabeth Hale and to the Semiotic Lab at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales”, University of Warsaw, led by Prof. Zbigniew Kloch.

<sup>2</sup> 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” instead of “-skii” endings. Well-known Russian names that have their traditional spelling are written according to it. English titles of the discussed movies correspond to their titles in world distribution, if applicable.

<sup>3</sup> Exceptions include *Спартак* [Spartak; Spartacus], dir. Ertuğrul Muhsin, Odessa: VUFKU, 1926; *Веселая хроника опасного путешествия* [Vesëlaia khronika opasnogo puteshestviia; Merry Chronicle of a Dangerous Voyage], dir. Evgenii Ginzburg, Moskva: Ekran, 1986; *Сократ* [Sokrat; Socrates], dir. Viktor Sokolov, Moskva and Leningrad: Soyuztelevfilm, Lenfilm, and Petropol', 1991.

of the 1960s may be seen rather in Soviet animations on ancient mythology.<sup>4</sup> Of course, some foreign films were distributed in the USSR and were very popular.<sup>5</sup> However, as a rule, searching for mythological or ancient connotations was alien to Soviet film criticism. At the same time, cinematography for children and youth was very robust, and it created a special genre of school cinema where classical references or allusions can be traced.

I have chosen films that were, in my opinion, the most influential children's and youth productions of the late USSR in terms of the aim of resolving the problems of being young and living among youth. As most Soviet school films were didactic and/or tended to present an ideal image of the Soviet school, these cinematic works were the most striking exceptions to the rule, as they showed the ambiguities of personality, groups, and life itself. The feature of ambiguity is all the more relevant to Greek and Roman mythology, where the fates of mythical heroes were preserved in stories that allowed various narrations and interpretations. These myths often contained elements not *ad usum Delphini*, which were to be eliminated in retellings aimed at children. Both *Scarecrow* and *Dear Miss Elena* verge on being improper for a Soviet film and a children's film, if only because they do not present an ideal image of socialist reality.

## School Cinema in the USSR

To put the films in context I wish to begin with a short introduction to Soviet cinema for children. Issues regarding children viewers and films appropriate for them were under discussion already in the late 1920s. In 1929, a survey of more than 3,000 pupils eight to nineteen years old from central and suburban Moscow

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hanna Paulouskaya, "Steht Herakles für den Westen? Oder: die griechisch-römische Antike im sowjetischen Animationsfilm", in Markus Janka and Michael Stierstorfer, eds., *Verjüngte Antike. Griechisch-römischer Mythologie und Historie in zeitgenössischen Kinder- und Jugendmedien*, "Studien zur europäischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur / Studies in European Children's and Young Adult Literature" 5, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2017, 287–312.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960) had its Soviet premiere in 1967 and was widely distributed, ultimately being viewed by 63 million people; see "*Спартак* (1960)" [*Spartak* (1960); *Spartacus* (1960)], Kino-Teatr.ru, <http://kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/hollywood/28477/annot/> (accessed 17 April 2020). Another example is *Le fatiche di Ercole* by Pietro Francisci (1958) with Steve Reeves as Hercules; it was premiered in the USSR in 1966 and attracted 31.5 million viewers; see "Премьеры. Подвиги Геракла. *Le fatiche di Ercole*, 1957" [Prem'ery. Podvigi Gerakla. *Le fatiche di Ercole*, 1957; Premieres: Feats of Heracles. *Le fatiche di Ercole*, 1957], КиноПоиск [KinoPoisk], <https://www.kinopoisk.ru/film/92386/dates/> (accessed 17 April 2020). For the idea to look at the distribution of Hollywood productions in the USSR, I would like to thank Sebastian Różycki.

schools and from smaller towns was carried out by psychologists, pedagogues, and film-makers. According to the obtained data, an ordinary Moscow pupil at that time went to the cinema up to four times per month, with 13% of respondents stating they visited the cinema more than eight (and up to twenty-four!) times per month.<sup>6</sup> Many of these avid filmgoers were children nine and ten years old.<sup>7</sup> The young audience expressed preference for adventurous and fast-action films first and foremost.

In 1928, the Совкино (Sovkino; Soviet Cinema), the main organization dealing with film production in the USSR in the years 1924–1930, singled out films suitable for children, thereby creating a children’s film collection.<sup>8</sup> Because there was a scarcity of cinematic works addressed specially to children during that period, the Sovkino proposed showing them productions made for adults, choosing ones that were “ideologically right” and served didactic purposes. A brochure published in 1929 contains a list of sixty such films,<sup>9</sup> usually ideologically correct, often depicting revolutions, as in the case of Sergei Eisenstein’s *Броненосец Потемкин* [Bronenosets Potëmkin; Battleship Potiomkin, 1925], although comedies and animations are also included. Apart from Soviet films, there were European and American productions on the list (for example, *Der letzte Mann* by F.W. Murnau, 1924; *Die Nibelungen* by Fritz Lang, 1924; *Berlin. Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* by Walter Ruttmann, 1927). Eventually films were made in the USSR for kids with children actors, and, as part of that, some were set in schools. The first school-based films were produced in the 1930s (*Путевка в жизнь* [Putëvka v zhizn’; Road to Life], dir. Nikolai Ekk, 1931; and

<sup>6</sup> See V. A. Pravdoliubov, *Кино и наша молодежь. На основе данных педологии: для школ, родителей, воспитателей и кино-работников* [Kino i nasha molodëzh. Na osnove dannykh pedologii: dla shkol, roditelei, vospitatelei i kino-rabotnikov; The Cinema and Our Youth: Based on Paedology Data. For Schools, Parents, Educators, and Film Workers], Moskva and Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel’stvo, 1929, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem. The situation was quite similar in the late 1970s. As Bykov notes: “According to film distribution data, children and young people constitute 70 percent of the auditorium” (7 February 1979; По данным проката, дети и юноши составляют 70% зрительного зала), in Rolan Bykov, *Я побит – начну сначала! Дневники* [Ja pobit – nachnu snachala! Dnevniki; I’m Defeated – I’ll Start Over! Diaries], comment. Elena Sanaeva, Moskva: Astrel’, 2010, 70. The online version of the diary is available at the website of the project *Prozhito* [Lived] containing digital versions of ego-documents written, first of all, in Russia and the USSR from the nineteenth century on; see <https://prozhito.org/person/249> (accessed 18 April 2020). Translations of all the Russian quotations are mine (H.P.), if not stated otherwise.

<sup>8</sup> Anna Latsis, L. Keilina, and A. Shirvindt, *Указатель кино-репертуара детских сеансов* [Ukazatel’ kino-repertuara detskikh seansov; Childrens’ Film Repertoire Index], vol. 1, Moskva: Tea-Kino-Pechat’, 1929, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Latsis, Keilina, and Shirvindt, *Ukazatel’ kino-repertuara*.

*Одна* [Odna; Alone], dirs. Grigory Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, 1931), and by the 1960s they developed into a full-fledged genre.<sup>10</sup>

School offers an ideal scenery as it represents a model of society with various types of interconnections: in addition to the teachers–pupils relations, there are different groups based on friendship, rivalry, love and hate, etc.<sup>11</sup> School as a group of people has an additional significance in the Soviet case as the collective was one of the main values of Soviet society. It is interesting that the genre of school film had hardly been developed in Stalinist cinema. According to Liubov Arkus, this was due to the fact that “school as a territory was too dangerous for cinema, as it always looks like a model of the state” (школа как территория была фактурой слишком опасной для кино, т. к. она всегда выглядит как модель государства).<sup>12</sup>

In general, Soviet school cinema aimed at “fostering officially recognized values” (утверждение официально одобренных ценностей).<sup>13</sup> The films produced after the Thaw (that is, after Stalin’s death) are fairly complicated and differentiated. They are often emotional and aspire to evoke sympathy in the viewer.<sup>14</sup> Some present difficult relationships and misunderstandings between children and adults (*А если это любовь?* [A esli eto liubov?; What If It Be Love?], dir. Yuly Raizman, 1961). But, contrary to American (*Blackboard Jungle*, dir. Richard Brooks, 1955) or European films (*if...*, dir. Lindsay Anderson, 1968), there is no revolt of youth against the school in Soviet films. Usually both

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<sup>10</sup> Galina Belyaeva and Vadim Mikhailin, “Советское школьное кино: рождение жанра” [Sovetskoe shkolnoe kino: rozhdenie zhanra; The Soviet School Film: Birth of a Genre], in Ilya Kukulin, Maria Mayofis, and Piotr Safronov, eds., *Острова утопии. Педагогическое и социальное проектирование послевоенной школы (1940–1980-е)* [Ostrova utopii. Pedagogicheskoe i sotsial’noe proektirovanie poslevoennoi shkoly (1940–1980-e); Islands of Utopia: Pedagogical and Social Planning in the Postwar Soviet School, 1940s–1980s], Moskva: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2015, 553–557.

<sup>11</sup> Vadim Mikhailin and Galina Belyaeva, “У истоков жанра: о предпосылках появления советского ‘школьного кино’ в позднесталинскую эпоху” [U istokov zhanra: o predposylkakh poivavleniia sovetskogo “shkol’nogo kino” v pozdnestalinskuiu epokhu; At the Source of a Genre: On the Prerequisites for the Soviet “School Film” in Late Stalin Times], in Jörg Baberowski et al., eds., *Советское государство и общество в период позднего сталинизма. 1945–1953 гг.* [Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i obshchestvo v period pozdnego stalinizma. 1945–1953 gg.; The Soviet State and Society during the Late Stalinist Period, 1945–1953], Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2015, 352.

<sup>12</sup> Liubov Arkus, “Приключения белой вороны. Эволюция ‘школьного фильма’ в советском кино” [Priklucheniia beloi vorony. Evolutsiia “shkol’nogo filma” v sovetskom kino; The Adventures of a White Crow: The Evolution of the “School Film” in Soviet Cinema], *Сеанс* [Seans; Showing] 41–42 (2010), <https://seance.ru/articles/whitecrow/> (accessed 18 April 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Belyaeva and Mikhailin, “Советское школьное кино”, 574.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

teachers and pupils form a unified body helping the main protagonist to become better (*Республика ШКИД* [Respublika ShKID; The Republic of ShKID], dir. Gennady Poloka, 1966).

In a similar way to the English school story, a teacher is often in the centre of the Soviet movies. However, in the latter case you would not see a teacher of Latin as the main character, a figure ever so popular in the classical school films (*Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, dir. Sam Wood, 1939; *Hets* [Torment], dir. Alf Sjöberg, 1944; *Child's Play*, dir. Sidney Lumet, 1972). The reason obviously relates to the abolition of classical languages teaching in secondary schools in the USSR just after the revolution of 1917.<sup>15</sup> Although Latin was partially reinstated during and after World War Two,<sup>16</sup> it was peripheral and did not find a place in novels or films. Indeed, even one of the most famous teachers of Greek in Russian literature – “the man in the case” – of Anton Chekhov is remembered usually just as a “severe teacher” without emphasizing his discipline (compare *Розыгрыш* [Rozygrysh; Practical Joke], dir. Vladimir Menshov, 1977). Teachers in Soviet school films usually specialize in languages, mostly Russian (*Урок литературы* [Urok literatury; Literature Lesson], dir. Aleksei Korenev, 1968; *Ключ без права передачи* [Kliuch bez prava peredachi; The Key That Should Not Be Handed On], dir. Dinara Asanova, 1976), rarely English (*Доживем до понедельника* [Dozhivëm do ponedel'nika; We'll Live till Monday], dir. Stanislav Rostotsky, 1968), also in mathematics (*Practical Joke; Dear Miss Elena*), and from the late 1960s in history (*We'll Live till Monday*).<sup>17</sup> It goes without saying

<sup>15</sup> On the problem of Latin teaching in European schools, see Françoise Waquet, *Latin, or, The Empire of a Sign*, trans. John Howe, London: Verso, 2002 (ed. pr. in French 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Aleksandr Gavrillov, “Jakov M. Borovskij: Poet of Latin in the Soviet Union”, in György Karsai, Gábor Klaniczay, David Movrin, and Elżbieta Olechowska, eds., *Classics and Communism: Greek and Latin behind the Iron Curtain*, Ljubljana, Budapest, and Warsaw: Ljubljana University Press, Faculty of Arts; Collegium Budapest Institute for Advanced Study; and Faculty of “Artes Liberales”, University of Warsaw, 2013, 28; Solomon Lurie, “Из воспоминаний о Марке Наумовиче Ботвиннике” [Iz vospominanii o Marke Naumoviche Botvinnike; Reminiscing about Mark Naumovich Botvinnik], *Древний мир и мы* [Drevnii mir i my; The Ancient World and We] 1 (1997), 187; Pamela Davidson, *Cultural Memory and Survival: The Russian Renaissance of Classical Antiquity in the Twentieth Century*, “Studies in Russia and Eastern Europe” 6, London: School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 17–18, available online at the University College London open access library: UCL Discovery, <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/69111/> (accessed 6 January 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Vadim Mikhailin and Galina Belyaeva, “Историк в истерике, или О внезапном появлении учителя истории в советском кино рубежа 1960–1970х гг.” [Istorik v isterike, ili O vnezapnom pojavlenii uchitelia istorii v sovetskom kino rubezha 1960–1970kh gg.]; A Historian in Hysterics: History Teachers in the Soviet Cinema of the Late 1960s and Early 1970s], in Vadim Mikhailin and Galina Belyaeva, *Между позицией и позой. Учитель истории в советском “школьном” кино* [Mezhdu

that the teacher-protagonist is usually an ideal character. However, in the 1960s we see good as well as bad schoolmasters portrayed in films (*What If It Be Love?*; *Друг мой, Колька!* [Drug moi, Kolka!; My Friend, Kolka!], dirs. Aleksei Saltykov and Aleksandr Mitta, 1961). Nevertheless, the ideal teacher usually was present and (s)he was the one who would resolve the given problems merely by her or his appearance. Initially the depicted pedagogues were both female and male; however, this changed in favour of the typical female teacher-protagonist at the end of the 1960s. "From now on, the teacher is usually a single woman, for whom the school replaces all other aspects of normal human life" (Отныне учитель – это, как правило, одинокая женщина, для которой школа заменяет все прочие аспекты нормальной человеческой жизни)<sup>18</sup> – something that closely reflected social reality.

### **Scarecrow and Dear Miss Elena**

The school film was reborn with new power in the late 1980s.<sup>19</sup> The two films I wish to discuss are examples of this genre. Both have their origins in literary texts known to the public from 1981: the novel for children and youth *Чучело* [Chuchelo; Scarecrow, 1981] by Vladimir Zheleznikov<sup>20</sup> and the drama *Дорогая Елена Сергеевна* [Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna; Dear Miss Elena, written in 1980, published in 1989] by Liudmila Razumovskaia.<sup>21</sup> Even though Rolan Bykov directed *Scarecrow* in 1983, while Eldar Riazanov made *Dear Miss Elena* in 1988, the difference in time is not so great, as the latter had been staged in theatres since 1981 (it was banned in 1983 by Mikhail Gorbachev), and Riazanov wanted

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pozitsiei i pozoi. Uchitel' istorii v sovetskom "shkol'nom" kino; In-Between Position and Pose: Teacher of History in the Soviet "School" Film], "Труды ЛИСКА" [Trudy LISKA; Works of LISKA – Laboratory of Historical, Social and Cultural Anthropology] 21, Saratov and Sankt-Peterburg: LISKA, 2013, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Vadim Mikhailin and Galina Belyaeva, "Поколение инопланетян: о 'новой волне' в школьном кино 1980-х годов" [Pokolenie inoplanetian: o "novoï volne" v shkol'nom kino 1980-kh godov; Generation of Aliens: A "New Wave" in the Soviet Late 1980s School Film], *Неприкосновенный запас* [Neprikosnovennyi zasap; Emergency Supply] 3.119 (2018), 101.

<sup>20</sup> Vladimir Zheleznikov, *Чучело* [Chuchelo; Scarecrow], Moskva: Sovremennik, 1988 (ed. pr. 1981).

<sup>21</sup> Liudmila Razumovskaia, "Дорогая Елена Сергеевна" [Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna; Dear Miss Elena], in Liudmila Razumovskaia, *Сад без земли. Пьесы* [Sad bez zemli. P'esy; The Earthless Garden: Plays], Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1989, 53–94.

to produce it from November 1982.<sup>22</sup> We can therefore consider the films to be products of the same time.

*Scarecrow* also had a long way to the screen. Zheleznikov wrote a film script in 1973, but Госкино (Goskino; State Cinema), the main censoring body in the USSR for film production, did not accept it and announced that “such children and such a school will never appear on Soviet screens” (такие дети и такая школа никогда не появятся на советском экране).<sup>23</sup> Due to this, the author rewrote the script as a novel and published it in 1981.<sup>24</sup> The novel was a success and was reissued in “millions of copies”, as the author states.<sup>25</sup> As a result, Goskino itself asked for a film adaptation. However, after the film was made, it was to be banned again. The director says it was only his personal contact with Yuri Andropov, then the leader of the USSR, that enabled the film’s release.<sup>26</sup> Distribution began in the autumn of 1984.<sup>27</sup>

Both films were exceptional and generated a huge resonance among young and adult viewers. The problem was that the usual pattern of good and bad characters was disturbed. It seems that in these films the entire society is sick, and at best one or more characters are good. *Scarecrow* presents the problem of bullying in the school community, while *Dear Miss Elena* discusses an incident of the terrorization of a teacher by several pupils in her own apartment. There was considerable dispute about the films, and over the years the authors received letters from their audiences.<sup>28</sup> Discussions were held in many newspapers

<sup>22</sup> David MacFadyen, “Ideology Faces the Horrors of Its Opposite”, in David MacFadyen, *The Sad Comedy of Eldar Riazanov: An Introduction to Russia’s Most Popular Filmmaker*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014 (ed. pr. 2003), 79.

<sup>23</sup> Vladimir Zheleznikov, “‘Чучело’ продолжается” [“Chuchelo” prodolzhaetsia; “Scarecrow” Goes On], interview with Zheleznikov by T. Korotkova, *Известия* [Izvestiia; The News], 26 October 2010, <https://chapaev.media/articles/2582> (accessed 17 April 2020).

<sup>24</sup> It was first published in an abbreviated version in the children’s and youth magazine *Пионер* [Pioneer; Pioneer] 3–7 (1981) under the title “Всего-то несколько дней” [Vsego-to neskol’ko dnei; Just a Few Days], then in its entirety in the author’s collections of short stories published in 1981, 1982, 1986, 1988, 1989, etc.

<sup>25</sup> Zheleznikov, “‘Chuchelo’ prodolzhaetsia”.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*; Viktor Matizen, “Ролан Быков: ‘Великий и ужасный’ на Чистых прудах. Интервью” [Rolan Bykov: “Velikii i uzhasnyi” na Chistykh prudakh. Interv’iu; Rolan Bykov: “The Great and the Terrible” at Chistye Prudy. Interview], *Искусство кино* [Iskusstvo kino; The Art of Cinema] 5 (May 1998), 79–88, available online at the journal archive, <http://old.kinoart.ru/archive/1998/05/n5-article17> (accessed 17 April 2020).

<sup>27</sup> See the diaries of Bykov from the years 1983–1984: *Ja pobit*, 293–371.

<sup>28</sup> Bykov used these letters to write a discussion with viewers published as “До и после *Чучела*” [Do i posle *Chuchela*; Before and After *Scarecrow*] in the popular magazine *Юность* [Iunost’; Youth] 9 (1985), 84–105.

and magazines, both large and small, central and local. Many letters contained objections. There were also personal confessions, however, about similar experiences, with viewers speaking for both the victims and the bullies.

*Scarecrow* as the first movie of this kind opened the way for other, similar cinematic works depicting social cruelty among children and youth in the USSR. Among them were *Плюмбум или Опасная игра* [Plumbum ili Opasnaia igra; Plumbum, or, The Dangerous Game], dir. Vadim Abdrashitov, 1986; *Соблазн* [Soblazn; Temptation], dir. Viacheslav Sorokin, 1987; and *Меня зовут Арлекино* [Menia zovut Arlekino; My Name Is Harlequin], dir. Valery Rybarev, 1988. *Dear Miss Elena* was one of the movies in this group.<sup>29</sup>

## The Hydra of the Collective

Both of the works analysed have been made in the school film genre. There is a class at the centre of *Scarecrow*, and five pupils and their teacher are the main characters of *Dear Miss Elena*. In both films, children show their worst qualities and the teachers are unable to influence them. In both cases, it is a group of people, the collective, that is the evil allowing the characters to reveal their wicked sides. This approach was uncommon in Soviet cinema, as the collective was one of the main values of the ruling ideology. Bykov, the director of *Scarecrow*, calls the school class the “hydra of the collective” from the beginning of his work on the production. The following is a fragment from his diary, from when he first decided to make the film:

ХОЧУ СТАВИТЬ “ЧУЧЕЛО” ЖЕЛЕЗНИКОВА. [...] В духовном плане разговор в “Чучеле” о “гидре коллектива”, правда которого чаще всего безнравственна. В самом зародыше, в самой игре во всевластие, в самом посыле – “интересы коллектива превыше всего”.<sup>30</sup>

I WANT TO SHOOT “SCARECROW” BY ZHELEZNIKOV. [...] Spiritually, the discussion in “Scarecrow” is about the “hydra of the collective”, the truth of which is often immoral. In the very origin, in the very game

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<sup>29</sup> On social cruelty in Soviet films about children, see Olga Romanova, “Социальное насилие в ‘детских фильмах о детях’” [Sotsialnoe nasilie v “nedetskikh fil'makh o detiakh”]; Social Violence in “Non-Children’s Films about Children”, a public lecture at the Belarusian State University, November 2013, available online at the website of the European College of Liberal Arts, Minsk, <https://eclab.by/texts/lection/socialnoe-nasilie-v-nedetskikh-filmah-o-detyah> (accessed 18 April 2020).

<sup>30</sup> Bykov, *la pobit*, 191–192 (1 December 1981).

of omnipotence, in the very message – “the interests of the collective are above all else”.

Referring to a principle of the Pioneer organization,<sup>31</sup> to subordinate personal interests to those of society,<sup>32</sup> Bykov undermines the very ideology of socialist society. However, his deeds cannot be interpreted as anti-Soviet. Rather, he was acting in the spirit of the upcoming *perestroika*, and aiming to improve the morals of the society. Bykov returned to the idea of the hydra after a few months, emphasizing that he was fighting with the vulgarity<sup>33</sup> of the group and mass culture as its result:

Все, что я делаю, и все те, кто по эту сторону, – это борьба со вселенской пошлостью. Массовая культура – самый общий и самый глобальный шаг пошлого. Мы должны понимать, что сегодня пошлости не противопоставлено общественное сознание, ибо само общественное сознание может быть пошлым. Пошлость человека не так страшна, как пошлость коллектива. Пошлость коллектива – явление типа гидры с двенадцатью головами: где отрубишь три, вырастает четыре.

Everything I do, and all those on this side are doing, is a fight against universal vulgarity. Mass culture is the most common and global move of vulgarity. We must understand that today vulgarity is not opposed to the public consciousness, because the public consciousness itself can be vulgar. Human vulgarity is not as terrible as the vulgarity of a collective. The vulgarity of a collective is a phenomenon like a hydra with twelve heads: where you cut off three, four start growing.<sup>34</sup>

Thus the author states that it is the bad collective that is evil. And that evil may rise when it is supported by a group. On the one hand, Bykov reflects on the developing phenomenon of mass culture. On the other, he removes the positive aspect from the idea of the collective. Mass culture from the Soviet perspective

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<sup>31</sup> The Vladimir Lenin All-Union Pioneer Organization (Всесоюзная пионерская организация имени В. И. Ленина; Vsesoiuznaia pionerskaia organizatsiia imeni V. I. Lenina) was a mass organization for children and youth of the USSR (from nine to fifteen years old), rooted in the Scout movement and aimed at the ideological education of Soviet youth.

<sup>32</sup> This principle was symbolized by the Young Pioneer salute – a hand raised above the head.

<sup>33</sup> The following quotation is based on an untranslatable Russian term – *пошлость*; *poshlost'* – which contains the meanings “banality”, “obscenity”, and “bad taste”, and is usually translated as “vulgarity”. Cf. Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1994, 41–66.

<sup>34</sup> Bykov, *Ia pobit*, 201 (16 February 1982).

was understood as “‘low’, commercial, [...] too vulgar”<sup>35</sup> in opposition to Soviet culture. Although socialist realism’s works of art were produced in extensive amounts, reached people all over the country, and very often were of altogether low artistic quality (functioning as another case of “mass kitsch”), they had different functions and aimed at educating the masses and bringing socialism to life – these artworks were considered “good” *a priori*. During late socialism, products of Western mass culture, music, and cinema became more accessible, even fashionable, to Soviet people, especially among youth.<sup>36</sup> This influenced not only aesthetics, but values as well, thereby debasing spirituality in favour of material goods and wealth – creating *poshlost’*, in Russian terminology. This combination of vulgarity and collective power created the hydra that Bykov was depicting.<sup>37</sup>

Before working on *Scarecrow*, for five years (1975–1980) Bykov was the host of the *Спор-Клуб* [Spor-Klub; Dispute-Club], a television show for teenagers. The problems of childhood and of the possibility of sincere conversation with children about difficult things became a concern for him, one he pondered for many years.<sup>38</sup> He was planning to write a book on childhood and was promoting cinema for children at meetings with the Soviet authorities, dreaming about a special television programme for young viewers: “[...] an international one. The programme of masterpieces, the world exchange” ([...] международной. О программе шедевров, о мировом обмене).<sup>39</sup> Thus, it seems natural that the director chose children and their society as the subject of his movie.

At the same time, Bykov was also very interested in folklore and fairy tales. In 1980 he was writing a screenplay for the fairy tale *Андрей – всех добрей* [Andrei – vsekh dobrei; Andrei, the Kindest] for Gennady Kharlan and

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<sup>35</sup> Boris Groys, “A Style and a Half”, in Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Social Realism without Shores*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 1997, 79. Compare Viacheslav Glazychev’s description of mass culture in *Большая Советская Энциклопедия* [Bol’shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia; Great Soviet Encyclopaedia], vol. 15, 3rd ed., Moskva: Izdatelstvo Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia, 1974, coll. 1346–1349.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Sergei I. Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity and Ideology in Soviet Dnepropetrovsk, 1960–1985*, Washington, DC, and Baltimore, MD: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010; Anna Ivanova, *Магазины “Березка”. Парадоксы потребления в позднем СССР* [Magaziny “Berëzka”. Paradokxy potrebleniia v pozdnem SSSR; “Beriozka” Stores: Paradoxes of Consumption in the Late USSR], Moskva: Novoe Literaturnoe Obzrenie, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> See Bykov, *Ja pobit*, 270 (1 April 1983); Bykov, “Do i posle *Chuchela*”, 97.

<sup>38</sup> See his diaries, especially the years 1979–1986.

<sup>39</sup> Bykov, *Ja pobit*, 84 (5 July 1979).

Belarusfilm studio.<sup>40</sup> He was fascinated with fairy tales and wanted to shoot his own wonder-tale film. In his diaries, Bykov quotes many academic books, documentaries, and lectures on the theory of folk tales (for example, by Alexei Galakhov, Yuri Barabash, Mikhail Bakhtin, James George Frazer), calling structuralism and folklore studies “his topics”.<sup>41</sup>

Bykov’s *Scarecrow* is obviously not a wonder tale, but the director uses much of this genre to build the narrative and characters. The action takes place over a year. It starts in autumn and finishes in autumn, referring to the cycle of nature and the school year. The protagonist is Lena Bessoltseva<sup>42</sup> – a girl who moves from Moscow to a small Russian town (unnamed in the movie) to live with her grandfather, Nikolai Nikolaevich. The pair of child and grandfather (or old father) is a common motif of fairy tales. It recalls Tom Thumb’s or Tommelise’s families, or Russian Дед Мороз (Ded Moroz; Grandfather Frost, the equivalent of Santa Claus; Ded Moroz has a granddaughter named Снегурочка [Snegurochka; Snow Maiden] in Russian folklore). Similarly to the “old father” of fairy tales, the grandfather is present and absent in the narrative; he does not participate or help Lena until the final events of the story start to unfold.<sup>43</sup>

Lena is a typical hero of fairy tales – kind, simple, over-trusting, brave, and sincere.<sup>44</sup> In a way, she is similar to Ivan the Fool or the Idiot of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, as Bykov himself states:

Чучело – “Идиот” в масштабе этой повести (кстати, это еще не сделано), она – Донья Кихот, но и не то. Ведь это о Любви. Она не ищет мельниц и не живет ради высокого помысла, она не “ради”, она естественно такова, она даже не ведает, кто она внутренне и кто она внешне, она сама являет собой ценность, редкость, искренность.<sup>45</sup>

Scarecrow is an “Idiot” on the scale of the story (by the way, it hasn’t been done yet), she is Doña Quixote, but not really. It is all about Love. She is not looking for windmills and does not live for the sake of high thought, she is not “for the sake of”, she is naturally so, she does not even know who she is inside and what she looks like; she is herself a value, rarity, sincerity.

<sup>40</sup> The movie was eventually based on another screenplay and was released as *Андрей и злой чародей* [Andrei i zloi charodei; Andrei and the Evil Wizard] in 1981.

<sup>41</sup> Bykov, *la pobit*, 142 (9 October 1980).

<sup>42</sup> The family name is a charactonym meaning “without salt”.

<sup>43</sup> The final role of the grandfather, when he finds the bullies and calls them by name, is quoted by Bykov as typical of fairy tales; see Bykov, “Do i posle *Chuchela*”, 102.

<sup>44</sup> See Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987, 86–88.

<sup>45</sup> Bykov, *la pobit*, 192 (1 December 1981).

In his study of folklore, Bykov was going to make “a comparison of heroes: Heracles – David of Sassoun<sup>46</sup> – Ilya Muromets”<sup>47</sup> (сравнение богатырей: Геракла – Давида Сасунского – Ильи Муромца). Ivan the Fool and his path of becoming Ivan the Tsarevich (the prince).<sup>48</sup> In my opinion, while developing the character of Lena Bessoltseva in the movie, the director uses features of the following folk and classical characters: Heracles fighting with the Hydra;<sup>49</sup> Ivan the Fool, Don Quixote, and the Idiot believing until the end in honour and the good intentions of other people; Joan of Arc and Christ ready to die for their ideals;<sup>50</sup> young David fighting against a giant.

When Lena appears for the first time in the film (see Fig. 1) we hear the song “Venus” by Shocking Blue, which was extremely popular in the Soviet Union of that time and even came to have a “Russian” name – “Shisgara”:

A goddess on a mountain top  
Was burning like a silver flame  
The summit of beauty and love  
And Venus was her name.  
She's got it  
Yeah, baby, she's got it  
Well, I'm your Venus  
I'm your fire  
At your desire [...].  
Her weapons were her crystal eyes  
Making every man mad  
Black as the dark night she was  
Got what no one else had [...].

This refers to the interpretation of the conflict by Bykov: “It is all about Love”. Lena does everything in the name of her love for Dima, her classmate, and does not see his flaws as long as she can. The whole conflict is based on this love: wanting to protect Dima, Lena takes his fault upon herself, claiming

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<sup>46</sup> An Armenian epic character.

<sup>47</sup> A Russian and East-Slavic epic character.

<sup>48</sup> Bykov, *Ia pobit*, 111 (23 May 1980).

<sup>49</sup> I use two variants of spelling the word “Hydra” – with capital “H” to mean the mythical creature, and lowercased when used in a metaphorical sense.

<sup>50</sup> For the messianic figure in youth culture, see also Michael Stierstorfer’s chapter, “From an Adolescent Freak to a Hope-Spreading Messianic Demigod: The Curious Transformations of Modern Teenagers in Contemporary Mythopoetic Fantasy Literature”, 219–229, in the present volume.

that she was the one who betrayed their class.<sup>51</sup> The class starts to persecute, boycott, and bully her in a cruel way. As a culmination, the children make a scarecrow using Lena's dress and set it on fire in the ruins of an old church. Afterwards Lena shaves her head, puts the burnt dress on, and comes to Dima's birthday uninvited. Changing the music, she dances to the song "Good Good Lovin'" by Chubby Checker, which refers to the topic of love again.



**Figure 1:** Kristina Orbakaitė as Lena Bessoltseva first appearing in the film *Чучело* [Chuchelo; Scarecrow], 1983, dir. Rolan Bykov. Courtesy of the Mosfilm studio.

This love of Lena is evidently a Christ-like love – forgiving, turning its cheek, bearing the cross. On the other hand, she is just a girl who is in love with a boy. And it is an ordinary human love. She idealizes Dima, does stupid things for him – and acts under the influence of a Venus type of love. Although she is supposed to be clumsy and not pretty according to Zheleznikov's novel,<sup>52</sup> Kristina Orbakaitė, the actress, is a beautiful girl, maybe a little bit funny. When she first appears in the movie, we first hear her name – Bessoltseva – and then see a crowd of children running towards a river. Then we see a girl walking behind the columns of an arcade. We see her face with long, fair, braided hair as she approaches, moving among the columns. Her figure and face are shot from

<sup>51</sup> For a more detailed description of the movie, see the *Our Mythical Childhood Survey* database: Hanna Paulouskaya, "Entry on *Scarecrow* [Чучело] by Rolan Bykov and Vladimir Zheleznikov", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Susan Deacy, *Our Mythical Childhood Survey*, Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019, <http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/853> (accessed 17 April 2020). See also an interesting contemporary analysis of the film made by Nancy P. Condee, holding a fellowship at the Institute of Current World Affairs in 1984–1986, available online at <http://www.icwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/NPC-6.pdf> (accessed 19 April 2020).

<sup>52</sup> Zheleznikov, *Chuchelo*, 7.

a similar perspective as the famous depiction of Venus of Botticelli. The song about the goddess in the background enhances this allusion.

In her mistakes and simplicity Lena acts as Ivan the Fool, the Idiot, or as the impulsive Heracles. However, her similarity to the latter is the slightest. She is neither strong nor performs great deeds. On the other hand, she fights a monster and stands by her truth until the end. It is the director's evocation of Hydra that hints at Heracles.

Are there allusions to the mythological Hydra in the movie? In my opinion, the director made at least a few attempts to shoot a crowd of kids as a multi-headed creature. At the very beginning of the film we have a pedestrian street view formed by a building in the background, the pavement in front of it, and a street for strolling with trees and benches, fenced with iron barriers. We hear sounds of vehicles and the indistinct chatter of the persons portrayed in the scene. The building is huge, and we only see a fragment of it. It is painted cream and white. Grey windows and doors are distinctive. There are three big doors in the centre of the building, ones which resemble a typical Greek theatre stage. The steps leading to the building are similar to the crepidoma of Ancient Greek temples. In the shot, there are a few groups of people: two men chatting in the left front corner, two women with a baby in the right back corner, one man standing in the rear centre. Some people are moving through the shot, also through the doors. In the very centre of the frame, there is a group of ten children sitting in a row on a bench. Most of them are dressed in grey, green, and dark-blue clothes. There is a girl in white and red clothes in the centre of the group, which focuses the scene visually. The camera zooms in and we see that most of the children are boys. One of them has a tape recorder, and we can hear music. The children are listening to it and moving. Some of them are fighting in a friendly way. Then the middle girl stands up, takes another girl with her, and they step out of the frame. At this moment the boys on the right go after them, and then all the boys follow the girls. The group sitting in a row and slightly moving resembles a living creature, a kind of a caterpillar or a snake. It is set in motion by its colourful centre, and then gathers all of its parts together.

Another scene I wish to describe is the moment when the class is standing on a street with suitcases, as the children were not taken on a trip to Moscow for their misconduct (Part 1, 00:47:02).<sup>53</sup> The children had conspired to skip a lesson and Dima confessed it to the teacher, which is why they have been

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<sup>53</sup> For the reader's convenience, I specify the start time of episodes in the film in the format "Part (1 or 2), Hour:Minutes:Seconds".

punished. After the bus to Moscow has departed, the children form a tight group behind Lena's back, and start to move in her direction. At first, they whisper resentfully, sounding like a snake's hissing. Then they call her names and the crowd surrounds her, moving towards her. The class has a leader, Mironova, usually referred to as Железная кнопка (Zheleznaia knopka; Iron Pin), as she is a small girl with an iron character. Mironova is depicted as the main head of this hydra. After the camera zooms in on her face, filling the whole screen, and only fragments of the other children's figures are visible (Part 1, 00:47:37), the operator makes shots of the full faces only of speaking persons (Mironova and Valka; see Fig. 2). Due to this, the faces of the children are similar to the heads of a single creature. The effect continues as the scene is shot from a more distant position, when the person speaking changes (Marina), and the crowd is now following the new leader, repeating words of boycott in a hissing way. Lena and Dima run away from the class, and it follows them. Children run with different speed and the group ceases to resemble a unified creature. In the city square they see an ice-cream seller, and at this point some of them behave like normal children again, abandoning the chase in order to buy an ice cream.



**Figure 2:** Mironova and Valka as hydra's heads, still from the film *Чучело* [Chuchelo; Scarecrow], 1983, dir. Rolan Bykov. Courtesy of the Mosfilm studio.

Each child from the group is different. We know their stories. Some of them are idealists, believing in communist values. Mironova is such a person. She is firmly committed to her principles and often speaks in slogans. Shmakova, the girl wearing the red jacket in the first scene, is beautiful, has the best clothes, and pays attention to her appearance. She behaves in a sneaky way. Marina Martanova wants to go to Moscow to find her father who had left her family,

and that is why she is very upset and angry. Valka, a tall, naughty boy, is cruel to dogs. Vasilev wants to help Lena, but is not strong and influential enough. Dima has the best marks in the class and is loved by everybody, but he has no courage to tell the truth. This mixture of principles and of their absence, the vulgarity seasoned with communist slogans makes the hydra-monster. The class has skipped a lesson, but it is not a problem for them, and they do not think that they have done anything wrong. They are convinced that they should stay together to the end and regard anyone who has a different opinion as a traitor. Their ideal behaviour is based on war principles, which command them to protect comrades to the end and to destroy their enemies. In persecuting Lena, they do not see her as a person and feel no empathy for her.

The role of the teacher in this situation is minimal. Margarita Ivanovna is preparing to get married and does not see a problem in the class until the end. There is also the figure of the school principal, who stands at the school entrance every year on 1 September – the first day of school – and greets the pupils (Part 1, 00:15:45; Part 2, 00:44:51). She resembles a pre-revolutionary school lady or a communist authority, but her role is only representative. The problem of the class is not resolved by the school, and the children are left alone with their understanding of life's principles.

It seems that the world of the adults is separated from the world of the children and has no influence on it. However, the adults, normal dwellers of the town, behave in a similar way. They do not like Lena's grandfather, because he, being a war veteran, a major, spends all his money on pictures painted by his own grandfather, a serf artist,<sup>54</sup> and on restoring the old family house. His concern for family history and tradition, together with his disregard for clothing or appearance, is not accepted by the other city dwellers. The kids call him "a patch-maker" and tease him.

There is another person in the movie who deserves attention, connected with a cadet school's brass band playing classical music from time to time on the town's streets or on the riverside. The conductor of the orchestra is Rolan Bykov, the director of the movie.<sup>55</sup> He resembles the figure of the coryphée of Greek tragedy, who is a witness to the events and is present during the performance. At the close of the movie, we see Bykov, who takes off his peaked cap and sends

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<sup>54</sup> In this way Zheleznikov gives the Bessoltsevs a peasant or servile origin, which was important for the Soviet system, combining it with a more civilized and modern – artistic – character (serfdom was abolished in Russia only in 1861, and dependent people had various functions).

<sup>55</sup> It is interesting that his wife, Elena Sanaeva, and her son, Pavel Sanaev, also acted in the movie (the teacher Margarita Ivanovna and Vasilev).

his respects to Lena and her grandfather (see Fig. 3). In a close-up shot, his face expresses pain and compassion for the girl.<sup>56</sup> Bykov emphasizes that he chose a cadet orchestra “to render military honours” (отдать [...] воинские почести) to the heroes of the film.<sup>57</sup>



**Figure 3:** Rolan Bykov as the conductor of the orchestra sending respects to Lena and Nikolai Bessoltsev, still from the film *Чучело* [Chuchelo; Scarecrow], 1983, dir. Rolan Bykov. Courtesy of the Mosfilm studio.

The classical music played by the orchestra refers to eternal human values. It differs from contemporary, mostly Western rock-and-roll music, which is used as themes for Lena and the class. Such a choice may stress the bad influence of Western mass culture or just depict differences between the generations and represent the contemporary world as a mixture of classical, serious values and pressure-free modern influences.

## A Soviet Antigone

The character of Mironova, Iron Pin, refers also to the model of Antigone, who stands by her ideals to the end. The girl acts as a class consciousness and does not say anything vicious or unprincipled. However, her values are too “iron” to produce a happy ending. During the finale, when the class finds out the truth about the real “traitor”, the girl proposes to make a new boycott, this time of Dima, as well as of Shmakova and Popov, who knew the truth and yet said

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<sup>56</sup> See Bykov, “Do i posle *Chuchela*”, 105; Mikhailin and Belyaeva, “Pokolenie inoplanetian”, 104.

<sup>57</sup> See Bykov, “Do i posle *Chuchela*”, 105.

nothing. But at this point the class does not follow Mironova, and the pupils make the decision to stop boycotting altogether.

An image of another Antigone is presented in the film *Dear Miss Elena* by Riazanov (see Fig. 4), or even in greater measure in the text of the play by Razumovskaia<sup>58</sup> and its theatre stagings. The difference between the generations, with youth portrayed as cruel and horrifying, is presented also in this cinematic production. This time the action is set in the flat of the teacher, Miss Elena, and she is most involved in the incident, as she is the object of the violence.

During the final school examinations four pupils from the last grade (Voldia, Vitia, Pasha, and Lialia) come to the flat of their teacher Elena with birthday wishes, flowers, and a present. The real reason of their visit is their wish to get the key to the safe where their tests in mathematics are kept. They want to correct their answers in order to get good or excellent marks. Elena does not want to give them the key, and they stay at her place all night, trying to persuade her and acting ever more cruelly. The movie ends with an attempted rape of Lialia, the resignation of three of the four persecutors, and the implied suicide of Elena.

Most of the night the pupils and their teacher are talking, which reveals the differences between their values. This is especially noticeable in the text of the play, which has more intertextual references and resembles a philosophical dialogue.<sup>59</sup> The most striking in this conversation is the impossibility of listening to each other. At some point in the play, the teacher even covers her ears and starts to recite Romantic poems by Alexander Pushkin not to hear the children.<sup>60</sup> It seems that the teenagers and their teacher speak different languages. Elena often uses clichés that reveal her idealistic nature. The pupils speak youth slang and have to explain some words to their teacher (*прикид* [*prikid*; outfit], *фирма́*

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<sup>58</sup> An analysis of the play is presented in the *Our Mythical Childhood Survey* database: Hanna Paulouskaya, "Entry on *Dear Miss Elena* [*Дорогая Елена Сергеевна*] by Lyudmila Razumovskaia", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Susan Deacy, *Our Mythical Childhood Survey*, Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019, <http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/854> (accessed 17 April 2020). See also Jeffrey Pace Stephens, *Dramatic and Theatrical Manifestations of Glasnost in Soviet Russia during the First Half of the Gorbachev Epoch, 1985–1988*, PhD dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1995, 156–165, [http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=osu1487862399452104](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=osu1487862399452104) (accessed 3 August 2021).

<sup>59</sup> Razumovskaia did not appreciate the interpretation of Riazanov, calling it "a conventional, contemporary realistic work"; see an interview with the author conducted in the spring of 1990 by John Freedman and archived on his blog as "Lyudmila Razumovskaya, Chicago, 1990", *Blogs and Stray Articles*, 13 November 2018, <https://johnfreedmanarchive.wordpress.com/2018/11/13/lyudmila-razumovskaya-chicago-1990> (accessed 8 April 2020).

<sup>60</sup> Razumovskaia, "Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna", 83.



**Figure 4:** Cover of the DVD edition of the film *Дорогая Елена Сергеевна* [Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna; Dear Miss Elena], 1988, dir. Eldar Riazanov. Courtesy of the Film Video Association Close-Up.

[*firma*; fashionable Western clothes]), but it is their vision of life she most fails to understand. Sometimes the children mouth slogans and phrases in the style of Elena, mocking her and undermining the meaning of her words. David MacFadyen interprets the conflict in the film as struggle for a new language in a period of crisis in society:

The pupils, as young people, are negotiating their selfhood within Elena Sergeevna's language, and they do so by using it: "The law is the law" now becomes "The language is the language." They steal her ability to give the world meaning. Once robbed of the power to affect anything, Elena Sergeevna finds herself in exactly the same situation as the students. They all need to form a smaller minimally social self.<sup>61</sup>

Elena presents herself as belonging to the generation of the 1960s and heartily believes in communist and human ideals. Riazanov calls her "a pure [*чистая; chistaia*] teacher".<sup>62</sup> She is very emotional and cries upon receiving the flowers and birthday wishes. As a "proper" teacher, she has pictures of her former graduates on the walls. Living with her mother, a war veteran, she also has a portrait of the communist leader Viacheslav Molotov, some children's drawings, photos of her young self. There are plenty of books (we see titles of volumes by Vladimir Vysotsky and Yevgeny Yevtushenko, a book on Marc Chagall), a bust of Vladimir Mayakovsky, a decorative sculpture of a child, and a nostalgic teddy bear from the old times on the shelves. In contrast to this world of ideals Elena lives in, the camera often shows a television screen presenting music clips and news – about hurricanes, floods, the arrests of drug dealers, etc. Such interruptions warn of an upcoming conflict and refer to the world the children are speaking about.

The teenagers do not believe in the high language of Elena or other authorities. They see the hypocrisy of their society, and that their parents live according to different principles. They think in a materialistic way and have "earthly longings" – to have money and position in society, to live a good life (00:47:26; 01:05:36). This is the "vulgarity" and influence of fashion and mass culture that Bykov was afraid of. Elena accuses them of *подлость* (*podlost'*; 00:44:32), which in Russian means villainy, deception, and betrayal. The teenagers answer

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<sup>61</sup> MacFadyen, "Ideology Faces the Horrors of Its Opposite", 80, 84.

<sup>62</sup> Eldar Riazanov, "В гостях у мастера" [V gostiakh u mastera; At the Master's House], *Panorama TV* 29.365 (24–30 July 2000), 7, quoted after MacFadyen, "Ideology Faces the Horrors of Its Opposite", 79.

that it is the school that teaches them to lie and be sneaky, as it promotes ideals not corresponding to reality (01:10:34). "We're your children" (Мы – ваши дети), they say to Elena. The conflicting ideologies reveal generational differences, as well as the complicated situation in a society under transformation, when many "truths" coexist and struggle with each other.

The pupils want Elena to commit a crime that is unthinkable from her point of view. From the moral perspective, Elena is totally right, and the pupils are simply young villains. However, at the same time they see some things Elena is missing. Without getting a good mark, at least one of the pupils, Vitia, will have to do military service, which at that time meant being sent to fight in Afghanistan (00:23:54; 01:17:50). This is not said openly, but the context was widely understood. Thus, sticking to high moral principles contradicts other values – of peace and the worth of human life – and ceases to be so unquestionably positive. This ambiguity of morals and ideals refers to *Antigone* of Sophocles, which also goes beyond a simple interpretation.<sup>63</sup>

In the text of Razumovskaia's drama, Volodia at one point calls Elena a Greek heroine, "diagnosing" her with the "Antigone complex".<sup>64</sup> When asked by Vitia what that means, he answers:

Это когда идеалистическое восприятие действительности возведено в принцип. Когда всякое насилие над их личностью или над их идеалами вызывает героическое сопротивление. И здесь существует прямо пропорциональная зависимость: чем сильнее на них давят, тем активнее и яростнее они сопротивляются. Из таких натур вырастают железные герои и вожди революций и войн. Но в обычной жизни это чаще всего чудачки, не от мира сего, юродивые, над которыми все смеются и которых никто не воспринимает всерьез.<sup>65</sup>

It's when an idealistic perception of reality gets elevated to a principle. When any force against your personality or your ideals provokes heroic resistance. There's a really remarkable phenomenon called proportional dependence: the more pressure you apply, the more active and intense the resistance gets. This is the kind of character that produces iron heroes

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. S.E. Wilmer and Audronė Žukauskaitė, eds., *Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>64</sup> "У нашей дорогой Елены Сергеевны комплекс Антигоны" (Our dear Miss Elena has the Antigone complex) – Razumovskaia, "Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna", 69. It is interesting that in this moment the author explicitly refers to the title of the play, thus emphasizing the importance of the fragment and the idea.

<sup>65</sup> Razumovskaia, "Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna", 70.

in wartime and leaders of revolutions. But in everyday life they mostly end up simple-minded moralising freaks, heads in the clouds, holy fools, whom nobody takes seriously and only raise a laugh.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, from the pupil's perspective Antigone is an anti-hero, a person that looks like a hero and behaves accordingly but is unsuitable for peaceful life. This diagnosis reveals a crisis of confidence in ideals during the late Soviet period. In the film, this explicit reference to Antigone is absent, and Elena is called Joan of Arc and a "full-blown idealist" (00:40:30; *махровой идеалисткой*); however, resemblance to the Greek character remains. Similar to Sophocles' Antigone, Elena has no power to influence the situation and cannot change the moods of the pupils or their behaviour. She is not the teacher from the Soviet school film, but just a victim. Elena is much older than the pupils, but she still lives with her mother and is unmarried, being similar to Antigone again. The pupils undermine her social position and comment on her clothes and appearance, advising her to be more fashionable (00:46:23). Thus, they put themselves higher than their teacher and change the roles.

As there is an attempted rape in the movie, the problem of gender and cruelty against women is emphasized, resembling the problem of Sophocles' tragedy again. The female topic is important for Razumovskaia and appears in most of her dramas (for example, *Медея* [Medea], 1980; *Под одной крышей* [Pod odnoi kryshei; Under the Same Roof], 1978). In this case, the students comment on the unmarried status of Elena and her looks, revealing the negative attitude to single women in Soviet society. According to the drama, when Volodia starts the rape attempt, he says to Lialia: "Sit quietly and stay seated. The men will decide. Understood? We have a patriarchy now" (Сядь спокойно и сиди. Решать будут мужчины. Ясно? У нас нонче патриархат),<sup>67</sup> which emphasizes the negation of women's rights by the group of men. Actually, it is first of all a group of men that came to Elena's house, as Lialia is only a companion and has the usual "female" roles – to speak with Elena as a woman and to calm her. Starting as a companion, she transforms into another victim, and her boyfriend, Pasha, who has been locked up in the attic,<sup>68</sup> cannot stop it.

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<sup>66</sup> Trans. after Ludmilla Razumovskaya, *Dear Miss Elena*, trans. Zoltan Schmidt and Roger Downey, Seattle, WA: Rain City Projects, 1992, 17.

<sup>67</sup> Razumovskaia, "Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna", 89.

<sup>68</sup> Pasha has given his permission for a mock rape according to the drama. Razumovskaia, "Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna", 88.

Let us take a closer look at the group. The children represent different backgrounds and social positions. Pasha is from a normal, ordinary family.<sup>69</sup> He is fond of philology and has won an award for an essay on Dostoyevsky. He has made a few mistakes on the test, but needs an excellent mark to enrol at the philology department. Volodia is from a well-established Soviet family. He does not need to correct the test – in fact, he does not need help at all because he has more power and connections than the school teacher. He is well educated, gallant, and can waltz. He is the leader of the group and is enrolling at the MGIMO (Московский Государственный Институт Международных Отношений; Moscow State Institute of International Relations), one of the most prestigious colleges in the USSR. Vitia is the son of a civil servant who has quite a high position, but has obtained it through corrupt means. His father likes to draw, and he philosophizes when he drinks. Vitia also behaves like a young alcoholic. He has the worst marks in the school and wrote nothing during the test. He wants to get into a forestry academy, as there is a need of students there. He is also the one under the threat of being called up to the Afghan war. Lialia is Pasha's girlfriend and had no problems with the test. She is the daughter of a librarian and lives with her mother in a room in a communal flat. She reads Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* in English and dreams about *la dolce vita*. Thus, all the teenagers seem to be "normal" children and represent different strata of Soviet society.

The leader of the group is Volodia. He is a trickster, the driving spirit of the incident. In the drama he calls himself a Shakespearean Iago, expressing his pleasure in the usage of power<sup>70</sup> by referring to the character who caused the death of Desdemona.<sup>71</sup> It is Volodia's idea to attempt to rape Lialia in order to reveal "the real face of life" (реальное лицо жизни) to the idealistic Elena, to open her eyes to reality, and to break her (00:41:40). Volodia is the person who insists the students go through with things, and he does not allow his companions to stop and leave the flat.

As the film is full of rock music, dance, wine, and sexuality, the group resembles Bacchus and his company. This is especially noticeable in the moment Elena's apartment is searched, when the teenagers have a breakdance disco party (see Fig. 5) and we hear the songs "Тореро" [Torero] by Aria and "Счастливый день" [Schastlivyi den'; A Happy Day] by Rodnik (00:57:12). From the beginning of the movie, the students behave in a weird way – they

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<sup>69</sup> He is the son of an academician in the drama. Cf. Razumovskaia, "Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna", 76.

<sup>70</sup> Razumovskaia, "Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna", 80, 81.

<sup>71</sup> I would like to thank Katarzyna Marciniak for this observation.

speak mockingly to bystanders, pretend to practise aerobics with a group on a street, undress and swim in the river. The young men wear rock clothes, sunglasses, and hairdos in the style of the 1980s. They have a tape recorder and dance a lot.



**Figure 5:** Vitia dancing before the search, still from the film *Дорогая Елена Сергеевна* [Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna; Dear Miss Elena], 1988, dir. Eldar Riazanov. Courtesy of the Mosfilm studio.

The film starts with a loud, energetic rock theme heard from the recorder – “Только ты и я” [Tol’ko ty i ia; Only You and Me] by Vladimir Kuzmin with the refrain “Кто бы мог подумать?” (Who would have thought?). In this film, the authors do not use Western music, but Russian rock with songs of such bands as Avia (“Я не люблю тебя” [Ja ne liubliu tebia; I Don’t Love You]), Aria (“Torero”), and Rodnik (“A Happy Day”). The lyrics are about love or its absence, happiness, fighting, and struggle. The music is much more energetic and often aggressive than in the previous movie. Similarly to *Scarecrow*, rock music is juxtaposed with older, calmer music. Elena listens to waltzes and poetic bards (singer-songwriters). They dance a waltz to a ballad about a hussar (00:16:33). Among the vinyl records in the flat, we see a disc of Bulat Okudzhava, popular

in the culture of the Thaw. In this film again, rock music symbolizes unrestrained forces that are evil by definition, and older music refers to high human values. Yet, it should be observed that Elena listens with pleasure to the contemporary music played by the teenagers.

As in *Scarecrow*, the director is present in the movie. Riazanov plays a neighbour and the only witness, someone who is disturbed by noise and demands silence. He knocks at the door of Elena at night and is the only possible contact with the outside world. But he does not help Elena, nor does he grasp what is going on – and thus he leaves the scene. He does not act as a coryphée or even a proper witness to the tragedy.

However horrible it may look, the teenagers also have their ideals and a code of honour. They perceive themselves as the future generation and think about Russia, the fate of the intelligentsia, and differing value systems. The film and the play show the problems of Soviet society during the *perestroika* period, when it faced a plurality of views, and contradicting ideologies coexisted in society. As Riazanov shows, it is the youth who were in the most difficult position in this situation. Always rebellious and full of dreams, ideas, and energy, young people could not agree to live the old way and to turn a blind eye to the hypocrisy of the world. At the same time, they were often too audacious and reckless, and crossed too many boundaries, thereby hurting their closest. In this play, the teenagers represent Creon, who brings new laws, and Antigone is the older generation.

## Conclusions

Both films are defined as dramas, but refer exceedingly to tragedy. *Scarecrow* refers to the scenography and chorus of Greek tragedy. *Dear Miss Elena* invokes Bacchus and his company. Riazanov, similarly to Razumovskaia, leaves his viewers with an open ending. Elena closes herself in the bathroom and does not react to the words of Lialia or Vitia. Her suicide is implied. Bykov also wanted to end the film with a dark finale in the form of Lena's death, but it was not possible in a children's production. However, even in this version the directors define their works as tragedies leading to a catharsis.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> These words were spoken by Zheleznikov at a screening of the film on 10 October 1983, at the Mosfilm studio; see Bykov, *Ia pobit*, 296 (10 October 1983).

Both films refer to Antigone, though they interpret the character in different ways. The irresolvable conflict of the Greek tragedy is constituted here by the new time and the new generation that bring an incomprehensible reality. The children are “aliens” in the words of their teacher (*Dear Miss Elena*, 00:17:40). Indeed, Vadim Mikhailin and Galina Belyaeva emphasize the typical representation of the young generation as “aliens” in the school cinema of the 1980s – by means of their appearance, language, behaviour, and music.<sup>73</sup> References to classical mythology and classical culture may give more tools for understanding and presenting the new reality, especially in the world of children and youth.

In my opinion, both films are crafted as mythical stories on their own terms. The heroes have their own names, but these are common names. They have their stories, but they are also quite typical. The things they are doing and the decisions they are making are cruel and unbelievable, which helps us to maintain distance while watching them. They evoke emotions and require a personal response, revising viewers’ own values and behaviour. They aim to achieve catharsis or its likeliness. Perhaps, in order to pose such serious questions and to hold a sincere conversation with children, it was necessary to make the stories folkloric and mythical. Classical Antiquity became a filter distant enough to give hope to adults that they can understand their children.

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<sup>73</sup> Mikhailin and Belyaeva, “Pokolenie inoplanetian”.

The book is to be recommended for academics as well as graduate and post-graduate students working on the reception of Classical Antiquity and its transformations around the world.

David Movrin, University of Ljubljana  
From the editorial review

*Our Mythical Hope* is the latest collection of articles by scholars participating in an ongoing collaboration to ensure that the beauty and profundity of Classical myth remain known, and (hopefully) remain part of our modern culture. The size of this compendium, the sweep of subjects considered, the involvement of leading experts from around the world, all testify to how important and extensive this initiative has become over the last decade. The project's continued commitment to engage all ages, especially the young, and to extend its outreach beyond the Academy merely, makes it a leading model for how research retains its relevance.

Mark O'Connor, Boston College  
From the editorial review



Classical Antiquity is a particularly important field in terms of "Hope studies" [...]. For centuries, the ancient tradition, and classical mythology in particular, has been a common reference point for whole hosts of creators of culture, across many parts of the world, and with the new media and globalization only increasing its impact. Thus, in our research at this stage, we have decided to study how the authors of literary and audiovisual texts for youth make use of the ancient myths to support their young protagonists (and readers or viewers) in crucial moments of their existence, on their road into adulthood, and in those dark hours when it seems that life is about to shatter and fade away. However, if Hope is summoned in time, the crisis can be overcome and the protagonist grows stronger, with a powerful uplifting message for the public. [...] Owing to this, we get a chance to remain true to our ideas, to keep faith in our dreams, and, when the decisive moment comes, to choose not hatred but love, not darkness but light.

Katarzyna Marciniak, University of Warsaw  
From the introductory chapter

