

## Chapter 3

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### **Soviet Argonauts: Sailing to the Coasts of Colchis in Soviet Film**

History is not pre-existent to the film,  
it is produced by it.  
*Pierre Sorlin*

This maxim is quoted by Evgeny Dobrenko in his study of Stalinist historical movies and their usage for the creation of culture, identity, and a shared sense of history.<sup>1</sup> Films on mythical topics are perhaps even more suited to this purpose as their subject allows for broader variation and the myth told may be used to create another myth, or a second-order semiological layer, as Roland Barthes would have put it.<sup>2</sup> In the Soviet case, it was the myth of ‘sovietness’ that was to be transferred by means of various media. Greek and Roman mythology, however, never played a prominent role in the Soviet feature film industry. It existed mainly in the form of animation (especially animation for children), and only in the later periods of the USSR. The topic was particularly popular in the 1970s and 80s. In the period following the revolutions, even the genre of the fairytale was called into question, and was officially permitted only after the intercession of Maxim Gorky at the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934.<sup>3</sup> At this time, the description of ‘real’ events (historical or contemporary) was given

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- 1 Dobrenko (2008: 2).
- 2 See Barthes (1957: 202). I use the term ‘myth’ both in the meaning of a ‘mythical narration’ (especially of ancient Greeks and Romans) as well as a ‘secondary semiotic system’ following the definition of Roland Barthes.
- 3 See Iustus (2000: 70–72), Balina (2005: 107).

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pride of place, for Socialist Realism became the official style of art and literature.<sup>4</sup> In such a context the presentation of myth on film and the ideologically influenced reception attracted even greater attention.

The controversy between Socialist Realism and mythology is, of course, delusional, as Soviet art specialized in making its own myth.<sup>5</sup> The very guidelines of Soviet Realism reveal as much. Artworks were supposed to display: ‘ideological commitment’ (*ideinost*), ‘party-mindedness’ (*partiinnost*), ‘popular spirit’ (*narodnost*), ‘historicism’, and ‘typicality’.<sup>6</sup> From this list only ‘historicism’ may be at variance with mythological narration, but the addition of ‘typicality’ may explain even this contradiction. As we shall see, ancient mythical stories were perfectly capable of successfully following the guidelines of Socialist Realism, and even be ‘class-oriented’.

From films on mythological topics made in the USSR, I have selected for analysis three films, all of which engage with the story of the Argonauts. This mythic cycle was naturally connected with the territory of the Soviet Union because the ancient mythical journey leads the Greek heroes to the shores of Colchis, modern-day Georgia, or the USSR when the films were made. Had this connection any importance for the filmmakers? Did it make the mythical story more ‘Socialist Realistic’? Was the Georgian location of the myth in any way emphasized in the movies? These questions are all the more important as Soviet policy towards nations changed constantly. Another problem was that it was difficult to find a ‘positive’ hero in the myth. This was another *sine qua non* for Socialist Realist aesthetics.<sup>7</sup> Greek heroes, as a rule, are not unambiguously good, and this needed to change in film interpretations.<sup>8</sup> Several of these films were made for children and young adult audiences, which resulted in even greater censorship and paring back of the plot.

The films I focus on were made in 1936, 1971 and 1986. The first two are animations made for the big screen, and the last two for televisual broadcast (the second animation was to be broadcast both ways). The first, entitled *Argonavtebi* (The Argonauts), or *Kolkhida* (Colchis), is an animation made in Georgia (‘Goskinprom Gruzii’ Ltd studio) in 1936 by Lado (Vladimer) Mujiri (1907–1953) with the assistance of a great Georgian painter Lado Gudiasvili (1896–1980). The second, also called *Argonavty* (The Argonauts), was made in 1971 in Moscow at the main Soviet animation studio ‘Soyuzmultfilm’. It was part of a series of animation films about Greek myths. The director of the series was Aleksandra

4 For more on Social Realism see Günter and Dobrenko (2000), Dobrenko (2011).

5 The aesthetics was often explicitly called ‘mythological’, for example by Günter (2000: 10) or Esaulov (2000: 49).

6 See Dobrenko (2011: 101).

7 See Clark (1981: 46–67), Clark (2000).

8 Compare my other analyses: Paulouskaya (2017), Paulouskaya (2020).

Snezhko-Blotskaia (1909–1980) and the screen-writer was Aleksei Simukov (1904–1995). The third film, entitled *Argonavtebi* (The Argonauts) or *Vesëlaia khronika opasnogo puteshestviia* (Merry Chronicle of a Dangerous Voyage) and filmed in 1986, was a TV musical made by Evgeny Ginzburg (1945–2012) with dances performed by Vocal-Music Instrumental-Ensemble (VIA) ‘Iveria’.<sup>9</sup> The production was filmed in Georgia by the Moscow TV studio ‘Ekran’ (screen) in cooperation with the Georgian television.

Thus the films represent various genres and were made in separate studios and in completely different historical periods. At the same time the first two were made by contemporaries but with more than thirty years distance. All the films were produced in Russian, the first and the third have also Georgian versions. As they were approved by state authorities, we may assume that they represent an official attitude to ideological questions. Defining the films as belonging to Socialist Realism may seem problematic; however as all officially-accepted Soviet art tended to preserve the norms of Socialist Realism, in my opinion these productions also represent this aesthetic and ideology.<sup>10</sup> I will try to present the films in their historical context and to analyse the construction and preservation of cultural memory about the heritage of antiquity in these products of popular culture (if we may use the term ‘popular culture’ for the Soviet context).<sup>11</sup>

### **Soviet Nations vs. Soviet Nation**

To start with, I would like to make a brief introduction into a problem of nationality in Soviet culture and explain what ‘Georgian’, ‘Russian’ or ‘Soviet’ meant in various periods.

The Soviet Union – organized on the base of the Russian empire – had conducted a careful policy to distinguish itself from the previous state entity from the very beginning and, at the same time, to preserve its huge territory. Tsarist attitude to non-Russian nations was condemned as imperialistic, and the ethnicities of the empire were understood as an object of liberation along with the oppressed classes. The nationalities were often in their infancy and people had very low level of national identity. Thus, giving nations the right to self-determination often meant bringing them into being. In the context of longing for the world revolution and class struggle, this emphasis on national aspects is not obvious.<sup>12</sup> Terry Martin calls the USSR ‘the world’s first Affirmative Action Empire’, referring to the underlying institutionalization of promoting the national consciousness

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<sup>9</sup> *Iveria* or *Iberia* was an ancient Greek name for the Eastern Georgian kingdom.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the understanding of late Soviet literature by Clark (1981: 234–250).

<sup>11</sup> See the interesting definition of Socialist Realism in comparison with Modernism and Post-modernism made by Groys (2000).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Eley and Suny (1996), Slezkine (1996b).

of ethnicities in the 1920s and 30s.<sup>13</sup> The territory of the country was divided into federal, union or autonomous republics and autonomous oblasts according to thirty-eight major nations (1923).<sup>14</sup> However the number of the ethnicities recognized was changing.<sup>15</sup> Attitudes to the nations and policies were also altered.

The nationalities policy of the 1920s was called *korenizatsiia* [‘rooting’ or ‘indigenization’] and paid attention to minor ethnicities and promoted cultural divergence and plurality. It aimed to promote indigenous languages and literatures as well as the formation of national elites, and to help to ‘culturally backward’ peoples. However, from the post-colonial perspective, the strategy of the Russian authorities was not so different from imperial politics – once again they perceived other nations as needing help and appropriated the right to judge about their cultural level.<sup>16</sup> Georgians (together with Russians, Ukrainians, Armenians, Belarusians, Jews and Germans) were acknowledged as ‘advanced’ nations and called ‘western’.<sup>17</sup> Georgia and Armenia were the only republics where the linguistic question was not an issue and *korenizatsiia* was fulfilled rapidly and successfully.<sup>18</sup> However, we should remember that Georgia consisted of smaller ethnicities, and the territory of ancient Colchis alone was inhabited by the Megrelians, Imeretins, Gurians, Adjars, Abkhazians, Svans, and Rachians, speaking different languages or dialects. *Korenizatsiia* aimed to support also these smaller ethnicities. In the case of Caucasian languages, grammars and alphabets were prepared with the main impact of an orientalist and linguist Nicholas Marr and his disciples. Marr was notorious for his ‘Japhetic theory’ that had a great and disastrous influence on Soviet linguistic, ethnography and literature studies at least till the late 1930s.<sup>19</sup> The ideology was even called ‘Marrism’ and was obligatory for the Soviet academia. Despite all the negative consequences this trend had promoted Georgian and Caucasian languages and culture, however at the same time it disparaged Indo-European languages, especially most established of them or ‘ruling’ in the terminology of Marr.<sup>20</sup>

In the late 1920s and 30s Stalinist cultural revolution took place putting emphasis on strong centralization and unification. The role of the Russian nation was emphasized. Russian art and culture were understood as exemplary and ‘above-

13 Martin (2001: 1).

14 See Martin (2001: 31).

15 From about 200 peoples in the 1926 census list, 172 in the 1927 revised list to 60 national groups according to Stalin’s remark to the constitution of 1936. See Martin (2001: 409).

16 Compare the post-colonial interpretation of the history of the Caucasus by Jersild (2002) based on Edward Said’s theory. Decolonization theory in the post-Soviet context is extensively developed by Tlostanova (2017).

17 See Martin (2001: 23, 56).

18 See Martin (2001: 77).

19 For more on Marr and his theory see Slezkine (1996a).

20 See Slezkine (1996a: 833).

national', and Russian language had been promoted to be the common language of the country.<sup>21</sup> *Korenizatsiia* was charged with local chauvinism and was downgraded. Relations between the Soviet nations were defined as 'the Friendship of the Peoples', a metaphor used by Stalin in December 1935.<sup>22</sup> The friendship campaign promoted union against 'the enemies of the [Soviet] people'. The concept of nation had changed underlining 'the deep primordial roots'.<sup>23</sup> Folkloric and exotic presentation of nations had been promoted, and stereotypical images of peoples were developed.<sup>24</sup> At the same time the 'stateness' (*gosudarstvennost'*) and 'sovereignty' (*suverenost'*) of the republics were stressed, and new republics were created by the 1936 constitution, among them the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic with Lavrenty Beria as its party leader.<sup>25</sup> Concurrently promotion of titular nations of the republics took place by downgrading smaller ethnicities. In the words of Ronald Grigor Suny, '[k]orenizatsiia had "grown over" into a Georgian chauvinism, parallel to the growth of Russian nationalism (often disguised as Soviet patriotism) on the all-union level.'<sup>26</sup>

It may be worth mentioning that attention to the past resulted not only in promotion of Russian 'classics' in literature, art or history,<sup>27</sup> but also heeded European and world heritage. It was the 1930s when most of the translations of classical authors were printed by 'Academia' publishing house. Being a continuation of the *Vsemirnaia literatura* (World Literature) publishing company<sup>28</sup> organized in 1918 by Maxim Gorky, the 'Academia' (1921–1937) aimed at translation and printing the treasures of the world literature. Although the process of translation started in the 1920s, most of the works were published in the 1930s,<sup>29</sup> even though the translators were often exiled, arrested or death sentenced.<sup>30</sup> Including world classics into Soviet canon verged on appropriation of it:

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21 In 1938 it was made a compulsory subject in all Soviet schools. See Suny (1988: 258, 268), Martin (2001: 361–362, 451–460).

22 See Martin (2001: 437–451).

23 See Martin (2001: 443).

24 For example, 'Georgia was invariably referred to as "sunny, socialist Georgia" and their fine weather was said to explain their "joyful" national art'. See Martin (2001: 443) on the base of newspapers published in Moscow in January 1937 during a festival of Georgian culture (the Georgian *dekada*). On the use of stereotypes as a tool of colonization, see the seminal essay by Bhabha (1994: 66–84).

25 See Martin (2001: 445–447).

26 Suny (1988: 282).

27 Compare the change of role of Alexandre Pushkin in the 1930s, see Platt (2016). For more on change of perspective in Stalinist culture, see Paperny (2007: 52–53). On promotion of historical figures in cinema see Dobrenko (2008).

28 See Khotimsky (2013), Lazzarin (2013).

29 Among which 30 of 35 titles of Greek and Roman authors. See Ratz (1980: 26–30).

30 See Budaragina (2013), Stead and Paulouskaya (2020).

By this time there could be only one classic – *our* classic, and if by chance an important part of this classic turned out to be *their*, it still was *our* classic. Similarly, the culture <sup>31</sup> has dealt with the philosophy of Marx: it was *our*, not German, philosophy, and at the same time classical philosophy of Hegel (whom Stalin once confused with Gogol) and even Kant became ours.<sup>32</sup>

This contradiction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ was growing during World War 2 and the Cold War and became one of the main foundations for the ‘Soviet nation’ (*sovetskyy narod*), the concept invented already in the 1920s. It was especially popularized after 1936 in the context of danger of war, and was always presented as ‘our multinational Soviet nation’.<sup>33</sup> Thus variety of ethnicities was emphasized, as well as their common – Soviet or socialist – nature. According to Stalin’s famous formula the individual national cultures were to be ‘national in form, socialist in content’.<sup>34</sup> During the Thaw as well as the *détente*, folklore of the Soviet nations of the USSR was popularized (also in cinema and animation for children). Chosen texts were included into the Soviet literary canon studied at schools.<sup>35</sup> Images of children in national costumes encircled maps of the USSR in school textbooks. Stereotypical images of representatives of various nations were spread in popular culture and film. The image of the Soviet nation consisting of many peoples, tolerant to others was popularized in the society. However, these imaginary ethnicities were usually sets of stereotypes. And the ‘Soviet man’ or the ‘Soviet nation’ had also got its distinctive characteristics.

The films about the Argonauts discussed here were produced in very different periods of Soviet history – during the rule of Stalin, Brezhnev and Gorbachev. Although the official ideology of the Soviet state had not changed to a large extent, in practice it had diverse interpretations. The films under discussion show the influence of Soviet ideas about ‘the Nation’ and ‘nations’ on cinema, and participate in creating an image of the ‘Soviet man’ and ‘producing the history’ (in the words of Sorlin) using material of ancient mythology. Let us look closer to the films and see what ideas were transferred through the films.

### ***The Argonauts*, dir. L. Mujiri (1936)**

The animation of Lado Mujiri is, to my knowledge, the first movie connected to antiquity made in the USSR. It was produced quite early, when cinematography was still developing. In fact, it was the first feature animation made in Georgia

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31 Culture of the 1930s in terminology of Paperny (2007).

32 Paperny (2007: 53). Hereinafter the translation is mine if not otherwise stated.

33 See Martin (2001: 450).

34 Stalin (1937: 195).

35 See Pavlovets (2016), Dobrenko (1997).

ever.<sup>36</sup> Lado Mujiri studied economics at Tbilisi State University (1930) and painting at the Georgian Academy of Arts.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, he worked in the animation workshop of the Georgian Film Studio, making propaganda poster films. *The Argonauts* was the third feature animation he worked on, and the first one he managed to complete, overcoming institutional and political obstacles. In his memoirs, his son Jimsher Mujiri describes the difficulties of the early days of Georgian animation and the hard work of his father and his colleagues. He also notes the great success of *The Argonauts* in Georgia and beyond.<sup>38</sup> The critics emphasized the high level of the film and its ‘non-provincial’ character.

Lado Mujiri and his brother-in-law Lado Gugushvili (1897–?), a philologist and pedagogue, decided to work on *The Argonauts* in the summer of 1934. Since Lado Mujiri was a proponent of the creation of national animated films in the Soviet republics and the use of the folklore of various ethnic groups,<sup>39</sup> we can be sure of the importance of the subject for him. The images for the film were made by Lado Gudiashvili, a famous Georgian painter and a teacher of Mujiri, who started his career in Paris, being a part of ‘La Ruche’ circle. Being fond of Caucasian traditional art he returned to Georgia in 1925. The composer Shalva Azmaiparashvili (1903–1957), along with the sound operators Vasyl Dolenko (1902–1998), Davit Lomidze (1914–1990), and Lado Dolidze (1908–1989) should be mentioned for their exceptional work in voicing this film.

*The Argonauts* is a black and white film with music as a background. It has no dialogues. Similar to a silent movie it includes title cards that describe the events and constitute its meaning in great measure.<sup>40</sup> The plot has the structure of an adventure love story, where the main hero has to fulfil the wish of his lover and eventually save her, winning over the enemies. The main heroes are Jason and Medea. It is Medea who asks Jason to bring her the Golden Fleece. The enemies presented as mosquitoes and toads make war with Jason. This naturally evokes *Batrachomyomachia*, but the main theme of the film is presented as the draining of the Colchis valley.<sup>41</sup> It was perceived as one of the major achievements of early Soviet Georgia, which similar to the whole USSR aimed on industrialization and

36 See Asenin (1974: 257).

37 See Kapkov (2006: 454), Asenin (1974: 256).

38 See Mujiri (1988: II 76–84). I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dzima Zhaunou, as well as to the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, and especially to Maya Maisuradze, for their enormous help in gaining access to this memoir.

39 See Mujiri (1988: II 85–88).

40 The description below will be based on the Russian version of the movie preserved in Gosfilmofond of Russia in Moscow (length 280 m, ca 10 minutes). Both versions are available online: <https://archive.gov.ge/en/lado-gudiashvili-125-1> (Georgian version, at the bottom of the webpage [last accessed 16 June 2024]); <https://www.culture.ru/live/movies/19066/argo-navty-kolkhida> (Russian version [last accessed 16 June 2024]).

41 See Bakhtadze (1983: 46), Asenin (1974: 257).

agricultural reform. Draining marshy lowlands, growing tea and citrus were the main tasks as well as positive outcomes of Beria's rule in Georgia.<sup>42</sup>

To confirm this idea, the very first title card of the film is a quotation from Beria: "Let's give lemons, tangerines, and oranges on the table of the worker of the Soviet country" (L. Beria).<sup>43</sup> This reference emphasizes the film's context as a work of propaganda. Indeed, at the end of the film Medea finds citrus under the Golden Fleece and gathers a harvest of the fruits. The last two title cards are: 'But under the skin of a ram the citrus is red with gold / And the new land of Colchis is crowned with the fruits.' Thus the Golden Fleece is interpreted in the film as the citrus or the product of Soviet amelioration of Georgia.

The film was made at Goskinprom Gruzii studio, which was aimed at propaganda. The topic of contemporary problems or/and achievements was natural for the studio, which often produced films praising progress and development of society, especially its industrialization and mechanization. *The Argonauts* also includes an image of contemporary machinery: at the most intense moment of the battle Jason receives help that gives him a victory, and the helper is an excavator (so 'deus' literally has come 'ex machina'). However, Jason and Medea have also another helper and companion – a donkey. This emphasizes the film's bucolic atmosphere and includes it in Georgian folk tradition, as well as makes connection with a famous novel of Apuleius. Thus the film shows different sides of Soviet Georgia – the delights of the country and tradition, alongside the power and excitement of technological progress and infrastructure.

An important part of the film involves the war with mosquitoes and toads. Despite the comic effect of the picture, the enemies are presented as organized, technically equipped forces. They march in rows and form combat vehicles or ammunition with their bodies (for example, a toad with two snakes create a 'tank'). The title cards are made in the style of military patriotic poetry:

Execute my orders strictly, and equip the troops right now.  
The headquarters on radio had said: 'The enemy has burst in!'  
There will be a battle to the death. All the troops came into motion...  
Ranks of infantry, cannon vents, and machine guns are coming.  
Terrible tanks are crawling on the enemy [...].<sup>44</sup>

42 Cf. the speech of Beria during the 17th Congress of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) ([http://www.hrono.info/dokum/1934vkrb17/5\\_6.php](http://www.hrono.info/dokum/1934vkrb17/5_6.php) [last accessed 16 Mar. 2024]).

43 This is a loose quotation of the mentioned above speech of Beria.

44 Мой приказ исполнить точно, – снарядить отряды срочно! / И по радио из штаба сообщали: "Враг ворвался!" / Предстоит на смерть сражение, все войска пришли в движение... / И идут ряды пехоты, пушек жерла, пулеметы; / Танки, страшные собою, на врага ползут гурьбою [...].

Jason fights fearlessly with the enemy troops and defeats all of them with help of the friend-excavator. Thus Jason is depicted as a brave hero, ready to fight and defeat countless enemies. In the context of the late 1930s the movie should also be read as a patriotic propaganda encouraging viewers to be ready to fight.<sup>45</sup> From the point of view of internal politics, it was a time of great repressions against the ‘enemies of the [Soviet] people’ and purges of the party members, which were especially vast in 1935–1938.<sup>46</sup> The atmosphere of fear, informing, condemnation, fight and death was pervasive, and the number of victims was no less than from military losses. So the toads and insects may also allude to the ‘internal enemies’, including those who fought against the Soviets during the Red Army’s invasion of Georgia in 1921.

At some point of the story Medea is abducted by mosquitoes. This episode resembles the plot of an adventure silent movie. The style of presentation of Medea (her makeup and movements) as well as the title cards emphasize similarity with this sort of films. Jason liberates the girl and gives her the Golden Fleece with the citrus inside.

Jason and Medea are depicted as a young Georgian couple. In the beginning of the film the young man is sitting cross-legged, wearing a Georgian national dress (*chokha*) with *gazyrs* (an implement to hold a rifle charge), playing a *panduri* (a traditional three-string plucked instrument). Lying nearby is Medea, a girl with expressive makeup, wearing a contemporary dress, holding a pretty umbrella. We may assume that Jason as well as Medea are Georgians. They are presented in a peaceful rural atmosphere, having a picnic. There is a donkey close by. Due to the wish of Medea they start their journey that brings them great adventures.

On the other hand, the enemies are also presented as Georgians. The first scene with the toads shows five of them drinking wine from horns, singing and dancing traditional dances, wearing Georgian national dresses. Thus the film does not contain an opposition based on national difference. The story is set in Georgian scenery. Characters from both sides are shown as belonging to the Caucasian traditional culture. The opposition present is that between nature and culture, or the animal and human worlds. And this explanation is emphasized in critical descriptions of the movie (‘a draining of the Colchis valley’).<sup>47</sup>

We might, however, trace also other messages. Let us return to the title cards describing the wish of Medea to get the Golden Fleece in the beginning of the film:

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45 The film had a long gestation period and was remade several times. I only had access to the latest version of the film. So I am not trying to interpret the motivations of the authors, but rather to look for the messages that may have been read by the audience.

46 See Martin (2001: 270–280).

47 See Bakhtadze (1983: 46), Asenin (1974: 257).

For a long time Colchis was rich with the Golden Fleece,  
 We have an important task: to drain the whole of Colchis!  
 Black-eyed Medea was seduced by the Golden Fleece  
 And fervent Jason has promised to give her the whole Colchis.<sup>48</sup>

While the first title card seems to be the most connected to the ancient myth, it does not explain what exactly ‘the Golden Fleece’ means in the film. The second presents the message of the film. The last two introduce the main heroes. In this interpretation Medea does not possess the Fleece. Jason, ‘fervent’ (most probably with love), promises ‘to give her the whole Colchis’. Thus Medea is not a daughter of the king of Colchis. And who is Jason? Does he not fight with ‘Colchis’ to conquer it and bring to the woman? As all the characters have similar uniforms, maybe a civil war is taking place in the movie? Is it possible that the toads were a metaphor for the locals who resisted melioration or sovietization of Georgia? We should stop here to avoid over-interpretation. In any case the film presents achievements of the communist government in Georgia (with Beria at its head) and its victory over the enemies that might be interpreted in various ways.

Such a usage of the myth that has undergone so many changes may imply that it was well known by the addressee, in this case – Georgian audience, and was a part of the traditional culture. However, it is also possible that it was the heroes who were popular, not the exact peculiarities of the story. In this case ‘Jason’ and ‘Medea’ would just mean ‘heroes connected with Georgian protohistory’ and may be used to denote various concepts. As the film was to promote deeds of the new Soviet state, we may assume that Jason symbolizes a new Georgian, Bolshevik, and Soviet man, who is strong and mighty, ready to help women and to conquer nature and all enemies. Medea represents a contemporary woman – beautiful, loving and being loved, as well as participating in historical events to some degree. It was her desire that sends Jason on his quest, but during the war she was kidnapped and was waiting for her rescuer. She is fully involved in rural activities in the time of peace. Little connects this Medea with her mythical prototype.

### ***The Argonauts*, dir. Al. Snezhko-Blotskaia (1971)**

A much more canonical representation of the myth is depicted in the animation made by Aleksandra Snezhko-Blotskaia and Aleksei Simukov.<sup>49</sup> It was one of five films in the series entitled *Legendy i mify drevnei Gretsii* (Legends and Myths of Ancient Greece). The first film in the series made in 1965–1969 is called *Voz-*

48 Золотым руном Колхида с давних пор была богата, / Важное у нас задание: всю Колхиду осушить! / Золотым руном прельстилась черноокая Медea. / И Ясон ей всю Колхиду обещал дать, пламеня.

49 There are memoirs of Simukov and a daughter of Snezhko-Blotskaia including a short description of making the movies: Bogdanova (2008), Simukov (2008).

*vrashchenie s Olimpa* (The Return from Olympus) and tells about Heracles returning to the Earth to help people.<sup>50</sup> Like the film made by Mujiri, this animation puts an ancient myth in contemporary context, and is extremely politicized. It contains clear anti-fascist, anti-militarist, and anti-racist messages. The Heracles film was the first animation about Greek mythology made in Moscow, which might be the reason for the abundance of propaganda elements in it. Making an ideologically dense film allowed to include ancient Greek narration into contemporary Soviet culture.

The third film in the series, *The Argonauts*, was prepared by the very same team in 1971.<sup>51</sup> It depicts the myth quite classically and puts narration into a frame. In the beginning and the end of the film we see an old Jason, who tells his story to two young Greek boys playing near an old shipwreck. This is rooted in a description of the Argonauts' myth by Lev and Vsevolod Uspensky, who add a similar episode to the final part of the story.<sup>52</sup> Jason tells the boys about building the ship 'Argo', the adventures on the way to Colchis and the tasks that he had to do to get the Golden Fleece. The story is partly told in hexametric verses, which makes it more elevated. In the first part Jason mentions parting the clashing rocks of the Symplegades, chasing away the Stymphalian birds, and his confrontation with the sirens. Only a few of the Argonauts are called by name: Theseus, the Dioscuri, the Boreads, Orpheus, and Heracles. In the second part the old man describes all the deeds in Colchis: putting a yoke upon fire-breathing oxen, plowing the field of Ares, sowing it with the dragon's teeth, defeating the new-born army, and getting the Golden Fleece – doing all this with help of Medea. The story ends with the escape of the heroes with the Fleece and Medea.

Colchis is depicted as a Caucasian country with snow-covered mountains and the sea shore. The king's castle has old Caucasian architecture and contains local furniture and objects – a Turkish style jug and a typical Georgian horn with vine. Palace guards are dressed in medieval coat of mail. Aeëtes and Medea have Georgian appearances and clothes in the style of Georgian aristocracy – they have original crowns and decorations on the clothes. Medea is the first to be shown in this part of the film. In the very first scene she is presented as a magician, however it seems that her magic is not a subject of fear and is close to wonderful magic of fairy tales. For example, Medea looks at a surface of water in a pot and sees Jason there – this motif is common for fairy tales of different nations. This is most likely connected with the fact that the film is aimed specifically at children – there are no cruel brutal scenes in any of the five films of the series. Snezhko-Blotskaia had made many animated fairy tales based on Russian and international motifs at

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50 More on this film see in my articles, Paulouskaya (2017), Paulouskaya (2018c).

51 More on the film in my other articles, Paulouskaya (2020), Paulouskaya (2018a).

52 See Uspensky and Uspensky (1941: 98–102).

that date, thus such an approach seems to be natural for her, and fairy-tale conventions are also used to introduce ancient myths in other films of the series.<sup>53</sup> Thus, bringing Medea and her father into these familiar contexts makes them a part of the known culture – of fairy tales and of Soviet Georgia.

Jason and his companions are presented as strong, confident young men. They are sure of their mission and are not afraid of obstacles. In his first speech to Aeëtes, Jason says that the king owns the Golden Fleece not ‘according to the law’ and ‘it will be fair’ to give the Fleece to the Argonauts. In response Aeëtes laughs and says that ‘justice belongs to gods alone’ giving the man tasks to fulfil. Thus we see that the mission of Jason is ‘fair’, ‘lawful’ and ‘just’. Jason is ready for difficulties and is not seeking help. Medea helps him on her own initiative involving magic. In a dialogue with her, when Jason receives instructions on how to plow the field and sow the seed, he is worried about the shoots, that he can hurt them by throwing a stone. This shows Jason as a farmer caring for his land.

To conclude, Jason is presented as a righteous person. As the story is narrated by him, such an assessment seems plausible. However, old Jason looks sad and tells the story without undue emotion. In the mythology of Uspensky, Jason seeing the boys first takes them for his children with Medea. The film does not mention the later tragic events and finishes with the Argonauts returning home.<sup>54</sup> At a difficult moment of the journey Jason carries Medea in his arms. At home he shows her the country giving it to her by this gesture. Being asked by the boys what happened next, he answers: ‘There was no next for Jason.’ After telling the story, Jason dies during a prayer to Athena and the boys continue his prayer dreaming to become new Argonauts.

In my opinion, Soviet spectators of this film might identify themselves with the Greeks – the young boys in the animation to whom the story is told, or the Argonauts. The Argonauts are ‘the heroes’ of the story. They are righteous and courageous. They do honour, being exemplary Soviet heroes. Colchians are presented in medieval Caucasian appearance, where Georgian national identification is rooted. They are shown as enemies, however they always preserve honour. To some extent identification with Colchians is also possible, i. e. with Medea. She is the only female human creature in the film, and her role is not overly simplified. The young woman has to make the choice of acting against her father in the name of love, and she is both courageous and independent. The presence of people of different cultures, who share similar values, goes hand in hand with the multinational representation of the USSR. To my mind these various possibilities of identification make the film more interesting and, in a way, more Soviet.

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53 See Paulouskaya (2020).

54 Cf. Lovatt (2009).

***Merry Chronicle of a Dangerous Voyage*, dir. E. Ginzburg (1986)**

‘Soviet’ Colchis and Greece are represented in even greater measure in the TV musical made in 1986 by Russian filmmaker Evgeny Ginzburg.<sup>55</sup> This movie was a response to the expedition of the British explorer Tim Severin, who in 1984 sought to reconstruct the journey of Jason. Tim Severin recreated ancient vessels and sailed according to the original ancient and medieval routes all over the world. In one of these trips he came to the shores of Georgia.<sup>56</sup> A response to this meeting was the production of the film under discussion. It begins with fragments of the documentaries of Severin’s journey and declares that it will present ‘our [Soviet] understanding’ of the myth.

The film is a full-length feature and contains many elements of the myth. To my mind, the main theme of the film is the image of young men travelling together and looking for adventures and fun. It is presented as a typical students’ trip to Georgia popular in Soviet culture. Travels could be aimed for tourism and recreation or have a higher purpose – to help the country. Such ‘work travels’ were promoted since the 1950s and were caused by huge Soviet building projects. In 1959 a first student construction brigade was organized in the Moscow State University. Afterwards it became one of the main Komsomol<sup>57</sup> and youth movements that included all the republics and all the universities and colleges. Students went to Caucasus, to Kazakhstan, to Siberia, wherever there was a need. It created special youth culture recognisable for its songs for guitar and ‘romantic’ spirit.

The film is full of songs that create the cheerful, relaxed atmosphere of youth. It contains most of the main elements of the classical myth presenting the story of Jason and Pelias, building the ‘Argo’ and gathering the team, as well as adventures on the sea and in Colchis. The following episodes are present: the island of the Bebrycians with king Amykos [Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* II 1–150], Lemnos as an island of the Amazons [Ap. Rh., *Arg.* I 607–912], meeting a prophet Phineus transformed into a harpy [*Arg.* II 178–533], meeting the sirens [*Arg.* IV 891–921]), sowing the field and getting the Golden Fleece. Each of the main elements of the myth have their ‘logical,’ non-magical interpretations. The fight with Bebrycians is a jam-session held by Heracles and Amykos. The dragon teeth sown in the field are interpreted as vineyard seeds, and the fight of the newborn army is shown as just the dream of a drunk young man. The Golden Fleece becomes a parchment that contains wisdom, and Aeëtes is happy to share it with every nation because it will bring only positive effects.

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<sup>55</sup> More on this movie in my other article, Paulouskaya (2018b).

<sup>56</sup> See Severin (1985).

<sup>57</sup> Komsomol (All-Union Leninist Young Communist League) was an organization that gathered youth of the USSR preparing them to become communists.

There are also episodes in the film absent in the myth. The Argonauts have one more member: Shalom, a merchant from Colchis returning home. He is one of the protagonists and we often see the events from his perspective. In the beginning of the film Jason meets Diogenes, traditionally portrayed among barrels. On the first island of the journey the Argonauts meet boys on the shore, who want the heroes to move them to laughter, which is a typical motif in various folklores. In Colchis Jason participates in a contest of suitors for Medea and wins her favour.

Medea is presented as a kind, chaste young woman, well versed in popular wisdom and fairy tales of the country, 'not a witch, but a fairy [...], a saint'. She has a bright smile, long hair, linen clothes, and is often depicted in nature scenery alluding to hippy culture. One of the most important motifs in the film is Medea falling in love with a beautiful stranger. Contrary to the ancient myth, the king trusts his daughter and approves of her choice. There is consequently no fight between Aeëtes and Jason. There are also other love stories in the film, for example of Heracles and Lydia, the Amazon queen. The conflict between the Argonauts and the Amazons is presented as a stereotypical antagonism between men and women, which disappears as soon as they meet each other in real life. Jason is shown as a king's son longing for power and a hero yearning for great deeds. However, his words sound childish and unconvincing. He comes across more like a person dreaming of becoming a hero.

The whole film is presented as a joyful story, a kind of joke told to friends after their return from vacations. The songs of the film were well known in wider popular culture, beyond the reach of the film itself. A Vocal-Music Instrumental-Ensemble (VIA) called 'Iveria' performed them. The 1980s was a period in which Western rock music was extremely popular in the USSR.<sup>58</sup> Being a closed country, the Soviet Union produced their own versions of famous compositions. Many musicals were produced at that date, also in the form of animated movies. Vocal-Music Instrumental-Ensembles were a popular form of newly organized rock bands, which combined European rock motifs with folk elements of the different nations of the USSR. These were extremely popular for decades. The VIA 'Iveria' was one such band, based in Georgia.

Georgian elements are very important in this film. The musical was filmed in Georgia and Armenia, and it made heavy use of the natural environment for scenic decoration. For example, a Greek temple in which one of the episodes is shot, is the Ionic temple in Garni, Armenia, built probably in the 1st century AD and reconstructed in 1969–1975.<sup>59</sup> The main scenes were filmed in Poti, a small port city on the Black Sea coast. Celebrating the film's 30th anniversary, the actors tell how after arriving at Poti the crew could not start filming for two days be-

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58 See Zhuk (2010).

59 It was a temple to the sun god Mihr.

cause of Georgian hospitality: ‘Summer, sun and Georgian feasts ruined all plans.’<sup>60</sup> The scene of the Argonauts’ arrival at Colchis contains documentary footage of people living in a town in the mountains. We see crowds of Georgians meeting the tourists with open arms. The song tells: ‘To meet a guest is a matter of honour. If there is place for one, there is for two hundred. Prepare the tables [...]’ Georgian hospitality was famous in the Soviet times and the film emphasizes this idea as one of the stereotypes.

This theme is explored in the moment of the Argonauts’ arrival at Colchis. Shalom, the most peaceful member of the crew, tries to convince Jason to forget about the Fleece and enjoy the hospitality of the country: ‘We will be welcome guests of the beautiful land. We will find shelter and warm reception in each shack. Let me be a human!’ But Jason reminds him that the Golden Fleece is the only aim and he was born as a king. Thus Jason is portrayed as a negative character. He is selfish and limited to his class belonging. He is an intruder bringing war, who does not listen to the voice of reason. This call for peace is even more appealing in the context of the Soviet-Afghan war. In February 1986 Mikhail Gorbachev makes a first statement about the beginning of the withdrawal of troops. Depicting Medea as a young hippy alludes to the American protests against the Vietnam campaign.

The problem of nationality has another interesting aspect in the film. The film actors are partly Russians, partly Georgians, but Georgians often play the part of the Argonauts, and some Russians enact the Georgians. For example, Shalom is played by Aleksandr Abdulov, but Jason by Zurab Kipshidze, Heracles by Roman Rtskhalidze, Orfeus by Nugzar Kvashali etc. Thus, the Greek Argonauts speak with a Georgian accent and sing Georgian songs. Even more, in this film the bearers of the highest values are the Georgians. Medea and Aeëtes are full of peace, love and understanding. They neutralize the military intentions of the young intruders with their wisdom and calm. They seem to be on higher cultural level than their guests. The wisest member of the Greek crew, Shalom, is of Georgian or Jewish origin. In my opinion the filmmakers sought to minimize national (and any other) tensions and to put stress on common youth culture full of joy, love and music, and to highlight the good qualities of Georgian culture.

Maybe one of the reasons was that the authors of the film were young themselves. The *Merry Chronicle* was made by a young director, performed by young actors and scored by young musicians. When they reminisce about the production of the film today, they tell of how there was a good deal of improvisation involved. For example, Valentin Manokhin, the choreographer of the musical, says

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60 See N. N. (2016).

that the main dance was prepared in just 5 minutes!<sup>61</sup> This spontaneous, relaxed atmosphere is very much felt by the viewer.

The film traces the ideas of peace, kindness, love and mutual understanding. Rooting the myth of the Argonauts in the king's desire for the crown is condemned. The youth culture of joy and music, which knows no difference between a king and a vagabond, is celebrated. The wisdom written on the Golden Fleece is to be shared among all nations. Thus the film, similar to its predecessors, promotes communist ideals – in this case of peace, internationalism and of the classless society, as well as emphasizes values of one of the Soviet nations (Georgian), but there is neither didacticism nor open propaganda in the movie.

## Conclusions

These films, made in different periods of Soviet history, show different approaches to the myth and to their audiences. The first one is a classic example of the propaganda cartoon, where a known myth is used to prove and promote contemporary ideology. The second, made in the 1970s and the period of *détente*, is highly didactical and used primarily to teach children about the plot of the myth. The authors assume that the viewer has very little knowledge about Greek mythology. In this case, however, the mythology is also transformed to match prevailing state ideology. The main values of the film are honesty, courage, and justice, as well as independence for women. The last film under discussion was produced in the final years of the Soviet Union. It anticipates a basic knowledge of the mythology from its audience, and has almost no didactical message. The film rather joyfully celebrates the life of the ancient Greeks and modern Soviet youth.

From the national point of view all the films emphasize the Georgian element of the myth. Two of them were made in Georgia itself. National ideas go hand in hand with the multinational Soviet culture, what is similar also for Ancient Greece, multinational a-priori. The films do not highlight Russian character of the Soviet culture. The Georgian people change from being the target of Soviet propaganda in the first case to the very object of description in the last. Its representation is highly stereotypical, based on traditional folk culture. However, it is important that in the last film it was Georgians who were depicted as the most positive heroes in the story. In the most didactic story addressed for children, the Argonauts are presented as good and fair heroes representing the Soviet values. Thus heritage of the ancient world was accepted as 'our [Soviet] own' and ancient Greece was acknowledged to be a good prototype for the USSR, because it not only had a huge impact on the ancient world, but its influence lasted for centuries as was the wish of the Soviet Union.

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61 See N. N. (2016).

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