



**From Perseus to the Selkies:
A Panorama of Film Adaptations of European Myths**

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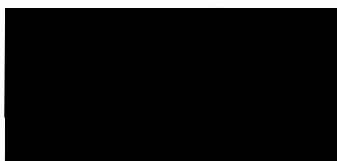


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Resum

Aquest article pretén donar una perspectiva general de la forma en què els mites i els relats tradicionals s'han adaptat al cinema. Per tal propòsit s'ha fet una selecció variada de pel·lícules, diferents pel que fa a la seva estètica, el tipus de pel·lícula o el públic destinatari, entre d'altres. Després d'una introducció en la qual es parla sobre temes com què és un mite o alguns aspectes de teoria d'adaptació, s'analitzarà cadascuna de les set pel·lícules per a descobrir què s'ha canviat, què no i per què. La darrera part resumeix algunes de les conclusions de les raons que van portar a les diferents maneres d'enfocar els mites, així com unes reflexions finals.

Paraules clau

Estudis cinematogràfics, mite, adaptació, fidelitat, mitologies europees.

Abstract

This paper seeks to give an overview of the ways in which myths and traditional tales have been adapted to film. For such purpose, a selection of films has been made. All selections are varied intrinsically. After an introduction in which topics such as what a myth is or some aspects of adaptation theory are discussed, each of the seven films is analysed so as to find what has and has not been changed and why. The last part draws some general conclusions on the reasons that led to the different ways of approaching those myths, as well as some final reflections.

Key words

Film studies, myth, adaptation, fidelity, European mythologies.

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1. Introduction

For a study like this one, in which the concept of “myth” is going to occur repeatedly and is of great relevance, it is suitable that some lines are devoted to the term. Moreover, the word “myth” is used in many different contexts with several differences in meaning. That is why it is important to specify what is referred to in this paper when such term is mentioned, to set the boundaries of the term from here on so as to avoid confusion.

“Myth” is sometimes used as a synonym of “lie”, a simple urban legend. That is the meaning used, for example, in the title of the TV programme *Mythbusters*, in which widely accepted ideas are put to the test to see if they are indeed true or not. In some other occasions, the word “myth” is used in fields such as philosophy with the meaning of “allegory”, as in the Myth of the Cave, more accurately and frequently referred to as the Allegory of the Cave, one of Plato’s most well-known examples in his work *Republic*.

Instead of any of these two meanings, this study will focus on “myths” as those tales of (normally) ancient times that tried to explain the origin of certain natural phenomena (meteorological changes, the sun and the moon, life and death, etc.) or give an answer to typically human existential questions (“why are we here?”, “where do we come from?”, “what is the purpose of life?”, etc.). For instance, in Hinduism, Brahma is the god that created life and human, or Osiris, according to ancient Egyptian beliefs, is the god of the underworld and rebirth. These examples make clear that mythology is “inextricablemente asociad[a] a la religión” (Green, 1995, p. 7). All of this is supported by the definition of the word “myth” that the Oxford English Dictionary gives in its first entry: “A traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events”. The supernatural element of the definition is so important that the μῦθος (*mythos*, myth) was even sometimes regarded as an invented tale, whereas its “opposite”, λόγος (*lógos*, word), was the epitome of rationality. That is what González Ríos argues, adding that “entre *mythos* y *lógos* hubo una precisa contraposición en determinados momentos de la historia de la lengua y de la cultura griega” (2016, p. 59).

Our ability to tell such tales is one of the characteristics that define us as humans and differentiate us from the rest of animals. Narratives, whether they be fictional or not, serve many functions: recalling the past, trying to explain happenings that go beyond our

understanding or conveying a moral, among others. Thus, narratives (in general) and myths (in particular) have played a key role throughout history. And nowadays, despite the fact that both mythology and mythography (the study of mythology) are far from being in vogue, we can still find in popular culture remnants of this huge influence that they used to have. Let us now think, for example, of Greco-Roman mythology. It is not outrageous to say that traces of it are still around us. Gianni Versace chose the head of the mythological creature Medusa, a being with snakes instead of hair and whose gaze turned into stone anyone who made eye contact with her, as the logo of his high-end fashion brand because he wanted people to freeze when seeing his work; the most successful football club in the Netherlands was given the name AFC Ajax in honour of the Greek hero Ajax, one of the best warriors that fought in the Trojan War, presumably as a reference to their bravery and strength; a cultural place related to music such as the Sala Apolo in Barcelona was named after the god Apollo, patron of music amongst other things. But we do not even need to go that far. Something as basic as the names of the planets perfectly illustrate that same influence: Saturn, Venus, Mars... All of those are the Roman versions of the names of the classical gods.

The presence of all these mythological elements had an effect on me from an early age. I enjoyed reading those stories and finding out more about those gods who seemed to be so powerful and so human-like at the same time. And this interest was supported by a not at all ancient medium: film. Evidently, these two items, myth and film, can be combined, and they do so in the meeting point of film adaptations of myths. Cinema, however, being one of the most popular arts nowadays, has a level of diffusion that myths and oral narration no longer have, and myths take advantage of it. Nevertheless, there are undeniable differences between a myth as it is and its film adaptation, and that is precisely what this study seeks to expand on: how differently have myths been adapted to film? For such purpose, a selection of seven films has been made: the classic *Clash of the Titans* (1981), directed by Desmond Davis; the Disney version of *Hercules* (Musker and Clements, 1997); Zemeckis' *Beowulf* (2007), that was made using motion capture techniques; *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (Columbus, 2010), based on Rick Riordan's best-seller *The Lightning Thief* (2005); Marvel's superhero film *Thor* (Branagh, 2011), and *The Secret of Kells* (Moore and Twomey, 2009) and *Song of the Sea* (Moore, 2014), both of them produced by the independent film studio Cartoon Saloon.

As the list above intends to show, the aim of this paper is not to carry out an extensive study of all mythologies or films. In fact, the scope is reduced to European myths. Even though classical mythology takes a big part of the weight (three out of the seven films are based on

Greco-Roman myths), the goal of these choices is to provide a variety of items to study in terms of aesthetics, year of release, audience, budget, etc. This way there will be plenty of chances to discuss differences in cinematographic methodology, storytelling, fidelity to the source texts or influences among the chosen adaptations. Ordered chronologically according to their year of release, each of them will have its own “review”, in which several topics, like their accuracy to the original myth and the possible reasons behind the narrative and creative decisions, will be tackled and discussed. Quite obviously, this paper deals with film plots in their entirety, so there will be spoilers. It might seem unnecessary to say this, but it can never be overstated. Being a student of English Studies, my initial intention was to focus on the myths and films of the British Isles. Such a decision would almost necessarily imply talking about the Arthurian cycle, but that would require an entire paper just for that, so it was left out. But other myths take its place as representatives of British mythologies (Celtic tales and an Old English text).

However, before diving into the body of this paper, since it is going to deal with the topic of adaptation, such term should be further explained with the help of some adaptation theory, more specifically film adaptation theory. And, when discussing such topic, the concept that immediately arises in any conversation, either academic round-tables or informal chats, is that of fidelity. Or in/fidelity, as Kranz and Mellerski put it (2008). It is one of the main points of argument when it comes to film and adaptation studies. Is it necessary? Does it make a particular adaptation better? Cheizoo expands on these and other questions in her essay “Why Adaptation Studies Need Fidelity”, defending a clear pro-fidelity position, in which one of her strongest arguments involves audiences’ perception and acceptance (or the lack of it) of adaptations. Not only that, but she also quite insightfully reflects on adaptation theory as a whole:

So why is this discussion relevant to the field of adaptation studies? At the very core, adaptation studies strive to transpose something from one medium, be it a story, a poem, a theme, or a set of characters, to another. According to the medium specificity arguments, this could never be done successfully as it involves transposing the ‘essence’ of one medium to a different one. The very existence of adaptations therefore proves that it is in fact possible to translate something from one medium to another, although essentialists might argue that adaptations will never be as successful as their source texts. (p. 3)

Nevertheless, every adaptation is going to be given the benefit of the doubt in this essay. And so, any changes from the original text (in this case, myths) that may “infringe” the principle of

fidelity will be accepted as long as there is an appropriate explanation for them and a reason behind them. After all, that is the aim of the present study.

The landscape of film adaptation theory has been undergoing a change from faithfulness-driven opinions to an approach somewhat similar to my position, that has been stated above, in this work. Some authors, such as Lopate, argue for a greater degree of freedom in the process of adapting a book, as if “a film adaptation should be the filmmaker’s critique of the novel” (Lopate in Kranz and Mellerski, p. 4). A very similar opinion is that of François Truffaut, who “praises the cinema of filmmakers such as Robert Bresson, Jean Cocteau, Jean Renoir or Jacques Tati –auteurs who, even when they are adapting literary material, bring something truly personal and original to it, thus turning their films into the expression of a personal vision” (Truffaut in Aragay, 2005, p. 15). It would be very interesting, in fact, to think of adaptations as originals, not as works “haunted at all times by their adapted texts” (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 6), in order to assess and value them more justly. However, that is not the case in the vast majority of the cases, unfortunately, and it is also fair to give credit to the original texts. Thomas Leitch expands on related topics, such as fidelity, intertextuality, originality, and the validity and underestimation of adaptations, in his article “Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory” (2003) and goes on to give a quite thorough account of his view on each of those twelve false notions. All of this knowledge will be taken into account up to some point in this paper. But now, without further ado, it is time to move on to the subsequent sections, which will individually examine all of the seven films, that will be in turn followed by a more concise analysis of the diverse motivations behind the changes made to the myths. Of course, it is definitely recommended to watch the films in order to fully understand what is going to be explained below.

2. *Clash of the Titans* (1981)

The genre of peplum films, also popularly known as sword-and-sandal films, reached its peak in popularity and spreading mainly during the decade of the 60s. They were basically low-budget historical films based on tales and myths from the classical era. It is in this genre that *Clash of the Titans* (Davis, 1981) could be included if it was not for the time gap between the period in which peplum films were in vogue and the year of release of the movie, and the fact that it was not a low-budget production by any means. It loosely follows the life and adventures of the Greek hero Perseus and, as in the case of *Hercules* (Musker and Clements, 1997), there are instances of myths that get blended and some elements are changed or omitted.

The core of the myth remains largely untouched in the film. Perseus is the son of Zeus and Danaë, a mortal princess; he and his mother are put in a chest and thrown into the sea but they survive; he is brought up unaware of his godly and royal family background; Perseus then goes on to kill Medusa without looking at her directly, but rather through the reflection of his mirror-like shield (his most iconic and well-known feat); and after that he rescues princess Andromeda from a sea monster by turning it into stone with the gaze of Medusa's head (Falcón Martínez, Fernández-Galiano and López Melero, 1980b, p. 511-513). All that is basically there in *Clash of the Titans*, but some other elements and minor details are different from the myth. For example, it is curious to notice how the otherwise unspecified sea monster from the original telling of the story is instead called the Kraken, a creature that is usually associated with Scandinavian folklore of later eras, not classical Greece. It is even more curious because the popular image of the kraken is that of a gigantic octopus or squid, and that is not how it is portrayed in the movie. Another character that draws inspiration from other traditions is Calibos, a figure that resembles Caliban, from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, both in name and physical appearance. He used to be a human, but was turned into a creature with horns, fangs, claws and a tail that serves his mother Thetis, the goddess of the sea, in her revenge against Zeus by hindering the quest of the latter's son, Perseus. Strangely enough, Calibos is not based on any figure of the mythological Greek imagery, but he plays the role of the enemy that the hero has to face several times in the film in order to fulfil his destiny.

As in Disney's *Hercules*, Pegasus is present in this film as the steed of the protagonist. In this case, it could be understood as the substitute for Perseus winged sandals that allow him to fly according to the myth. But the connection between Pegasus and Perseus has in fact some historical evidence. The image of Perseus as the rider of Pegasus dates from way back in time,



Rubens's *Persée délivrant Andromède*, an early portrayal of Pegasus as Perseus's horse.
(Google Images)

as some paintings show, such as Peter Paul Rubens's *Persée délivrant Andromède* (1622). Apart from this, other passages are quite faithful to the myth. For example, Perseus is helped by the gods and given some presents that help him in his adventures; his encounter with the Graeae sisters (seeresses that only have one eye and tooth for the three of them) in the film is almost exactly identical to the one traditionally told, and his fight with Medusa

ends up with the clever use of the shield explained above. It is true that Medusa is depicted as using a bow and arrows and as having the body of an enormous snake, none of which things are actually true according to the myth, but these should be simply taken as the director's ways of making her a more fearsome and dangerous foe.

Therefore, after considering what parts of the myth were kept and what parts were changed, this is the case of a film that got the nucleus of the story quite faithful to its source. In the end, the audience may get a fairly good general understanding of what the myth was about by watching the film, but some of the elements and secondary characters are indeed rather different. Some of those decisions were made due to the familiarity of the audience with certain images (the Kraken) or narrative devices (Calibos as the henchman of the superior antagonist power), and some other choices have proved to have some historical basis (Pegasus) even though they imply deviation from the myth.

3. *Hercules* (1997)

During the late 1980s and most of the 1990s, Disney was engaged in making several films based on traditional tales and stories, such as *The Little Mermaid* (Musker and Clements, 1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale and Wise, 1991) or *Aladdin* (Musker and Clements, 1992). Among them was *Hercules* (Musker and Clements, 1997), the company's version of the myth of the Greek hero. Being a film studio mainly devoted to producing animated pictures for children, this case was no exception. The movie was criticised for its lack of accuracy and for deviating from the original myth (Llewellyn Smith and Byrne, 1997, p. C1).

First of all, purists will probably argue that even the title is wrong, since Disney chose "Hercules", the Roman version of the name, and not "Heracles", the original Greek name. It is a Greek myth, so such choice would make more sense. But Hercules (or Heracles) is one of the most well-known heroes (if not the most) of all the classical tradition, which is why his story has been revisited uncountable times in cinema: *Hercules* (Francisci, 1958), *The Legend of Hercules* (Harlin, 2014) or *Hercules* (Ratner, 2014), just to name a few of the oldest ones and the most recent ones. As can be seen, the vast majority of them use the name Hercules, not Heracles, which explains why Disney decided to go with the Roman version in their movie. Besides, perhaps that is also why nowadays both the hero and his life are more known as Hercules than as Heracles, but that is just an idea.

Let us now have a look at the plot of the film. What the audience sees is more of a typical story in cinema: a guy that goes from being a misunderstood teenager to a young adult

who wants to prove himself and the rest of people that he can be and is a hero (he becomes famous in a very American-Western way, celebrity-like: fans, autographs, merchandising...). It is surprising how the Twelve Labours, which were Hercules' most important and emblematic feats and took most of his life to complete (Falcón Martínez, Fernández-Galiano and López Melero, 1980a, p. 302-309), are hardly mentioned or seen in the film. It is true that Disney's Hercules kills the hydra as his first act of heroism, and that there are brief references to most of them in a quick scene in which he goes from *Zero to Hero*, as the song that accompanies the images well says, but that does not mean they are regarded as the pivotal element that shapes the demigod's life.

Moreover, many other myths and legends that have nothing to do with Hercules are referenced in the film, some of them with a good deal of importance. For example, Pegasus is usually related to the hero Bellerophon, while here the winged horse is simply Hercules' animal sidekick, an almost indispensable Disney cliché; Philoctetes is shown as being a satyr in charge of training heroes, when in fact he was a human soldier in the Trojan War. The role of mentor of heroes is traditionally attributed to Chiron, the wise centaur, not a satyr. It is to be assumed that they decided to turn him into a satyr (half goat) for the comic relief it may provide, and the name Philoctetes was chosen because it could be shortened to Phil. Even Medusa appears briefly, but she is actually related to the myth of Perseus.

Plus, Hercules' main antagonist in the film is Hades, whereas traditionally there is no account of any kind of enmity between the two of them. It is to be assumed that this narrative decision was made because Hades, the god of the dead and the underworld, seems the equivalent to the Christian devil in some respects, and the devil is *always* the bad guy in Hollywood. Thus, these three changes, the development of the character of the hero, the blending of some non-related myths and Hades' role, can be seen as an effort on the part of Disney to bring the myth closer to a mostly Western (that is, American and European) audience.

Another character that is absolutely different is Hera, portrayed as a loving mother and bearing little relevance in the 1997 film. None of that is the case in the myth. Zeus' wife, she has to deal with her husband's constant cheating and she develops a hatred for all his lovers and illegitimate children, including Hercules, son of Zeus and Alcmena, a mortal princess. She is Hercules' archenemy and is responsible for almost every misfortune that happened to him throughout his life. She sent two snakes to his cradle when he was just a baby and made him go crazy years later. That craziness blinded him, and he ended up killing his own children and his (first) wife, Megara, who is also pictured in a quite different way in the movie. Apart from being the only love interest Hercules ever has in the film, she is said to have been tied in some

ways to Hades, but, despite her first scene being a damsel-in-distress type of scene, she is presented as a strong, independent and sarcastic female figure, a rather unusual depiction of women in Disney at that time.

That aside, these changes (Hera's and Megara's roles, primarily) were most probably made because of the intention of the company to suit a young audience. Therefore, all the gore killing, adultery and sex that is present in the Greek myth (and Greek mythology in general) is omitted and replaced by softer narrative elements. In the end, it is a children's film and Disney has proved to be quite puritan in that sense. However, such a claim seems contradictory if another element is considered: violence. Hercules is a hero and kills, or rather beats in most occasions, his enemies. The scene with the hydra is actually quite explicit even though it is just computer-generated animation. So, the inevitable question that arises is: why is violence acceptable for children and not sex? Hopefully Disney will change and adapt to more socially responsible views and to modern times.

All in all, the main idea is that the myth of Hercules was altered so as to suit a specific type of spectators. They modernised some of its elements and adapted them to a non-classical, Western audience, and omitted bits and pieces to make it available for children. Evidently, not everyone was happy with these deviations from the source text, but again, "a film adaptation should be the filmmaker's critique of the novel" (Lopate in Kranz and Mellerski, p. 4).

4. *Beowulf* (2007)

Out of all the myths that are discussed in this paper, none has stirred so much debate among scholars and experts as the one that is dealt with in this section: *Beowulf*. This epic poem written around the year 1000 is of unknown authorship, but it is nevertheless a text of unquestionable importance, since it is the earliest written record of Old English. There have been uncountable articles on many of the aspects related to *Beowulf* (who the poet was, when exactly it was written, its poetic value, etc.), as well as quite a number of film adaptations, each of them with its own characteristics. In this case, it is Zemeckis' *Beowulf* (2007) the film that will be analysed next. It employs the innovative (at least at the time the movie was made) technique of motion capture, which gives it a rather distinctive look and which had been previously used by Zemeckis in another of his films, *The Polar Express* (2004). It is relevant to say, however, that the creators of this version of the old poem saw it as their opportunity to dive deeper into some of the questions some scholars and themselves had regarding the original *Beowulf*, which

is why “it seems most constructive to approach the film as an interpretation of the poem”, as Forni put it (2009, p. 45).

It could be said that the scene that actually makes the plot of the film ostensibly deviate from the Anglo-Saxon poem is the encounter between the hero and Grendel’s mother. Up to that moment, Zemeckis follows the original story without much change: in the land of the Danes, king Hrothgar and his people celebrate at their hall Heorot, but the noise they make causes Grendel, an ogre-like beast, to come into the hall and kill many of them. Seeing that this happens quite often and that they do not seem to be able to get rid of the monster themselves, they are aided by Beowulf, a hero and prince arrived from Götaland. He faces Grendel unarmed and he manages to single-handedly mortally wound him by tearing one of his arms off. In revenge, Grendel’s mother attacks the hall herself, after which Beowulf decides to go to her lair to kill her and that is the crucial scene in the film. The poem narrates how Beowulf goes into her underwater cave and, after a long fight, beheads her. Grendel’s mother, by the way, is never described in detail in the poem, the general idea being that she is either some kind of sea-monster or a hag. As a matter of fact, she even appears to be somehow related to wolves, because she is referred to as “the wolfish swimmer” (Heaney, 1999, line 1506) and “the wolf of the deep” (line 1599). Nonetheless, the film portrays her as a golden creature that can adopt a human-shape. She behaves in a seductive and promising way towards Beowulf, saying that, now that he has killed her child, he should give her another one. Besides, she entices him into having sex in exchange for “riches beyond imagination” and a glorious future as a king. Furthermore, it is later revealed that Hrothgar is also involved in all of this, as it is implied that he once made a similar pact with Grendel’s mother, thus making him Grendel’s father.

The result of the union between Beowulf and Grendel’s mother is the third antagonist in the poem: the dragon. By making all the aforementioned changes, the screenwriters of the film, Roger Avary and Neil Gaiman, wanted to “give [the] characters reasons why things happen”, as they said in an interview. They felt like the original poem was split in two clearly differentiated parts, separated by a lapse of time of 50 years: the killing of both Grendel and her mother on the one hand, and then Beowulf’s confrontation with the dragon on the other. Apart from that, they stated that they had many questions regarding other aspects of the story, which led them to build this net of relationships and liaisons between different characters, so as to link the two disconnected halves of the poem. In that sense, their almost academic line of thought is praiseworthy, and so is the fact that they elaborated a new interpretation themselves. Evidently, in order to fit these substantially big changes into the larger frame of the poem, some other elements in the story had to be tweaked. For example, after his encounter with Grendel’s

mother, Beowulf becomes the king of the Danes following Hrothgar's suicide. The ancient poem has the hero reach the throne in his own homeland, but by doing this, the scriptwriters made sure that two things happened: Grendel's mother's "oath" or "prophecy" was fulfilled, and Beowulf was still close enough to Grendel's mother and their child-to-be.

Generally speaking, the film's ending is pretty similar to the one depicted in the original *Beowulf*, with the hero slaying the dragon but ultimately dying as a result of his fatal wounds. The two works even coincide in that Wiglaf, one of Beowulf's most trusted warriors, is to be the new king as the hero's heir. However, the poem depicts him as being Beowulf's only living relative, a distant cousin, whereas in the film Wiglaf is his life-long friend, companion and fellow warrior. In fact, when Beowulf's funerary rites are over, the film has Grendel's mother give one last seductive gaze at Wiglaf before the credits roll, thus leaving open the possibility of her bribery going on with the new king. Other characters from the poem also appear in Zemeckis' film, but they are not as important or suffer as many changes. For instance, queen Wealhtheow goes from being Hrothgar's to Beowulf's wife, which is a remarkable change for that character in particular, but it has no effect on the plot; and Unferth, a Dane warrior who first challenged and then accepted Beowulf, who in the film has the particularity of showing some early signs of Christianity reaching those northern lands.

No matter the profound thinking put into developing the plot for the film, it is difficult not to think that "the team's interpretation seems to have been informed by their effort to make a commercially viable product" (Forni, p. 50). What is more, Forni further argues that this version of *Beowulf* gives the impression of having been particularly aimed at male teenagers, a hypothesis drawn from the abundance of action scenes, gore and sex that can be found throughout the movie. In any case, the narrative and creative decisions taken by Zemeckis, Avary and Gaiman show a will to dive deeper in the story and the gaps they considered should be filled with answers, and their reading of such a scholarly text is, to say the least, a clever and original one. Although it was quite easy to foresee that this film would most likely not have many fans among purists and academics, its effort to make *Beowulf* accessible to popular culture consumers cannot be overlooked and, in the end, it was an openly admitted exercise of trying to play with the poem and find their own answers. The result, as one would have expected, stirred even more debate in the academic sphere working on *Beowulf*.

5. *The Secret of Kells* (2009)

Cartoon Saloon is a small Irish film studio specialised in animation and films for children. Its first movie is *The Secret of Kells* (Moore and Twomey, 2009), and it is a beautifully made homage to Irish folklore and aesthetic tradition, all the while staying away from the most well-known (almost stereotypical) elements of Irish-Celtic mythology, such as leprechauns, banshees or the Tuatha Dé Danann (the god-like race of superior beings) (Green, p. 16). Instead, the film approaches other lesser known figures of such an exuberant tradition, framing the action in a time in which Ireland was still transiting from paganism to Christianity and the Vikings were a palpable threat. It tells the story of Brendan, a young boy in an abbey who sees himself suddenly in charge of completing the book that is nowadays known as the Book of Kells, a richly illustrated volume that contains the Gospels of the four Evangelists. While doing so he discovers the real world outside of the walls of the abbey and comes into contact with some of the creatures in those pagan tales he has always been told not to believe in. This synchronicity of Christian and pagan Celtic beliefs and traditions, coinciding in space and time, creates an interesting hybrid in the film, “giving rise to what Moore, the director, has called ‘a very unique kind of Christianity’” (O’Brien, 2011, p. 37).

The first figure worth discussing is Aisling. She is a fairy of the forest with the ability to change her physical form, among others, from that of a white wolf to that of a little girl. She becomes Brendan’s friend in their escapades to the forest. What is very interesting is that the “aisling” (meaning “vision” or “dream” in Gaelic) is a typically Irish type of poetry in which Ireland appears as a woman, either young or old (Dunne, 1998, p. 34), which fits with her representation in the movie. What does not fit is that Aisling is very closely related to the forest. She says that “this is *my* forest” on several occasions, and she even appears to have control over the creatures that inhabit it. For example, she saves Brendan from the wolves simply by telling them to back off and forbids a swarm of bees to sting him. Besides, there is also her shapeshifting ability, that enables her to turn into a salmon, a deer or a wolf. None of these two characteristics, her connection to the forest and her metamorphoses, correspond to the image of the personification of Ireland in aisling poetry. Rather, they are more like the kind of attributes that a fairy would have, and that is precisely what she is. In the end, she is the result of combining Irish literary tradition and “children’s” beliefs.

Aisling is meant to represent the good, playful side of the forest. But there is a counterpart to that goodness. And that is Crom Cruach, also referred to as “the Dark One” in the film. The nature of this Celtic deity in particular is apparently not very clear, as he has been

labelled both the “principal dios” (Dapía, 200, p. 216) and a god with “diabolical custom(s)” (Mackenzie, 1924, p. 251) by different scholars. At least from a present-day perspective, the fact that there were many human sacrifices made to him (children were offered to the god especially) (Mackenzie, p. 6) seems to point at the idea that Crom Cruach was not a benevolent god, even though those sacrifices were made to ensure the fertility of the land. This is the scope that the film chooses, as it represents Crom as a dark, malign entity hidden in the forest, thus related in a way to fertility and nature, but not amiable in any way. Nevertheless, there is a link that connects the two of them, both Aisling and Crom Cruach, together. At a certain point in the film, the main character has to fight the god and defeats him. This could be seen as Christianity defeating paganism, but that is not the case at all. Actually, everything seems to indicate that “this epic battle between Brendan and Crom is in fact a dream” (O’Brien, p. 35), which is a reminder of Aisling’s name, “dream”, who helped Brendan in his quest to finish the book. All in all, “[t]he battle between good and evil is internalized within Brendan’s mind” (O’Brien, p. 35).

The Secret of Kells is a unique introduction to Celtic folklore for a younger audience. Its elaborate yet delicate aesthetics is almost as much a piece of craftsmanship as the Book of Kells is in the film. What is more, the story includes certain events that are based on real historical facts, such as the arrival of the Vikings and the making of the Book of Kells itself by Columkiel (based on the real Saint Columba, the evangelist who is believed to have started the book) (Meyvaert, 1989, p. 6). Actually, there is a point in which it is no longer easy to distinguish what is historically accurate and what is not. Moreover, the apparent duality of good and evil, embodied in Christianity and paganism respectively, is effectively banished from the film, for Brendan is helped by a pagan creature, Aisling, instead of just using his faith.



A piece of Celtic-looking art next to a Christian text, also symbolised by Aisling and Brendan, respectively.
(Google Images)

6. *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (2010)

What would Greek myths be and look like nowadays? That is the premise of Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* 5-book best-selling saga, in which the author develops a series of adventures typical of classical mythology in a present-day setting, following the life of a modern demigod, Percy Jackson, in the United States. The first volume, *The Lightning Thief* (Riordan, 2005), was adapted to film as *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (Columbus, 2010), and so did the second one, *The Sea of Monsters* (Riordan, 2006), under the title *Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters* (Freudenthal, 2013), but let us now just focus on the first. It is interesting to have a look at the film as an adaptation of a book (since it has its own intricacies and differences from the novel), but it is even more interesting to do so as an adaptation of a myth. Obviously, Chris Columbus, the director, had much advanced technology at his disposal than the one that, for example, Desmond Davis, the director of *Clash of the Titans* (1981), had access to, which enabled him to have more possibilities in terms of sound, digital and special effects. All of this is due to the enormous difference in budget between the two productions, since *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* could even be considered a Hollywood blockbuster regarding its large budget, so they used far more advanced filming techniques and technology. Plus, there seems to have been a revival of the interest in Greco-Roman mythologies and of the genre of peplum films since the beginning of the 20th century since the release of *Gladiator* (Scott, 2000), whose success sparked the appearance of several other films such as *Troy* (Petersen, 2004) and *Clash of the Titans* (Leterrier, 2010), the remake of the 1981 film. Therefore, both the books and the films could be included in this trend.

First and foremost, it is worth starting by saying that Percy Jackson is mainly based on the hero Perseus, but the biggest difference between the two is who their respective fathers are. Greek tradition gives Zeus the role of Perseus' progenitor, but Riordan puts Poseidon, the god of the sea, as the father of the main character of his novels. Let us not forget that this is just a part of a whole book series, and none of what happens in the books would be possible had Percy been Zeus' son, because the powers that he has are those of Poseidon (for instance, control over any liquid element and ability to breathe underwater) and they become helpful and even necessary throughout his adventures. This is in itself another difference with respect to the myth, since Perseus does not have any superhuman powers despite being a demigod too. All in all, the film is aimed at a teenage audience, so the element of "superpowers" was included. Another very interesting point is that this time Hades is not the villain in the story,

unlike it happens in many other films: for example, *Hercules* (Musker and Clements, 1997) and *Clash of the Titans* (Leterrier, 2010), above mentioned. In this film he seems to be the antagonist because he is presented as such, but, due to a turn of events, it is finally revealed that he is not.

As seems to be usual in this type of films, the blending together of different myths also takes place in this one. For example, towards the middle of the movie Percy kills the hydra with Medusa's head. But it has already been explained that Hercules was the one who killed the hydra. Plus, he did so by chopping its various heads off and setting its necks on fire to prevent them from growing again, whereas the usage of Medusa's head as a weapon was Perseus strategy to defeat a sea monster, not the hydra. Nonetheless, the most representative

trait of this film is that numerous elements present in the myth have been modernised to fit its current-day setting. To give just a couple of examples, Perseus' traditional winged sandals are replaced by Percy's winged Converse trainers and the reflective shield Perseus uses to kill Medusa is instead updated in the film as a music player with a reflective case that allows the protagonist to see Medusa without having to look at her directly. Indeed, she is not the only mythological figure to make an appearance. Chiron is portrayed as the centaur he is, but he has to disguise when in sight of everyone else as a teacher in a wheel chair (thus "hiding" his horse legs), quite appropriately as well because he is said to be the instructor of the heroes.

Many gods (Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Persephone, Athena...) also appear for a brief time. However, two very iconic mythological locations are updated too in the film: the Olympus and the Underworld. On the one hand, the Olympus is no longer a mountain, but rather, as a symbol of power and home of the gods, it is situated at the top of one of the emblems of the most important city in the most powerful country in the world nowadays: the Empire State Building, in New York City. On the other hand, the Underworld is hidden under the "H" of the Hollywood Sign, in Los Angeles. The "H" may stand either for "hell" or "Hades" (the name traditionally given to the Greek underworld), and its location



The winged sandals are turned into a pair of winged trainers and the reflective shield becomes a reflective music player.

(Google Images)

possibly indicates the opposition between the Olympus and the underworld as a parallelism with the rivalry between New York City and Los Angeles. It is, anyhow, curious to see a film placing a thing such as the equivalent of hell (therefore, theoretically a bad place) next to the symbol of its own sector, the film industry.

After all, the goal of *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* was to bring the classical myths to the present day all along, and that was exactly what was achieved. This revamping of the ancient tales is intended to attract a young audience, and the inclusion of these narratives within the wider frame of a popular culture environment definitely helps bring them closer to that certain group of viewers.

7. Thor (2011)

Thor made his first ever appearance as a comic book superhero in Marvel's *Journey into Mystery* #83 (1962). The character was created by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and Larry Lieber, and most of his most representative traits and distinctive elements from Norse mythology and tradition were kept. Moreover, Thor was not alone, given that he was accompanied by several traditional figures of the Scandinavian pantheon, such as Odin, Loki or Sif, among others. However, because it is such a long-running series, the stories of Thor told in the dozens of comic books have come to deviate with time from the mythological narrations typically attributed to the thunder god. Nonetheless, it is not the comic book series what is going to be analysed in this paper, but rather the 2010 film adaptation, *Thor* (Branagh, 2010). It belongs to the Marvel Cinematic Universe superhero movie saga and it has had several sequels, including one specifically centred around the figure of Thor, *Thor: Ragnarok* (Waititi, 2017), but only the previously mentioned film is going to be taken into consideration in the discussion in relation to the myth, not its comic book counterpart.

To begin with, the filmic Thor is portrayed with many of the attributes that have traditionally been assigned to him. He is a war god, the lord of lightning and thunder, a brave and bellicose fighter. He lives in Asgard, the dwelling of the gods, with Odin, his father, and the rest of gods. However, due to his impetuosity (and this is where the film differs from the myth), he is banished to Midgard (the human world, the Earth) after causing a long-forgotten conflict between the gods and the giants of Jotunheim (another mythologically accurate place) to revive. Once there, he is rid of all his powers and has to prove himself worthy in order to be allowed back to Asgard. Besides, his renowned hammer, Mjolnir (with which Thor was able to summon the lightning and the storm), is fixed to a stone and can only be released by a man

worthy of it. This, which very much reminds the audience of the image of Arthur and Excalibur, the Sword in the Stone, is never present in the original myth.

All his quest to restore his name and his value can be seen under the scope of the Norse peoples' moral views. They highly regarded traits such as bravery and worthiness. As McCoy puts it: "The most honorable behaviors and character traits, as evidenced especially in the sagas, were manliness, generosity, hospitality, valor, courage, eloquence, and loyalty." (2016, p. 85) Not only that, but another element that was brought into the film straight from the myth of Thor is his close relation with humans. He is said to be the god of all people, especially of the disadvantaged. That is, as a matter of fact, why he was more worshipped than Odin himself, the leader of all Scandinavian gods. Consequently, in the film adaptation Thor falls in love with a human woman, a mortal. Certainly, such love does not take place in any of the mythological and folkloric accounts of the life of the god, but it serves the purpose of conveying his closeness to humanity.

As previously mentioned, other mythological figures make an appearance as well. Odin, father of Thor and lord of the gods, is portrayed as even more powerful than Thor (as he indeed was said to be) but is unable to take action for most of the film. Frigga, sometimes also referred to as Freya, is Odin's wife and Thor's mother in the film, whereas the myths usually portray her as Odin's partner but not as the mother of the thunder god. That role is usually attributed to Jord, a female giant, and the same thing happens in the comic book, which raises the question of: why did they change that if the comics were faithful to the traditional tales and there was not any apparent reason for such alteration? It is to be assumed that she plays a more relevant role in the forthcoming films. Then there is also Loki, the trickster god in Norse mythology. In the movie he is Thor's adopted brother (although that is revealed later on), son of Laufey, one of the ice giants of the realm of Jotunheim. In spite of the fact that traditional accounts portray Laufey as Loki's mother (a being about which nothing else is known), all these changed family ties were introduced for narrative and plot purposes, as Loki will go on towards the end of the



The Asgardian Royal Family in the film (clockwise from the top): Odin, Frigga, Loki and Thor.
(Google Images)

film to realise he is adopted and to seek to overthrow Odin as the ruler of Asgard. This fits with Loki's traditional behaviour, since he is presented in the old texts as the irreverent causer of many of the gods' problems, including the last threat they will face when Ragnarok (the rough equivalent to the Christian Apocalypse) comes.

The film even shows other mythological characters outside of the "royal family" of gods, but they do not really play a key role in the story. Heimdall is the protector of Asgard, an all-hearing god that guards the entrance to the realm of the gods over Bifrost, the rainbow



Thor, wielding Mjolnir while on Bifrost, the rainbow bridge.
(Google Images)

bridge that serves as the pathway leading to the walls of Asgard and that also makes an appearance in the film adaptation. All this is portrayed quite accurately, but again, bears little relevance.

Conversely, Sif is Thor's wife according to tradition. She is basically known only for her golden hair, but the film's Sif is a skilful (black-haired) warrior that fights alongside Thor when needed. This sudden deviation from the myth, omitting her traditional position beside Thor as his wife (which does not happen in the storyline of the comic books), is a consequence of the film already having a love-interest figure in Jane Foster, the woman Thor falls in love with, thus Sif's role is no longer (narratively speaking) needed, in this case.

Having had a look at many different aspects of both the myth and the film, it is safe to say that the changes made and the elements adapted followed the narrative intentions of the director. For example, the plot had Loki betray Odin, but he would not have been able to betray him if he had been portrayed as in the myth, an unpredictable, selfish god. Of course, the whole topic of gods suited the superhero trend very well, as it involves beings with supernatural powers, usually fighting one another. Nevertheless, the producers included many of the most distinguishable elements of the original myth, thus making the relationship between the two texts clear.

8. *Song of the Sea* (2014)

Whereas *The Secret of Kells* focused on mythological creatures and folklore in the Middle Ages, in *Song of the Sea* (Moore, 2014) Cartoon Saloon attempted to bring the mystical flare of the 2009 film a few centuries forward. Therefore, this time there is no historical fact to base the narrative of the film on, and the story is completely original, again directed by Tomm Moore. This time, the story revolves around two children, as in their first film, and the selkies, creatures typical of Celtic folklore, all of it sprinkled with the traditional Irish aesthetics that the studio is known for. Nevertheless, this time “*Song of the Sea* is more inspired by than based on Irish mythology”, as Greydanus posits, adding that “the world of the movie’s adapted mythology [...] stands matter-of-factly alongside the everyday world.” (2015) It is difficult to argue against such statements, since both ideas become quite clear once the film starts: the creators have taken inspiration from several myths, tales and creatures, but then have changed what they needed for the sake of the plot; and the transition of the mythological elements from their original ancient times to the contemporary setting in the film is done in a very natural and smooth way.

When beginning to talk about this movie, it is important to explain what a selkie is. In Celtic mythology, a selkie is a magical seal-like creature that can transform into a human. Most frequently, the tales involve female selkies rather than male. The figure of the selkie is a traditionally Scottish folk-creature, not Irish, but the story of *Song of the Sea* is set in Ireland (as evidenced by several elements in the film, including the accent of the characters). It is very common to find folkloric tales in which a female selkie lives in her anthropomorphic form with a human husband, but still longing for her life in the sea. A situation very similar to this one is presented to the audience in Moore’s movie, with Bronagh, a selkie, having to leave her family behind. The problem begins when her young daughter Saoirse seems to be a selkie herself, which implies that she also feels that pull of the sea. In the end and with the help of her mother, that attraction is not so strong in her case because she is half human, and eventually, she decides to stay with her brother and father. Other films with similar plot lines are movies like *The Secret of Roan Inish* (Sayles, 1994) and *Ondine* (Jordan, 2009), both of them Irish productions centred around the figures of selkies and their connections to the sea.

But the selkies are not the only mythological creatures to play a role in *Song of the Sea*. For example, Saoirse and her brother Ben come upon a group of odd-looking beings that turn out to be the Deenashee or *daoine sídhe*, which is the Gaelic name given to the fairies in Ireland. Interestingly enough, it literally means “people of the mounds”, which is exactly what they are

in the film, given that they live in a mound in a roundabout. These fairies seem to fear another supernatural beast, Macha. Macha is portrayed as an old witch with control over all owls, being herself in the body of a human-sized owl. It could be said that she is the antagonist of the film, because she wants to turn every magical being to stone so as to avoid having feelings and the pain that comes with them. Therefore, she also wants to petrify Saoirse, but the young half-selkie manages to prevent that from happening and eventually turns her into a good-natured version of herself (after all, this is a children’s film). But this is not what the Macha from the Celtic traditions is said to be like. Instead, she is said to be three separate goddesses at the same



The giant Mac Lir, son of Macha, turned into an island.
(Google Images)

time, a sort of threefold identity. In any case, myths depict her mainly as a war-goddess (Mac Cana, 1983 p. 86-88). The film, however, does not show any of these traits. As clarified earlier, *Song of the Sea* just draws inspiration from Irish mythology, it does not intend to be accurate, thence these significant changes.

In relation to Macha, another figure that appears in the film is that of her son, the giant Mac Lir, turned into an island by his own mother after she saw him suffering from a broken heart. Just as Macha, Mac Lir is a mythological figure, but there is not much resemblance between the original and its representation in the film. According to the traditional tales, Mac Lir is the god of the sea (which would explain why in the film he is transformed into an island, surrounded by the

ocean), and he belongs to the race of the aforementioned Tuatha Dé Danann (Mac Cana, p. 66-69). Therefore, he is not supposed to be a giant, but a god in his own right. Legend has it he is the ferryman who leads souls to Tir na n’Og. Tir na n’Og is the Irish Otherworld, a paradise across the sea, “un lugar feliz, sin límites de tiempo ni edad, una fuente de sabiduría, paz, belleza, armonía e inmortalidad” (Green, p. 83). It is the home of the gods, fairies and other supernatural beings. At the end of the film, all such creatures (including Macha, Bronagh, Mac Lir and many fairies, among others) head towards the horizon, apparently with the intention to go back to their home, but Mac Lir does not appear to be the one leading them, thus not seeming to be “the ferryman”. Then is when Saoirse decides to stay behind with her human family, having to say goodbye to her mother forever.

Song of the Sea is again a tribute by Cartoon Saloon to Ireland, its culture and its traditions. In *The Secret of Kells* the focus seemed to be on the forest and the forces that lie within it, but this time the core of the film looks deeply into the sea as a source of myths and the importance of such natural environment. Starring a wide variety of mythical beings, the ones that have the biggest role are the selkies, in spite of the fact that they traditionally appear in Scottish tales. By simply making references to various deities and creatures, the result is in any case a film brimming with originality yet conscious of its background and past. That is how the movie succeeds in putting together all the elements and creatures of the old tales and builds a totally new story that feels and sounds like a lullaby.

9. Conclusion

At this point, it is already quite clear that the goal of this paper was never to thoroughly analyse and fiercely criticise any of the films, but rather to discuss some of the interesting elements in each one of them. For such purpose, the scope of this research paper was intentionally reduced to European mythologies. However, it would certainly be a very engaging task to widen those limits and have a look at not only Europe, but also Indo-European folklores and beyond. Ancients civilisations in Central America, Africa and Australia, for instance, have impressively rich tale-telling traditions, and it is also worth alluding to the Indian cinema industry, Bollywood, which has witnessed the making of innumerable films (based on their literary epic-mythical cycles, namely the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*). In any case, that comparative exercise would make for a more extensive and complete work than this one.

It is interesting, nonetheless, to have a look at the whole picture and see how the film industry (specifically Hollywood) has changed over the years. If we only focus on the films discussed above, there seems to be a general trend to adapt myths as animation movies for children, apart from the fact that they quite often include a moral. *Hercules*, *The Secret of Kells* and *Song of the Sea* are examples of such assertion. That might be because myths are the kind of story that children will probably like, with lots of imaginary creatures, powerful heroes and supernatural events. But a significant number of films do not follow that guideline and, instead, are meant to be consumed mainly by adolescents, like *Beowulf* and *Percy Jackson*, following the (reasonable) idea that that part of the audience most probably finds the action-adventure and sometimes even sexual elements in the myths appealing. There are plenty of other films that were considered for this paper but finally did not make the cut. Among several others, films like *Troy* and the aforementioned remake *Clash of the Titans* were thought of and later

left out. The main reason for discarding these two and some other movies was that, even though it would have been interesting to have a look at them anyway, the type of changes that they presented were illustrated by some other films in the final selection of seven films.

As stated before, the mythologies that have been covered in this paper belong to European traditions. Nearly all those traditions are essentially patriarchal, a fact that is very often mirrored in and transferred to the myths themselves. Thus, it is very easy to find male figures in power positions, displaying their “masculinity” by means of brute force and physical prowess. Heracles is the perfect and clearest example of this, but others like Beowulf and Thor also fall into this category. As a result, women usually play the role of the wife or love interest of the protagonist. It is not rare to find that they are misogynistically portrayed as damsels in distress, Andromeda being the epitome of such a helpless figure who cannot fend for herself and has to wait for someone to save her. As a matter of fact, it is not unusual either to find instances of myths in which the female is accused of being the source of all evils, as is the case of Pandora, Lilith, Eve and many others. Of course, Hollywood being another epicentre of patriarchy, all these examples of macho men and suppressed, defenceless women were not at all likely to change in the adaptations of folkloric narrations and tales.

Nevertheless, this sexist under- and misrepresentation of women in films (especially mainstream ones) was slowly and quietly subverted, giving way to a colourful range of different ways in which they are represented. For example, in her essay “Deesses i tombes: Mites femenins en el cinema de Hollywood”, Bou attempts to “reexaminar l’univers narratiu i iconogràfic de les ficcions dels anys vint i dels cinquanta” (2004, p. 20), all the while stating that “la fascinació dels creadors per la figuració femenina va ser tan exacerbada que directors, dissenyadors i guionistes van superposar arquetipus diferents en la creació d’un mateix personatge femení” (p. 21). She then goes on to categorise women in movies into two main blocks with their own subdivisions: the block of bellicose women, led by the figures of Pandora and Athena; and the block of silent women, personified by Demeter and Persephone. However, her essay deals with women in all kinds of films. Sadly, in most of the cases of films based on myths it all still seems to be about men being strong and muscular.

This comparative study has gone over a tiny sample of films and, after examining each one of them individually, it is quite clear that the different deviations from the source texts are due to several factors. *Clash of the Titans* placed a lot of importance to the familiarity of the audience with certain images and narrative devices, which led to a few significant changes, but overall, the plot is similar enough to the myth. *Hercules* was made with a specific type of target audience in mind, that is to say, present-day Western children, therefore omitting most of the

violence and some other aspects of the original legend. Conversely, *Beowulf* was orientated towards teenagers, and so consequently, violence is a frequent theme in the film. However, its most interesting characteristic is that Zemeckis' film is a reinterpretation and a new reading of the myth, thus showing a greater degree of involvement with the Anglo-Saxon poem. *The Secret of Kells* is a totally different thing: it is a gem in terms of both its aesthetic and cultural value, since the historical facts and the fictional events merge in a way similar to how Celtic paganism and Christianity coexisted at the time. *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* presents us with a simple yet innovative premise of modernising the ancient myth it is based on. Bringing a text to the current era implies having to adapt (and "update", up to some point) many elements, locations and characters, but it is carried out quite effectively nonetheless. Then there is *Thor*, in which several narrative elements were made so as to fit a superhero-like storyline. Still, the film is a quite complete recreation of the myth thanks to the inclusion of many of the original characters and iconic details of the original tale. Last but not least, Cartoon Saloon's *Song of the Sea* can be seen as a film entirely different from the rest, as it is a melting pot of traditional Celtic tales and fables, modifying as many things as needed in order to have a totally original story as a result.

In the end, it can be inferred that there are mainly three types of different reasons why the changes were made. The first type is audience-focused changes. These imply that it was decided to change a given element because it was not appropriate for a specific age-group (most usually young spectators) or because it was considered that a given element would have more acceptance if it was modified in respect to the original. The second one is narrative-driven changes. This type of changes entails that some degree of artistic or creative licence was taken on the part of the creators of the film so that the plot of the film followed as they had planned, even if that meant deviating significantly from the source text. And the third is the modernisation of the myth. As the name suggests, changes of this type mean that the story is taken from its originally ancient timeframe to a (near-)current-day setting, with all the necessary modifications that come with it. It might perfectly be that each of the seven films does not fall uniquely into one of these three categories, but rather it meets the requirements to belong to more than one. For instance, *Beowulf* could be considered to belong to the two first types, because its target audience is largely teenagers and the original story is heavily twisted; *Song of the Sea* fits in all three of them, as it is meant to be watched by children, all the while it has taken several mythological elements from the Celtic traditions, transported them to contemporary Ireland and come up with a completely new product; *Percy Jackson*, however, is mostly an exercise of modernisation; and so on and so forth. All in all, it has already been

proven that, regardless of the changes made, a film adaptation is different from its source text and it reflects how a given director sees the original and how they transpose it in a completely distinct medium.

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