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The Train Cut the Thread

Juja Dobrachkous' *Bebia, à mon seul désir* (2021)

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The thing about Greek mythology is that no one really knows what happened. Take the Cretan saga revolving around Minos' wars against Athenians; Daedalus and his labyrinth; and Theseus and Ariadna. No one really knows what kind of prison the labyrinth was: did prisoners work as slaves, or did they do nothing, or maybe – as Plutarch has it – they "wandered about at their own will and, being unable to find an exit, perished there"?[1] And if the latter is true, what is the whole Minotaur story about? Was it not just Minos' way of, firstly, exteriorizing his own guilt over taking away Athenian children from their parents, and secondly, of coping with his being jealous about his wife Pasiphaë's affair with his war commander Taurus by imagining a monstrous fruit of their illicit relationship? Wasn't Theseus himself a personalization of Minos' desire to kill first the competitor (the Cretan bull) out of jealousy, then his competitor's child (the Minotaur) out of guilt? Didn't part of it happen in Minos' head? As Plutarch remarks, "there are many other stories about these matters, and also about Ariadne, but they do not agree at all".[2]

What Juja Dobrachkous works with in her film *Bebia, à mon seul désir*, is this exact trait of mythology – it exists not as a chain of stories, but rather as a set of names living through stories that make each name become a variant of itself. A God turns into a bull – into a monster – into a teacher (Eusebius) – into a commander (Philochorus) – into a king (Hamartolus). Juja plays with the way these images flicker, merge, collide, never really existing as realities independently of their interaction with each other. You can never tell a person from his demons; human entities, as we are accustomed to imagining them, don't exist here. What we really have is a set of names that occupy different places in different stories. In other words, we have a set of *signifiers*.

I think those are things we have to keep in mind when approaching Dobrachkous' film. Also, I believe a fruitful approach to Dobrachkous' film is a psychoanalytic one, as it is psychoanalysis that conceptualizes the role of signifiers in the life of a subject.

The film tells the story of a girl named Ariadna (played by Anastasia Davidson as well as Anushka Andronikashvili in the role of young Ariadna). Ariadna is growing up in rural Georgia with her parents and her maternal grandmother Medea (Guliko Gurgenidze). “Bebia” from the title is the Georgian word for granny, and we soon start to see that Medea is a key figure in Ariadna’s life and the main catalyst of the development of the film. Medea is always as angry, nagging, depressed, and capricious as a child. She is also one of those grannies that try to attract everyone’s attention by constantly repeating that they are dying. She tells Ariadna that no one needs kids, and that “life’s better without them.” She also seems persuaded that Ariadna is not “from their family” because of her blonde hair. She tells Ariadna’s mother that at the market people think the same, refusing to give Ariadna her share of the bread on that basis. These remarks being regularly repeated, Ariadna gradually develops a kind of depression of her own, apparently interpreting her granny’s words in this way: “life’s better without children, I am a child, so life is better without me”; “I am not from the family, so I don’t deserve bread, so I deserve to die.” Ariadna grows up with the certainty that her grandmother hates her, and, her demand of love being rejected, she develops an identification with her grandmother. There are several scenes that suggest this strong identification. Little Ariadna witnessed a scene when her parents’ love play was interrupted (whether on purpose or not) by Medea slipping and falling in the next room. On another occasion, Ariadna will stand in for her grandmother and, upon hearing her father touch her mother in the kitchen, will rise from her bed and interrupt her parents with her sudden appearance. That this identification does not resolve with time will become clear from several memories of the grown-up Ariadna, in which an image of a dog will stand both for Medea (in the image of a barking dog) and for herself (a dog descending the stairs).

The main collision of the film takes place around the time when Ariadna is 17. Ariadna has left home to go live in London. She has become a model, only to prove, as she will later admit, that her grandmother was wrong about her being a good-for-nothing. But the image of Medea continues to haunt her to such an extent that one evening she cuts her wrist. After the suicide attempt fails, she sits in the kitchen disinfecting the wound when she receives a call from home. They tell her that Medea has died and that Ariadna needs to come to the funeral. Obviously, the coincidence of her attempt to kill herself with the news of the death of Medea cannot but awaken the identification, adding a sense of guilt to it: she killed her grandmother.

Ariadna takes off for Georgia. That is where the mythical or imaginary layer that vaguely corresponds to the Greek myth becomes apparent as structuring Ariadna’s psychic life. She is met at the airport by Temo (Alexander Glurjidze), a young, chain-smoking and long-haired guy she doesn’t know and whose ties to her family are unclear. When she asks him who he is, he replies that he is a slave.

Back at home, Ariadna witnesses usual rural scenes of mourning, with a multitude of distant relatives and a dozen of hired mourners that fill the house with their cries and lamentations around the open coffin. She also meets her mother (Anastasia Chanturaia), whose name remains unknown. Her mother has recently divorced (not Ariadna's father, but someone else), and she is ill with some disease vaguely reminiscent of Alzheimer's: she easily forgets things and passes her days confused and irritated.

Dato (Nukri Archvadze), who is, apparently, Medea's brother, calls Ariadna and Temo and tells them that according to an old tradition, the youngest offspring of the deceased has to unspool a thread from the place of death to the coffin so that the soul of the dead person reunites with the body. Ariadna is Medea's youngest offspring. And Medea died in a hospital 25 kilometers away from home. The spools are ready, Ariadna has to go in the morning. Dato asks Temo to accompany her. Ariadna, first thinking that it's some kind of joke, finally agrees to make the trip.

As Dobrachkous suggests herself, Temo stands for Theseus, and Dato for Daedalus, the creator of the labyrinth and the one who instructs Ariadne about the use of the thread in the Greek myth.

Now we seem to see where this is going. Only that, at the same time, it is going somewhere else. It is as if Dobrachkous challenged us by making the references so obvious and yet saying: "You think you know the story? Then figure this out." First of all, Ariadna doesn't seem too eager to go anywhere, especially with Temo, whom she doesn't seem to like. Temo, too, seems to be involved in the whole story by pure chance. Instead of the clear purpose of Theseus' trip into the labyrinth, we seem to witness some kind of rural custom two youngsters have gotten themselves into.

We have to go back to the beginning and remember that, in essence, nothing is much clearer in the Greek story. Even its most popular variant supposes that we believe in princesses seduced by bulls, men with bull's heads, and heroes slaying these monsters with one blow of a fist. Add to that the fact that nothing is really clear about the labyrinth, and about the whole motives of the sacrifice: according to the legend, Athenians made peace with Minos on condition of giving him seven young boys and seven young girls every nine years. What for? Only to feed them to the Minotaur upon arrival on Crete? No one can really say.

We've already taken note of the possibility of interpreting the whole myth as a drama of the jealousy and guilt of one person, in which the Minotaur plays the role of Minos' inner KGB, to which the tyrant delegates all the dirty work he himself is guilty of. I think that if it is not in these exact terms, the myth as presented in the film of Dobrachkous follows this same logic.

It is easy to see how this works on the example of Temo. If the Minotaur and

Theseus are both signifiers in one person's imaginary order built around guilt and its expiation, there must necessarily be something common between them, and Dobrachkous easily finds it in their binary nature. As we know, Theseus has two fathers, a God and a man, and the Minotaur was born from a liaison of two creatures: a beast and a woman. This mythological structure allows for further metonymic mixing of the actors. In the film, we have Temo, a mix of Theseus and the Minotaur who, as he says himself, feels, within himself, "a monster – and someone meant to slay the monster." Temo has two fathers, the one (a beast/a God) who raped his mother, and the one (a man) who raised him and didn't slay the rapist – those are the two faces of Minos' repression: jealousy and guilt. We clearly see how the figures of God and the beast merge in the figure of Temo's biological father, and that is not at all Dobrachkous' invention: not only in the case of Theseus is it (a) God who rapes Aethra, Theseus' mother. We also know a story of Zeus becoming a bull to take hold of Europa (according to Pseudo-Apollodorus, it was *the same bull* that Pasiphaë then slept with and that fathered the Minotaur). Thus God, assuming the role of seducer and tearing families apart, always puts on a mask, and that is what Temo refers to the only time he talks about God in the film: "His invisibility impresses me," he says. Temo clearly blames the God-beast for his own divided existence and sees himself as a product of a family collision, as an actor in someone else's story, so he tears himself from everything that ties him to his family, and to the world: "In the end, I realized that I hated them both. Nor could I tolerate more lies." That is where we meet him in the film, a depressed stoner living in a family which is not his, a slave in the labyrinth folded upon itself, with no one to slay, and no way to leave. Temo presents a characteristic case of melancholy based on identification with an abandoned object. Freud describes the structure of such cases in the following way: "They show us the ego divided, fallen apart into two pieces, one of which rages against the second".[3]

Now we see that Temo and Ariadna represent very similar, yet somehow different figures. Let's start with the similarity. The similarity lies in the phantasm of exclusion and identification they both take part in. That is the phantasm of the Greek myth. The phantasm can be unpacked as follows:

1. *Exclusion*. Both see themselves as slaves, that is to say as not belonging to the family. Temo states it directly: "I am a slave." As for Ariadna, we already talked about the roots of her separation from the family in the words of Medea. In one of her childhood memories, she sees herself at school, standing along the wall among seven girls who wait to get vaccinated, thus taking up the role of an enslaved Athenian girl being taken to the Minotaur (some of us can still remember the fear of needles we felt when we were kids). This is obviously the reason why her grandmother's name is Medea – an empress who kills her children. This motive of exclusion, of being expelled from home, is at the center of an episode where Temo and Ariadna, traveling with the thread, chance upon

a family of war refugees and instantly relate to them.
2. *Identification*. As slaves, both Ariadna and Temo also identify with the executioner in the figure of a violent progenitor, or the Minotaur: which is Medea for Ariadna, and the father figure, or a God-beast, for Temo. This identification is the source of their own violent drive against the beast and of the mission of slaying the Minotaur that their mythical predecessors accomplish together: Ariadne by providing the thread, Theseus by killing the monster. In the film, this idea is rendered even more directly: Ariadna and Temo travel together.

In short, in both cases we witness an *identification with the agent of exclusion.* The difference between them is also close to the difference between the mythical figures. Ariadne is the daughter of Minos, and Theseus is a slave brought from Athens. The same is true for the film: everything happens in Ariadna's home, whereas Temo is a stranger. What makes Ariadne, ultimately, help Theseus to kill the Minotaur? Why did she fall in love with him? The Greek myth doesn't give a reason: she just happened to fall in love. But now we can say: something makes her, too, feel herself enslaved in the home of her father, and this something also has to do with the presence of the Minotaur.

To make this absolutely clear, we need, once again, to remind ourselves of the details of the life of mythical Ariadne. People say that her mother had an affair with her father's subordinate, commander Taurus. That's the most probable reality behind the Minotaur myth. Many Greek sources suggest that those were the rumors that went around Minos' court. In the film, those rumors are represented by the people from the market that refuse to give the family's share of the bread to Ariadna, saying that she *doesn't look like her father*: both her father and mother have black hair, and Ariadna is blonde. That's the story Medea believes in and keeps repeating at home. So both Ariadne from the myth and Ariadna from the film have reasons to suppose that their father is not their (biological) father and that, therefore, they are not from the same family as him.

The very fact that Medea denies Ariadna the love she deserves as a family member, creates an identifying motive of Ariadna's hatred towards herself as a stranger in her own family. Something similar but more complex happens with Temo: apparently, his identification shifts as he grows up. First, he passes the boyhood stage of identifying with the father he grows up with. Then he discovers that there is another, biological father, a rapist, *a father that is not in the family*. That is where he develops a sense of double identification he tells Ariadna about: unable to get love from the absent father, he identifies with him, automatically becoming a stranger in the family, personifying the absent father in the image of the God-beast. Unable to forgive the "family" father for defending his mother, he takes this role upon himself and identifies with him as someone meant to slay the beast. With identification, he adopts the same self-hatred as Ariadna: "In the end, I realized that I hated them both." That is why

Temo is, *first*, Theseus, a slave, meant to slay the Minotaur, and then, the Minotaur, the beast itself.

Well, rape is different from infidelity. And Temo's way of coping with trauma in the film is different from that of Ariadna. But the feeling of being a guest in one's own family is what unites them. We have reasons to suppose that something similar happens in the myth. Ariadne needs to slay the beast to save her mother from the slander of the court, to prove her father is wrong: that's, in a way, why she *uses* Theseus by giving him the thread; Theseus needs to slay the beast to end the war with Minos and to free his people: that is why he uses Ariadne to get out of the labyrinth. That's what their love is worth: and that is why, after completing their mission, they soon forget each other. In the film, we see the same kind of bond, more structural than "emotional": Ariadna and Temo, traveling together, are both absorbed by their own trip. Ariadna needs to believe that she *is* her mother's daughter, that Medea was wrong; Temo needs to end the war with his absent father.

They both have to fight against this identification they built with the image of the aggressor. But how to proceed? The tradition offers them a way: a thread that is supposed to lead them to their childhood and then help them return from it to become adults. That's Dato's way, and that is also a way Ariadna and Temo don't believe in – and for a reason.

A theme of a Procrustean bed of tradition that the subject of modernity is unable to fit into is central in the film: it is underlined by a scene that starts and ends the film and that is external to the main storyline. It is a scene of a church choir rehearsal. The choir sings a *cherubikon*, a hymn that is supposed to symbolically turn the singers and listeners into angels gathered around God's throne. What's ironic is that, obviously, the singers of a modern choir have a hard time turning into angels, raising on the level of the universe they are supposed to represent. Maybe this is the main danger that Dobrachkous avoids: the danger of turning a myth into a legend. What she understands about the nature of myths is that their structure reflects not the thought of the mythological time, but the thought of the time when the myth is formed: and that is the motive of myth-making in the first place. Dobrachkous' myth happens now. Unable to take it anymore, Ariadna screams: "I'm done! It can all go to hell. What thread? What souls? *It's the twenty-first century*. Why the hell am I doing this?" Temo and Ariadna are not Theseus and Ariadne, first and foremost because they are subjects of modernity, in many ways unable to fit in the form that tradition, in the figure of Dato, suggests to them. The very structure of the subject of modernity is different from the structure of the pre-Cartesian subject presented by the Greek myth and followed to this day by the naive psychological approach that supposes that a subject is a unity that can follow the thread of its memory, find itself in the past, and then come back with some kind of knowledge. What thread? What knowledge? "The train cut the thread. We buried Bebia without her soul," says Ariadna, referring to the real

train and the real thread they unspooled while crossing the railway, but also to the train as the archetypal image of modernity. The world is constantly cut and reshaped, and there is no such thing as the wholeness of the subject that could be represented in its soul. If the subject exists, it is only as a byproduct of the immense machinery of desire that knows no boundaries – the same machinery that lets Temo sleep with Ariadna's mother, be her father, her brother (the Minotaur), and her lover. The subject is split, but it is not split by another subject, and not by nature, it is split as *one signifier that occupies two different places in the same story*: a beast and a hero, a slave and a master, a host and a guest, a God and a man, a victim and an executioner, a father and a son, etc. This concept has several direct representations in the film: one of the most striking ones is a scene when Temo and Ariadna, driving a country road and having an argument, almost run over two strangers on the side of the road; turning his head, Temo sees that these people are also themselves, Temo and Ariadna. Another significant scene is exceptional in that we can't attribute it unequivocally to either Temo or Ariadna's memories, because it shows Temo and Ariadna together as kids, even though they didn't know each other as kids; this suggests that the scene belongs to the realm of their common phantasm; in this scene it is Ariadna that replaces the beast.

These observations are supported by the structure of the film's visual narration. It has two main layers that constantly cross over: Ariadna's present and Ariadna's memories. The nature of their interaction is one of the main keys to the film's semantic structure, because, in many ways, it follows associative, but also distorting mechanisms of memory. I'll give just a few examples. Ariadna and Dato are talking at the table about the song that should be sung at the funeral. Ariadna instantly remembers a scene from her childhood where a song coincided with a death: she remembers how, during a lesson at school, when one of her classmates was singing in front of the classroom, the teacher killed a wasp that flew in from the street. The recollection is so productive because the images of a dead wasp and dead grandmother easily fit into the common image of a *dead beast*. Another example: looking at Temo rolling a cigarette and calling himself a "monster – and someone meant to slay a monster", Ariadna remembers a fight between her parents, during which her mother says to her father that he's always making a monster out of her: the merging of the images of Temo and Ariadna's father is reinforced by their physical resemblance and their common smoking habit. There are more straightforward examples of the kind: turning her head and seeing Temo crossing a narrow suspension bridge, Ariadna remembers how she, as a child, walked a narrow alley between two buildings.

The important thing about these memories is that they belong to the same imaginary level as many other events of the film do. First of all, these memories are mixed with something that can only be understood as phantasms: a chilling scene with little Ariadna walking through a completely deserted market (a source of the accusations); or a scene of her demonic

turning into a beast that menaces little Temo; or, finally, a scene where she is standing at the wall among seven girls: this number indicates that here again we deal with a kind of false memory, or a memory distorted by the later phantasm. But not only memories are mixed with phantasms, but the “real” events of the film, when closely inspected, reveal a phantasmatic nature too. Take the scene where Temo and Ariadna run over themselves. Or rather take a long “realistic” scene of their stay at the refugees’ house that is more difficult to reduce to phantasm. And yet it is one, as the numbers, once again, suggest. The family has two children, like Ariadna and her brother the Minotaur, and the parents say that they have been living in this house for *seven* months.

All these remarks support hypotheses we’ve proposed above: first, that all these memories, phantasms, events refer to *one* psychic structure, and that this structure reflects that of the key myth. Second, that the subject is not *localizable* in this structure as a “person”: although we can say it is Ariadna’s story, we also see that her and Temo’s stories are as closely related as are variants of one and the same myth, and that Ariadna’s subjectivity functions as a signifier occupying different places, marked by names, with “Ariadna” being only one of those names. There are many things in this extraordinary film that I haven’t addressed. What I tried to point out is the way Dobrachkous enriched mythological variability by the variability written into the structure of desire. Greek mythology leaves the question of where the beasts come from unintelligible, reporting their cause to the usual *deus ex machina* of the Greek tragedy. By incorporating desire into the mythological structure, Dobrachkous rethinks the way Ariadne and Theseus are bonded by their relation to the beast that’s enslaving them and offers a glimpse into the structure of this enslavement.

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