

*A Companion to Greek Religion*  
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PART IX

**Epilogue**

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

# Gods of the Silver Screen: Cinematic Representations of Myth and Divinity

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Ever since cinema's infancy, myth – and Greek mythology in particular – has been a mainstay of cinematic output, in that films either incorporate mythological names or characters in their titles – *The Andromeda Strain* (dir. Wise, 1971), *The Poseidon Adventure* (dir. Neame, 1972), *Black Narcissus* (dir. Powell, 1947) – or else recreate episodes from classical mythology. Jon Solomon estimates that there have been over eighty mythological movies made by American and European film studios to date, proving that movie producers are keen to mine the depths of classical myth for screen materials (Solomon 2001:101). The release of films like Disney's animated feature *Hercules* (dir. Clements and Musker, 1997) and the blockbuster *Troy* (dir. Petersen, 2004) demonstrates that Greek mythology continues to play a significant role in the construction of ancient history in mass popular culture. As Martin Winkler puts it:

Ancient myths and archetypes recurring in films attest to the vitality of our own cultural tradition. Retellings of classical stories on film show that filmmakers have used the ancient material consciously in order to comment on their own times or that they unconsciously reflect cultural trends. Ancient myths can also provide instances of more or less imaginative entertainment. In such processes the classical sources may become imbued with a creative art and intelligence not readily apparent to a casual viewer. Openly commercial films set in antiquity, whose historical or mythological accuracy may leave much to be desired, can still reward a close engagement with their underlying qualities. (Winkler 2001:3)

Winkler identifies two types of cinematic approach to mythology in film: a “high art” approach, permeated with “intelligence,” by which he refers to complex European

art-house movies such as *Medea* (dir. Pasolini, 1970), *Phèdre* (dir. Dassin, 1962), and *Orphée* (dir. Cocteau, 1949), and a “low art” approach, in which the naive vision of mythology is dictated by commercial box-office necessity. Here Winkler no doubt alludes to the Italian “peplum” movies of the 1950s and 1960s such as *Hercules Unchained* (dir. Francisci, 1959) and *Hercules, Samson and Ulysses* (dir. Francisci, 1961), which were big on muscles and mass appeal, but low on budgets and historical integrity. But this is too simplistic a breakdown, as Richard Buxton has recently recognized:

The enduring attractiveness of the ancient myths [is not] restricted to what [is] described as “high” culture. If film, television and computer software are solid indicators of popular taste, then . . . the popularity of films such as *Jason and the Argonauts* [and] *Clash of the Titans* . . . and of the TV series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* . . . suggest that the decline in the cultural centrality of classical antiquity in most Western countries has far from extinguished the appetite for ancient stories. Such retellings should not be taken as a sign that the “true meaning” of the myths has been forgotten or falsified. On the contrary: they are a sign of vigour, and should be welcomed as such. (Buxton 2004:245)

Some commercial myth movies actually display an enormous integrity towards ancient source materials without ever compromising their popular accessibility or their box-office appeal. Two such films, already cited by Buxton, stand head and shoulders above all others: *Jason and the Argonauts* (dir. Chaffey, 1960) and *Clash of the Titans* (dir. Davis, 1981) were enormous box office hits and share and benefit from the superb special effects of Ray Harryhausen’s SuperDynamation and the clear narrative outlines of Beverly Cross’ witty and involving scriptwriting.

In this chapter I will explore how, between them, Harryhausen and Cross responded to Greek mythology and adapted aspects of its diverse output for the big screen (because of his impact on the genre I will refer to these myth movies as Harryhausen films). Rather than take on board the many and varied elements of their cinematic responses to the Jason and Perseus myths as a whole, I will focus here on how cinema artists visualize and utilize the Olympian gods (in many ways the starting point of this chapter), who play key roles in the films, as a means of assessing the filmmakers’ appreciation and knowledge of original mythic and historical sources. It is not my intention here to show where the films diverge from received accounts of the ancient myths per se; instead I want to highlight how and why the Olympians are presented on film and to question how far their portrayals play with ancient conceptions of divinity (for which see, most importantly, Sissa and Detienne 2000 and Otto 1954).

That said, it is important to have a brief synopsis of the films’ plots, simply as a means of assessing how the gods are utilized within their narrative structure. What follows here are the very briefest outlines.

### *Jason and the Argonauts (1960)*

Jason (Todd Armstrong) has been deprived of his kingdom by King Pelias (Douglas Wilmer) who, when Jason was still an infant, slaughtered his mother and siblings in

the temple of Hera (Honor Blackman) at Corinth. The outraged goddess resolves to protect the child, and gains the reluctant permission of Zeus (Niall McGinnis). When he reaches maturity Jason is brought to Olympus by Hermes (Michael Gwynn) and is told that he can regain his rightful throne by bringing home the Golden Fleece from Colchis. A ship is built by Argos (Laurence Naismith) and with the help of Hera, who appears as the ship's (misplaced) figurehead, Jason sets out with the Argonauts, including Hercules (Nigel Green) and Acastus (Gary Raymond). They encounter and defeat the bronze monster Talos, before imprisoning the harpies who have been terrorizing the blind seer Phineas (Patrick Troughton). Jason and the Argonauts fight their way through the Clashing Rocks in order to reach Colchis and are saved from drowning by Hera, who instructs Triton to save the Argo. Arriving at Colchis, Jason falls in love with Princess Medea (Nancy Kovack), the priestess of Hecate. Her father, King Aeetes (Jack Gwillim), tries to prevent Jason taking the Fleece, but after killing the hydra which protects it, Jason and Medea flee the kingdom. Aeetes pursues them and sows the teeth of the hydra into the earth, whence spring skeleton warriors. With two of his men Jason fights and conquers the skeleton army before rejoining Medea on board the Argo to sail towards their future.

### *The Clash of the Titans (1981)*

Zeus (Laurence Olivier) has fathered a child by Danae (Vida Taylor), whom she names Perseus. Her father, King Acrisius of Argos (Donald Houston) casts mother and child into the sea in a wooden chest, but they are saved by Zeus' interference. He commands Poseidon (Jack Gwillim) to release the sea-monster known as the Kraken, the last of the Titans, to destroy mankind. Years pass, and Perseus (Harry Hamlin) grows to manhood with the help of Zeus and despite the complaints of jealous Hera (Claire Bloom). Thetis (Maggie Smith), angered when Zeus turns her son Calibos (Neil McCarthy) into a sub-human creature, transports Perseus to her cult-city of Joppa, where he meets an actor named Ammon (Burgess Meredith) and falls in love with Andromeda (Judi Bowker), daughter of Queen Cassiopeia (Siân Phillips). But Andromeda's suitors are required to answer impossible riddles or be killed. Having received several magical gifts from the goddesses Hera, Aphrodite (Ursula Andress), Athena (Susan Fleetwood), and the god Hephaestus (Pat Roach), one night Perseus captures the winged horse Pegasus and flies to Calibos' lair, where he learns the riddle that nightly he commands Andromeda to repeat. Calibos fights with Perseus, and in the tussle Calibos' hand is severed from his wrist. He offers the severed hand at the altar of his mother Thetis and demands vengeance. Perseus is betrothed to Andromeda and in a temple ritual Cassiopeia declares that her daughter is more beautiful than even Thetis. The already angry goddess is made furious and declares that Joppa will soon fall victim to the Kraken unless Andromeda is offered to him as a sacrifice of atonement. Perseus learns that the stare of the Gorgon Medusa will render any creature, even a Titan, lifeless, and so he seeks her out and cuts off her head. He returns to Joppa just in time to slay Calibos and save Andromeda from the Kraken. Perseus and Andromeda are married and immortalized in the stars by Zeus.

## Divine Apparatus in Homeric Style

Ray Harryhausen has called Greek mythology “a rich source for fantasy projects and therefore stop-motion animation.” He has also noted that:

There are few other sources where you could find so many adventures, bizarre creatures and larger-than-life heroes. Most films in the genre, including the Italian sword-and-sandal epics of the '50s and '60s, had concentrated on the heroes, heroines and villains while more or less ignoring the creatures and the machinations of the gods. So I asked myself: what if we make a film that featured the creatures and the gods and used the humans to link the story? That was how *Jason and the Argonauts* was born. (Harryhausen and Dalton 2005:99)

Aware of the liberties he and his fellow-filmmakers took with some of the key elements of the ancient myths, Harryhausen is nonetheless pleased with the final results: “I suspect the Greeks would have been pleased with what we did – even if the academics have not always been quite so impressed” (Harryhausen and Dalton 2005:99). His paranoia about the academic credentials of the myth movies is unfounded, for after all Harryhausen himself has called Beverley Cross “an expert on Greek mythology” (Harryhausen and Dalton 2003:152). Certainly judging from early drafts of the scripts for *Jason and the Argonauts* and *The Clash of the Titans*, Cross deserves the commendation. He investigated a myriad of mythic possibilities which could be incorporated into filmic narratives before finally settling on the stories outlined above. Watching the films, it becomes clear that Cross’ understanding and knowledge of the scope of Greek myth were extensive, but we can sense a meticulous comprehension of the minutiae of mythology in the more detailed aspects of his scripts, especially in scenes set in Olympus amongst the gods. There can be little doubt that Cross’ conception of divinity, as utilized in his movies and the subsequent reworking of *Jason*, derives from a thorough understanding of the Homeric approach to godhead; the fashioning of the gods of the silver screen is modeled on predominantly epic forms.

Even the casual reader of Homer will know that the gods frequently intervene in human affairs, to such an extent that they can alter human behavior and thought processes – imbuing a hero with courage, or limiting his desire for a vengeful frenzy of slaughter. This premise forms the basis for the filmic use of the gods, as the storylines cut between heaven and earth, showing the gods viewing, deliberating on, or interfering in the lives of the on-screen heroes. Yet to judge from the Homeric poems the representation of the gods is ambiguous – we are told that they are different from mortals in that they have no sense of earthly time, no physical bodies, and that they are terrible to behold. At the same time, Homer insists that they live lives remarkably like those of humans – they love, hate, suffer, even look like (admittedly beautiful) mortals, but have the ability to fly, become invisible, or conjure great strength.

Cinematic interpretations of the gods delight in playing up these Homeric inconsistencies, and use the double-sided nature of Olympian divinity to augment the films’ plots: gods are omnipresent and ever watchful for the welfare of their mortal favorites, but they are simultaneously distracted from a specific action which often

puts that cherished mortal into danger. In the *Iliad*, for example, Hera seduces Zeus so that his attention will drift from his vigilant protection of the Trojan warriors, and his brief absence from his watching-post brings about a change of fortunes in the war. In *The Clash of the Titans*, Zeus only has to turn his back on his beloved Perseus for an instant before Thetis is seen causing trouble for the vulnerable youth. As he sleeps, she reaches down from the sky and, with her hand, picks him up off his lonely but safe desert island and transplants him into her sacred city of Joppa: “It is time for chance to intervene,” she declares. “Time you saw something of the world, Perseus. Time you came face to face with fear. Time to know the terrors of the dark and look on death; time your eyes were opened to grim reality. Far to the east, in Joppa, in the kingdom of Phoenicia.” Thetis’ malevolent action is the catalyst for the movie adventure to begin.

The “us-and-them” ideology of mortal–immortal relationships becomes a vital element of the cinematic construction of Greek myth. But how is the polarity of powerful divinity and inferior mortality played up on screen? Filmmakers employ the full battery of cinematic armory to create this opposition, which by and large follows Homeric models closely

## Olympus

The community of the gods lives on Olympus, high in the sky – a space where time is unchanging. That the gods belong by definition to a plane beyond that which mortals can touch or see is a given. If the gods decide to interact with men, disguised as beggars or nursemaids, or to move unseen among the battlefields of Troy, they do so only as visitors, and always return to their Olympian home. Of course, that the physical mass of Mount Olympus can be seen from afar (it is even visible from Thessaloniki on a clear day) is another Homeric contradiction, for the folds of Olympus correspond to Heaven.

In *Jason and the Argonauts*, Olympus is envisaged as a vast and essentially tangible citadel with a monumental propylaea decorated with “classical” friezes and flanked by immense white marble statues of Zeus and Athena, opening up onto a gleaming white marble colonnaded hallway and a multi-leveled room constructed from giant blocks of veined marble. Ornate bronze lamps, chairs, footstools, cushions, and tables give the impression of a lavishly furnished neoclassical stately home set amidst the clouds. This Olympus is very much a palace for the gods. Harryhausen explains his design decisions:

Olympus . . . had to look impressive and inspiring, but not cost too much, so we used a long-shot of [a] temple-like palace set where the gods are seen entertaining themselves, then combined that with a matée painting . . . We painted the set pure white with gold embellishments . . . As a final touch we later added in the lab an edge of mist around the frame. (Harryhausen and Dalton 2003:155)

The notion that this palace is otherworldly is strengthened not only by the misty edges of the screen frame but also by the camera panning upwards from the earth to the sky (usually passing through the clouds) as the story cuts from earth to heaven.

The same technique of aerial photography and cloud effects is utilized in *The Clash of the Titans*, but here the realization of Olympus is more ephemeral. The establishing shot shows a mountain-top city of classical domes, colonnades, and pediments set against a background of an ethereal city inspired in one part by John Martin's epic painting *Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still* and in another part by Michael Gandy's early nineteenth-century oil painting *Jupiter Pluvius*, and created in model form in one of the sound studios at Pinewood (Harryhausen and Dalton 2005:18, 21). Working with the production designer, Frank White, Harryhausen recalls how "We created an Olympus that combined the look of paradise and a realistic dwelling for supreme beings, a reflection of the ancient Greek image of the home of the gods" (Harryhausen and Dalton 2003:265).

Externally, Olympus appears to be a physically definable space, but on entering its halls all sense of logical scale and perspective evaporates. Zeus' throne room or council chamber is a vast, echoing, misty environment of immense proportions. Harryhausen explains that "We went for outsized columns (of which we could only see the bases), suggesting massive structures that could only be guessed at" (Harryhausen and Dalton 2003:265). The set-dressings are radically modified and kept to a minimum when compared to the ostentations of Olympus in *Jason and the Argonauts*. Here only huge circular mosaics ornament the floor; there is no redundant furniture and no superfluous décor, just vast, empty, vaporous spaces. The only necessary piece of set-dressing is Zeus' throne, raised on a lofty platform and decorated with golden lions and coiled snakes.

However, in keeping with the Homeric conception of Olympus being divided into specific areas, such as the bedchamber where Aphrodite and Ares are discovered *in flagrante* by Hephaestus and subsequently watched by the other gods, this cinematic heavenly mansion has many rooms too. Hephaestus, for example, is shown hard at work in his hot and dirty forge, adjacent to Zeus' throne room. Most importantly the same throne room has a semi-circular antechamber, decorated with archaic winged sphinxes, whose walls are pocked with hundreds of small niches containing terracotta statuettes of all the mortal inhabitants of the earth.

## Anthropomorphism, Transformation, and Metamorphosis

To enable the audience to identify with the characters of the gods they are shown in human form. This is an epic tradition (Burkert 1985:182–9). In Homer, with the exception of immortal *ichōr* in place of human blood, the bodies of gods and mortals correspond entirely: their limbs are the same, their tissues and organs are identical. They groom and dress themselves like humans; in the *Iliad* we see that Hera's skin, like any mortal woman's, needs to be cared for with scents and oils. Her white-armed beauty is not easily maintained.

The flawless bodies of the immortals are frequently depicted in Greek art, where the gods are usually given special attributes or costumes to remind the viewer exactly who's who in the divine family. In the most simplistic terms Athena wears a helmet or carries an owl; Artemis has her quiver and bow; Dionysus his crown of vine leaves (Childs 1998; Woodford 2003). The on-screen gods are given many of the same

attributes and wear costumes recognizably “ancient Greek.” In *The Clash of the Titans*, for example, all of the gods wear white robes, in imitation of sculpture, with slight variations to suggest character: Hera’s head is veiled, Aphrodite’s robe falls off one shoulder, Zeus wears a long-sleeved tunic beneath his *himation*, in contrast to Poseidon who is bare-chested beneath his. As Harryhausen recalls: “[We dressed] the actors in white togas [*sic*], which were distinctly different to the humans’ more earthy colours” (Harryhausen and Dalon 2003:155).

But cinema audiences cannot be trusted to recognize the signs spelled out through costumes and sets. Other methods need to be adopted to ensure that film viewers recognize different gods and, moreover, appreciate the essential qualities that individual gods incorporate. Therefore the on-screen image of the god and the movie star who plays the deity are often merged in the audience’s subconscious in order to clarify the type of god being portrayed.

Harryhausen and his producer, Charles Schneer, got the idea of casting the Olympians with a bunch of international stars, and so in *The Clash of the Titans* the phenomenon is knowingly played up to the film’s advantage: Zeus, king of all gods, is hammed up relentlessly by Laurence Olivier, king of all actors; Hera, his queen, is played by Claire Bloom, Olivier’s leading lady at the RSC for many decades and something of a figure of elegant respectability in theatrical circles. The love goddess Aphrodite is the Swiss love goddess Ursula Andress, who like Aphrodite arose from the sea in *Dr No* (dir. Young, 1962) and set the world on fire. Thetis, the dry-witted sea goddess, is played to perfection by the caustic Maggie Smith (Beverly Cross’ wife). Indeed, one of the major pleasures of *The Clash of the Titans* is the preponderance in the cast of women “of a certain age.” Claire Bloom, Maggie Smith, and Siân Phillips (as Queen Cassiopeia) demonstrate effectively that it is entirely possible for female characters to be gorgeous, strong, and interesting *despite* being played by actresses over the age of 25 (in significant contrast, Ursula Andress does not speak a single line in the film, although off-screen, of course, she was – true to her Olympian character – conducting a passionate romance with Perseus).

The divine hierarchy of Olympus is therefore reflected in the casting of the characters, especially in terms of age and status. The gods “frieze” in age to reflect their position in the Olympian genealogy: Zeus and Hera are depicted as the older generation, Athena is a young woman, Hermes a young man. The same principle is followed in the casting of particular actors in specific roles.

The clever work of the casting director permits an audience with limited knowledge of the Greek gods to identify immediately the character traits of the Olympians with the off-screen and inter-filmic personas of the stars who portray them. To avoid any further confusion, however, the movies opt to show only a select handful of the many gods of the Greek pantheon: *The Clash of the Titans* shows Zeus, Hera, Athena, Thetis, Poseidon, Hephaestus, and Aphrodite, while *Jason and the Argonauts* highlights only Hermes, Zeus, and Hera (another clever piece of casting – with Honor Blackman as the Olympian queen). This movie differs, however, in its depiction of the wider family of the gods, who are seen dotted around Olympus engaged in various leisurely pastimes and group together behind Hera and Zeus as curious observers when the mortal Jason is brought to visit them.

As an introduction to the gods in *Jason and the Argonauts*, Hermes, the messenger and herald of the gods, appears to Jason as an old man, a seer, who transforms himself



into a god; the moment is captured in some rare surviving storyboard sketches: “The seer’s face becomes watery and is transformed . . . into Hermes” (Harryhausen and Dalton 2005:105). Harryhausen had some interesting ideas for Hermes’ transportation of Jason to Olympus:

In one of the early scripts Hermes, in the form of man, asks Jason to climb into his chariot, whereupon Jason witnesses his transformation into a god (but without any increase in size). The journey to Olympus is also interesting. With one pull of the reins the horses are transformed into unicorns and fire spits from the wheels of the chariot taking both Hermes and Jason into the sky. Sadly, the script was altered to save time and money, and we ended up with almost a straight transition to Olympus through a dissolve. (Harryhausen and Dalton 2003:155)

In the final film version, as he casts off his human guise, so Hermes grows in stature until Jason is dwarfed by the vast figure of the god. He places Jason in his hand and carries him heavenward before setting him down on a tabletop in the hall of the gods. Here the minuscule hero is examined by the giant figures of the Olympians, who loom over him like curious children.

The inspiration for this transformation scene is found in a famous passage from the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, where the goddess casts off her restrictive mortal form and displays herself in all her divinity. As her golden locks fall around her shoulders, as sweet smells emanate from her robes, and light blazes from her body, so too she grows in size, dwarfing the frightened mortals at her feet (*Homeric Hymn 2* [to Demeter] 275–80). The common Greek assumption that the gods are bigger than mortals is given wide rein in the movies. *Jason and the Argonauts* plays on this notion, employing camera trickery to convey the diminutive scale of mortals compared to the massive proportions of the gods. In *The Clash of the Titans*, Thetis’ giant hand scoops the sleeping Perseus off his island home and places him down in the city of Joppa as her face appears in the moon and dominates the night sky. Why is scale an issue in the on-screen retelling of these myths? In terms of *Jason and the Argonauts*, Harryhausen recalls that:

Both the Art Director and I discussed how we could depict the actors as gods. We didn’t want to cut from the mortal world to the gods with barely anything to differentiate between them, so we decided to use a variety of images and designs to give the impression that the gods were truly omnipotent and dominated the world of humans. The obvious trick was to make the gods huge versions of humans. . . . [Thus when] Jason arrives on Olympus in the hand of Hermes, he steps onto [a] board game that Zeus has before him. For this confrontation with Zeus we built a full-sized board with oversized pieces on which [Jason] would deliver his lines upward, towards the camera, so as to appear as if he were talking to a gigantic Zeus. I used a travelling matte of [Jason], against yellow backing . . . [showing him] with his back to the camera as Hermes places him on the chessboard. . . . Combined with the gods looking down at him, it seemed that a tiny Jason is standing in front of them. (Harryhausen and Dalton 2003:154–5)

In addition to stories of the gigantic scale of the immortals, Greek mythology is peppered with stories of gods shifting shape and metamorphosing into animal (or more abstract) forms; the seductions of Zeus are often played out against this

background, although Thetis is perhaps mythology's most advanced shape-shifter, morphing from animal to reptile to fish in order to ward off the unwanted advances of the mortal Peleus (Forbes Irving 1990). However, this most fantastical of divine powers is (oddly) only infrequently used in filmic renditions of myth. *The Clash of the Titans* uses the theme the most: Hermes takes the form of a sea bird (a common feature in transformation myths) in order to fly from earth to Olympus, and (more tentatively) Thetis' son Calibos is transformed on screen (but in silhouette) from handsome youth to deformed monster, but otherwise there are no further on-screen metamorphoses. Allusion is made in the script, however, to Zeus' habit of morphing shape in order to seduce. Thetis, the most confirmed shape-shifter, leads the goddesses in criticizing Zeus' womanizing:

THETIS. So many women, and all these transformations and disguises he invents in order to seduce them. Sometimes a shower of gold, sometimes a bull or a swan. Why, once he even tried to ravish me disguised as a cuttlefish . . .

HERA. Did he succeed?

THETIS. Certainly not!

ATHENA. What did you do?

THETIS. Beat him at his own game. I simply turned myself into a shark.

[*They laugh*]

## Epiphanies

Closely related, in cinematic terms at least, to the notion of shape-shifting is the concept of the epiphany – the god's appearance (through voice or physical manifestation: Burkert 1997) to mortals. Epiphanies have an irresistible draw for the filmmaker since, like metamorphoses, they afford an opportunity for special effects and the furtherance of cinematic narration. They can take an overt form of display or a more subtle form of manifestation. A particularly popular tradition is that whereby an inanimate statue (or other artifact) takes on a living shape or else acquires the ability to speak. In the opening scene of *Jason and the Argonauts* the hero's eldest sister, fleeing from Pelias' persecution, takes refuge in the temple of Hera and throws herself at the feet of her *xoanon*, beseeching the goddess' aid. Hera appears on screen in shadow, swathed in black veils and standing behind the statue, whence she promises the girl help. While she does not inhabit the statue, she is identified as the power the statue represents. Later, however, when Jason builds the *Argo*, he places a similar wooden image of the goddess at the stern of the ship. This time the goddess' essence enters into the statue and animates it: Hera's great ox-eyes open and her voice, heard (at first) only by Jason and the audience, resonates from within the painted figurine. This conceptualization of Hera caused Harryhausen some disquiet:

The Hera figurehead, located at the stern of the vessel, was designed so that the eyelids opened and the eyes moved, but I drew back from making the mouth move, as I felt most audiences would liken it to a ventriloquist's dummy, and it would then become borderline comedy. In the end we decided that Hera would communicate with Jason in his mind. (Harryhausen and Dalton 2003:153)

In *The Clash of the Titans*, when Calibos enters the temple of Thetis and prays before an enormous white-marble seated statue of his goddess-mother (“Beg your beloved lord Poseidon to let loose the Kraken,” he pleads), she responds to his prayer by appearing in the statue – a projection of Maggie Smith’s animated features thrown onto the white face of the statue. Later, when angered by Cassiopeia’s insistence that Andromeda is “even more lovely than the goddess Thetis herself,” Thetis smashes her cult statue, and the huge stone head, collapsed from its body, rolls forward to become animated once more as Thetis threatens to destroy the kingdom of Joppa unless it sacrifices the virginal Andromeda to the Kraken:

Hear me, vain and foolish mortal woman: you dare compare your daughter’s beauty to mine, and in my own sacred sanctuary? You will repent your boast and the cruel injury you have inflicted on my poor Calibos. . . . For the insult you have given me, I demand the life of Andromeda!

And with that the statue collapses and the gods reveal their real powers.

Even Zeus opts to show himself to mortals: in *The Clash of the Titans* he appears to Perseus reflected in the gleam of a golden shield, a gift to the hero from the gods. “Who are you?” asks Perseus. But Zeus gives nothing away: “Find and fulfill your destiny” is all he has to say, leaving it up to the wise old Ammon to comment, “The gods indeed move in mysterious ways.”

Besides physical epiphanies, the device of dreams is used at several important junctures within the movies. In *The Clash of the Titans* Andromeda’s dream-double leaves her body each night and is taken to the lair of Calibos, where nightly she learns a new riddle to test her suitors. Likewise, the adventure begins when, in sleep, Thetis visits Perseus and instructs him that his future lies in Joppa. Thetis also dictates the course of the story through her epiphanies in dreams. She declares: “If my son is not to marry [Andromeda] then no man will. My priests of Joppa are loyal. I will speak to them in dreams and omens. As my Calibos suffers, so shall Andromeda!”

## Time and Space

Filmic retellings of myth delight in playing games with the audience in terms of time and space. Film editing means that the audience can be transported effortlessly between mortal and divine worlds. In the Harryhausen films the physical demarcation of mortal/immortal space is more clearly defined. The gods are not omnipresent; they choose specific moments to examine (and sometimes interact with) mortals and therefore utilize a viewing portal over the mortal world. In *Jason and the Argonauts*, for example, it is a pool of water which serves as this viewing screen: Zeus and Hera are both seen gazing into the blue waters of the pool which shows them the action of their chosen hero on earth. In effect the audience sees the action from the gods’ point of view. But the audience is privileged in another way too, since they can observe the gods in action (without the gods’ knowledge) and thereby delight in the knowledge of the gods’ divine plans and machinations before the mortal on-screen heroes do. The cinema audience therefore has the ability both to eavesdrop on the gods and to witness the events of the story from their vantage point.

Similarly, the audience's conception of time can be stretched and twisted. This is a strong feature of the myth movies, but not of Greek epic tradition *per se*. While Homer continually establishes temporal connections to unite his poems to the world in which his culture is rooted, concepts of external time and inner time do not exist for him; only physical time matters. He looks only at what happens outside in the bright, visible, concrete, unique, and real world; the notion of abstract time does not occur to him. There is no reference, therefore, to an immortal time, or to a time lapse between the world of the gods and the world of men. The gods, immortal beings, ageless though they might be, do not operate within a separate time sphere; they share the same timescale as men.

In contrast the cinema has been obsessed with distorting time and rendering it convoluted, and cinema's tricks with time have become an accepted convention: the movies have trained their viewers to follow the most contorted temporal patterns with such ease that it seems "natural," and even the most routine films skip back and forth between narrative worlds (cross-cutting), and elongate or compress specific moments or even repeat incidents, sometimes from multiple perspectives. The dimension of time is important in any cinematic structure, and even some pop-culture films exploit cinema's ability to conjure with time with great box-office success. Movies such as *Back to the Future* (dir. Zemeckis, 1985), *Terminator-2* (dir. Cameron, 1984), and *Peggy Sue Got Married* (dir. Ford Coppola, 1986) effectively play with cinema's ability to juggle conceptions of time and space.

The myth movies capitalize on the filmic twists of time to great narrative advantage, and one which highlights, moreover, the divergence between man and god. The idea of two parallel timescales running in opposition is highlighted towards the beginning of *Jason and the Argonauts*. Having appeared (in mortal guise) to King Pelias, and having pronounced his future overthrow by "a man with one sandal," Hera returns to Olympus where she is chastised by Zeus for interfering with the affairs of mortals. She insists that her patronage is just, and declares:

It will be twenty years before Jason becomes a man. Oh, an instant of time here on Mount Olympus, but a long twenty years for king Pelias [she gazes through the pool of water at Pelias on horseback]. He cautiously travels the roads of Thessaly. Yes, Pelias, you have had years of watching and waiting for the one who must come to kill you. The man with one sandal.

Thus within a minute of on-screen "real time" in Olympus, twenty years fly by for the mortal protagonists of the movie. The same convention is used in *The Clash of the Titans*: as the voices of the gods are heard in conversation, an on-screen montage shows Perseus growing to his maturity – first as a toddler walking hand in hand with his mother on the sea shore, then as a young boy running and playing, finally as a young man galloping in horseback over the same shoreline. The time it takes Perseus to reach manhood (twenty years it would seem, like Jason) is encompassed within the time span of one brief Olympian tête-à-tête.

This incongruity in time helps explain the fleeting nature of the gods' interest in mankind: a lifetime's mortal toil is a moment's passing among the Olympians. At best prayer is a minor distraction for the gods. This explains Jason's lament, "The gods will not answer those who believe, why should they answer me, who doesn't?"

## Conflict, Intervention, and Immortality

In Homeric epic one of Zeus' chief concerns is to keep the other gods in check and to reaffirm his divine leadership continually. This is not always an easy task. At the opening of *Iliad* Book 4, for instance, Zeus is forced to back down from his suggestion that the gods should put an end to the war, and ends up making a compromise agreement with his wife. Yet the respect the other gods have for Zeus is clear: they acknowledge the fact that his decisions carry more weight than any of theirs. In film the same strain is placed on Zeus' powerful shoulders; he continually reasserts his authority, either with gentle coercion and good humor or with furious anger and bullying. In *Jason and the Argonauts*, Zeus is the undoubted head of the pantheon and, when Hera decides to aid Jason's quest, Zeus is perturbed and suggests that she looks after the fate of Jason's infant sister, a role more becoming for a goddess. But when Hera insists that Jason will be her concern, Zeus concedes that she may help the mortal on five occasions only and adds firmly, "That is my final word." In *The Clash of the Titans* the husband-wife relationship is of less interest than Zeus' interaction with the other Olympians – both as a group and as individuals. His pre-eminence among the gods is established visually, for only Zeus sits on a throne placed on a high dais. The gods attend on him as if in a formal court audience hall, and as they look up at him on his throne they see lightning beams radiating from his head like a halo (the effect is created by laser beams, a popular special effect in 1980s movies).

By and large, the gods obey Zeus' commands: when he instructs his brother Poseidon to "destroy Argos [and] release the Kraken," the sea god readily obeys. And yet Zeus, as we have seen, is the object of the goddess' smutty jokes and frequently has to contend with the gods' discontent. When he instructs Aphrodite, Hera, and Athena to aid Perseus by bestowing gifts on them, Zeus specifies that Athena should give the mortal her pet owl. This instruction horrifies the goddess:

ZEUS. It is my wish, my command! [*Zeus leaves.*]

ATHENA. Never! Let great Zeus rage until even Olympus shakes, but I will never part with [my owl].

As a compromise Athena asks Hephaestus to fashion a mechanical owl as a gift for Perseus. It is a clockwork reproduction of her beloved Baubo which she bestows on the baffled Perseus.

In the Homeric epics the gods are very much concerned with human affairs. One reason for this involvement is the fact that many gods and goddesses who have mated with mortals have human children or human favorites participating in the Trojan War. The gods take sides in the war in accordance with their like or dislike of one side or the other. For example, Athena and Hera, who lost a beauty contest judged by the Trojan prince Paris, are fiercely anti-Trojan, while the winner, Aphrodite, dotes on Paris and favors the Trojans in the war.

This divine partisanship is highlighted in the myth movies too. Concern for their mortal offspring causes Zeus and Thetis to quarrel on several occasions, a conflict which, indeed, fuels the plot of *The Clash of the Titans*. Thetis is adamant that laws of

gender and hierarchy rule in Olympus and that while Zeus' philandering with diverse mortals and the subsequent birth of a clutch of infants may go "unnoticed" in Heaven, the misdemeanors of any goddess lead to her chastisement. Thetis' crime of bearing a mortal child, Calibos, is punished with Calibos' own transformation from a handsome youth into a monstrous demon. Zeus, however, insists that Calibos was disciplined for a crime independent of his mother's transgression: he allegedly hunted and slaughtered Zeus' herd of sacred winged horses (only Pegasus remained). For this crime, Zeus declares, is Calibos turned into "a mortal mockery, a shameful mark of . . . vile cruelty." Thetis weeps and begs Zeus to spare her son, but the king of Olympus is adamant: "This is my final judgment," he says. But when Zeus' back is turned, Thetis claims her right to avenge her son and her plan of action for her unrelenting torment of Perseus begins. Nevertheless, at the close of the film, and with Perseus' triumph over the Kraken, and over Thetis and her son, it is left to Zeus to gloat:

ZEUS. Perseus has won. My son has triumphed!

HERA. A fortunate young man.

ZEUS. Fortune is ally to the brave.

The interest and involvement of the gods in human lives have an important effect on the action of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The gods universalize the action of the poem. Because the gods take interest in human affairs, the events described in the epics are not just particular actions of little significance, but take on a universal meaning and importance that would have been missing without the gods. On the one hand, the involvement of the gods exalts human action. Thus, when Achilles in *Iliad* Book I considers killing Agamemnon, his decision not to kill could have been presented on a purely human level without the intervention of a deity, but we are shown just how critical a decision it is by the involvement of Athena. Throughout the *Iliad* there is a tendency to present action consistently on two planes, the human and the divine. On the other hand, the gods also serve to emphasize the limitations of man, how short his life is, and, quite paradoxically in view of the previously stated purpose, how ultimately meaningless human affairs are. The same justification for human-immortal interactions can be found in the myth movies. In *Jason and the Argonauts* the gods of Olympus spend their time meddling in the lives of mortal men, semi-divine offspring, and favorites, who are depicted as clay chess-pieces to be maneuvered by the likes of Zeus and Hera. When Jason is first brought to Olympus, as we have seen, he is placed on a giant chessboard as a pawn in the great Olympian game. Although this has no Homeric (or later Greek) precedent, the rationale for the chessboard image is suggested by Harryhausen: "It was important to the story that the human characters feared the gods but also saw them as . . . fickle by treating the mortals as chess pieces" (Harryhausen and Dalton 2003:155). Thus, at the end of the film, with the Golden Fleece safely on board the *Argo*, and Medea's life having been saved by its magical powers, Zeus is able to say to Hera, over his chessboard: "For Jason there are other adventures. I have not yet finished with Jason. Let us continue the game another day."

In *The Clash of the Titans* a similar, but more sophisticated, device is used to show how the gods interfere with mortal lives: in the halls of Olympus one room contains, at its centre, a miniature arena with hundreds of tiny terracotta statuettes in niches all

around the walls. These are the game-pieces which are taken from their recesses and placed into the center of the arena by the gods. Each game-piece is made in the likeness of a human: Perseus, Calibos, Danae, Andromeda, and Acrisius of Argos all suffer a dramatic turn of Fate when their icons are placed into the arena. Like an ancient Greek magical *kolossos* or a modern voodoo doll, each terracotta statuette contains the essential life-force of the mortal being. Thus when Zeus decides to end Acrisius' life and to destroy Argos, he does so by taking the terracotta figure of Acrisius in his hand and crushing the clay to dust. As he does so, the audience is shown Acrisius in this throne room clutching at his heart in the midst of his death throes.

Harryhausen has expanded on his decision to use the arena motif in *The Clash of the Titans* in some detail:

As it was my task to visualize the story's events, I was conscious that we had to avoid the same situations seen in *Jason*, especially in the sequence featuring the gods of Olympus. After reading an early treatment by Beverley [Cross], I felt it required a transition between gods and mortals, similar to the chessboard used in *Jason*, which communicated to the audience that a deadly game was being played by the gods for the hearts and lives of the Greeks. I came up with using a miniature arena. Behind this "arena of life" were niches containing hundreds of characters reflecting all the Greek legends. Zeus would put the figures into the arena, where the gods would control their destinies. It was a vital tool in introducing the characters of our story, which is evident when Zeus takes the figure of Calibos and commands that "He shall become abhorrent to human sight," whereupon the shadow of the tiny statue transforms into a monstrous creature. This tells you much about Zeus, and everything about Calibos, before the audience even sees him. (Harryhausen and Dalton 2003:261-2)

Yet despite the gods' control over the lives and fates of mortal characters, there remains in these films a sense of impending doom for the Olympians. Homer may not have conceived of a end for the gods, since for Homer the Olympians are as deathless as they are ageless. But for Beverley Cross the writing of the film scripts for *Jason and the Argonauts* and *The Clash of the Titans* afforded him the postmodern opportunity to tell his audience that these gods, so feared and revered by the on-screen heroes, no longer exist. Their time had past. Thus, in *The Clash of the Titans*, Thetis, alarmed that Perseus has defied the will of the gods and has completed his task of saving Andromeda by his own mortal bravery, declares that he will set a "dangerous precedent." She continues:

THETIS. What if there more heroes like him? What if courage and imagination became everyday mortal qualities? What will become of us?

ZEUS. We would no longer be needed. But, for the moment, there is sufficient cowardice, sloth and mendacity down there on Earth to last forever.

So while human shortcomings remain, the gods will be needed – not to set the precedent for how life should be lived (for the gods of epic and of film do not set the model for a good life, in heaven or on earth), but to terrorize, inspire, and awe mankind. But should Zeus' vision of the future of the gods fail, he has one more possibility to ensure that, if nothing else, the legends of the Greeks will never be forgotten. Zeus:

Perseus and Andromeda will be happy together. Have fine sons . . . rule wisely. . . And to perpetuate the story of his courage, I command that from henceforth, he will be set among the stars and constellations. He, Perseus, the lovely Andromeda, the noble Pegasus, and even the vain Cassiopeia. Let the stars be named after them forever. As long as man shall walk the Earth and search the night sky in wonder, they will remember the courage of Perseus forever. Even if we, the gods, are abandoned or forgotten, the stars will never fade. Never. They will burn till the end of the time.

## End Credits

The myth movies of Ray Harryhausen privilege roles for the gods since both Harryhausen and Cross realized at an early stage in the films' development that the driving force behind the Greek stories is the gods – their capriciousness, their irresponsibility, their shallowness, their cruelty. The cinema audience identifies so strongly with on-screen heroes like Jason and Perseus because they know that they are dealing with forces beyond our control, above our mortal capabilities. In this way, Jason and Perseus – heroes who do not play a significant role in Homeric epics *per se* – are given Homeric epic qualities on screen owing to their direct involvement with the gods. The gods give the films their structure and force. Realizing this, let the final word go to Roger Ebert who, writing in the *Chicago Sunday Times* in April 1980, commented:

*The Clash of the Titans* is the kind of movie they aren't supposed to be making anymore: a grand and glorious romantic adventure, filled with quarrelling gods, brave heroes, beautiful heroines, fearsome monsters, and awe-inspiring duels to the death. It has faith in a story-telling tradition that sometimes seems almost forgotten, a tradition depending upon legends and myths, magical swords, enchanted shields, invisible helmets, and the overwhelming power of the gods.

## GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

There are few books that tackle cinema's response to Greek myth and religion directly, although Solomon's excellent study (2001) contains a comprehensive account (chapter 3) of Greek and Roman mythology in American and European movies. He also analyzes the popularity of the peplum movies mass-produced in Italy throughout the 1950s and 1960s side by side with the art-house genre of classically inspired films made by the greats of European cinema in the same period. Disconcertingly, but accurately, he notes (2001:131) that "a truly superb film of ancient Greek myth still waits to be made." Winkler's thought-provoking work (2001) combines film theory and the classics to re-examine mythic or classical resonances in films as diverse as *Star Wars*, *9 to 5*, *The Usual Suspects*, and *Chinatown*. For a stimulating approach to film and (Christian) religion I recommend Walsh 2003, especially the first chapter, "Telling Sacred Stories in Cathedral Cinemas," which explores the correlation between cinema-going and divine worship. Of particular importance for this current chapter are two recently published, lavishly illustrated books on the work of Ray Harryhausen, both written by Harryhausen himself with the aid of Tony Dalton. Harryhausen and Dalton 2003 is a thorough chronological record of all of Harryhausen's work and includes discussions not only



of his animation techniques but also the wider context of fantasy movies. Two separate, and detailed, chapters are given over to *Jason and the Argonauts* and *The Clash of the Titans*. Harryhausen and Dalton 2005 is a beautifully illustrated compendium of original sketches, model work, and film stills chronicling Harryhausen's complete oeuvre; chapter 7 ("Zeus Complex") is given over to the films discussed here.