

Последний Богатырь: Propp in Modern Russian Cinema

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Vladimir Propp (1895-1970) was a Russian folklorist who is predominantly known for his work in analyzing Slavic fairy tales. In particular, his publication *Morphology of the Folktale* recognizes 31 functions that all Slavic folktales have in common. In Propp's *Morphology*, a *function* is some action or undertaking performed by a character in a folktale, which Propp claims are stable and fundamental to the construction of a folktale. Propp's goal in identifying these functions was to seek out the basic underlying structural units that unite all Slavic folktales. In this essay, the objective will be to seek out whether or not the functions that Propp originally identified are still applicable to contemporary renditions of folktales. To do so, the discussion will be based around *The Last Bogatyr* (Russian title: *Последний Богатырь*) a 2017 Russian fantasy film produced by Disney that is heavily based around Baba Yaga and Koschei, two characters taken from Russian fairy tales. *The Last Warrior* has strong ties to the original Russian tales and pays homage to many of the popular characters (like Baba Yaga) in Slavic folklore. In *The Last Bogatyr*, the audience is introduced to the main character, a con artist named Ivan who escapes into the fantasy world of classic Russian fairy tale characters. The film also has an underlying moral message, which is something that is a key characteristic of both fairytales and many Disney movies, thus making it an appropriate material for analysis of this kind. Although this movie was published centuries after the era of Russian folktales, *The Last Bogatyr* manages to preserve the morphology originally defined by Propp and hence demonstrates that Propp's approach is still relevant in the modern adaptations of Slavic folktales.

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The Last Bogatyr starts off with the introduction of Illya Muromets, a well known warrior in slavic folklore who is attempting to escape an army led by the main female antagonist of the film, Varvara. Unfortunately, he is not successful in his escape which leads to Varvara casting a spell on Illya and turning him into stone. The first stage of Propp's *Morphology* is identified when Illya's stone-turned body is thrown into the sea, marking the extinction of the Bogatyrs. That is, this event can be seen as an *absentation*. The sea also contains the rest of Varvara's victims. The movie shifts to the introduction of the main protagonist of the film, Ivan Naydenov, a con-artist based in modern-day Moscow. Ivan works as a con-artist often scamming people out of money through his claims of being able to see into the future. He lives with his caretaker who warns him that his scams will eventually land him into trouble, which marks the second function, interdiction of Propp's *Morphology*. Ivan, being a nonchalant character, doesn't take too seriously to this and sure enough, lands himself into trouble with the husband of one of his clients. Violation of interdiction happens when Ivan is chased down by the husband and some of his men through a mall, which, through some strange turn of events, causes him to be whisked away into the magical world of Belogorye, where the movie's first function occurs. Ivan is met by the wood spirit, Leshy, who explains to him that he was the one in fact, who had saved Ivan from being harmed and that Ivan was also the son of Illya Muromets. Shortly after, the third function Reconnaissance, of the *Morphology* is employed when Ivan is captured by Varvara and her army and taken to

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Dobrynya Nikitich. Varvara, being as cunning as she is, is aware of exactly who Ivan is, and much like his father, she wants him gone. Ivan is shortly thrown into jail, effectively displaying the next function, *trickery*. When thrown into jail, Ivan meets the disembodied Koschei, who informs him that the only way to get back to Moscow was to seek out the sword of Kladenets, a famous sword from Slavic mythology which Koschei, himself, used to gain immortality. Unfortunately for this, the Bogatyrs had thrown him into jail several years prior. It's also important to note that up until this point, the audience is set to believe that the sole villain is Varvara. However, it is learned later on in the movie of Koschei's intentions and his alliance with Varvara. Therefore, the final function of the first part of Propp's Morphology, *trickery*, is applied when Ivan sets his mind to find the Sword of Kladenets, and where the villain, in this case, Koschei is disguised as Ivan's ally when in reality, that is not the case.

However, this moment also sets the stage for the second part of the Morphology, beginning with *counteraction*. That is, Ivan decides to find the Sword, believing that it would help him in rescuing other fairy tale characters and to help defeat the evil Varvara. Unbeknownst to him, she wasn't the only evil character in this retelling. As mentioned before, Koschei is also heavily involved in deceiving the naive Ivan. It is also important to note that this event could also signify another distinct earlier function- villainy and lack, because Ivan realizes that in order to go back to Moscow and in order to save his acquaintances from the reign of terror under Varvara, he would need to

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obtain the Sword- hence, one can argue that this is when the lack is identified by the hero as well as lead to his decision to obtain the magical item, which in this case, is the sword. Nevertheless Ivan embarks on his journey, with the help of other beloved folklore characters, including Baba Yaga and Vasilisa the Wise, and thus establishing the *departure* of the hero. At this point, the second of Propp's stages is complete.

Moving on to the third stage of Propp's Morphology in *The Last Bogatyr*, the movie enters the *testing* function. Ivan is tested when he has to prove himself to be the true son of Illya Muromets. Ivan's *reaction and acquisition* to the test is when he is able to obtain the Sword of Muromets, confirming any pre-existing doubts that he is, in fact, the son of Illya Muromets. It is also important to note, that the tests that he goes through establish the traits of humility, bravery and selflessness when he chooses to give up the Sword after Varvara threatens to kill his new friends if he does not hand over the sword. At this point too, Koschei is revealed to be in league with Varvara and that in fact, the whole quest was carefully constructed by Dobrynya who held jealousy and resentment towards Illya. In these examples, it is clear that Propp's Morphology of the Fairy Tale is still alive and well in contemporary retellings of Slavic folklore.

Due to the sufficient evidence within the first 3 acts of the movie of these function, and due to fear of redundancy and repetitiveness, it is also important to highlight interesting elements of the story telling in this movie that perhaps influenced the direction that it took. The movie, *The Last Bogatyr* is a modern adaptation of a very well-known Slavic

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fairytale, *Baba Yaga and Koschei*. Perhaps due to this, the movie parallels the same structure of the original source material, and thus, the morphology of the fairytale itself, is preserved. It's not known whether to do so was intentional, but it does raise some interesting thoughts to consider- namely, if all potential movies being adapted from Slavic fairy tales preserve this structure, is there really any room for new plots? That is, are Slavic folktales able to inspire new tales or are these new tales just recycled retellings of the original source materials from which they are derived?

Another interesting aspect of this movie was the preservation of the characteristics, whether it be physical characteristics or personality, are preserved. For example, Baba Yaga and Vasilisa the Wise depict many of the stereotypical characteristics associated with them from the original fairy tales. However, while their characteristics are preserved their functions in the story are not. Baba Yaga is a great example of this, as she takes on the role of the guardian and/ or friend to Ivan, when in the traditional folklore, she is anything but. This is an important aspect to consider, because while the plot may be recycled and regressive to some, the functions of the characters can be changed and modified, allowing for more creativity and variation in contemporary folklore.

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It is for the reasons above, *The Last Bogatyr*, is a great example of where Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* is still a dominant approach to fairy tale narratives. The movie is based on the folklore *Baba Yaga and Koschei* and often heavily references many elements that are typical to the original folktales. The movie does try to take a more creative approach in which the functions of the characters are different from the original tales, the stability and chronological order of the functions that Propp originally defined are still maintained.

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