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The Role of Objects and Artifacts in Crafting the On-Screen Images of Mythological Medusa

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Medusa, the Gorgon known for her monstrous appearance and petrifying gaze, is one of the most iconic figures in Greco-Roman mythology. Unlike many other mythological characters, Medusa can be identified solely by her distinctive physiognomy, without the need for symbolic attributes, as is often the case with depictions of deities. However, in the myth of Perseus, where Medusa is the main antagonist, various props play a crucial role in defining her character. This article explores the role of three key categories of these objects–those used against Medusa, those created by her gaze, and those formed from her dead corpse–in shaping her image in film pop culture. Through an analysis of films such as *Clash of the Titans* (2010) and *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (2010), as well as their originals or remakes, the study demonstrates how these objects not only construct Medusa's portrayal but also engage with themes of objectification and dehumanization.

KEYWORDS: Medusa, Perseus, myth in film, Hollywood cinema, *Clash of the Titans*, *Percy Jackson & the Olympians*

Medusa, a Gorgon much like her two sisters Stheno and Euryale, was the daughter of the sea gods Keto and Phorkys. As a monstrous figure with striking snake hair and a gaze that could turn any living being to stone, she is undeniably one of the most iconic characters in Greco-Roman mythology. Unlike many other mythological figures, Medusa is easily identifiable in both descriptions and artistic representations across the centuries by her distinctive physiognomy alone, without the need for characteristic objects or attributes often used to identify deities. However, in the myth of Perseus, where Medusa serves as the central antagonist, physical objects–or what we might call props–play a pivotal role. This importance is evident not only in ancient texts but also in earlier and later works, including the most recent adaptations, such as films, which will be the primary focus of this analysis. The main aim of my study is to explore how various types of objects contribute to the cinematic portrayal of Medusa, what meanings these items convey, and how they are anchored in ancient tradition.

This analysis is organized around three categories of items:

– I: those used against Medusa,

– II: those created by Medusa's deadly gaze,

– III: those crafted from Medusa's dead body.

The focus will be on recent films (from 2010 onward) where Greco-Roman mythology forms the primary and literal setting.[1] While it would be ideal to examine films in which Medusa is the main protagonist, such films do not exist–Medusa has consistently been a secondary and antagonized character, just as in the most popular versions of the myth. Given this limited representation,[2] it is essential to consider the most widely distributed films, which narrows the focus to two Hollywood productions: *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (2010), directed by Chris Columbus, and *Clash of the Titans* (2010), directed by Jonathan Liebesman. Other works that do not fully meet all the criteria will be discussed as contextual references to illustrate the evolving portrayal of this character on screen. Among these, the most significant are the iconic *Clash of the Titans* (1981), directed by Desmond Davis (which Liebesman's film remakes), and Disney's TV newest remake series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2023). These works, particularly when compared to the earlier films, reveal the dynamics of Medusa's evolving character. The *Percy Jackson* film and series, based on Rick Riordan's 2005 novel,[3] further demonstrate how Medusa's story is adapted for younger audiences. In all four works, objects play a crucial role in conveying the narrative's message.

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The myth of Perseus has been explored by numerous ancient Greek and Roman authors, including Hesiod (8th century BCE) and Pherecydes (5th

[1] Consequently, certain intriguing films were excluded because they portray Medusa merely as a metaphor for other issues; examples are the Brazilian *Medusa* (2021, dir. Anita Rocha da Silveira) and the British *Medusa Deluxe* (2022, dir. Thomas Hardiman).

[2] In his 2000 book *Medusa: Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon*, Stephen R. Wilk highlights the limited number of films about Medusa by the late 1990s. He discusses five examples:

– *Porky's Hero Agency* (1937) – a Warner Brothers cartoon directed by Bob Clampett and animated by Charles M. Jones,

– *Perseo Invincibile* (1963) – an Italian production later released in the United States as *Medusa Against the Son of Hercules*,

– *7 Faces of Dr. Lao* (1964) – a western directed by George Pal,

– *The Gorgon* (1964) – a Hammer Films production, with a screenplay by John Gilling based on a story by J. Llewellyn Devine, directed by Terence Fisher,

– *Clash of the Titans* (1981) – a Warner Bros production directed by Louis Leterrier.

– *S*.R. Wilk, *Medusa: Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon*, New York 2000, pp. 202–217.

[3] R. Riordan, *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*, New York 2005 (e-book).

century BCE), whose works were later incorporated by Apollodorus in the *Bibliotheca* (1st or 2nd century CE).[4] However, the most influential version is that of the Roman poet Ovid, presented in his *Metamorphoses*, written in the 8th century CE. This version seems to have had the greatest impact on modern interpretations. Paul Murgatroyd, in *Mythical Monsters in Classical Literature*, describes Ovid's work as follows: "It has long occupied a central position in the Western literary tradition, and in it, Ovid, a highly accomplished storyteller, gave many myths and legends their most memorable and enduring form to date."[5] Similarly, Stephen R. Wilk, in his book *Medusa: Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon*, highlights that Ovid made significant adaptations to earlier versions of the myth, both in content and in narrative style: "His telling of the myth of Perseus and Medusa is highly sophisticated. It is presented in a nonlinear fashion, and Ovid devotes much more time and space to the story of Perseus and Andromeda than other versions do. In addition, he either invents details or uses sources that differ from what we would call the «standard» version."[6] The most significant change Ovid made, however, arises from the central theme of his epic poem: the concept of metamorphosis. Ovid emphasized the transformation Medusa underwent long before her encounter with Perseus. In Perseus' words, he describes the origin of her monstrous appearance as follows:

> Her looks were famous once,
> When she was many suitors' jealous hope,
> And best of all her features was her hair –
> A man who said he'd seen it told me so.
> The sea lord raped her in Minerva's shrine,
> It's said, while Jove's pure daughter hid her face
> Behind her aegis. To punish the deed,
> She made foul serpents of the Gorgon's hair.
> And now, to strike her foes with fearsome dread,
> Upon her breast, she wears these self-made snakes.[7]

Reading this description in 2024 feels familiar, instantly bringing to mind the mythological Medusa. This is largely because modern art often

[4] Fragments of ancient works about Medusa can be found in: *The Medusa Reader*, M. Garber, N.J. Vickers (eds.), New York–London 2003. Garber and Vickers note that "The Athenian scholar Apollodorus is now thought to have authored none of the works traditionally attributed to him, though for convenience his name is still used' (Ibidem, p. 23). For consistency, I will refer to this author by that name in this text.

[5] P. Murgatroyd, *Mythical Monsters in Classical Literature*, London 2007, p. 102.

[6] S.R. Wilk, *Medusa…*, p. 18.

[7] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 4.794-803. Here and further translated by C.L. Soucy. C.L. Soucy, *Ovid's Metamorphoses: A New Translation*, Oakland 2023.

portrays Medusa as a victim–a woman raped by the "sea lord", Neptune-Poseidon, and unjustly punished by Minerva-Athena, in whose temple this crime occurred. However, the earliest depictions of the Gorgon Medusa in Archaic Greek art primarily portray her as a monster rather than a human. Whether shown as a full female figure or just a head (known as the Gorgoneion), Medusa is depicted with a round, unpleasant face, large eyes, a broad nose, a grotesque grin with a protruding tongue, and sometimes even tusks and facial hair, such as a beard and moustache. In these early representations, Medusa symbolized pure horror, meant to evoke fear.

It was only during the Classical Greek period, an era marked by a shift toward humanism beginning around the 5th century BCE, that Medusa was progressively reimagined as a young woman. Pindar, in his *Pythian* ode, referred to the Gorgon's lips as those of a "dread maiden", yet also described Medusa as "fair-cheeked."[8] Kiki Karoglou, curator of the 2018 exhibition *Dangerous Beauty: Medusa in Classical Art* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, contrasts this with a vase from the same period: "A red-figure pelike attributed to the painter Polygnotos preserves one of the earliest depictions of a beautiful Medusa. The Gorgon sleeps peacefully on a hillside as Perseus approaches, sickle in hand, and grabs her by the hair. He looks away to avoid her deadly gaze, though it is disarmed by sleep."[9] From this point onward, Medusa was increasingly depicted as a tragic figure–a portrayal that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* would later crystallize, establishing a tradition that would endure through the centuries.

Today, Medusa stands as an icon of feminist movements, symbolizing "a sign of powerful womanhood", as described by Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers in the introduction to their anthology on Medusa.[10] In 1975, Hélène Cixous, in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*, used Medusa as a metaphor for the liberation of the female voice and women's writing. Over the years, other authors have continued to invoke her as a symbol to highlight the struggles of successive generations of women.[11] Medusa has become a fixture in feminist studies and has also entered broader public discourse. In recent years, the installation of a bronze replica of Argentinian-Italian sculptor Luciano Garbati's *Medusa with the Head of Perseus* in

[8] Pindar, *Pythian 12*, translated by G.S. Conway, [in:] *The Medusa Reader*, p. 15.

[9] K. Karoglou, *Dangerous Beauty: Medusa in Classical Art*, «The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin» 2018, no. 3, vol. 75, p. 9.

[10] M. Garber, N.J. Vickers (eds.), *The Medusa Reader*, New York–London 2003, p. 1.

[11] M. Garber and N.J. Vickers, cited above, present the most significant of these texts in their anthology, covering works up to the 1990s. In the following decades, this discourse expanded into journalistic and online spaces. One of the most recent and notable feminist publications that discusses Medusa, among other topics, is J. Zimmerman's *Women and Other Monsters: Building a New Mythology*, Boston 2021.

Collect Pond Park, New York, in 2020, drew significant media attention. The sculpture faces the New York County Criminal Court building. Garbati's piece is a direct inversion of Benvenuto Cellini's bronze *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* (Pic. 1), a renowned Renaissance work depicting a naked, triumphant Perseus, adorned with winged sandals and a helmet, standing victoriously over Medusa's lifeless body, with her severed head in one hand and a sword in the other. Garbati completely reverses this narrative, presenting a calm, composed Medusa holding the severed head of Perseus with a sense of ease.

Picture 1. *Perseus with Medusa's head* (1554) by Benvenuto Cellini, Florence – Loggia della Signoria in Florence by Carlo Raso is marked with Public Domain Mark 1.0.

While the sculpture received praise, it also sparked controversy. Karen Attiah expressed her criticism in *The Washington Post*:

> Garbati's Medusa was placed outside the Manhattan courthouse where serial sex offender Harvey Weinstein was convicted. But the statue's new status as a symbol for #MeToo and female power has met with controversy. While plenty of women have responded positively, several lines of criticism have emerged: Should a pretty, naked woman killing a man really serve as a symbol for women who have survived male abuse?[12]

Regardless of how one might answer this question, it is clear that Medusa's redemption is a recurring theme in contemporary art. The question then arises: Does this trend also appear in contemporary pop culture films? The works selected for analysis capture the spirit of the mainstream across different time periods and accurately reflect the extent to which feminist themes have permeated popular culture. This is directly evident in the portrayal of Medusa and the telling of her story, which is narrated off-screen in all four cases, with Medusa herself narrating it in two of them. Table 1 presents the detailed content of each story:

The story of Medusa's transformation in each work borrows key elements from tradition, but there are also significant departures from the classical versions of the myth. In the 1981 film, Athena is unexpectedly replaced by Aphrodite–perhaps to emphasize the change in Medusa's appearance from a beautiful woman to a monster. Interestingly, in this film, Medusa is the least human of all four portrayals, resembling the archaic representations of the Gorgon with a distorted face, long nose, and decaying teeth. In the other versions, her beauty is highlighted (e.g., through the use of beautifying makeup), and the role is played by model Natalia Vodianova and actresses Uma Thurman and Jessica Parker Kennedy. Poseidon is mentioned in each version, but only in the 2010 *Clash of the Titans* does he assault Medusa. The most simplified version of Medusa's story is found in the 2010 *Percy Jackson* film, likely due to its younger target audience and the fact that the book it is based on also downplays this aspect of the story. Interestingly, the 2023 Disney series remake, despite still targeting a young audience, takes Medusa's story more seriously: she does not see herself as a monster but as a survivor, feeling unjustly treated by another woman whom she loved, which fuels her rage. This latest portrayal of Medusa seems to possess the most contemporary, feminist consciousness, closely resembling Garbati's Medusa in this regard.

[12] K. Attiah, *The epic tragedy of the #MeToo Medusa*, «The Washington Post», 19.10.2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/10/19/epic-tragedy-metoo-medusa-new-york-luciano-garbati/> [accessed: Aug 29, 2024].

Table 1. Medusa's backstory in four films

Clash of the Titans (1981)	Clash of the Titans (2010)	Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief (2010)	Percy Jackson and the Olympians (season 1, episode 3) (2023)
AMMON: I wrote a play about her long ago. I was partial to tragedy in my youth, before experience taught me that life is quite tragic enough without my writing about it. PERSEUS: Medusa. She was priestess to Aphrodite. AMMON: Yes, and a most beautiful woman, by all accounts, but she was **seduced** by Poseidon. They **made love** in the temple of Aphrodite. And that goddess was so jealous that she punished Medusa. She transformed her into an apparition so horrible that one look from her will turn any living creature into stone.	IO: A beast? Medusa was beautiful once. So beautiful as to tempt Poseidon. When he came for her… She ran to Athena's temple thinking that the goddess would protect her. She didn't. Poseidon **took her** on the cold floor. She prayed to Athena for comfort… But the goddess felt nothing but disgust. She made sure no one would ever want Medusa again. One look at the creature she has become will turn any living thing to stone. I cannot assist you there. A curse prevents me. It was Athena's one bit of solace to Medusa so that Medusa would never harm a woman. Only men are allowed in the temple.	MEDUSA [to Annabeth]: You have such beautiful hair. I once had hair like that. I was courted, desired by many suitors. But that all changed because of your mother [Athena], the woman who cursed me. Who turned me…into this! […] MEDUSA [to Percy]: I can sense you. Son of Poseidon. I **used to date** your daddy.	MEDUSA [to Annabeth]: You're concerned I would hold a grudge against you simply because you are a daughter of Athena? You shouldn't be. We're not our parents after all. And you and I might have more in common than you think. […] PERCY: So you're not a monster, what are you then? MEDUSA: A survivor. […] The gift the gods gave me is that I cannot be bullied anymore. ANNABETH: What my mother did to you wasn't a gift, it was a curse. MEDUSA: You are loyal to your mother. […] Do you know the story of how I came to be this way? […] Athena was everything to me. I worshipped her, I prayed to her. I made offerings… She never answered. Not even an omen to suggest she appreciated my love. I wasn't like you, sweetheart. I was you. I would have worshipped her that way for a lifetime… in silence. But then one day, another god came, and he broke that silence. [To Percy] Your father. The Sea God **told me that he loved me**. I felt as though he saw me in a way I had never felt seen before. But then Athena declared that I had embarrassed her and I needed to be punished. Not him. Me.

Finally, the comparison between the sculptures by Cellini and Garbati provides a brief yet surprisingly complete map of objects, whose roles in the films I will explore further in the text, as outlined in the introduction: Perseus' attire, which he uses against Medusa, the form of the statue itself, and the head severed from the lifeless body.

I. Perseus and His Gifts

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Perseus' attire is easy to overlook. The encounter with Medusa is described briefly, with little more than the mention that Perseus cautiously wielded a shield to see "her fearsome shape reflected in the bronze" (4.783). From an earlier passage describing his battle with the sea monster to save Andromeda, we learn that he approached it "on wings" (4.700), indicating that he was wearing the winged sandals, and that he once plunged "his blade's whole curve" (4.720). Ovid focuses on Perseus' actions rather than the origins of his gear.

However, other authors provide much more detail about his equipment. Apollodorus recounts that, in preparation for his encounter with Medusa, Perseus received the Cap of Hades from the nymphs, which granted him invisibility, along with winged sandals and a *kibisis*–a bag in which to carry Medusa's severed head. From Hermes, he received an adamantine sickle. The origin of the shield is unclear, but it is known that Athena guided Perseus' hand as he beheaded Medusa, using the reflection in the shield.[13] This set of items frequently appears in various accounts, with minor variations in details.[14]

Stephen R. Wilk humorously notes that the moment when Perseus receives his magical items may be compared to scenes from popular films: "Ever since the 1960s, popular writers referring to Perseus' visit to the Nymphs have likened it to the moments in James Bond movies when he receives his gadgets from Major Boothroyd, better known as Q."[15] However, Wilk does not view this comparison favourably:

> When all is said and done, Perseus – armed to the teeth with miraculous aids from a plethora of supernatural entities, slaying the monster as she sleeps, and then escaping by donning a cap of invisibility – doesn't seem terribly heroic. I don't think he would have appeared that way to an ancient audience, either. I submit that

[13] Apollodorus, *The Library*, translated by J.G. Frazer, [in:] *The Medusa Reader*, p. 23.

[14] For example, in Lucan's *The Civil War*, the winged sandals are given by Hermes, not nymphs.

[15] S.R. Wilk, *Medusa*..., p. 27.

> we may have here another case of concatenation, wherein the magical gifts from many different versions of the story have all been preserved in one existing form[16].

The researcher suggests that the abundance of props might stem from the condensation of different versions of the myth: in each version, Perseus might have received a different single item, and overly meticulous ancient chroniclers wanted to preserve them all. This theme is consistently repeated in films about Perseus. The comparison with James Bond films underscores the on-screen appeal of these props, as acquiring them has become a typical activity for protagonists in action and adventure movies. It is no surprise, then, that they are given significant emphasis in these films as well.

In both versions of *Clash of the Titans*, Zeus is eager to equip his son Perseus for his confrontation with Medusa. In the 1981 version, he persuades three goddesses to bestow magical gifts upon Perseus: Aphrodite presents him with a sword, Hera provides a shield, and Athena offers a helmet. Interestingly, in the 2010 remake, which has a much stronger anti-god tone, Perseus' rebellion against the gods is evident in his initial refusal to use these gifts. However, he cannot give them away either–they are useless in the hands of anyone who is not a demigod. In an argument with Draco, he exclaims, "I will not use that sword or anything that they give me!" to which Draco responds, "So we'll just continue to die." Perseus eventually accepts the gifts out of a sense of responsibility for the people who accompany him on his quest.

There is, however, one completely original item in these films a mechanical owl named Bubo, which Hephaestus constructs at Athena's request in the 1981 film. Zeus had ordered her to give Perseus her own familiar, a living owl, but the goddess was unwilling to part with it. Stephen R. Wilk claims that Bubo was "obviously inspired by *Star Wars*' R2-D2"[17]–like this droid, Bubo speaks in a language incomprehensible to the audience and, although helpful to the hero, primarily serves as comic relief. The 2010 remake dismisses Bubo rather abruptly: before setting out on his quest, Perseus finds the mechanical owl in a junk-filled chest. When he asks what it is, someone simply tells him, "Just leave it."[18] This moment serves as a humorous nod to the 1981 original while also highlighting the significant shift in tone in the newer version of the film.

A playful approach to the gods' gifts is even more evident in all versions of *Percy Jackson*–the book, film, and TV series. The way these items function

[16] Ibidem.

[17] S.R. Wilk, *Medusa*..., p. 213.

[18] In the 2012 sequel, *Wrath of the Titans*, Bubo makes another cameo appearance: he is seen in Hephaestus's forge–dirty and inactive.

reflects the unique blending of mythological elements with contemporary realism. In this world, the gods are ancient and timeless, yet they exist in the 21st century, still interacting with mortals and producing new demigods. Through these magical items, Rick Riordan, and later the creators of the adaptations, build a bridge between the ancient and the modern. As a result, the Cap of Invisibility takes the form of a baseball cap, winged sandals become winged sneakers, and the weapon is a pen that transforms into a sword with a click. Interestingly, modernizing the gods' gifts by turning them into everyday objects also has unexpected consequences: it highlights how fleeting the concept of "modern" really is. In the 2010 film adaptation, director Chris Columbus adds an inventive take on the shield that Perseus used to view Medusa indirectly: in his film, this role is played by an iPod, a device that was recognizable at the time, but had become outdated by the time the TV series was made. As a result, in the 2023 series, Percy blindly strikes at Medusa, relying only on the help of his friends. It is also worth noting that in all on-screen depictions of Perseus' quest, the hero does not travel alone but with companions–a hallmark of adventure films. However, only in the *Percy Jackson* stories are the magical items shared among the members of the quest, reinforcing the theme of collective effort and shifting the focus to the actions of each character rather than just their equipment.

To conclude this chapter, I will revisit the topic of objects associated with Medusa. In the introduction, I noted that the mythological Medusa is primarily defined by her physical traits rather than by any possessions. However, in film pop culture, Medusa is often depicted with certain items. In both *Clash of the Titans* films, Medusa wields a bow and carries arrows, making her more dangerous, as she can attack from a distance, not just in face-to-face combat, with her sole weapon being her gaze. In *Percy Jackson*, each version of Medusa is also given an article of clothing that serves as a barrier to her gaze. In the book, Percy Jackson initially identifies Medusa as a Middle Eastern woman because "she wore a long black gown that covered everything but her hands, and her head was completely veiled."[19] In the 2010 film adaptation, however, Medusa's appearance changes–she wears a leather coat, a turban, and sunglasses. In the TV adaptation, she is dressed in a retro style reminiscent of 1940s fashion, complete with a hat and veil. In each case, this costume can be seen as a disguise–it conceals her snake hair and deadly eyes. However, these additions also tame Medusa, adapting her to fit into human societal norms.

This form of covering is a modern invention, yet it has become surprisingly common in pop culture. Sunglasses, in particular, have become a fre-

[19] R. Riordan, *Percy Jackson*…

quent attribute in modern depictions of Medusa. She appears in sunglasses in the 2001 series *Voyage of the Unicorn*, the 2014 short animation *Mythopolis* by Alexandra Hetmerová, and the 2021 Amazon Prime commercial *Medusa Makes Friends*. In each instance, the sunglasses protect people from Medusa's gaze, symbolizing her domestication. In the modern world, Medusa must limit her power to coexist with society. The sunglasses can thus be interpreted in two ways: as a tool of self-control (with Medusa deciding who to turn to stone) or as a means of controlling her. Interestingly, this latter idea has ancient roots. The Latin poet Lucan, in his *The Civil War*, writes:

> Even Minerva couldn't look at her, and her gaze would have
> frozen his [Perseus'] face although it was averted, if Minerva hadn't
> spread out Medusa's hair and **veiled her face with the snakes.**" (682-684)[20]

At that moment, however, Medusa was no longer in control–her cover served only those who possessed her head, allowing them to control her once untamed powers.

II. Medusa's Statues

On the website of the Capitoline Museums in Rome, which houses Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Bust of Medusa*, dated to the mid-17th century, we read:

> The classical myth is overturned by Bernini to exalt the imitative quality of the sculpture: it is not the Gorgon who petrifies her enemies with her gaze, but it is Medusa herself, by making the fatal error of looking at her own image in a mirror, who is materially transforming herself into marble right in front of the onlooker.[21]

The question of whether Medusa can turn herself to stone is rarely explored in contemporary films; this is likely because mythological sources clearly state that looking at Medusa's reflection is a way to protect oneself from her gaze. However, I cite this passage for another reason: it highlights the parallel between the effects of Medusa's gaze and the art of sculpture, a connection that filmmakers have often found intriguing.

This comparison is neither a modern nor a Baroque invention. Martin M. Winkler, in *Ovid on Screen: A Montage of Attractions*, wryly refers to the victims Perseus petrifies with Medusa's head as an "art gallery", re-

[20] P. Murgatroyd, *Mythical Monsters…*, p. 107; emphasis added.

[21] *The Dream of Rome*, <https://www.museicapitolini.org/en/mostra-evento/dream-rome> [accessed: Aug 29, 2024].

calling his actions in the opening of the fifth book of *Metamorphoses*.[22] In this scene, Perseus battles Phineus and his followers, turning them into statues one by one, which will forever adorn the home of his father-in-law, Andromeda's father.[23]

Contemporary film narratives often draw on this comparison, with some even portraying Medusa as an artist. Interestingly, one of the earliest film depictions of Medusa does just that. In 1937, Warner Brothers released a short animated film for children called *Porky's Hero Agency*, directed by Bob Clampett and Charles M. Jones. In it, Medusa runs the Gorgon Statue Factory, highlighting the mass production aspect of her artistic work. Notably, Medusa petrifies her victims using a camera–she must look through the lens to capture her compositions. The film humorously suggests that many famous statues, such as the Venus de Milo or the Discobolus, are actually the results of her work.

Medusa's activities are portrayed in a similarly playful manner in *Percy Jackson*, where she is the owner of the Garden Gnome Emporium. Percy describes his first impressions of the place in the book: "The warehouse was filled with more statues–people in all different poses, wearing all different outfits and with different expressions on their faces. I was thinking you'd have to have a pretty huge garden to fit even one of these statues, because they were all life-size."[24] It is possible that Riordan was inspired by the Warner Bros animation, given that his Medusa also uses a camera (before revealing her identity, she says she needs to take a picture to create a sculpture from it). This reference to photography does not appear in either of the adaptations. However, the life-sized realistic statues in all cases serve as a wink to the audience, who, if familiar with Medusa's story, may guess her identity before the characters do.

In the world of *Clash of the Titans*, statues–not just those created by Medusa–are given a broader functional role. In the 1981 film, there is a clear distinction between the large monuments on Earth, depicting the gods, and the small clay figurines on Olympus, representing humans. The gods use the former to communicate with people: their statues sometimes come to life and speak. The latter are used to influence people's fate–they are pawns that can be moved around to shape human destinies. In the 2010 remake, statues serve as a symbol of humanity's crisis of faith in the gods–the toppling of Zeus's monument early in the film sets off a chain of events that

[22] M.M. Winkler, *Ovid on Screen: A Montage of Attractions*, Cambridge 2020, p. 208.

[23] Winkler also points out the irony in comparing petrification to an artistic process. The act of freezing can be seen as the inverse of the equally common "Pygmalion Effect" depicted on screen, where a statue sculpted by an artist is brought to life. Ibidem, p. 212.

[24] R. Riordan, *Percy Jackson*…

culminates in *Wrath of the Titans*. In a decaying, abandoned temple, the statues of forgotten Olympians crumble, and the gods themselves turn to dust upon their death.

This identification of statues with memory finds another interesting expression in the 2010 *Clash of the Titans*. In the scene where many of Perseus' companions are turned to stone by Medusa, Draco's petrification is particularly significant. Before facing Medusa, ready to meet his death, he tells Perseus, "Let them know men did this", referring to the defeat of the Gorgon. As Medusa catches him, he manages to smile, as if posing for the work of art he is about to become, ensuring that he will be remembered as a monument to victory.

Importantly, in all four works central to this analysis, the petrification caused by Medusa is equivalent to death. However, this is not the case in all on-screen depictions of Medusa. In the previously mentioned *Porky's Hero Agency*, Medusa has a needle that can reverse the effects of her actions. This lack of finality seems to be influenced here by the young age of the audience. In the 1963 Italian film *Perseo Invincibile*, the ability to reverse petrification serves as a plot device–in the climactic moment, warriors who have been turned to stone for years are restored to life and join the battle in a war between neighbouring kingdoms. For the people of antiquity, however, being turned to stone was unequivocally synonymous with death. Jean-Pierre Vernant discusses this in *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*:

> A number of indications show that death was seen as a petrification of living beings. Pindar, for example, uses the expression *lithinos thanatos* (stony death). These symbolic associations are easy to understand when one thinks of the transformation of the living body – supple, animated, warm – into a stiff, silent, icy corpse.[25]

The finality of Medusa's gaze in the films under study not only establishes a more serious tone but also portrays Medusa as ruthless and hostile. These traits, in turn, lead to her dehumanization and serve as a moral justification for her eventual beheading, which occurs in all four works.

III. The Head

We now reach a point where we must consider perhaps the most unsettling prop in terms of its ontological status–Medusa's head itself. It is striking that a part of the body of a humanoid being (and in some versions of the myth, simply a human woman) has completely lost its connection to

[25] J.P. Vernant, *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*, London–Boston 1983, p. 328.

the concept of corporeality. This is especially notable in the context of the Greek world, which emphasizes the importance of respecting the human body–glorifying characters who care for it (like Antigone) and condemning those who do not (like Sisyphus). One might try to resolve this issue by simply stating: Medusa is not human but a monster. However, as discussed earlier in this text, the problem is precisely that with the transition from the Archaic to the Classical Greek period, Medusa's human origins were increasingly emphasized. This makes it all the more intriguing how strongly her head is associated with an object, whether it is depicted as beautiful or grotesque.

In all versions of the myth, starting with the earliest by Pherecydes, Medusa's head is treated as a separate object even before she is killed. Polydektes, who was offended by Perseus for rejecting his advances toward Danae, Perseus' mother, demanded the Gorgon's head as a gift. Stephen R. Wilk notes: "There never seems to have been any question that Perseus could substitute something else for the head, or not appear at the gathering at all. This, apparently, was a matter of honour, and Perseus would have to succeed in bringing back the head of the Gorgon or die in the attempt."[26] Thus, the head was a trophy of sorts from the very beginning–the quest's goal in and of itself.

This motivation for Perseus might seem trivial, even random, though it is a fairly typical starting point for a hero's journey. This is how his motivation is portrayed in one of the earliest film depictions of the Perseus myth, namely, the silent film *The Gorgon's Head* from 1925, re-released in 2020 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.[27] Later versions, however, sought to ennoble this motivation. In both *Clash of the Titans* films, retrieving Medusa's head is the only way to save the innocent Andromeda from being devoured by the sea monster Kraken: only by turning it to stone can it be defeated. What is striking, however, is the lack of reflection on the fact that Medusa becomes a random victim of this situation–she has no involvement in Andromeda's predicament. In the 2010 version, the theme of objectifying is emphasized. When Draco says of Medusa, "She's no use against the Kraken. We can't control her," Perseus responds, "Then we

[26] S.R. Wilk, *Medusa*…, p. 20. In a footnote, Wilk elaborates: "Exactly why Perseus made the brash vow that propelled him into his adventure isn't entirely clear. The implication seems to be that he made the statement jokingly, trying to outdo the extravagant suggestion of a horse as a gift, only to find himself trapped by that seemingly innocent exaggeration. In Pherecydes's account, Perseus did eventually bring a horse to Polydektes, but it was refused." Ibidem, p. 243.

[27] *The Gorgon's Head*, USA 1925, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwkFveYqC8A> [accessed: Aug 29, 2024].

take her head." The piece of flesh is thus treated as a tool or weapon that can simply be stolen.

In the *Percy Jackson* stories, the protagonists accidentally stumble upon Medusa's gnome garden, unaware of who she is at first. The narrative frames killing Medusa as an act of self-defence–a reasonable approach given the young age of both Percy and the audience. Even so, Medusa's head subsequently becomes objectified. In the book, the characters discuss how ugly it is before wrapping it in "some old plastic grocery bags." In the 2010 film adaptation, Percy calls it "disgusting", wraps it in a hoodie, and tosses it to Grover like trash. In a post-credit scene with a comedic tone, one of the disliked characters finds it in the fridge. In the 2023 TV series, which focuses more significantly on whether Medusa is a monster or a victim, the head is treated cautiously–as a dangerous object. However, it also becomes a trophy, which the heroes send in a box to Olympus.

In these newer adaptations, Medusa's head is frequently shown *en face* in close-up, central to the frame. This recalls the Gorgoneion, one of the earliest ways of depicting Medusa in art, where she was represented solely by her head, often placed as a warning on doors. Over time, as the image of a beautiful Medusa spread in art, Gorgoneions became less monstrous and were more commonly placed on statues of Athena–on her *aegis* or shield. Ovid and other authors explained this by noting that Perseus finally gave Medusa's head to Athena, who had transformed her into a monster. The traveller Pausanias, in his *Description of Greece* (2nd century CE), also incorporated this idea. In his version, Medusa was the leader of a Libyan tribe that Perseus' army fought. After killing her treacherously at night, "Perseus, admiring her beauty even in death, cut off her head and carried it to show the Greeks."[28] Thus, even without its monstrous traits or petrifying power, Medusa's head could still be viewed simply as an object, albeit a very beautiful one.

Reflecting on the dismembered, beautiful Medusa prompts a broader discussion on how the female body is depicted in film pop culture, especially through the lens of Laura Mulvey's theories, which suggest that the film camera objectifies women by fragmenting their bodies.[29] While it is easier to view the monstrous, grotesque Medusas of older films as something other than women, this becomes much harder when Medusa is given a backstory, dialogue, and human expressions. Yet in the case of Medusa, we see a complete dehumanization of her body. It is telling that Benvenuto Cellini's sculpture shows Perseus holding up Medusa's severed head while standing

[28] Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, translated by W.H.S. Jones, [in:] *The Medusa Reader*, p. 44.

[29] L. Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, "Screen" 1975, no. 16, pp. 6–18.

on her defeated human form without much controversy. However, when Garbati's Medusa carries Perseus' severed head, the discomfort it provokes–leading some to generate backlash–is both striking and thought-provoking.

Conclusion

The myth of Medusa has long been a source of inspiration for feminist thought, and for good reason. Perhaps the most significant is that, although Medusa gradually transformed from a monster into a woman in ancient times, she has never fully shed her identity as a monster. Her story naturally incorporates elements that are central to feminist film theory, such as the concepts of the gaze and body fragmentation. This analysis has also highlighted how the props in Medusa's story reveal the complex relationship between "object" and "objectification".

Firstly, the various items Perseus uses against Medusa are increasingly viewed as diminishing his heroism. In films that aim to bolster Perseus' heroic image, the number of these items is often reduced, or they are distributed among other characters. Meanwhile, Medusa is given modern attributes, like sunglasses, to make her more relatable within human society. Secondly, the statues created by Medusa's deadly gaze are often interpreted as works of art, prompting a deeper exploration of what art communicates and the ideas it preserves. Lastly, and perhaps most surprisingly, Medusa's severed head continues to be dehumanized and treated as a mere object. This conclusion is particularly striking given the growing sensitivity of contemporary audiences.

In pop culture, Medusa remains just another step in the hero's journey–a single quest among many. Her perspective is still noticeably absent from film, and her myth has yet to be fully told as "herstory". The 2023 *Percy Jackson* series comes close: we see Percy's mother telling him that "Medusa is not what people think of her." However, Medusa's own story was not compelling enough to save her from being beheaded. Despite this, the increasing interest in reclaiming myths from a female perspective, which is already gaining traction in literature,[30] suggests that it is only a matter of time before Medusa's story is told on screen in a fuller, more nuanced way.

[30] Cf. M. Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, Edinburgh 2005; U.K. Le Guin, *Lavinia*, Orlando 2008; M. Miller, *Circe*, New York 2018; P. Barker, *The Silence of the Girls*, London 2018; N. Haynes, *A Thousand Ships*, London 2019.

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