



Mythological images and motifs in the works of Belarusian artist Vsevolod Shvaiba

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ABSTRACT:

The article examines the mythological images and motifs inherent in the works of the Belarusian graphic artist Vsevolod Shvaiba². It shows that the artist's worldview unites ancient cosmogonic ideas about the Universe and provisions of the physics theory of strings. The master's works emphasize the desire of humans to systematize the objective reality of modern existence and to find harmony in the world.

KEYWORDS:

mythological image; Makosha; Belarusian art; V. Shvaiba

1. Introduction

The emergence and rapid development of virtual reality has had a great impact on the modern human's vision of the universe and on our perception and experience of space and time. The human world is changing, sinking into a state of "the tumult and confusion" [1]. It *loses* long-established *values and meanings* for things, *searches* for the non-existent and/or *creates* new things. People turn to myth (return to the beginning) in an effort to bring order to their understanding of the objective reality and *to find balance* in the constantly changing and accelerating world.

Myth is "not a *figment of imagination*, but a most vivid and most *authentic reality*" where nothing is accidental [2]. It "constantly synthesizes new realities" which, in the process, undergo "deformation... while preserving... their authenticity" [3]. The American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan noted that a spacetime of myth was "an intellectual construct. It can be very elaborate", it "is also a response of feeling and imagination to fundamental human needs" [4, p. 99].

The myth contains within itself the *image of the Univesum*, allowing a person to create a complete *picture* from the scattered pieces of the existence mosaic. It provides the opportunity to express complex concepts through simple objects and actions, which is confirmed by the similarity of many mythological plots, images, and motifs in various cultures.

In contemporary reality, myth, while retaining its content, acquires new meanings and forms of expression, which is reflected in the images of literature, film, and visual arts.

The aim of this article is to identify the mythological images and motifs which are characteristic of the works of the contemporary Belarusian graphic artist V. Shvaiba and reflect his worldview.

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2. Discussion

The ambivalent image of the Spinning (weaving) Goddess is one of the oldest and most-essential figures in the mythological worldview of various peoples and historical eras. It is universal, carries cosmogonic significance and reflects the structure and spacetime laws of the Universe.

Spinning, weaving, knitting, braiding, etc., are ancient and typically female crafts that hold sacred significance in all cultural traditions. In myths, the movements of some threads relative to the others in space and time irreversibly change both material and spiritual reality and are interpreted as an act of creation (creation and/or destruction). Since time immemorial, the mythological understanding of fate, the past, the present, and the future has been expressed in the motifs of the *spindle (spinning wheel, loom), thread, guiding ball of yarn, knot, and woven fabric*.

In Ancient Greek mythology, the *rulers of fate* were three ancient sisters, the Moirai, who were beyond the control of even gods. They corresponded to the three Parcae in Ancient Roman mythology. Scandinavian sagas tell of three Norns who “judge destinies and choose lives for human children” [5].

In East Slavic mythology, spinning goddess Makosh is the ruler of fate, the proprietress of paths and crossroads between the worlds of Yav (the visible world) and Nav (the invisible world) and the keeper of the secrets of the Universe (Knowledge). In Russian fairy tales, she is likened to Baba Yaga who, along with her younger sisters, the Spinners, lived on the border of light and darkness. Makosh corresponded as well to the goddess Mara-Marena and, after the adoption of Orthodoxy, to Paraskeva Pyatnitsa.

In various mythologies, the characteristics and functions of goddesses of fate are similar. They are organizers of the Universe, spinners and “weavers; they twist, wind, and... break the thread of life” [6, p. 137].

By referencing the image of Makosha as a reflection of the immutable universal laws of being, Belarusian graphic artist V. Shvaiba attempts to introduce balance and order into contemporary human reality – the “spacetime of Chaos”. He creates his own Universum by using objects characteristic of the spinning (weaving) goddess in his iconography. The distaff, spindle, thread, ball of yarn, knot and fabric are interwoven into endless, non-linear chains of meaning.

In “Makosha and her Daughters”, the artist emphasizes the dialectical unity of the visible and invisible worlds (Fig. 1). The radiant faces of the goddesses wearing garments of white woven fabric are connected / separated with / from their inverted “reflections” (the opposing dark essence) with the tread that forms a permeable boundary between the levels of the Universe. The linen garments of the goddesses seem to be an extension of the fabric of the Universe. The three women of different ages symbolize the transience of existence. Makosha (the woman in the center) is holding a ball of yarn in her hands. The young woman on the left is holding a long thread, the end of which is hidden outside the space of the drawing, while her older sister is joining the ends of two threads (or, possibly, tearing a single thread). On the other side of Existence, above Makosha’s head, there is a bright thread, not yet wound into a ball, but coiled into a spiral.

The “mirror-like” construction of the drawing’s composition, the use of axial symmetry, application of the principles of similarity and repetition suggest an inversion of the work’s meanings. “Everything repeats itself endlessly, and in reality... nothing new ever happens. But such recurrence... communicates reality to the events” [7].

Turning the drawing upside down reveals that the woman wearing the dark robe (on the left) is trying to pull a short thread from the hands of her lighter counterpart (or is she handing it to her?) (Fig. 2). The other goddesses merely touch the long thread. At their feet, among the folds of the black fabric, lies a piece of white thread torn off an already unwound ball of yarn.

The repeating, wave-like silhouettes of the women, and the contrast between their black and white garments, create a rhythm and produce an effect of “movement” (“fluidity”) in spacetime. The image of Makosha in the artist’s interpretation is “not divisible into »real« and »illusory«, »direct« and »figurative«, but there is a continuous transition from one to the other, their genuine interconnectedness” [8, p. 178].



Fig. 1. V. Shvaiba. Makosha and her daughters. Pencil on paper, 35 cm x 53 cm
Source: <https://www.shvayba.com/viewpic.php?ln=ru&galleryid=1&picid=36>



Fig. 2. The drawing Makosha and her daughters rotated by 180 degrees

Since ancient times, the song has accompanied rituals and ceremonies, as well as holiday celebrations and many everyday human activities (spinning, weaving, etc.). The song marked the beginning of an event, giving the action a certain rhythm, regularity, etc.

"The Song of Makosha" awakens the Non-Existence that safekeeps the fundamental essence of Creation. The song evokes the movement of threads that wind into balls and interconnect, resembling a living river stream flowing at the feet of the three women, intertwine and create their woven patterned clothes and headdresses (Fig. 3). In cosmogonic myths, the act of Creation (the birth of the world) has sacred significance. "In the darkness something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing. ... Sometimes it seemed to come from all directions at once. ... There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was, beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise ... the voice was suddenly joined by other voices... They were in harmony with it... the blackness overhead, all at once, was blazing with stars. They didn't come out gently one by one... One moment there had been nothing but darkness; next moment a thousand, thousand points of light leaped out - single stars, constellations, and planets... The new stars and the new voices began at exactly the same time..." [9]. The Song of Makosha called them to Life – the World obtained a Soul.

The spindle in the hands of one of the goddesses resembles an ancient wind instrument – a wooden ocarina. The instrument creates metamorphoses of spacetime, forming the Cosmos. The “halos” around the women’s heads suggest the cyclical movement of the planets. Among them, Saturn (Cronus) stands out as a personification of the inevitability of Time.

“For myths, or at least for most of them, there is no »before« and »after«, but only »here« and »always«. Therefore, mythological events unfold in the songs as if they happen right before our eyes, like a sort of ... a theatrical act” [10].

The *thread* wound around the spindle held by one of the women symbolizes fate, the connection between the past, present, and future and, at the same time, a “spiritual thread that connects all things like a string that holds all the pearls together” [11, pp. 108-109]. The ancient head-dresses of the goddesses (the *namitki*³) emphasize the integrity of the place and time of Creation, as well as the unity of the directions – West and East.

The composition of the graphic work resembles a tree motif. The threads of spacetime form the crown of a tree, thus separating Being from Non-being. The thread balls are the tree’s fruits. The lines on the garments of the three women resemble ancient writings that hold secret knowledge or the pattern of the bark of old trees. Three female figures in the center of the sheet – the “tree trunks” – represent “The Wood Between the Worlds” (C.S. Lewis). In the cultures of various peoples, the *World Tree* is a universal symbol that reflects the structure of the Universum and is associated with myths about the Creation of the world.



Fig. 3. V. Shvaiba. The Song of Makosha. Ink, pen, paper, 30 cm x 40 cm
Source: <https://www.shvayba.com/viewpic.php?ln=ru&galleryid=1&picid=47>

The motif of the *Spindle* is frequently found in visual arts and symbolizes the transience of human Existence and is present in most of Shvaiba’s works. The spinning of the spindle symbolizes the endless movement, cyclical nature of all processes in the Universe, and the existence of the *Axis Mundi*.

The vertical composition of “The Cross of Makosha” block printing is based on axial symmetry and the principles of sacred geometry (Fig. 4). The intersection of the two spindles against a black circle forms a cross above the woman’s head. The cross within the circle is “...a cosmogonic symbol signifying the four seasons and the four principles of the Universe...” [12, p. 825]. The inseparability of Quiescence and Movement is transformed in the artist’s work into a *Spinning Wheel*.

³ The *namitka* is a traditional Belarusian women’s headscarf made of thin white home-woven fabric. Similar head coverings were found in the cultures of Western Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

The cross is formed by threads wound on two spindles representing the spacetime spiral. The intersection of the spindles symbolizes the point of the Beginning and End of the life cycle, the Axis Mundi.

The circle – a symbol of World Harmony – intersects with the dark outline of the rectangle that delimits the pictorial space. The union of the shapes creates movement (Cosmos), which is emphasized by a fragment of concentric circles alluding to the motifs of the “Cross of Atlantis” and the Labyrinth (the path of self-understanding and mysteries of the Universe). Makosha, born with the Universe, will (must) bear her Cross as long as the Universe exists.

In mythology, the *loom* was the instrument of Creation. In Shvaiba’s graphic work, Makosha’s braids resemble vertical threads of a loom, and the three horizontal spindles hanging at their ends resemble shuttles. The shuttle threads pass between the warp threads, forming crisscrosses of the fabric of the Universe. The vertical threads connect all levels of the Universe and serve as their immovable foundation while the cyclical movement of the horizontal thread wound on the spindle signifies the structure of these levels and their temporality.

The white lines of Makosha’s braided hair resemble threads of light or streams of rain, revealing the feminine form against the black background. The artist seems to have peeled away the dark layer from the canvas, revealing the luminous face of the goddess.



Fig. 4. V. Shvaiba. The Cross of Makosha. Woodcut print, 29 cm x 14.5 cm
Source: <https://www.shvayba.com/viewpic.php?ln=ru&galleryid=1&picid=316>

In “Threads of Spaces”, the artist combines the mythological images of the Spinning Goddess and the World Tree with the basic postulates of *string theory* (Fig. 5). Numerous thin horizontal spider web-like threads penetrate the pictorial space between the two spheres at the top and bottom of the painting and weave into a single thick thread on a spindle in the woman’s hands. The *motif of web threads* converging at the Center of the World reflects the integrity of spacetime and the connection of all things.

All that exists, “what is above the heavens, what is beneath the earth, what is between heaven and earth, what is called past, present, and future – all this is woven along and across on space”,

which is “woven along and across” on the Eternal. “Verily, by the will of this Eternal... the sun and the moon... heaven and earth take their place. Verily... moments, hours, days and nights, fortnights, months, seasons, years” [13].

The physics string theory interprets cosmic spacetime as radiation which is the movement of energy streams in the form of a multitude of vibrating multidirectional strings (i.e., threads of the Spinning Goddess) forming a mobile weave of the fabric uniting the Universe.

The figure of the Spinning Woman, like the trunk of the Yggdrasil Ash Tree, exists in the human world, connecting and/or separating the two spheres of the Heaven and the Earth, embodying order and harmony and maintaining the balance of the Universe. Referring to the cosmogonic myth allows the artist to create an ordered model of the Universe that suggests the possibility of the world’s Rebirth. The Universe does not disappear; it changes.

Shvaiba associates the cyclical nature of existence (the transition from one state to another) with the changing lunar phases – new moon, waxing and waning moon, and full moon. The lower and upper parts of the composition are balanced by two spheres. The darkness of the lower sphere (new moon) in which the woman’s tunic is immersed and the ball or yarn of the upper sphere (waning moon) wound from the cloth on the spinner’s head are extensions of her. The moon emphasizes the ambivalence of the goddess’s image. Her two faces – the world of Yav and the world of Nav – symbolize the *balance of the Universe*.



Fig. 5. V. Shvaiba. Threads of Space. Black paper, white ink, pen, 70 cm x 50 cm
Source: <https://www.shvayba.com/viewpic.php?ln=ru&galleryid=1&picid=319>

The “Makosha’s Ball of Thread” woodcut print depicts a portrait of a young woman holding a ball of thread (Fig. 6). The infinitely long thread stretching from the ball wraps around her wrists tying her hands, leaving marks (deep wrinkles) on her face and filling the entire space around her. The thread unwinds, intertwining randomly and transforming itself into a tangled web or script (the text of the Universe), which only the Goddess herself can read.

The thread envelops Makosha in its web, tightly binding her to the laws of the Universum and leaving her no choice. A woman can wind the thread of every person’s life into a neat ball and place it in a basket, but she is powerless to disentangle the thread of her own destiny. She is destined for a Path that she has no right to change. The motif of the thread wound into a ball signifies movement through spacetime, overcoming a predestined path.



Fig. 6. V. Shvaiba. Makosha's Ball of Thread. Woodcut Print
Source: <https://www.shvayba.com/viewpic.php?ln=ru&galleryid=1&picid=318>

The composition of "Thread Balls of Fates" uses vertical axial symmetry emphasizing the ambivalence of the Spinner's image and symbolizing the balance of Life and Death, Good and Evil, and so on (Fig. 7). A person's predetermined destiny cannot be changed. At the same time, his/her thoughts, words, intentions and actions leave their mark on the thread of life. The goddess grants each person freedom of choice, and then she can bring them both happiness and misfortune by winding the thread of their life onto one of the two spindles. Nothing is accidental in Fate.

The woman depicted in the linocut print holds a ball of her own hair in her hands, peering at it. Is it the ball of her own destiny or someone else's? Her long, flowing hair serves as her garment, connecting the goddess (the Universe) with the destiny of each person, signifying the Universality of existence.



Fig. 7. V. Shvaiba. Thread Balls of Fates. Linocut Print, 23 cm x 24 cm
Source: <https://www.shvayba.com/viewpic.php?ln=ru&galleryid=1&picid=327>

In Shvaiba's interpretation, "Makosha's Knot" resembles a symbol of Eternity existing in numerous variations, such as Möbius strip or "Solomon's Knot" (Figs. 8, 9). The beginning and end of each of the light horizontal threads that form the knot is lost beyond the boundaries of the design. The knot, or a guiding ball, signifies the endless journey of Makosha and her two companions. The silhouettes of the three women wearing dark robes disappear against the black background cut through with thin white threads. The artist associates the three goddesses' head-dresses (woven fabrics wound into balls) with the Moon and its changing phases thus marking the cyclical nature of Existence (birth, life and death).



Fig. 8. V. Shvaiba. Makosha's Knot. Black paper, white ink, pen, 65 cm x 50 cm
Source: <https://www.shvayba.com/viewpic.php?ln=ru&galleryid=1&picid=325>

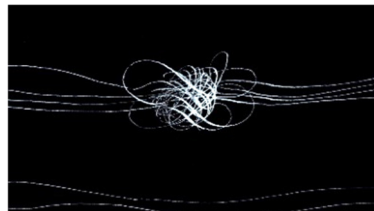


Fig. 9. A fragment of Makosha's Knot

Makosha weaves the fabric of human destiny, tying and untying knots on it and creating thereby "... live and indelible events ...; the dependencies ... by which long-past events are connected with the events of the present moment and, through them, with the events of the future disappearing beyond" [13, p. 398].

Destinies of people are interconnected through events common to them (knots joining together the separate fabrics of their lives). In the "The Bonds Between Us 2" drawing, the relationship between a man and a woman is interpreted as unbreakable "Cosmic Bonds" that exist on the spiritual level of Existence (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. V. Shvaiba. The Bonds Between Us 2. Paper, pencil, 30 cm x 40 cm
Source: <https://www.shvayba.com/viewpic.php?ln=ru&galleryid=1&picid=45>

Everything that happens in the human world is reflected on the other levels of the Universe. “Wedding” changes forever both the daily lives of the two people and their spiritual reality (Fig. 11). The woven ribbons of the man’s and woman’s headdresses intertwine, tightly binding their destinies. The Threads of the Universe swirl in a swift vortex around the motionless couple, showering them with grain, bestowing prosperity and fertility.

The marriage rite is primarily aimed at procreation. In the “Yar” drawing, within the folds of a woven cloth carefully carried by a man and a woman (a family) lies a priceless gift from the Universe – a Child (Fig. 12). The Child symbolizes the embodiment of the possible into the actual. The Child is a metamorphosis of Being and is a symbol of an emerging new Thread of Fate and connection between past, present, and future.

The composition of the “Cast Away 2” is built on the contrast between movement and rest (dynamic and axial symmetry) and consists of two parts, each of which can be viewed as an independent work (Fig. 13). On the right side of the sheet is a static group of men of varying ages, forming a single whole and connected with the ribbons of their woven headdresses. The oldest one in the foreground holds a cup (the “bosom of the patriarchy”) signifying “the security of people who have entrusted themselves to God” or to the eldest in the family [15, p. 184]. The group of men represents the center of the Universe, which is emphasized by one of the vertical compositional axes and by the circle of threads of the Universe above their heads. The silhouette of the group resembles an hourglass, indicating the balance, cyclicity, and temporality of Existence.



Fig. 11. V. Shvaiba. Wedding. Ink, pen, paper, 40 cm x 86 cm
Source: <https://www.shvayba.com/viewpic.php?ln=ru&galleryid=1&picid=49>



Fig. 12. V. Shvaiba. Yar. Paper, ink, rapidograph, 86 cm x 44 cm
Source: <https://www.shvayba.com/viewpic.php?ln=ru&galleryid=1&picid=63>



Fig. 13. V. Shvaiba. Cast Away 2. Ink, pen, paper, 40 cm x 86 cm
Source: <https://www.shvayba.com/viewpic.php?ln=ru&galleryid=1&picid=51>

The left side of the graphic depicts a solitary figure of a writhing young man who is covering his head and face with his hands in an attempt to protect himself from the moving threads of the Universe which are tearing away his woven garment. In mythology, tearing linen (thread) signified discontinuity of Existence – Death. Shvaiba interprets the loss of the young man's linen garments tantamount to death. He is an outcast, torn from the womb, and must find his way or perish.

3. Conclusion

By turning to the mythological image of goddess Makosha in his works, the Belarusian graphic artist Vsevolod Shvaiba attempts to discern order in modern human reality within the "spacetime of Chaos". The image of the Spinner goddess is both part of the overall traditional cosmogonic model of the Universe and an expression of the artist's own Worldview.

In the artist's interpretation, Makosha exists simultaneously in the spacetime of the myth and in the "here and now". The goddess is given a realistic image whereas she is separated from the human reality, which doesn't suggest placing her in any specific location.

In all works of the artist, Makosha, the spacetime of Existence is pictured as a backdrop that is interpreted as movements of horizontal threads that stretch, tear, touch, and intertwine forming the Fabric of the Universe. The *motif of threads* or *woven fabric* is present in all of the artist's works and represents his thoughts, knowledge, and understanding of the laws of the Universum. Objects distinguishing the Spinner goddess – the *spindle*, *thread*, *ball*, *knot*, and *fabric* – become the main *mythological motifs* of Shvaiba's graphic works.

In Shvaiba's interpretation, the *image of Makosha is ambivalent*; it combines two faces of the goddess of Fate (the bright Yav and the dark Nav). The ambivalence is emphasized in his

graphic works by the alternation of white and black and by the use of symmetrical techniques in compositions.

Since ancient times, spinning and weaving have signified Creation – the transformation of Non-Existence into Existence. The Eternity of the Existence cycle suggests that the Destruction of the world means also its new Birth (in a different form) beginning the next turn of the Wheel of Time. The *Cycle of perpetual return* is the main mythological principle upon which the semantic contents of Shvaiba's works are built. In the compositions of the artist's graphic works, the principle is expressed through the use of repetition, similarity, and symmetry (axial, mirror, and dynamic). He does not juxtapose the human world and other worlds, but is guided by the principles of the integrity of the Universe and Universality. In the artist's view, goddess Makosha's primary purpose is to create and maintain the World Order (Universal Harmony).

Shvaiba resorts to the fundamental principles that have governed the world since ancient times and have emphasized and actualized timeless values. Humans are treated as witnesses to the laws of the Universum.

The artist's works are characterized by realistic rendering, meticulous attention to detail and emphasis on the presence of the spiritual world in contemporary human reality.

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Obrazy i motywy mitologiczne w twórczości białoruskiego artysty Wsiewołoda Sz wajby

STRESZCZENIE:

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje mitologiczne obrazy i motywy obecne w twórczości białoruskiego grafika Wsiewołoda Sz wajby. Analiza twórczości dowodzi, że światopogląd artysty łączy starożytne kosmogoniczne wyobrażenia o wszechświecie z zasadami teorii strun. Motywy w pracach artysty podkreślają ludzkie dążenie do uporządkowania obiektywnej rzeczywistości współczesnego świata i osiągnięcia globalnej harmonii.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

obraz mitologiczny; Makosza; białoruska grafika; W. Sz wajba