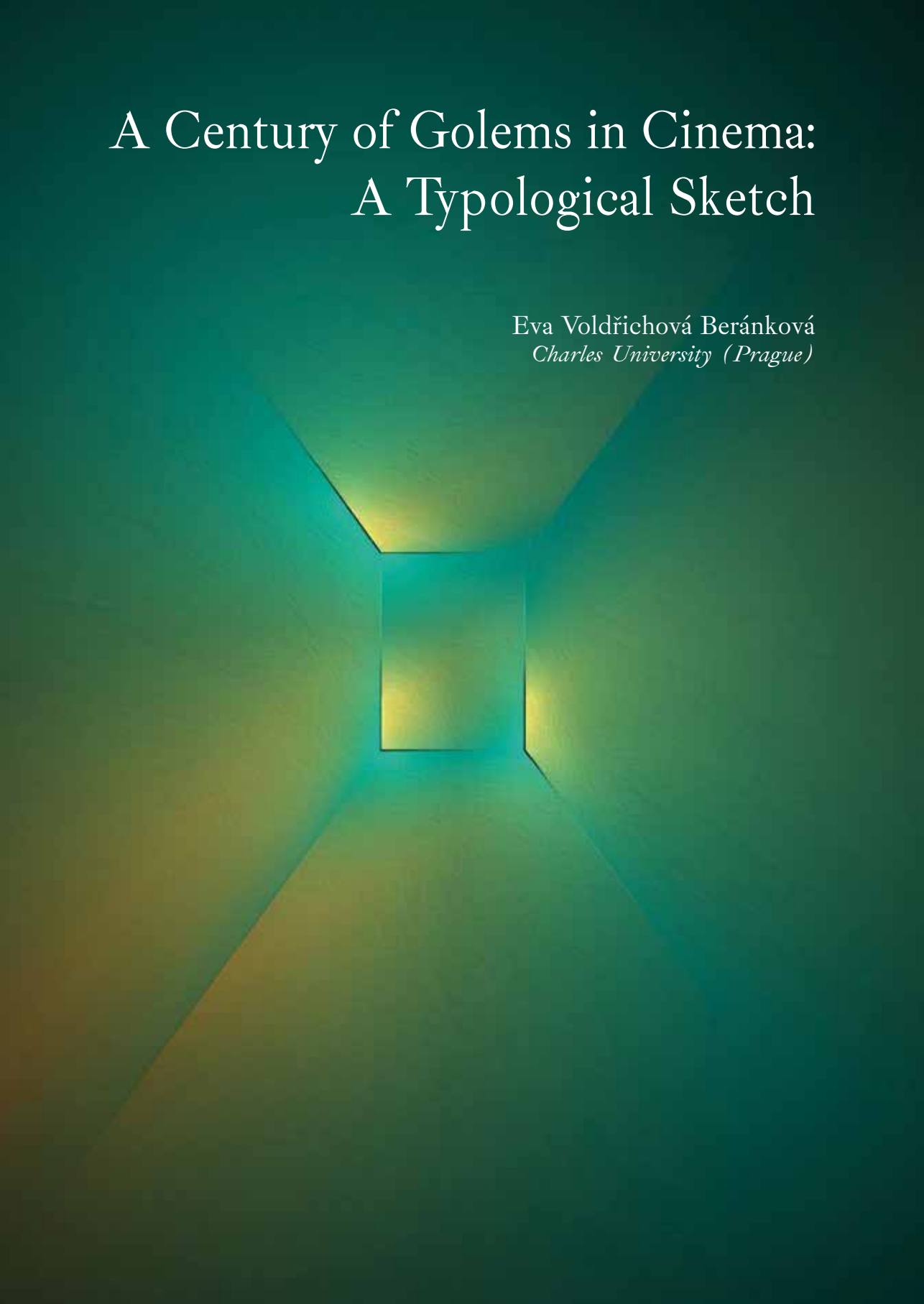


# A Century of Golems in Cinema: A Typological Sketch

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# A Century of Golems in Cinema: A Typological Sketch<sup>1</sup>

The legend of the Golem is a very special biblical myth as it was inspired by only one verse from Psalm 139, today translated as «Your eyes saw my unformed body».<sup>2</sup> The «unformed body» is expressed by the Hebrew word גלמי (*galmi*, «my golem»), which traditionally meant a «raw material», a «germ», an «embryo» (Eisenberg & Abécassis, 2004, p. 374-379). The meaning of the word golem has gradually expanded to also include, on the one hand, an uncompleted, clumsy, autistic man unable to control himself and, on the other hand, an artificial humanoid (Mackerle, 1992).

Although the first cabbalistic recipes for Golem-making date back to the twelfth century, the two traditional versions of the legend (located in Prague and Chelm, respectively) appear no sooner than during the Renaissance (Voldřichová Beránková, 2012, p. 61). As for the modern literary adaptations that Philippe Sellier classed among Biblical literary myths (Sellier, 1984, 118), these began to emerge around the middle of the nineteenth century.

This article will examine how the digital revolution, specifically cinema, has affected the myth of the Golem. To do so, let us first examine the fundamental components structuring the story: Traditionally, the Golem is an artificial man whom a rabbi creates from clay and then magically endows with life in order

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<sup>2</sup> «Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be». Psalm 139/16 (BibleGateway, 2019).

that it protects the Jewish ghetto and performs tasks that require considerable physical strength. The rest of the story varies in different versions, but it inevitably ends with an error resulting in a revolt that turns the Golem against its creator (Golem, 2017). So as to save the community, the Golem must be deactivated either by destroying its *shem*, that is, by erasing a letter from the formula that gave him life, or by some other magical operation (Golem, 2003).

Let us see to what extent this basic schema is respected in the cinematographic adaptations of the myth. I worked with a corpus of thirty films and series, all shot between 1915 and 2016 in ten various countries. The films are listed after the final bibliography of this article. Their list is not exhaustive, of course, but it seems to me that it still allows us to describe several basic trends.

First of all, the Golem is not necessarily an artificial man. There are six female Golems in our corpus: Rabbi Löw's beautiful servant who allows him to punish the pride and lecherousness of rival rabbis in Jiří Brdečka's *The Last Golem* (1968); the cynical and self-seeking *Miss Golem* by Jaroslav Balík (1972) who wants to kill the human original of whom she is a cloned copy; the somewhat androgynous Golem interpreted by the renown singer Annie Lennox in Amos Gitai's *Birth of a Golem* (1991); the unhappy female android promoted to the horrors of sexual slavery in the «Innocence» (2004) episode of the Japanese computer animated series *Ghost in the Shell 2*; a fiancée created for the Prague Golem by Marge Simpson in «Treehouse of Horror XVII» (2006); and the psychopathic murderer from Juan Carlos Medina's *The Limehouse Golem* (2016). These female Golems are very diverse in terms of their opinions, tasks and moral characteristics, but they all share the feature of great physical beauty. This fact leads to the conclusion that the Golem's story may sometimes be contaminated by other myths (Geisler Szmulewicz, 1999) – in this case, by that of Pygmalion.

Regarding who has created the Golem in question, only in half of the films it is Rabbi Löw himself (eventually another rabbi, i.e. his more contemporary successor), but the Jewish character of the story is adhered to in more than three quarters of the studied cases. This is not a real invariant since we still find many counterexamples, but Jewish elements (be it the atmosphere of a ghetto, wise rabbis, old synagogues or liturgical objects related to Judaism) are one of the most recurring features of Golem cinema. It is interesting to note that in only two cases does Golem have a female creator: as already mentioned, Marge Simpson and, in a much more serious register, the young Ariel of the «Kaddish» episode of the *X-Files*. Ariel creates her Golem in order to, on the one hand, avenge the assassination of her fiancé Isaac Luria by three neo-Nazis and, on the other hand, symbolically marry Isaac before bidding him farewell.

Among the non-Jewish creators dominate more or less crazy scientists, engineers serving dystopian totalitarian societies or experimental sculptors. In the first and

second cases, the myth of the Golem is often enriched by elements borrowed from the Frankenstein story in the sense that the artificial creature arouses the pity of the spectator while its author shows a lack of responsibility or even commits bloody crimes. In Michael Mann's *The Keep* (1983), the Golem is associated with another monster named Radu Molasar, who belongs to Romanian folklore and, on some levels, is vaguely reminiscent of Count Dracula.

The actual process of creating a Golem is shown only in approximately half of the studied films. Most of the creators use clay in its capacity as a traditional material, but we also find Golems made out of wood (*Little Otik* by Jan Švankmajer) or metal (*Ghost in the Shell 2 – «Innocence»*) as well as those having resulted from either the cloning of humans (*Miss Golem*) or the exposure of their bodies to radioactive rays (the whole cycle of *Hulk*).

Every fifth Golem is created or animated by chance or by accident: that of Amos Gitai emerges spontaneously from sand following music and two Golems (that of *Inglourious Basterds* and *The Limehouse Golem*) are in fact real human beings just stylizing themselves as clay creatures or adopting some Golemic behavior.

Literary and cinematographic versions of the myth of the Golem generally consist of four narrative units or mythemes (Brunel, 1992): 1. the initial need to create an artificial being; 2. the making of the body; 3. the animation of the inert matter 4. the unexpected and more or less harmful consequences of such a transgressive act. From the point of view of the logic of the story and its presentation in images, the third mytheme turns out to be the most problematic. In films inspired by the traditional legend, Rabbi Löw places the *shem* or recites magic formulas, as expected (Funkenstein, 1986), but in the more modern adaptations the moment of the first animation of the Golem is either very quickly sketched (the creatures seem to come to life on their own) or completely missing. It is as if the filmmakers are counting on the complicity of the viewer: Since further development of the story requires an animated Golem, such technical details do not matter.

Since the 1960s the motif of a clumsy sorcerer's apprentice or of a demonic scientist who mishandles Rabbi Löw's creature, eventually turning it away from its original purpose, is very common (Bartov, 2005). This seems to be a modern variation on the medieval conviction that only a rabbi, a sufficiently literate, pious and morally irreproachable person, has the right to create and animate artificial beings (Idel, 1990). The experiments launched by unworthy creators indeed never fail to end in a massacre. A very original version of such an unworthy creator is portrayed in Jan Švankmajer's *Little Otik*: a childless couple finds a tree stump that looks vaguely like a baby, name it Otik and start to treat it like their son. The will to have a child at any price and a pathological parental love animate

a growing monster who has an insatiable appetite and ends up devouring the whole family, the neighbors and part of the city.

Having examined these creators of Golems, the materials used by them and the animation techniques at play, we come to the initial motivation to create artificial beings. In the traditional versions, the Maharal of Prague or another rabbi intends his Golem to serve and protect the Jewish community (Neher, 1987). He reads in the stars that his people are threatened (Paul Wegener's films); he fears imminent pogroms (Julien Duvivier's *The Golem*, 1936); he fights against modern anti-Semitism (*Supernatural* – the «Everybody Hates Hitler» episode, 2013) or he defends his own family against violence (*Grimm* – the «Dyin' on a Prayer» episode, 2014).

We can conclude from our corpus analysis that all of the Golems created by Jews —whether they be rabbis or not— perform the function of protection even centuries after the adventure of the Maharal of Prague. Two of them are even formidable Nazi killers: Radu Molasar (*The Keep*), who was not intended for such a purpose, and the Bear Jew (*Inglourious Basterds*), who chose the vocation himself. On the other hand, in Armand Geiger's *The Golem Awakening* (2008), the term «Golems» refers to the servants of evil and the persecutors of the Jewish people – from ancient Egypt to Hitler's Germany (Baer, 2012).

As for the non-Jewish creators of Golems, their motives are very diverse: Rudolph II (Martin Frič's *The Emperor's Baker – The Baker's Emperor*, 1951) is simply bored in his castle, dreaming of the coming to life of Golem and the discovery of the elixir of eternal youth. A crazy curator of a museum (Herbert J. Leder's *It!*, 1967) animates Golem to use the creature as a weapon against his enemies. The experimenter Petr Vondráček (*Miss Golem*) has fun creating clones of the women he finds beautiful. Doctors in dystopian totalitarian countries (Piotr Szulkin's *Golem*, 1980) specialize in the production of obedient artificial men with no will of their own. Sterile parents (*Little Otik*) want to have a child despite physiological impossibility. The rich of the future (*Ghost in the Shell 2*) need beautiful sex maids – and so on. In short, once separated from the Jewish context, the Golem can serve almost any purpose. There is neither a special task nor a logic dominating a priori in the «secularized» films of this sort.

Only in half of the studied films does a Golem end up turning against its creator; and in eighteen of the thirty stories the clay man is openly destructive. It is interesting to compare the last scenes of the films, too. The traditional Golem stories necessarily end with the deactivation of the clay monster with the result that its strength can harm no more.

Modern versions give the Golem a much greater chance to survive: In *The Emperor's Baker – The Baker's Emperor*, a sort of communist interpretation of the myth, the

clay man is nationalized and its energy is used toward baking bread for the people (Barzilai, 2016). Herbert J. Leder's Golem is so strong that it even resists nuclear weapons, escaping then into the sea. Piotr Szulkin's Golem remains alive in a post-apocalyptic society. Radu Molasar disappears into the depths of his own castle to only see a resurrection after several centuries. Little Otik, The Incredible Hulk and the Golem of «Dyin' on a Prayer» also remain unstoppable. The Bear Jew wins the Second World War and the Golem of *The Simpsons* gets married. The bride even convinces Chief Wiggum not to press charges (in connection to a murder committed by the Golem) with the promise of pan-fried latkes, a traditional Jewish delicacy.

In short, modern versions of the story like to play with the idea of the Golem becoming a positive hero or, on the contrary, with the eternal threat of an invincible monster hovering over humanity. It is no coincidence that the most common genres among Golem movies are horror and comedy. Less frequently do we find philosophical films or historical dramas.

Before concluding let us take a quick look at the places of action and the plastic appearances of the Golems. Sixteenth century Prague or the modern Czech capital is included in twelve films. Four films take place in the United States, two in England, but there are also Golems haunting France, Romania or Belarus during the Second World War as well as contemporary Israel or a Japan of the future. As you can see, the Golem has become truly international as well as eternal.

The clay man can, of course, be interpreted by a disguised actor or actress, as is the case in the oldest of the films and, more recently, in the comedies. One of the peculiarities of this myth, however, consists in the considerable role it has played in the development of plastic techniques. A clay monster coming to life indeed represents an interesting challenge for animators of all generations. In the Czech Republic, Jaroslav Horejc's impressive Golem (*The Emperor's Baker – The Baker's Emperor*) turned out to be so popular that it influenced all subsequent representations of the clay man (Cornis-Pope & Neubauer, 2010). In 1987, Jiří Barta was inspired by the legend to design an entire Prague made out of clay from whose walls Golems emerged spontaneously. As for the surrealist Jan Švankmajer, he developed a special animation technique to give life to his wooden *Little Otik* (Solařík, 2018). While the schools of Czech and Latin American animators (Matías Lorenzo Muñoz's *Golem*) prefer handmade Golems animated using the stop-motion principle (Lukeš, 2013), the Americans («Treehouse of Horror XVII») and the Japanese (*Ghost in the Shell 2*) opt instead for classical animation or manga-inspired techniques. The Golem is a real polymorphous monster who continues to stimulate the imagination of many visual artists (Morel, 2011).

Claude Lévi-Strauss affirms that «all versions of a myth have the capacity to be equally valid» (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, p. 378). From this point of view we can consider

the Golem's story to be one of the most productive biblical myths in the history of cinema. And since many new projects are emerging as we speak, the silver screen Golem still has a great future ahead of it.

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## LIST OF FILMS AND SERIES

1915	Paul Wegener	<i>The Golem</i>
1927	Paul Wegener	<i>The Golem and The Dancing Girl</i>
1920	Paul Wegener	<i>The Golem: How He Came into The World</i>
1936	Julien Duvivier	<i>The Golem</i>
1951	Martin Frič	<i>The Emperor's Baker</i>
1951	Martin Frič	<i>The Baker's Emperor</i>
1967	Jean Kerchbron	<i>The Golem</i>
1967	Herbert J. Leder	<i>It!</i> [ <i>Anger of the Golem; Curse of the Golem</i> ]
1968	Jiří Brdečka	«The Last Golem» (part of <i>Prague Nights</i> )
1972	Jaroslav Balík	<i>Miss Golem</i>
1980	Piotr Szulkin	<i>Golem99</i>
1983	Gyora Gal Glupczynski	<i>The Golem</i>
1983	Michael Mann	<i>The Keep</i>
1987	Jiří Barta	<i>Golem</i>
1989	Boris Lehman	<i>The Clay Man</i>
1991	Amos Gitai	<i>Birth of a Golem</i>
1992	Amos Gitai	<i>Golem, the Spirit of the Exile</i>
1993	Amos Gitai	<i>Golem, The Petrified Garden</i>
1997		<i>The X-Files</i> – «Kaddish» episode
2000	Jan Švankmajer	<i>Little Otik</i>
2003	Ang Lee	<i>Hulk</i>
2004		<i>Ghost in the Shell 2</i> – «Innocence» episode
2006		<i>The Simpsons</i> – «Treehouse of Horror XVII» episode
2008	Louis Letterrier	<i>The Incredible Hulk</i>
2008	Armand Geiger	<i>The Golem Awakening</i>
2008	Quentin Tarantino	<i>Inglourious Basterds</i>
2013		<i>Supernatural</i> – «Everybody Hates Hitler» episode
2014		<i>Grimm</i> – «Dyin' On A Prayer» episode
2016	Juan Carlos Medina	<i>The Limehouse Golem</i>
...	Matías Lorenzo Muñoz	<i>Golem</i> (work in progress)