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De-Disneyfying Disney: Notes on the Development of the Fairy-Tale Film

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Although one could (and perhaps should) consider Georges Méliès, who produced highly innovative féeries at the end of the nineteenth century, as the founder and pioneer of the fairy-tale film, it is Walt Disney who became king of the fairy-tale films in the twentieth century, and though dead, still rules the throne. Not only did he dominate the field of animated fairy-tale films, but many if not most of his live-action films followed the format that he developed for his animated films – a conventional reconciliation of conflicts and contradictions that engenders an illusion of happiness, security, and utopianism. Naturally, Disney did not do this by himself. He hired and organized gifted artists, technicians, and collaborators, not unlike the industrious virtuous seven dwarfs, who adapted fairy tales for the cinema by creating extraordinary cartoons and also developed the animated feature fairy-tale film in Disney's name so that his productions effaced the names of the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault and became synonymous with the term fairy tale. There is scarcely an adult or child born in the twentieth century who, in the western world, has not been exposed to a Disney fairy-tale film or artifact. Our contemporary concept and image of a fairy tale has been shaped and standardized by Disney so efficiently through the mechanisms of the culture industry that our notions of happiness and utopia are and continue to be filtered through a Disney lens even if it is myopic. It seems that myopia has come to dominate both reality and utopia, thanks to

Disneyfication, or that we are conditioned to view reality and fairy tales through a myopic pseudo-utopian lens.

Despite the domination of the fairy-tale film by the Disney Corporation, however, it would be misleading to consider the Disney productions as constituting a monopoly of fairy-tale films, or that they have totally twisted our views of reality and utopia, for there have always been competing films that offer a different vision of fairy tales and social conditions. As Pierre Bourdieu has made abundantly clear in The Field of Cultural Production, culture is constituted by different fields of production in which conflicting forces enter into a dialogue, often antagonistic, and seek to gain proper recognition and a stronghold for their views and beliefs in the field, and though the Disney fairy-tale films have been dominant throughout the twentieth century, they have never been without opposition. In fact, with the rise of filmmakers like Hayao Miyazaki, Michel Ocelot, Jan Svankmajer, Michael Sporn, David Kaplan, Matthew Bright, Tom Davenport, Andrew Adamson, Vicky Jenson, Kelly Asbury, and Conrad Vernon in the twenty-first century, it appears that the fairy-tale film may eventually become de-disneyfied. But before I explain what I mean by de-disneyfication, I want to comment on the evolution of the fairy tale from the oral to the cinematic, how this genre has expanded and morphed into the dominant form of fairy-tale film, and why the conflict in the cultural field of cinematic production is so significant.

### **Theses**

1) The fairy tale began hundreds if not thousands of years ago as an oral form of storytelling created by adults, who told all kinds of tales in diverse settings in which adults determined the forms and contents. The fairy tale was never a genre intended for

children – and it is still not a genre for children. With the advent of the printing press in the fifteenth century, writers gradually began to record and publish the oral forms of storytelling in print directed mainly at adult reading audiences. Adults have never stopped reading, producing, re-inventing, and experimenting with fairy tales.

2) It was not until the nineteenth century that the fairy tale was cultivated as genre and social institution for children in the western world and mainly for children of the upper classes. Notions of elitism and Christian meritocracy were introduced into the stories, and a select canon of tales was established for the socialization of the young, geared to children who knew how to read. These notions are easily recognizable in most of the classical tales, especially those written by Hans Christian Andersen, who had become one of the most popular writers in Europe and America during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The emphasis was on extraordinarily gifted individuals who owed their rise in fortunes to God's benevolence or miracles of destiny represented metaphorically through the intervention of a fairy or powerful magical people and objects. Another aspect that appealed to children and adults was the Richard Whittington/Horatio Alger attitude that encouraged taking advantage of opportunities and pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps. Although the fairy tale was altered to address the adult views of what a child should read, it was still read vastly by adults.

3) Despite the rise of print materials, the fairy tale continued to be told widely throughout the western world for all types of audiences, and by the end of the nineteenth century in America and Great Britain, professional folklore societies were formed, and hundreds of collections of folk and fairy tales were produced in all the major European languages. One major purpose was to preserve oral traditions in print from folk cultures

all over the world. At the same time the printed fairy tale with pictures gained more legitimacy and enduring value than the oral tale which “disappeared” soon after it was told, unless recorded or written down. The preservation of the oral tales and the revisions made to suit a Christian and middle-class ideology were completed by the beginning of the twentieth century in Great Britain and the United States during a period of western imperialism. It was only after World War II that a shift in the ideology of collectors and translators took place with more respect shown to the indigenous populations.

4) By the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, the fairy tale was often read by a parent in a nursery, library, school, or bedroom to entertain and to soothe a child’s anxieties because the fairy tales for children were optimistic and had plots with closure, that is, with a happy end. Fairy tales were among the first to be performed by adults and children and staged in the United States and Great Britain. In addition, they were read to children by librarians and teachers and made their way into school primers. Significantly, L. Frank Baum published his famous fairy-tale novel, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz in 1900, and J. M. Barrie produced Peter Pan in 1904 and had the character of Peter ask his adult audience whether they believed in fairies to save Wendy’s life, and the audience responded with a loud vocal YES!

5) By the beginning of the twentieth century, the western classical fairy tales became established memetically as a canon and were disseminated through all forms of the mass media including books, postcards, newspapers, journals, radio, and film. The major tales were and still are: “Cinderella,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Snow White,” “Sleeping Beauty,” “Bluebeard,” “The Frog Prince,” “Rapunzel,” “Rumpelstiltskin,” “Donkey Skin,” “The Ugly Duckling,” “The Little Mermaid,” “Beauty and the Beast,”

“Aladdin,” “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” “Jack and the Beanstalk,” and some other variants of these tales.

6) Although the plots varied and the themes and characters were altered, the classical fairy tale for children and adults reinforced the patriarchal symbolical order based on rigid notions of sexuality and gender. The types of characters, based on real professions, family figures, social class -- often stereotypes, not archetypes -- depicted in printed and staged versions of fairy tales tended to follow schematic notions of how young men and women behaved and should behave. Though somewhat of a simplification, most of the heroes are cunning, fortunate, adventurous, handsome, and daring; the heroines are beautiful, passive, obedient, industrious, and self-sacrificial. Though some are from the lower classes and though the theme of “rags to riches” plays an important role, the peasants and lower-class figures learn a certain Habitus, what Pierre Bourdieu describes as a set of manners, customs, normative behavior, and thinking, that enables them to fulfill a social role, rise in social status, and distinguish themselves according to conventional social class and gender expectations.

7) In printed form the fairy tale became property (unlike the oral folk tale) and was regarded as a fixed text. It was sold and marketed, and property rights were granted authors, collectors, and publishers. When bought, it could be taken by its “new” owner and read by its owner at his or her leisure for escape, consolation, or inspiration. An oral tale that once belonged to a community was gradually lifted from its context and deprived of its original social meaning and relevance.

8) There was always tension between the literary and oral traditions. The oral tales continued and continue to threaten the more conventional and classical tales because

they can question, dislodge, and deconstruct the written tales and published texts.

Moreover, within the literary tradition itself, there were numerous writers in the late nineteenth century such as Charles Dickens, George MacDonald, Lewis Carroll, Oscar Wilde, Edith Nesbit, and even L. Frank Baum, who questioned the standardized model of what a fairy tale should be.

9) It was through script by the end of the nineteenth century that there was a full-scale debate about what oral folk tales and literary fairy tales were and what their respective functions should be. By this time the fairy tale had expanded as a high art form (opera, ballet, drama) and low art form (folk play, vaudeville, and parody) and a form developed classically and experimentally for children and adults. The oral tales continued to be disseminated through communal gatherings of different kinds, but they were also broadcast by radio and gathered in books by folklorists. Most important in the late nineteenth century, as I have already mentioned, was the rise of folklore as an organized field of study and inquiry along with anthropology. It became a social institution and various schools of folklore began to flourish. There was hardly any literary criticism that dealt with fairy tales and folk tales at this time.

10) Though many fairy-tale books and collections were illustrated and some lavishly illustrated in the nineteenth century, the images were very much in conformity with the text. The illustrators, mainly male, were frequently anonymous and did not seem to count. Though the illustrations often enriched and deepened a tale, they were more subservient to the text and rarely presented alternative ways to read or look at a text. However, they clearly began influencing the way readers imagined the characters and the scenes of the tales. The heroines were largely blonde and beautiful with perfectly

proportioned features; the heroes were gallant, handsome, and courageous, often with sword in hand and on a white horse. These illustrations, proliferated in the nineteenth century, marked the beginning of a major change for the fairy-tale genre.

11) The domination of the printed word in the development of the fairy tale as genre underwent a momentous change in the 1890s and early part of the twentieth century. The next great revolution in the institutionalization of the genre was brought about by the technological development of the film, for the images now imposed themselves on the text and formed their own text in “violation” of print but also with the help of the print culture. And here is where Walt Disney and other animators enter the scene.

### **Spectacle, Film Production, Disneyfication, and the Fairy Tale**

By focusing on how the advent of film technology changed the genre of the fairy tale, I am less concerned with the techniques of filmmaking and scholarly approaches that focus on film history and technology than I am with the issues of the adaptation and transformation of the fairy-tale genre. That is, my concern is with the evolution of a specific cultural genre that has been most widely spread and promulgated through film and the mass media. The manner in which we appreciate, evaluate, and disseminate our understanding of all kinds of art, especially simple and short forms of fiction such as the myth, the legend, the anecdote, and the fairy tale, have undergone immense changes involving orality, literacy, and image. Although all three means of communication – oral, print, and image – are often combined with sound to convey a message and make an impression on our brains and imaginations, the image, particularly the cinematic, TV, and

Internet image, has superseded the other means of communication and conditions our perception of most art forms.

In the specific case of the fairy tale, I maintain that, throughout the world, children and adults are more apt to be familiar with cinematic versions of the fairy tale than they are with oral or printed ones. As Guy Debord has pointed out, we live in a world of the spectacle that causes our lives to be mediated and determined by illusory images. Debord explains that “the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.”<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Walter Benjamin, who believed that art in the age of mechanical reproduction would lead to greater democratization and freedom of choice in society through the film and other forms of the mass media, Debord argued along the lines of Theodor Adorno’s theses in his essay on the culture industry to show how the dominant mode of capitalist production employs technology to alienate and standardize human relations. In particular, he examined the totalitarian or totalizing tendencies of the spectacle or what he called the spectacular, because the spectacle is constituted by signs of the dominant organization of production and reinforces behaviors and attitudes of passivity that allow for the justification of hierarchical rule, the monopolization of the realm of appearances, and the acceptance of the status quo. Only by grasping how the spectacle occludes our vision of social relations will we be able to overcome the alienation and separation that pervades our lives. Debord insisted that “by means of the spectacle the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise. The spectacle is the self-portrait of power in the age of power’s totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence. . . . If the spectacle – understood in the limited sense of those ‘mass media’



that are its most stultifying superficial manifestation – seems at times to be invading society in the shape of a mere apparatus, it should be remembered that this apparatus has nothing neutral about it, and that it answers precisely to the needs of the spectacle’s internal dynamics. If the social requirements of the age which develops such techniques can be met only through their mediation, if the administration of society and all contact between people now depends on the intervention of such ‘instant’ communication, it is because this ‘communication’ is essentially one-way; the concentration of the media thus amounts to the monopolization by the administrators of the existing system of the means to pursue their particular form of administration.”<sup>2</sup>

Debord did not believe that the spectacle was impenetrable or that we all live in a glass bubble constructed by illusions. He wrote, as many critics have continued to write, to expose, contest, and negate the predominance of the spectacle and the social organization of appearances. His concept of the spectacle is particularly important for a critical understanding of how the fairy tale as film was “spectacularized,” that is, how its signs and images were organized to create the illusion of a just and happy world in which conflicts and contradictions would always be reconciled in the name of a beautiful ruling class.

Almost all of Walt Disney’s films operate according to the laws of the spectacle. They impose a vision of life, the better life, on viewers that delude audiences into believing that power can and should be entrusted only to those members of elite groups fit to administer society. All the major, animated feature-length Disney fairy-tale films – Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Pinocchio (1940), Cinderella (1950), Alice in Wonderland (1951), Peter Pan (1953), Sleeping Beauty (1959), The Sword and the Stone

(1963), The Little Mermaid (1989) Beauty and the Beast (1991), Aladdin (1992), Mulan (1998), The Emperor's New Groove (2000) – follow conventional principles of technical and aesthetic organization to celebrate stereotypical gender and power relations and to foster a world view of harmony. The images, words, music, and movement lead to a totalizing spectacle that basically glorifies how technology can be used to aestheticize social and political relations according to the dominant mode of production and ruling groups that entertain a public spectatorship through diversion and are entertained themselves by a monologue of self-praise. There is virtually no difference in the “utopian” vision conveyed by these films that celebrates the actual standardized mode of production in the Disney Studios, its rationalization, hierarchy, and purpose.

Let us take examine the earliest feature animated fairy tale films, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and one of the latest, Beauty and the Beast as examples. Each film is framed by a prince on a quest for the proper mate, essentially a young virginal woman, a trophy princess, who will serve his vested interests, and the quest ends with a marriage in a splendid castle, in which the prince and princess will be attended by admiring if not obsequious servants. The manner in which the prince attains his goal depends on the collaboration of the underlings, the dwarfs and enchanted objects, and the ingenuity and valor of this sympathetic prince. Songs are strewed along the plot as flowers to enliven and brighten the action, just as comic gags are used to divert us from the serious nature of the business at hand – ruthless competition for power. But everyone knows his or her role, and their roles are all geared to guaranteeing the happiness of their heroes, seemingly born to lead, take power, and to be admired, as fetishist objects. They will

eventually reside in a palace, a utopian realm, that few people are privileged to inhabit, unless you are one of the chosen servants.

This crude, schematic description of how a Disney fairy-tale functions appears to be overly formulaic, but the formula holds true: with slight variations, it can be applied to almost all the Disney fairy-tale films and the numerous live-action family films made by the Disney corporation. The model of the film reflects the actual structure of the operations in a Disney studio that have not been altered all that much over time. In the formative years of the Disney studio, those years that determined the work principles, ethics, and ideology, the guiding practices became set and were similar to other studios and corporations that participated in establishing what Debord has described as “spectacular” relations that stem from the mode of production and reification. Pictures and descriptions of the hierarchical arrangements in the Disney studios are widely known and widespread. By 1930 Disney had consolidated power in his studio so that he ruled without question, and he divided his workers into separate groups and departments who often worked side by side at desks, as though they operated mechanically serving a conveyor belt in a factory. They were organized according to their functions: cell painters, animators, musicians, gag men, storyboard producers, and directors. Disney did not do any animating, composing, or screenplay writing and worked out of his own personal office. However, he supervised almost every film, large and small, and his decision was the final decision for almost all the early productions. To his credit, he sought out the very best collaborators and rarely stinted when it came to improving the technical quality of his productions. He also set the standard of hard work and showed great attention to detail. Most of all, he conceived many of the ideas behind the films and

decided what project would move forward and which collaborators would work on a particular project. If there was a vision in a Disney fairy-tale film – and his spirit lived on well beyond his death – it was a shared spectacular vision of efficiency, exploitation, and expediency: how best to use a story to promote one’s artistic talents, make money, market oneself, and promote a vision of how social relations should be ordered. The contents and history of the fairy tale were only a pre-text, that is, they provided the materials to be appropriated and adapted for production purposes that served market needs. Behind such purposes, of course, was an ideology commensurate with the capitalist mode of production and commodity fetishism that was intended to shape the vision of audiences so that they would want to see and consume more of the same.

Though it would seem that there is something utopian about the Disney vision of the world, one that was elaborated in collaboration with hundreds of mainly male artists, it is more apt, I think, to talk about the degeneration of utopia in Disney’s schemes for fairy-tale films and how his corporation continued to cultivate it. Jan Svankmajer, the extraordinary Czech filmmaker of disturbing fairy-tale films, once remarked, “Disney is among the greatest makers of ‘art of children.’ I have always held that no special art for children simply exists, and what passes for it embodies either the birch (discipline) or lucre (profit). ‘Art of children’ is dangerous in that it shares either in the taming of the child’s soul or the bringing up of consumers of mass culture. I am afraid that a child reared on current Disney produce will find it difficult to get used to more sophisticated kinds of art, and will assume his/her place in the ranks of viewers of idiotic television serials.”<sup>3</sup>

But it is not only the taming of the child's soul and the commodification of children, and might I add, adults, that constitute the degeneration of utopia in the fairy-tale films of Disney, but also a carefully planned narrative that leads to the banalization of utopia. In one of the most significant studies of Disneyland, Louis Marin explained that "the visitors to Disneyland are put in the place of the ceremonial storyteller. They recite the mythic narrative of the antagonistic origins of society. They go through the contradictions while they visit the complex; they are led from the pirates' cave to an atomic submarine, from Sleeping Beauty's castle to a rocketship. These sets reverse daily life's determinism only to reaffirm it, but legitimated and justified. Their path through the park is the narrative, recounted umpteen times, of the deceptive harmonization of contrary elements, of the fictional solution to conflicting tensions. By 'acting out' Disney's utopia, the visitor 'realizes' the ideology of America's dominant groups as the mythic founding narrative of their own society."<sup>4</sup>

Utopia, as most scholars from Thomas More to Karl Mannheim and Ernst Bloch have explained, does not exist; it is literally no place, and yet, numerous writers and artists have created and projected their image of utopia through their works to offer an alternative to the existing state of things. The fantastic images of utopia forge a space of play in which artists and writers experiment and invite their readers and spectators to play with the possibilities for changing social relations under real conditions of existence. Utopia demands an ideological critique of the status quo without limits, for the utopic knows no limits and offers no solutions or resolutions.

From the very beginning, however, Disney set limits on the possibilities of utopia that laid out a prescribed way of ordering the world and curbing the imagination. His

theme parks and plans for the perfect city were nothing but a continuation of degenerated notions of utopia in the fairy-tale films, for like the narrative of Disneyland outlined by Marin, they lead the viewer on a quest that legitimates a reality of violence and injustice by making it appear, through fixed stereotypes and values fostering violence and exploitation, that contradictions can be reconciled through a collective fantasy, namely the sets of images that constitute a Disney fairy-tale film. The telos of all Disney's fairy-tale films is to shape the vision of the spectators so that they are convinced and believe that they share in the values and accomplishments of the narrative, thus obviating any or all contradictions. The imagination of the spectators is thus curbed by the calculations of fantasy imposed by the film, and individual wishes are denied or caught in the snare of the fantasy. As Marin remarks, "this brings about a rather violent effect on the imaginary by fantasy. The other side of reality is presented (Fantasyland is Disney's privileged place for this), but it emerges in the form of banal, routine images of Disney's films. They are the bankrupt signs of an imagination homogenized by the mass media. The snare I mentioned is the collective, totalitarian form taken by the 'imaginary' of a society, blocked by its specular self-image. One of the essential functions of the utopic image is to make apparent a wish in a free image of itself, in an image that can play in opposition to the fantasy, which is an inert, blocked and recurrent image. Disneyland is on the side of the fantasy and not on that of a free or utopic representation."<sup>5</sup>

If the Disney fairy-tale films constrain the utopic imaginary and fix our image of utopia through hallucinatory images, they have done this through the systematic dissemination of images in books, advertising, toys, clothing, houseware articles, posters, postcards, radio, and other artifacts that have mesmerized us into believing that the

“genuine” fairy tale is the Disney fairy tale, and that the Disney fairy tale promises to fulfill what is lacking in our lives, to compensate for discomforting aspects of social reality, and to eliminate social and class conflicts forever. It plays pruriently upon the utopian longings of people by offering and selling set images intimating that special chosen celebrities and elite groups are destined to rule and administer just social codes that will make people happy and keep them in their proper places. Nothing is gray in the colored films of Disney, but the color camouflages the black and white view of good and evil in the world.

The Disney world-view conveyed through the fairy tale is not, however, limited to Disney productions. In fact, most American fairy-tale films and many of the British and European as well as Japanese, are variants of the Disneyfication process in the film industry. One need only view the majority of the films of the Faerie Tale Theatre produced by Shelly Duvall in the 1980s or the Canon Movie series in the 1980s as well as the other numerous cheaply produced infantile films shaped by a myriad of minor film studios to dumb down children and their parents as well to understand how pervasive the Disneyfication of the fairy tale became in the twentieth century and how the Disney influence continues into the twenty-first. Yet, we must never forget that, just as drug addicts can save themselves through detoxification programs, the fairy tale film – and the fairy tale in general – can save itself through De-Disneyfication programs, and perhaps we can also rescue ourselves and restore our vision so we can play with the fairy tale and social reality on our own terms.

### **The De-Disneyfication of Fairy Tale Films**

As I have already noted, the fairy tale began to be adapted in many different ways by filmmakers almost as soon as the movie camera was invented and put to use. Aside from the extraordinary work of Georges Méliès at the turn of the twentieth century, there were interesting experimental works produced by Emile Cohl, Max Fleischer, Ub Iwerks, Paul Terry, Tex Avery, and others up through the 1930s. Most of the films were short, five to ten minutes, and were produced to “warm-up” audiences. They were shown before the main feature and were intended to induce laughs through the use of unusual twists to the plots and hilarious gags. There were some live-action feature fairy-tale films in the 1920s, but they were not very successful. Even the animated fairy-tale films had difficulty finding and holding a niche in the market because they were expensive to produce, and because the cinema industry demanded quick and profitable releases. By the early 1930s the Disney Studio had become the dominant producer of fairy-tale cartoons using voiceovers, music, and technicolor in adroit ways to set standards for the other studios and to prepare the way for production of the feature-length Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs in 1937.

More important than this film, I believe, was the production of The Three Little Pigs in 1933 followed by The Big Bad Wolf (1934) and Three Little Wolves (1936). Not only did it perfect the gags, but it incorporated them in much better synchronization with the story line and music than ever before. As Michael Barrier has commented in his significant study, Hollywood Cartoons, “None of the cartoons released on either side of Three Little Pigs in the spring and summer of 1933 come close to matching it in that regard. . . . Fairy tales and animal fables were sturdier raw material, and now that they



were open to the Disney writers, there was no reason to hope that more cartoons would capture what most distinguished Three Little Pigs from any cartoon that had come before: its sense of balance and completeness.’<sup>6</sup>

Although it would be an exaggeration to state that most fairy-tale cartoons up until 1933 had paid very little attention to the storyline and contents of the tale, it is clear that the emphasis had always been on producing as many jokes and gags for their own sake, whether they fit the story or not, and on showing off the technical skills of the artists and cameramen. While the gags remained important in Three Little Pigs, more attention was paid to strengthening the story by making careful changes in the characterization of the wolf and the pigs, adding lyrics, and endowing the film with a message that quickly captured the sentiments of American audiences in 1933. The appeal of the film had a great deal to do with the Great Depression, poverty, and oppression, and how the story emphasized overcoming the voracious evil wolf at the door of the helpless pigs. It is thanks to the oldest brother pig that the younger ones can sing “Who’s afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?” This ditty, which became a national song, was repeated in the two sequels in which the big brother pig always saves the day. It is through him that happiness is guaranteed and all conflicts are resolved. The house as home sweet home as a sacred place that is to be defended at all costs is celebrated, just as the big brother pig, whose industry, wisdom, orderliness, and strength are extolled as American values. It did not matter to Disney and his collaborators that the country was falling apart due to the values that counted more – exploitation, mismanagement, ruthless competition, violence, and corruption – they saw more of a need to submit to the protection of the individual owner, big brother pig. Though it may be stretching a point to compare this pig to the

prince in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, they do play similar functional roles in that they as strong admirable characters provide the closure to the conflicts in the story and tidy up the mess that apparently is caused by greed and voracity. The spectacular image of the strong rational leader as rescuer concealed, of course, the real causes of antagonism and unhappiness in both the films and the social situation of the audiences of those times, for one must always ask why the wolf is impoverished and hungry and must resort to violence to survive, and why and how the pigs got their money and live comfortably in their own homes that the wolf cannot afford. One must also ask why little people are silly, stupid, and weak and cannot fend for themselves.

Once the Disney images and plots were set by 1937 and repeated throughout Walt's lifetime, they were not without their competition and opposition, and I want to consider some pertinent examples of unusual fairy-tale films that represent different forms of a de-disneyfication process that continues up through the present – and appears to becoming stronger and more varied in the twenty-first century. The works that I intend to discuss briefly are: Tex Avery's cartoons Red Hot Riding Hood (1943) and Swing Shift Cinderella (1945), Charlie Chaplain's Monsieur Verdoux (1946), Paul Grimault's Le Roi et l'Oiseau (1952/79), Jacques Demy's Donkey Skin (1970), Jim Henson's The Frog Prince (1972) and Sapsorrow (1987), Michael Sporn's The Red Shoes (1990), Matthew Bright's Freeway (1996), David Kaplan's Little Red Riding Hood (1997), Michael Sporn's The Little Match Girl (1999), and Michel Ocelot's Kirikou and the Sorceress (1998). Given the limited time that I have to present and analyze these films, I shall stress the major salient de-disneyfication quality of each film, bearing in mind that the director of each film was not explicitly intent on critiquing the trademarks of the

Disney corporate productions and management, as, for example, the directors of the two recent Shrek films were, but that they were more serious in exploring and adapting the canonical text to critique it or elaborate it in more profound ways than Disney and his collaborators did. In short, their focus was not on creating a spectacle but grasping social and aesthetic issues through the medium of the fairy-tale film to penetrate the spectacle.

Acknowledged as one of the most gifted if not provocative animators of the golden age of cartoons, Avery directed a good number of fairy-tale films for major film studios such as Warner and MGM and frequently undermined the studio approaches to animation and the use of fairy tales. In Red Hot Riding Hood he begins by having his characters (Red Riding Hood, the wolf, and grandma) protest against repeating the same old story and compel the director to change it. In Swing Shift Cinderella, the wolf chases Red Riding Hood across the credits until the girl points out that he is chasing the wrong woman and should be pursuing Cinderella. If anyone can take credit for the term “fractured fairy tale,” it should be Avery, for long before the Rocky and Bullwinkle fractured fairy tales, Avery was taking apart the traditional fairy tale and using motifs to delight audiences and unsettle the canonical tales. In Red Hot Riding Hood and Swing Shift Cinderella, aside from the brazen erotic depiction of the young women, the major twist in the plot involves sexy elderly women, the grandmother and the fairy godmother, who pursue the wolf, who never loses his lustful and predatory desire for young women. The frank portrayal of gender conflict and sexual proclivities with open endings were unique in Avery’s times and remain somewhat unique today.

Unique is also the only way to characterize Charlie Chaplin’s brilliant dark comedy Monsieur Verdoux, which cynically suggests that society is more a danger to

humankind than men are to society. In fact, this film touches a fairy-tale subject, namely, the serial murderer Bluebeard, which most animators of fairy tale films, especially the Disney animators, have been afraid to touch. However, it is highly relevant today because it concerns a man, who is “stiffed” and resigns himself to the overwhelming economic and military forces that are about to bring about the mass murders of World War II. On trial for having murdered over 12 women, Monsieur Verdoux bitterly defends himself by explaining that he was only carrying on the same ruthless business as an individual that organizations constantly conduct en masse and that in comparison with the contemporary world which is “building weapons of mass destruction for the sole purpose of mass killing,” he is only an amateur.

Chaplin made this film in 1946 after the atomic bombs had been dropped in Nagasaki and Hiroshima and during the hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. In fact, he purposely had one of the first showings of the film in 1947 take place in Washington DC to stir controversy and to support one of his friends, the Communist musician, Hanns Eisler, who was about to be deported from the United States. The film makes a blunt didactic statement to support freedom of speech and small people exploited by the government and big business, and thus it was banned in many states and received an unjust if not hypocritical treatment by the press.

Chaplin makes no excuse for Verdoux. This is not a film that justifies male brutality toward women. Rather, it is a film about a man who has lost his identity as an honest worker and falls in and out of his role as a misfit murderer, who eventually – after his wife and son die – abandons the business of murdering because he doesn’t see how anyone can set a moral “example in these immoral times,” as he himself puts it. What

makes this film so exceptionally poignant is that Verdoux is depicted clearly as a cog in the wheel of an economy and society that drive people to death, while the comic touches and interludes reveal the touching human side of Verdoux that he cannot help but express. Not only does he stumble about as he woos and kills his wives, plays the stock market, races by train from place to place to expedite his calculating plans, but he also visits his invalid wife and son, helps poor animals, and takes in a young woman in distress, who ironically marries a munitions manufacturer by the end of the film. If Verdoux has a secret, he does not keep it from himself, nor can he keep it from others. He is the shafted man, the man, who has no power, and he does not attribute his loss to women. They are unfortunately easy victims, objectified and convertible. Even here, the women are not simply passive and obedient but represent different types like the outrageous Annabella Bonheur and dignified Mme Grogney, whom Verdoux fails to trap. In the end it is Verdoux, who is trapped. But stripped of his disguises, he becomes more noble than ever before, and in the last frame we watch as Verdoux walks toward the guillotine and recalls the figure of Chaplin's tramp, defeated but aware of what the forces are that have taken away his manhood.

Like Chaplain, the French animator Paul Grimault and his friend, Jacques Prévert, poet and screenplay writer, were also concerned about war and fascism. Adapting Hans Christian Andersen's "The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep," a tale, which is not widely known, Grimault and Prévert made two versions, *La Bergère et le Ramoneur* (1950; English version, *The Curious Adventures of Mr. Wonderbird*, 1952) and *Le Roi et l'Oiseau* (The King and the Bird, 1979), which does not have an English version.

Both films can be regarded as odes to freedom, for they celebrate the emancipation not only of the persecuted lovers (the shepherdess and the chimney sweep) from a mean-spirited dictator but also the freedom of an oppressed populace living in darkness. First conceived in 1945, Grimault's two films hark back to World War II, the French occupation by the Nazis, and the atomic bomb. These events marked Grimault and Prévert to such an extent that they worked on the project for twenty-four years until they made the film as they desired and envisaged it. They rejected the 1950 version which was produced without their approval, while the 1979 version was Grimault's "final," vastly improved film which has remained popular in Europe for the past thirty years and has not been shown in America. This fairy-tale film is a good example of how animation can be employed artfully to develop a profound and disturbing discourse about politics that often reaches poetic heights.

The film begins with the depiction of a cross-eyed vain king, who rules a mythical urban state modeled after a feudal kingdom and a quaint futuristic realm. The king's apparent hierarchical and authoritarian reign is reflected by the total submission of his subjects and the pictures, statues, and designs that have his face on it. He is about to go hunting, his greatest avocation, and just when one of his servants sets free a tiny cute bird from a diminutive cage, a large crow-like bird with a top hat and vest, swoops down all at once and saves the tiny one. It is his son, and he taunts the king, who had recently shot and killed his wife. The remainder of the film, which has surrealist scenes reminiscent of *Maigret*, depicts the gradual exposure of the methods used by the king and ends with his defeat and also the total destruction of the kingdom caused by his exploitation of technology and workers. In the final scene, the gigantic machine that has destroyed the

realm is sitting alone in the pose of Rodin's *The Thinker*. The bird's little son is once again caught in a diminutive cage – the naughty bird is always getting caught – and gently the hand of the iron giant reaches over, lifts the gate of the cage, and the little bird flies off into freedom.

The reason why Grimault and Prévert re-titled the film “The King and Mr. Bird” is because the film is no longer about the love between the shepherdess and the chimney sweep but about the struggle between the small oppressed people represented by the bird and his offspring and the cruel dictatorial king. Clearly, Grimault and Prévert were influenced by the period of French and German fascism and were horrified by oppressive governments and the use of technology to intimidate people and cause mass destruction. But its most provocative aspect as a fairy-tale film is its skeptical optimism. There is no happy end to the fight against fascism, only a flicker of hope.

The de-disneyfication of fairy-tale films did not only involve the introduction of politics but also sexual topics that are generally taboo in the Disney tradition. For instance, the French filmmaker Jacques Demy, who had earlier collaborated with Grimault, created a mock sentimental version of Charles Perrault's “Donkey Skin” to explore the manner in which incest is colored and camouflaged in contemporary society. Following the technique he developed in The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (1964), Demy's Donkey Skin (1970) parodied the American musical film so that the perverse love of a king for his daughter is minimized by his daughter's ignorance, and the courtly reconciliation at the end of the film is an incredible exaggeration that unveils the spectacle of ruling families as a farce. Clearly, Demy relies on all the conventions of

camp culture to critique the Perrault and Grimm tradition of masking and reconciling conflicts.

Jim Henson approached the problematic sex, mating, and incest in a more burlesque manner than Demy. The Frog Prince, directed and produced by Henson,<sup>7</sup> was telecast by CBS on May 11, 1971 and was later made into a videotape for distribution in North America. It is notable for its irreverent attitude toward the Grimms' version of The Frog King and is a critical transformation of the classical beast/bridegroom narrative that basically celebrates male authority. The Muppet film is told tongue-in-cheek from Kermit the Frog's perspective, and with the exception of live actors as the prince and princess, all the roles are played by bizarre puppets who remain puppets. That is, the story is fantasy with no pretensions of becoming lifelike or acting like real people, even though a frog-puppet is transformed into a human being in the end.

This cinematic spoof of the Grimms' fairy tale is filled with humorous songs such as the lullaby song for the ogre: "Go to sleep you stupid brute. Lay your ugly head on your wretched bed. Close your eyes and go to sleep." And there are also tender songs such as the princess's lyrical ditty about loneliness. Instead of reinforcing notions about male sovereignty, the story is about friendship, kindness, and the exposure of authoritarianism and tyranny. The king is benevolent but stupid; the witch is mean and nasty. The ogre is nothing but brute force. They are overcome through the friendship of the frogs, prince, and princess, who learn to trust each other through the course of action. Their relationship is contrasted with superficial and exploitative relationships. For instance, there are two wonderfully droll scenes in which the king reads proclamations to his subjects, who, as in a TV audience, must be prompted to laugh, cheer, or sigh.



Henson's film mocks such artificial prompting through his artful use of the puppets, who keep reminding us that they are playing with plots and roles.

This alienation technique is common in Sapsorrow (1987), part of the series of fairy-tale films made for TV that he produced at the end of the 1980s. He took nine tales, mainly from the Grimms' collection, and produced them with the assistance of Anthony Minghella, who was responsible for the screenplays.<sup>8</sup> In an interview published in American Film, Henson remarked, "the stories we were telling were traditional folktales, and they could never be depicted literally because there's a lot of traveling and meeting giants and going to far countries. So we had to do a lot of storytelling through different shortcuts. There were a lot of interesting visual ways of telling the story. We did certain portions in silhouette, and other times we would just have the storyteller (played by John Hurt) tell the story instead of literally showing it."<sup>9</sup> The frame for all the fairy-tale films is indeed ingenious: the storyteller, a wizened, gray-haired man, sits by a fireplace and tells tales to a puppet dog, who skeptically poses questions and even intervenes during the storytelling. The dog as listener keeps the storyteller honest and on his toes, and when the story is finished, the dog expresses disbelief about the authenticity of the teller's sources. There is no absolute truth in these tales, and yet, there are truths built on contradictions and suggestive images that make the tales into compelling narratives, worth viewing and reviewing: the Henson studios have created tiny masterpieces that have set remarkable artistic standards for fairy-tale films by contravening traditional tales and the Disney prescriptions. For instance, he deals with the taboo topic of incest in Sapsorrow, based on the Grimms' "All Fur" and an English variant, in an ironic humorous manner, revealing how strong, cunning, and self-reliant the persecuted heroine

is. In the end she does not make up with her father, and she teaches the prince a lesson in humility. The rapacious nature of males appears to be tamed by a clever princess.

But desire and rape receive different treatment in the films about “Little Red Riding Hood.” Most recently two inane if not highly banal versions in the Disney tradition have made their appearance, a musical, Red Riding Hood (2004) directed by Randal Kleiser, and an animated film, Hoodwinked (2005), directed by Cory Edwards, and it is hoped that they will soon disappear. More significant are two cult films, which have never received the attention they have deserved, Matthew Bright’s Freeway (1996) and David Kaplan’s Little Red Riding Hood (1997). Freeway depicts the trials and tribulations of a semi-literate teenage girl named Vanessa Lutz, whose mother is a prostitute and whose father abandoned her. She is picked up on a highway by a serial rapist and killer named Bob Wolvereton, and because she is so street smart, she manages to turn the tables on him, grab his gun, and shoot him. She then takes his car but is arrested because the rapist miraculously survives. Two detectives interrogate her, but largely due to their male prejudices, they do not believe her story about attempted rape. In prison Vanessa succeeds in escaping while the two detectives follow leads from people they interview that convince them that the rapist was really lying. The rapist flees to Vanessa’s grandmother’s house, kills her, and awaits Vanessa. When she arrives, she bravely beats him to a pulp, and the astonished detectives, who had wanted to help her, show up only to witness how Vanessa can take care of herself. Bright views the “adventures” of Little Red Riding Hood from the perspective of the police and detectives so that law and order are questioned rather than the motives of a young teenager, who has been dealt a poor hand of cards since her birth. Her needs, desires, and intelligence have

been neglected and degraded, and Bright opens up the traditional tale by showing how young people are violated continually in an American society that often confuses violence with law.

Kaplan's approach to the issues of rape and violence are much different. He adapts an oral French tale in his short black and white film that poetically celebrates a young girl's coming of age and how she fulfills her sexual drives while containing the wolf. In the text that he uses a young peasant woman takes some bread and milk to her grandmother. At a crossroads in the woods, she meets a werewolf, who asks her whether she is going to take the path of the pins or the path of the needles. She generally chooses the path of the needles. He rushes off to the grandmother's house and eats her, but he also puts some of her flesh in a bowl and some of her blood in a bottle before getting into the grandmother's bed. When the girl arrives, the werewolf tells her to refresh herself and eat some meat in the bowl and drink some wine. A cat or something from the fireplace condemns her for eating the flesh of her grandmother and drinking her blood. Sometimes there is a warning. All at once the werewolf asks her to take off her clothes and get into bed with him. She complies, and each time she takes off a piece of her clothing, she asks what she should do with it. The werewolf replies that she should throw it into the fireplace because she won't be needing it anymore. When the girl finally gets into bed, she asks several questions such as "my, how hairy you are, granny," until the customary "my what a big mouth you have, granny." When the wolf announces, "all the better to eat, you my dear," she declares that she has to relieve herself. He tells her to do it in bed. But she indicates that she has to have a bowel movement, and so he ties a rope around her leg and sends her into the courtyard through a window. Once there the smart girl unties

the rope and ties it around a plum tree and then runs off toward home. The werewolf becomes impatient and yells, “What are you doing out there, making a load?” Then he runs to the window and realizes that the girl has escaped. He runs after her, but it is too late, and she makes it safely to her home. There is no dialogue in Kaplan’s film. Instead he uses the voiceover of a narrator who unemotionally tells the tale depicted in stark black and white that focuses on desire and seduction. Ironically, it is the girl who seduces the wolf and takes charge of her own body. There is no end, happy or otherwise to this film.

Michael Sporn, an American animator, is more clear about the endings of his fairy-tale films. He adapted three of Andersen’s fairy tales, “The Nightingale,” “The Red Shoes,” and “The Little Match Girl” for Italtoons Corporation, and they are currently distributed by Weston Woods Studios, an educational company. The films, all about twenty-five minutes and created for children between five and ten, have been shown on HBO, but for the most part they have not received wide public attention, and they can be considered marginal cultural products of the culture industry -- all the more reason that they deserve our attention, because Sporn’s films written by Maxine Fisher are profound interpretations of Andersen’s stories that transcend age designation and keep alive Andersen’s legacy. They all use voiceover and colorful still sets as backdrops, and naively ink-drawn characters who come alive because they are so unpretentious and resemble the simple and found art of children. Most important, they have strong utopian political tendencies.

In *The Little Match Girl*, Sporn depicts a homeless girl, Angela, who sets out to sell matches on New Year’s Eve 1999 to help her family living in an abandoned subway

station on Eighteenth Street. She meets a stray dog named Albert who becomes her companion, and together they try to sell matches in vain at Times Square. The night is bitter cold, and they withdraw to a vacant lot where Angela lights three matches. Each time she does this she has imaginary experiences that reveal how the rich neglect the poor and starving people in New York City. Nothing appears to help her, and when she tries to make her way back to the subway station, she gets caught in a snowstorm, and it seems that she is dead when people find her at Union Square the next morning. However, she miraculously recovers, thanks to Albert, and the rich people, gathered around her, (all reminiscent of those in the dream episodes) begin to help her and her family.

Sporn's films are obviously much more uplifting than Andersen's original tales. But his optimism does not betray Andersen's original stories because of his moral and ethical concern in Andersen and his subject matter. Sporn's films enrich the tales with new artistic details that relate to the contemporary scene, and they critique them ideologically by focusing on the intrepid nature of the little girls rather than on the power of some Divine spirit. At the same time, they are social comments on conditions of poverty in New York that have specific meaning and can also be applied to the conditions of impoverished children throughout the world. What distinguishes Sporn's films from Andersen's stories is that he envisions a hope for change in the present, whereas Andersen promises rewards for suffering children in a heavenly paradise.

The real hope for children is clearly marked out in Michel Ocelot's two animated films Kirikou and the Sorceress (1998) and Kirikou and the Wild Beasts (2005). The protagonist of these two films is a tiny naked West African child who is born with wisdom beyond his years and also has the capacity to speak. In the first film – and I shall

focus only on this one – Kirikou quickly learns that his tiny village is threatened by the sorceress Karaba, who uses an army of automats to take gold and kill any of the men who dare to oppose her. Kirikou decides to save the village, and everyone mocks him, but when he begins to succeed with his adroit speed and cunning, they begin celebrating him with songs that extol his deeds. However, the curious Kirikou does not only want to defeat Karaba, he wants to know why she is so mean and evil. So he undertakes a perilous journey to seek advice from the Wise Man of the Forbidden Mountain. There he learns why Karaba became so wicked and drove her to become an outcast. In the end he discovers away to subdue her evil drives and bring her back into the tribe.

Aside from the artful depiction of lush colorful landscapes, bizarre mechanical devices, native animals and plants, and villagers who are bare-breasted and naked as they generally are in West African villages, the film makes no attempt to westernize or Americanize the characters or plot. Based on various African folk tales, the fairy tale focuses on the extraordinary bravery, curiosity, and imagination of Kirikou. Ocelot, who studied animation in California and in France, was well aware of the Disneyfication of fairy-tale films, and he consciously endeavored to shape his film to respect the intelligence of his audiences of all ages. The village does not become a utopian realm at the end of the film; nothing is fixed or certain. But Ocelot touches on utopian longings and the potential in every tiny child to find his or her way through a morass of human relations degraded by tyrants and their command of technology.

If we compare Kirikou and the Sorceress and its sequel Kirikou and the Wild Beasts (2005) with the Disney production, The Emperor's New Groove (2000), we can see that the conflict in the field of fairy-tale films at the outset of the twenty-first century

will continue and that the de-disneyfication process is gaining strength with the production not only of Ocelot's films but also those by Miyazaki, the Dreamworks Studio, and other innovative filmmakers. The Emperor's New Groove may in fact be one of the last gasps (of gaffs) of the Disney domination of the fairy-tale film. It is a putrid and stale film filled with imitative gags and scenes reminiscent of Tex Avery's cartoons. The plot is offensive: it concerns a faux Inca emperor named Kuzco who is accidentally turned into a talking llama by his conniving evil advisor, the witchlike Yzma, because Kuzco fires her. Kuzco himself is a vain, despotic hipster, perhaps a model for the 1990s Silicon valley types, who tramps upon his people for his own pleasure. However, he learns that he cannot survive without the help of a kind peasant, whose village had been threatened by Kuzco, for the young emperor had ordered Pacha's village to be destroyed so that he could build a luxurious summer-home called Kuzcotopia as a gift to himself for this eighteenth birthday. After numerous comic adventures, Pacha helps Kuzco regain his human form and turn Yzma into a kitten and her dumb lover into a boy scout leader. And Kuzco, who supposedly has learned how to become kind, builds his utopian summer house on a hill facing Pacha's village.

The sentimental music and tendency of the drawings in each scene are intended to make the audiences feel sorry for the wise-cracking Kuzco and also to identify with the tender-hearted submissive Pacha. From an ideological perspective, the film is a disaster, for it repeats the totalitarian message that almost all the Disney films have conveyed since their origin: the role of the peasants or little people is to help to reinstall kings, emperors, queens, princesses, and other celebrities so that they can rule more graciously. But rule they must and should. This is a stale message and a stale approach to fairy tales,

and despite the moderate commercial success of The Emperor's New Groove and its television and DVD sequels, it may not be able to withstand the de-disneyfying opposition of filmmakers, who seek to offer a fairy-tale vision of the world that will enable audiences to think for themselves and to grasp the forces that are degenerating their utopian longings.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995): 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Hames, "Bringing Up Baby: Jan Svankmajer interviewed by Peter Hames," Sight and Sound 11.10 (October 2001): 28.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Marin, Utopics: Spatial Play. Trans. Robert A. Vollrath (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1984): 241.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Barrier, Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 100.

<sup>7</sup> Jerry Juhl wrote the screenplay. The princess was played by Trudy Young; the prince, by Gordon Thomson. The film was co-produced by Henson Associates and VTR Productions (Canada).

<sup>8</sup> See the book based on the TV series, Anthony Minghella, Jim Henson's "The Storyteller" Illustr. Darcy May (New York: Knopf, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> "Miss Piggy Went to Market and \$150 Million Came Home," An interview with Jim Henson, American Film XV (November 1989): 20.

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