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The Fantastic and the Real: Fairy-Tale Films in the 21st Century

Greenhill, P. (2020). *Reality, magic, and other lies: Fairy-tale film truths*. Wayne State University Press.

Abstract:

This article provides a critical examination of Pauline Greenhill's monograph, *Reality, Magic, and Other Lies: Fairy-Tale Film Truths* (2020) and situates it within her larger body of scholarship. The title reflects the contradictory nature of fairy tales, which often contain moral and social truths beneath their fictional surfaces. Though related to her previous work, this book represents a departure from her earlier collections. Here, she provides close readings of various films, employing a sophisticated and detailed analysis of film techniques, and supplying a relevant social commentary. She asserts that fairy-tale films are multi-layered works that do more than simply convey aesthetically pleasing imagery. She breaks downs scenes into minute details, and occasionally provides diagrams that allow readers to understand and visualise scenes of films that, perhaps, they have not even seen. While these characteristics are present in her previous works, here they coalesce to form a perspective that reflects in a detailed way Greenhill's vision of fairy-tale films and situates it within the larger context of fairy-tale film studies.

Key words:

adaptation, fairy tale, film, Pauline Greenhill, social commentary

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Fantastyka i realność. Baśniowe filmy w XXI wieku

Abstrakt:

Artykuł przedstawia krytyczną analizę monografii Pauline Greenhill *Reality, Magic, and Other Lies: Fairy-Tale Film Truths* [Rzeczywistość, magia i inne kłamstwa. Prawdy baśniowych filmów] (2020) w kontekście jej dorobku naukowego. Tytuł odzwierciedla sprzeczny charakter baśni, które pod powierzchnią fikcji często zawierają prawdy moralne i społeczne. Książka ta, choć powiązana z dotychczasowymi badaniami autorki, zmienia ich kierunek. Greenhill dokonuje tutaj wnikliwej analizy rozmaitych filmów, w sposób wyrafinowany i szczegółowy eksplorując techniki filmowe oraz dostarczając odpowiedniego komentarza społecznego. Twierdzi, że baśniowe filmy to wielowarstwowe dzieła, które czynią więcej niż tylko przekazywanie przyjemnych estetycznie obrazów. Rozbija sceny na najdrobniejsze szczegóły i niekiedy wprowadza diagramy, które pozwalają czytelnikom zrozumieć i zwizualizować owe sceny, których być może nawet wcześniej nie dostrzegli. Chociaż te cechy są obecne w jej poprzednich pracach, tutaj łączą się, tworząc perspektywę, która w szczegółowy sposób odzwierciedla prezentowaną przez Greenhill wizję baśniowych filmów i umieszcza ją w szerszym kontekście studiów nad baśniowymi filmami.

Słowa kluczowe:

adaptacja, baśń, film, Pauline Greenhill, komentarz społeczny

The relationship between fairy tales and film has been explored by many prominent scholars, including Jack Zipes (1996, 1997, 2010), Christina Bacchilega (2013; previously also in cooperation with John Rieder – Bacchilega, Rieder, 2010), Sue Short (2014), Laura Hubner (2018), and Pauline Greenhill (2015a, 2016a, 2016b, 2019a, 2019b; see also her co-edited articles: Greenhill, Kohm, 2013, 2020). Adaptations of fairy tales into moving images date back to the silent film era; in particular, according to Zipes (2011, p. 31), to the work of Georges Méliès. As technology has evolved, so have fairy-tale films. Zipes speaks about this evolution specifically when he states the following:

> To begin with, we must recognize that there are various types of fairy-tale films that can be categorized according to the cinematic techniques used: a silent black-and-white film shot with a fixed camera; the drawings, cells, puppets of animated films; the acting of live-action films; the mixed media of live-action/animated films; clay and wooden puppet films; paper-cut animated films; faux-historical films; documentary films of fairy-tale authors; and all

kinds of digital films. The technologies determine the extent to which a film-maker can elaborate and expand upon a particular fairy tale or fairy-tale motifs and themes (p. 8–9).

Adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon (2006) supports this notion, indicating that "[t]echnology, too, has probably always framed, not to mention driven, adaptation" (p. 29). As film techniques, technological advancements, and social issues evolve and change, so do fairy tales. Pauline Greenhill's (2020) *Reality, Magic, and Other Lies: Fairy-Tale Film Truths* expands on her already impressive work in the field of fairy-tale film studies and uses a variety of approaches to explore the dynamic state of the 21st-century fairy-tale films.

My first exposure to Greenhill's work was her co-edited volume *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity* (Greenhill & Matrix, 2011). Prior to encountering this text, my perception of fairy-tale films was primarily focused on works that were overtly referencing fairy tales: *Shrek* (2001), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) immediately come to mind. Zipes (1996), reflecting on the recognition of fairy-tale films, indicates that people recognise such films when they see them:

> Just as we know, almost intuitively, that a particular narrative is a fairy tale when we read it, it seems we know immediately that a particular film is a fairy tale when we see it. […] It is almost as though it were natural that there be fairy-tale films since fairy tales are so much part of our cultural heritage as oral and literary tales (p. 1).

Fairy Tale Films expanded my vision and allowed me to achieve the level of awareness of which Zipes speaks. It demonstrated that many works have fairy-tale elements and inspirations, even such unlikely films as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Mars Attacks* (1996). Prior to encountering this text, I had a much narrower view of what constituted a fairy-tale film. The modern fairy tale has changed considerably, as James Poniewozik (2018) indicates, "[t]his is a new world of fairy tales: parodies, ironized, meta-fictionalized, politically adjusted and pop-culture saturated" (p. 467). The tendency to overlook such fairy-tale comparisons, particularly when they are translated into film, is not uncommon. Greenhill and her co-editor, Sidney Eve Matrix (2011), address this point in the introduction to their volume, stating that "filmed fairy tales are as much the genuine article as their telling in a bedtime story or an anthology. Thus, the present work approaches fairy tale film not as a break with tradition but a continuation of it" (p. 3). In a similar fashion, Greenhill's newest text builds on her extensive work in this field, elevating this area of inquiry to a new level.

While *Fairy Tale Films* was my introduction to Greenhill's work in this area, it does not represent the extent of it. The co-edited collection *Channeling Wonder: Fairy Tales on Television* (Greenhill & Rudy, 2014) assembled a strong array of essays exploring fairy-tale connections in the realm of television programming. More recently, co-edited volumes: *Fairy-Tale Films beyond Disney: International Perspectives* (Zipes, Greenhill, & Magnus-Johnston, 2015), *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures* (Greenhill, Rudy, Hamer, & Bosc, 2018), and *Fairy-Tale TV* (Rudy & Greenhill, 2020) presented scholarship that helped illustrate the evolution of this field since I first encountered her work a decade ago. It should also be noted that Greenhill prepared (in collaboration with other scholars) *The International Fairy-Tale Filmography* (Greenhill, 2015b; Zipes, Greenhill, & Magnus-Johnston, n.d.). *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* (Turner & Greenhill, 2012) is perhaps her most influential anthology, comingling queer theory and folkloristics, establishing a powerful perspective as to how scholars can approach fairy-tale texts. Many of the same issues and ideas, such as film theory, folkloristics, queer theory, fairy-tale truths, and social criticism, that were present in these earlier works, are also on display in *Reality, Magic, and Other Lies*. But it goes beyond them, creating a unique perspective and approach to fairy-tale films.

Though this history of Greenhill's scholarship is cursory, it is important to situate *Reality, Magic, and Other Lies* into its proper context. In terms of Greenhill's personal publication record, it illustrates an evolutionary process and perspective that have grown increasingly more complex, diverse, and relevant. Here, Greenhill takes the reins over the entire volume, providing close readings of various films' texts, like *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *Coraline* (2009), *ParaNorman* (2012), and *Cabin in the Woods* (2012). More importantly, though, it represents a significant addition to the larger realm of fairy-tale film studies. In one of the most prominent works in the field, *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films*, Zipes (2011) states the following:

> In my opinion reality can best be understood paradoxically through artificiality, and in the case of the metaphorical fairy-tale film, we learn to view ourselves in artificially arranged images anew. The fairy tale is cinematically remade so that we can enter into particular and peculiar discourses that touch on audience concerns (p. 15).

Greenhill (2020) explores this cinematic remaking of fairy tales by employing several approaches to the material, regularly augmenting the discussion with socially relevant critique. In the first chapter, she states that "this work

periodically breaks the academic frame to directly address the current politics of fairy tale and reality" (p. 14). In doing so, Greenhill directly addresses the audience concerns of which Zipes speaks while examining many films that have been, heretofore, researched.

For instance, in her discussion of the film *Kubo and the Two Strings* (2016), she discusses troublesome casting choices made by director Travis Knight, who failed to cast Japanese actors in prominent roles.

> Though Knight declares that "we honestly were trying to do what we thought was the best interest in this movie, to bring this film to life in the best way" (quoted in Cheng, 2016), this simplistic allegedly color-blind presumption depends on the circular logic of systemic discrimination that works against actors of color. They tend to be less familiar than White-identified actors because they get less work; they get less work because they have had less experience; so they get less exposure and are thus less familiar (Greenhill, 2020, p. 59).

Addressing the whitewashing of Asian characters is, indeed, a significant issue. Negative perception of, and violence towards, Asians since the beginning of the COVID-19 global pandemic illustrates that this issue has evolved from a representation issue to one with violent repercussions. This text obviously went to press before the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns took place, with derogatory epithets (e.g., Kung Flu, China Virus) and blame hurled at Asians, particularly, the Chinese. Unfortunately, such anger eventually turned to violence. Scholar Dr. Joey Kim (2021), of the University of Toledo, addresses this issue directly, stating that, "[t]he spike in anti-Asian violence, assaults, and outright hate crimes continues throughout this pandemic. In New York City it rose 1900% in 2020 alone. National legislators have called it a 'crisis point' for anti-Asian violence." While whitewashing Asian characters in the film industry may pale in comparison to this increase in violence against them, both issues point to a devaluing of Asian people. One can only imagine what Greenhill may have included in the text had she been armed with this information at the time. Her sharp but polite social commentary may have contained even more bite. Greenhill clearly had her finger on the pulse of this issue before many others took notice.

While social commentary is part of the discussion, it does not represent the extent of it. Her examination of the entertainment company LAIKA and their use of stop-motion animation to produce "fairy-tale-inflected content" (Greenhill, 2020, p. 28) exhibits a strong connection between fairy-tale themes and the moving image. Greenhill specifically focuses on four films: *Coraline*, *ParaNorman, The Boxtrolls* (2014), and *Kubo and the Two Strings*, while

referencing other notable stop-motion animation works that readers are likely to be familiar with, such as *Chicken Run* (2000) and *Corpse Bride* (2005). By providing other relevant examples, as well as some historical background for those who may be unfamiliar with the impact of cinematic greats like Ray Harryhausen, Greenhill connects LAIKA's films to the broader context of stop-motion animation, situating it not only within the fairy-tale context, but also in reality. For example, she states that "stop motion is real, in the sense that at least part of its complex visuality results from a direct camera record of something that actually took place in the world" (p. 38). Later, in discussing the uncanny real aspects of stop-motion animation, she states that, "[t]hey uncover, but also make fantastic, not only the construction behind figures in the films but also the methods of actually animating them" (p. 64). This relationship between the real and the fantastic is explored throughout the volume, and the importance of this idea is also acknowledged by others, including Bacchilega (2013), who says that "[o]ne of the most prominent forms of genre mixing in recent fairy-tale films is the parodic strategy of undercutting fairy-tale conventions by contrasting them humorously with realist ones" (p. 114). This contrast between the real and the fantastical illustrates a symbiotic relationship between the two when it comes to fairy-tale films.

The text contains close readings of many films, ranging from the popular to the obscure. Throughout, Greenhill extensively breaks downs scenes into minute details, occasionally providing helpful diagrams that allow the reader to understand and visualise scenes of films that, perhaps they have not even seen. The following example shows the level of detail she provides:

> The closing animation of circling mice recalls a brief shot early in the film. As Coraline (voiced by Dakota Fanning) sleeps, the scene dissolves to the opening of the small door the girl recently located. When her mother (voiced by Teri Hatcher) unlocked it earlier, the space behind was bricked up. But now in the center of the bricked-up entrance, first one, then two, then four two-dimensional mouse figures appear, and they swirl around tail-first in a clockwise motion – the image reprised at the film's end (see figure 2.1; Greenhill, 2020, p. 40).

The figure mentioned in this passage adds a visual context to this detailed explanation. While I am quite familiar with *Coraline*, even readers who are not would be hard pressed to miss the concept here – that this closing animation references an earlier scene in the film and that, indeed, is significant. Such depth and detail were particularly helpful when the subject included films I was less familiar with, including *Mama* (2013), *Freeway 2: Confessions of a Trickbaby* (1999), and

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Hansel & Gretel (2007). Here, the extensive descriptions were not just helpful, but essential.

Much of the text focuses on cinematic technique, but it is not the only methodology employed. Greenhill's discussion of the works of the famous Indian director Tarsem Singh Dhandwar, known professionally simply as Tarsem, uses an auteur approach to examine three of his most prominent efforts: *The Fall* (2006), *Mirror Mirror* (2012), and *Emerald City* (2017). I was unfamiliar with his work outside of *Emerald City*, his television series treatment of the *Wizard of Oz* tale, but the discussion is quite thorough, and Greenhill has a constant awareness of the readers who may be unfamiliar with the films being discussed. Her conclusion, however, speaks to the significance of his work in the canon of fairy-tale films. "For those of us who find the world today paralyzingly dystopic, imagining our empowerment – as fairy tales and these films do – can be useful in helping us to enact it" (Greenhill, 2020, p. 92). Her approach to Tarsem's work is reminiscent of the approach used by Zipes in his discussion of Georges Méliès in *The Enchanted Screen* in that it illustrates not only the impact fairy tales have on the artist, but the influence of the artist on fairy tales.

In her conclusion, Greenhill portrays the then President Donald J. Trump as a fairy-tale villain. This idea, of course, has been presented in the media before, with perhaps the most humorous one occurring when Stephen Colbert called him a "Racist Rumpelstiltskin" (Gettell, 2018). Greenhill (2020) references Trump throughout the volume, but saves her most scathing comment for last:

> He's such a caricature of a fairy-tale villain, and his name is so pun-worthy when linked with his attitude. But he comes from a long line of odious, hideous politicians, whose influences have been equally or even more villainous and abhorrent (p. 229).

Obviously, the conclusion does more than simply focus on Trump, but it is noteworthy that she is able to make such a real-world connection to fairy-tale films and villainy. The example illustrates the point that fairy-tale films reflect present day anxieties and fears, further connecting the uncanny real with the fairy-tale form.

In *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry*, Zipes (1997) speaks to the commodification of fairy-tale films, stating that, "[a]s commodity, the fairy-tale film sacrificed art to technical invention; innovation to tradition; stimulation of the imagination to consumption for distraction" (p. 69). And Bacchilega (2013), in *Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-First-Century*

Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder, speaks of "the genre's hypercommodification in mainstream films" (p. 72). Fairy-tale films are indeed a commodity, and what is often being sold is the magical, the wonderous, the happy ending. Underneath, however, lies an undercurrent of troubling social issues such as inequality, intolerance, and injustice.

Reality, Magic, and Other Lies: Fairy-Tale Film Truths illustrates the truths while pointing out the lies. Fairy tales, despite their sometimes-outlandish premises, are often truthful without being true. The author explains that "fairy tales as traditional and literary forms aren't actual lies, because though they're not strictly speaking truthful, they lack the falsehood's intention to deceive" (Greenhill, 2020, p. 13–14). While Marie-Louise von Franz (1982) states that fairy-tale language seems to be the international language of all mankind – of all ages and of all races and cultures (p. 11), Greenhill (2020) acknowledges that, "[n]ot all audiences will necessarily recognize the presence of fairy tales in a film they are watching" (p. 18). Texts like this one, however, make it much easier to do so. She delivers a volume that explores many films with tremendous attention to detail. These films range from the popular and familiar, such as *The Babadook* (2014), to the relatively obscure ones like *Celestial Clockwork* (1995). Relevant social commentary is provided when appropriate, illustrating that fairy-tale films are multi-layered works that do more than simply convey aesthetically pleasing fairy-tale imagery. While these characteristics were present in all of Greenhill's previous works, they coalesce here to form a perspective that reflects more than just the issues and themes presented in this specific text. The relationship between fairy tales and films is one of mutual influence. This volume culminates in a detailed portrait of Greenhill's overall vision of the 21ˢᵗ-century fairy-tale films, while connecting to, and expanding on, other works in the field.

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