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HAPPILY EVER AFTER:
Fairy Tales, Children,
and the Culture Industry

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4

Once Upon a Time beyond Disney

Contemporary Fairy-Tale Films
for Children

Without question, Walt Disney set the standards for feature-length fairy-tale films in the world of cinema. After his beginnings during the 1920s in Kansas City, where he and Ub Iwerks made several shorts such as *Puss in Boots*, *Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *The Bremen Town Musicians*, Disney moved to Hollywood and began perfecting the techniques of animation, organizing his studio along the lines of efficient modern factories, and experimenting with story lines that would appeal to large audiences of all age groups and social classes. By 1934 he was finally ready to produce the film that would institutionalize the fairy-tale genre in the cinema industry in a manner that was just as revolutionary as the collecting and editing of the Brothers Grimm had been for the print industry in the nineteenth century: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) was the first animated feature in history based on a fairy tale and made in color with music. Moreover, as a mass-market commodity with the trademark "Disney," it was created with such technological and artistic skill that the Disney Studios have been able to retain a market stranglehold on fairy-tale films up to the present. Any other filmmaker who has endeavored to adapt a fairy

tale for the screen, whether through animation or other means, has had to measure up to the Disney standard and try to go beyond it.

But just what is the Disney standard, or, rather, the Disney standardized fairy tale? Since all Disney fairy-tale films are alike, from *Snow White* of 1937 to *The Lion King* of 1994, it may be more appropriate to talk about standardization than about standards.

In fact, the success of the Disney fairy tale from 1937 to the present is attributable not to Disney's uncanny ability to retell nineteenth-century fairy tales with originality and uniqueness but to his intuitive genius, which made use of the latest technological developments in the cinema to celebrate mechanical reproduction in animation and to glorify a particular American perspective on individualism and male prowess. In short, Disney "Taylorized" the extraordinary talents organized in his studios to represent himself as the prototypical American hero who cleans up the world in the name of goodness and justice. Embodied as the stalwart prince in all his fairy-tale films, Disney himself became the trademark and the product of technical animation controlled by corporate powers that communicated a single message: "What is good in the name of Disney is good for the rest of the world."

Not all Disney fairy-tale films are univocal and one-dimensional. As Eric Smoodin has convincingly argued in his important book *Animating Culture*, "Animation was not produced within a system of fixed institutions and social practices, practices which, as conventional wisdom might have it, always and unproblematically reduced cartoons to children's entertainment, or which uniformly enforced censorship restrictions. Instead, the Hollywood cartoon from the classical era developed from, expressed, and was frequently controlled by a number of shifting and often contradictory discourses, about, for instance, sexuality, race, gender, class, leisure and creativity."¹ Although Smoodin's study is concerned primarily with the short cartoon and how it was frequently placed in movie programs and changed through censorship for purposes of social control, his remarks are applicable to the animated fairy-tale feature film, and certainly he is correct in arguing that the meanings of each film could not be totally controlled by Disney or the Hollywood industry. Nevertheless, it is within the framework of power

relations and the development of the culture industry that the reception, interpretation, and discussions of the films take place. That is, the filmmakers' creative intentions are governed by a structural network of production for profit to which they appeal and against which they rebel, and this network is built into the very plots and narratives of the fairy-tale films.

Most important for Disney and other producers of fairy-tale films was the manner in which they could "hook" children as consumers not because they believed their films had artistic merit and could contribute to children's cultural development, but because they wanted to control children's aesthetic interests and consumer tastes. Richard deCordova makes this point quite clear in his essay "The Mickey in Macy's Window: Childhood, Consumerism, and Disney Animation": "From the late 1920s to the middle 1930s there was an intensification and rationalization of the process through which films were linked to consumer goods. Such organizations as Hollywood Associates and the Modern Merchandising Bureau emerged to coordinate the display of fashions in Hollywood films and fan magazines with the subsequent production and marketing of those fashions to the public. And the studio exploitation departments systematically began to conceive of story ideas and scripts as opportunities for a wide range of lucrative product tie-ins."²

DeCordova points out that in the early 1930s the child was regarded as a consumer in a double sense—consumer of films and consumer of products displayed through films. All studios with children as target audiences developed elaborate networks of mutual reference between these two levels of consumption so that it has become common practice today to market most fairy-tale films for children with books, cassettes, t-shirts, ties, jewelry, porcelain figures, plates, toothbrushes, school supplies, toys, underwear, pajamas, and even books. Such marketing has become so common that we rarely think twice about it, though there were major debates in the 1930s about the effect such films and practices had on children. And it was in the 1930s that the Mickey Mouse Clubs were formed to contribute to such consumerism.

By 1937 everything was in place for Disney to tirelessly convey and reinforce his trademark message in all the animated fairy-tale

films and other cinematic products of his studios. In fact, as early as 1934 the American magazine *Fortune* was able to state with remarkable perspicacity, "In Disney's studio a twentieth-century miracle is achieved: by a system as truly of the machine age as Henry Ford's plant at Dearborn, true art is produced. Hereafter we shall examine that system and see how it resembles and how it differs from the automatic simplicity of an assembly line."³ Though the *Fortune* article maintained that the final products of the Disney studio were artfully manufactured, it also demonstrated that the films were made not for the sake of exploring the story as an art form or for the sake of educating children and stimulating their imaginations but for the sake of promoting the Disney label. There was very little difference in emphasis then, as now, between a Disney plate, watch, t-shirt, cap, or amusement park filled with other commodities and rides and the fairy tales that he adapted for film and book publication. The copyrighted label was what counted most. Disney's signature designating ownership of the fairy-tale films was part of his "modern" endeavor to re-create an ancient mythic cult through mechanical reproduction. What is perhaps most striking about Disney's fairy-tale films, unlike his other inventions and commodities, is that he avowedly sought to make the characters and background as lifelike as possible, and the more he attempted to do so, the more his versions of the classical fairy tales became lifeless.

Indeed, Disney's re-creation of himself had a result opposite to fairy tales' traditional message, for they illustrate how people and things can be magically restored to life, whereas he transformed himself from a living being into a brand name that became synonymous with what Nietzsche called "the eternal return of the same," in Disney's case the eternal return of the same kind of youth. There is something peculiarly American about this striving to remain forever young and blissful in Disney's fairy-tale films that perhaps accounts for their appeal. However, the films continually package youth and bliss in the same manner so that the end effect is homogeneity in perfect synchronization.

All of the Disney Studios fairy-tale films focus on synchronization, one-dimensionality, and uniformity for the purpose of maintaining the Disney brand name as champion of entertainment. If

we were to study each one of the studio's fairy-tale films from *Snow White* to *The Lion King*, we would discover the following similar features:

1. Each film is a musical that imitates the standard Hollywood musical of the 1930s. Special attention is paid to catchy lyrics and tunes, background music, and sound effects that either heighten or break the action so that the characters can reveal their innermost thoughts. For instance, *Snow White* sings about wishing for a prince, and *Beauty* announces that she wants to break out of her provincial town and find the love of her life. As Richard Schickel has remarked,

There is also a structural rigidity about the Disney animated features that has grown increasingly obvious as the years have passed. The editing principles applied to *Snow White* were those of the conventionally well-made commercial film of the time. There was nothing particularly daring about the way it was put together; its merit was based on other skills. In general, a scene would open with an establishing or master shot, then proceed to an intermediate shot, then to close-ups of the various participants, with conventional cut-aways to various details of scenery or decor as needed. Confusing flashbacks or dream sequences were avoided, and special effects were introduced in such a way that every child was aware that something out of the ordinary was about to happen.⁴

2. The sequential arrangement of the frames, with clear breaks between each scene, follows the same prescribed plot: The disenfranchised or oppressed heroine *must* be rescued by a daring prince. Heterosexual happiness and marriage are always the ultimate goals of the story. There is no character development because all characters must be recognizable as types that remain unchanged throughout the film. Good cannot become evil, nor can evil become good. The world is viewed in Manichaeian terms as a dichotomy, and only the good will inherit the earth.

3. Since the basic plot is always the same, the incidental characters and their antics play an important role in the film version of the story. They are always funny, adorable, infantile, and mischievous. They are the dwarfs and animals in *Snow White*; the mice and fairy godmother in *Cinderella*; the household utensils in *Beauty and the Beast*; the genie and animals in *Aladdin*. Their slapstick humor and marvelous feats place the technical wonders of the film on display and prevent the fairy tale from becoming boring. Since nothing new is told or explored in the story, there is always a danger that it will become boring.
4. What passes as new is the introduction of innovative camera work, improved color, greater synchronization, livelier music and lyrics, and unique drawings of exotic characters. Yet this "newness" reinforces the nostalgia for eternal youth and a well-ordered, clean world in which evil is always recognizable and good takes the form of a male hero who is as dependable as the phallic principles that originally stamped the medium of animation at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵
5. Disney's films were never intended solely for children but were meant to captivate the "child" in all the viewers. If one can discern an attitude toward children in the films, it is that they are to be swept away as objects by the delightful and erotic images. This sweeping away is an envelopment that involves loss of identity; that is, children as viewers are to lose themselves in the oedipal wishes that are depicted on the screen. The process of viewing involves infantilization because each frame regulates the drives and wishes of the viewer according to rigid sexist and racist notions that emanate from the nineteenth century and are recalled in the film with nostalgia.

Since Disney never really wanted to explore the narrative depths of the fairy tale through cinema but instead wanted to celebrate the techniques of animation itself and to figure prominently

as the divine power behind these techniques, he left an opening for other filmmakers who have sought to go beyond Disney in re-creating fairy tales for the screen, with varying success. They range from Jean Cocteau to Jim Henson and have used both realistic means and animation to focus more on changing the tale than reestablishing its antiquated view of the world. In light of the fact that there have been hundreds of fairy-tale films produced for both children and adults since 1937, it would be extremely difficult to discuss all the experiments that have sought to transcend the standardized Disney film. Therefore, I want to focus on some of the more recent endeavors of such filmmakers as Jim Henson, Shelley Duvall, and Tom Davenport, who have tried to produce "high-quality" fairy-tale films for young viewers. Indeed, these filmmakers, though marked by Disney, have different attitudes toward children as viewers, and instead of using the film medium to infantilize them, they have produced films that seek to challenge children and to make them think and act for themselves. Their success (or lack of it) cannot be measured by breaking the Disney stranglehold on the fairy-tale film because no studio can really challenge Disney Studios' corporate power over the means of distribution and the market for fairy-tale films. Even Henson Productions had to realize this fact after Jim Henson died in 1991.⁶ However, other filmmakers' success can truly be measured by their artistic use of innovative narrative strategies to deviate from the "Disney standards."

Jim Henson

Until his sudden death in 1991, Jim Henson and his associates appeared to be the greatest challenge to the Disney Studios in developing animated and live-action shows for children that not only captured their pocketbooks but managed to stimulate their minds as well. More daring and innovative than the Disney films, the productions of Henson Associates covered a wide variety of topics and tapped the technical possibilities of puppetry, animation, and acting to challenge the creative and critical capabilities of young viewers, whether through *Sesame Street*, which was telecast on American public broadcasting service from 1969 to 1981; *The*

Muppet Show, which ran on American television from 1976 to 1981; the films *The Muppet Movie* (1979) and *The Great Muppet Caper* (1981); or the television production *The Storyteller* (1987).

Henson experimented with fairy tales in different ways by parodying the classical and Disney traditions through his Muppet characters and by addressing serious concerns of history, folklore, and narration in his brief series *The Storyteller*. I want to discuss three examples of his work to demonstrate how the Henson films subverted the standards of Disney fairy-tale films to break through the Disney techniques of infantilization, narrative strategies of closure, and the exaltation of homogeneity.

The Frog Prince, directed and produced by Henson,⁷ 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 of the roles are played by bizarre puppets who remain puppets. That is, the story is fantasy with no pretensions of the characters becoming lifelike or acting like real people, even though a frog puppet is transformed into a human being in the end.

The new story as fantasy reads as follows: Kermit, sitting by a pond, recalls an incident in which he encountered a tiny frog, a stranger named Robin, who tells him and the other frogs at the pond that he is an enchanted prince, bewitched by an evil motley witch and her sidekick, a dumb ogre named Sweetums. None of the frogs, including Kermit, believes him as he sings, "They call me Robin the brave, and history will one day rave. I'm noble and brave ..." Because Robin's such a runt of a frog, they all think his story is just a fairy tale, but Kermit soon realizes that he is telling the truth when he sees that Robin cannot swim.

Now, the only way that Robin can become human again is to be kissed by a princess who lives in a nearby castle. However, Kermit tells him that there is little chance because Princess Milora has also been bewitched and can only speak backward. But when she comes

to the pond and accidentally loses her golden ball, Robin promises to retrieve it if she will take him to the castle and befriend him. Since he promises not to cause any trouble, she gladly agrees, and Robin miraculously gets the ball. Once at the castle, where Kermit continues his narration, we learn that the princess was cursed by her Aunt Tamanella, who is none other than the witch who had changed Robin and who has tricked the stupid king into believing that she is his long-lost sister. Tamanella's eyes are on the king's throne, and she seeks to be crowned as queen in Princess Milora's place. To prevent any attempt at interference, she captures Robin and gives him to Sweetums the Ogre to eat. However, Kermit helps Robin escape, and along with the other frogs of the pond, they intercede at the coronation of Tamanella and smash the ball on the handle of the witch's cane. She loses her powers, is transformed into a bird, and flies off. The princess, who immediately regains her ability to speak correctly, thanks her friends for their help and gives Robin a kiss. Of course, he is transformed into a prince, and the spectators sing a song of joy to celebrate the coronation of the princess. At the end, we are returned to the pond where Kermit sits on the edge of the well and tells the viewers that he still sees the prince and princess a lot. They appear on the scene with a baby, and Kermit adds that he feels proud to have a baby named after him.

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." 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 the action. This friendship 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, like a television 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 sense of play is also kept alive in other Henson films. For instance, in the thirty-minute animated film *Snow White and the Seven Muppets* (1988), part of *The Muppet Babies* series, there is a clear playful reference to Disney's *Snow White* right at the beginning of the film. The Muppets, all depicted as children, return to their home after seeing the film *Snow White*. Their nanny leaves them in the playroom, and they begin talking about the film and wanting to be actors. Kermit suggests that they put on their own play, and he assumes the role of director while the other well-known Muppet figures (Fozzie, Rowlf, Animal, Scooter, Beaker, Gonzo, Rizzo, etc.) begin dividing the parts. Of course, Miss Piggy wants to play Snow White, but she is opposed by Scooter. A coin is tossed and Miss Piggy loses, and this "loss" sets the tone for the rest of the play. Miss Piggy cannot stand losing, and she is vindictive in and outside the play.

As director, Kermit has his hands full trying to use the found objects in the room for the sets and to gain the cooperation of the other Muppets. Once the stage is set, Piggy admires herself in a mirror and states, "I'm so cute. I can't stand it." The next frame is a black and white documentary scene of crowds cheering. Kermit reminds Piggy about the plot. So she asks the mirror, played by Fozzie, who is the cutest in the world, and Fozzie replies, "I've got something to tell you you're not going to dig. You're just an ordinary pig." Hearing this response, Miss Piggy explodes and chases Fozzie off the stage until Kermit restores order, but after he calls for a change of scene, Animal lowers the background set upside down.

The remainder of the play continues in this chaotic manner, with all of the Muppets falling in and out of their roles. Miss Piggy calls for exterminators to wipe out the pest Snow White, who escapes to a beauty parlor where the dwarfs work. They promise to change her looks so no one will recognize her. However, eventually Miss Piggy as the witch finds Scooter as Snow White and scares her to death with a snake because she has run out of apples. The final scene depicts Scooter on a table with the dwarfs singing the "Snow

White Blues" and scraggly animals sobbing with the dwarfs in an obvious caricature of Disney's final scene. Kermit arrives on a black, mangy horse, which the others find inappropriate, but he responds by saying, "Don't blame me, blame Animal. He drew it." Since Kermit is now in the play, Miss Piggy chooses to become the director and won't let Kermit kiss Scooter. She changes the ending of the play twice by having the wolf from "Little Red Riding Hood" and the giant from "Jack and the Beanstalk" interfere. As the Muppet "actors" complain, the nanny enters the room, and after discovering that the Muppet children were rehearsing the play *Snow White*, she remarks that she has always wanted to play the witch. Miss Piggy is redeemed by this remark, and as the Muppets prepare to put on the play again, they all want to play the witch.⁸

The animation by Takashi in this Henson production is not highly inventive, but the explosive use of unexpected montage, the transformation of crude childlike drawings into workable sets, and the clever script by Jeffrey Scott all make for an extraordinary film about child's play and the creative manner in which children resolve their disputes through play. The classical *Snow White* is about a jealous conflict between an older woman and her young "rival" that only a prince can resolve, and the Henson film makes this conflict much more comprehensible for children by depicting the vain Miss Piggy as a sore loser who acts out jealousy in an imaginative play. Nor can Kermit as director or prince save Scooter/Snow White or bring about a resolution to the jealousy felt by Miss Piggy. There is no closure to this narrative, which is a rehearsal and will keep changing as the children are encouraged to explore the tale's manifold meanings.

Such creative exploration of narration has continually marked Henson's films. In his most unique contribution to the development of the fairy-tale film, *The Storyteller*, he took nine tales, mainly from the Grimms' collection, and produced them with the assistance of Anthony Minghella, who was responsible for the screenplays.⁹ 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."¹⁰ The frame for all of these fairy-tale films is 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, yet there are truths built on contradictions and suggestive images that make the tales into compelling narratives worth viewing and reviewing: The Henson studios created tiny masterpieces that have set remarkable artistic standards for fairy-tale films by contravening traditional tales and Disney prescriptions.

Despite the fact that the frame for all of *The Storyteller* films is similar, the creative development of each tale is visually and technically so different that each film demands a long, detailed discussion. I shall therefore deal with just one of the films, "Hans My Hedgehog," to demonstrate how unique the Henson productions are.

The most popular version of "Hans My Hedgehog" is to be found in the Grimms' collection, and it is based on the beast/bridegroom type of folktale in which a young woman is obliged to sacrifice herself because her father has made a promise to a monster. The most well-known tale of this kind is "Beauty and the Beast," and the plot generally makes an equation of beauty = passivity = femininity, whereas ugliness is due to some curse and the victim is in need of salvation. The heroine is supposed to sacrifice herself for the welfare of her father or parents, and she is generally rewarded for being docile, virtuous, and obedient. In the Henson and Minghella cinematic version, various themes are explored in depth instead of the necessity for feminine sacrifice. With regard to the "monster," there is the hedgehog's personal struggle to overcome his bestial shape and form his own whole identity, the conflict with his father that leads to his mother's death, the betrayal by the princess, and the

suffering he endures because of his split personality. With regard to the princess, the question is one of sincerity and loyalty. She is depicted as strong and valiant. When asked by the hedgehog whether she finds him very ugly, she responds, "Not so ugly as going back on a promise." Here she is referring to her father's promise, and we are introduced to another aspect of ugliness and beauty. Beauty is connected to loyalty, honesty, and respect, and later the princess feels ugly when she breaks her promise to the hedgehog not to reveal that he sheds his skin at night and is a handsome man. Swayed by her mother's false advice, the princess drives the hedgehog away, and she wears out three pairs of iron shoes on a long quest to find him. In the end, she must struggle with him so that he can regain his human form, and the tale ends with a second wedding, with the storyteller concluding, "This time the feasting went on for forty days and forty nights, and I myself was there to tell the best story there is to tell, a story that begins in hello and ends in goodbye, and for a gift they gave me a shoe worn to nothing. And here it is."

As the storyteller holds the shoe up, the dog shakes his head with skepticism, bringing the film to a close—but not really to a close, for the story has been questioned and may indeed have another version. In fact, at one point during the narration, the dog interrupts and insists that the storyteller is telling the story incorrectly. The dog shifts the narration according to his viewpoint until the storyteller picks up the threads and builds a role for himself within the narrative so that he is both inside and outside the narration. Throughout the film the narrative perspective keeps shifting through the interchange of the storyteller and the dog and through the artistic use of the camera, lighting, and sets.

The initial fireplace scene is the hearth of the stories, and out of the fire in darkness, the story unravels through the silhouettes of puppets behind a sheet, painted figures on a cracked antique plate, and finally the rural cottage in which the hedgehog is born. Live characters interact with puppets and fantastic creatures with no line drawn between reality and fantasy. The action moves from sets that imitate real homes and castles to canvas paintings of imaginary woods and hills. The surrealism of the images is heightened

by slanted frames and camera shots taken from below. The cinematic portrayal of the storyteller's tale is fabulous and filled with surprises so that the viewer is encouraged to expand his or her knowledge of storytelling and manner of looking at images. Even—or especially—if one is familiar with the Grimms' version of this beast/bridegroom tale, the film opens new insights into the traditional scheme of things, exploring new artistic forms for conveying the themes of this particular tale.

All the films in *The Storyteller* series are creative experiments with classical tales, puppetry, cinematic techniques, painting, and music that reveal the potential of the film through television and video to recapture communal aspects of storytelling. Brought together in homes in front of a small screen, viewers see the storyteller actively engaged with a listener who interrupts, questions, mocks, laughs, and sighs while the story is told and enacted. A bond is formed between storyteller and listener and viewer, and the sharing of the story becomes a unique experience that does not call for identification or envelopment of the viewer.

Shelley Duvall's *Faerie Tale Theatre*

In an article that recorded Shelley Duvall's success as a television producer, *Forbes* reported, "In 1982 the pay television network Showtime, desperate for original programs to help it compete with both HBO and network TV, finally commissioned three *Faerie Tale Theatre* shows. Like most struggling business people, the first thing Duvall did was ask some of her friends—in this case Hollywood stars—for help, thereby bypassing the traditional channels of agents, managers and studios. Shrewdly targeting stars with children, Duvall asked for their help in creating quality television for kids."¹¹

I must question the adjective *quality* in this article and whether the fairy-tale films were actually done for "kids." From 1984 to 1987, when *Faerie Tale Theatre* was sold into syndication, Duvall produced twenty-six episodes, each fifty minutes long, featuring Klaus Kinski and Susan Sarandon in "Beauty and the Beast," Dick Shawn, Art Carney, and Alan Arkin in "The Emperor's New Clothes," Eve Arden and Jean Stapleton in "Cinderella," Ben Vereen and Gregory Hines in "Puss in Boots," Lee Remick in "The

Snow Queen," Elizabeth McGovern, Vincent Price, and Vanessa Redgrave in "Snow White," Liza Minnelli and Tom Conti in "The Princess and the Pea," and Robin Williams and Terri Garr in "The Frog Prince," to name but a few of the star-studded productions.

Obviously, with actors like Redgrave, Remick, and Williams and directing by Eric Idle, Roger Vadim, and Duvall herself, the films had a certain professional "quality" to them, but the emphasis in most of the films was on the stars' tour-de-force performances rather than on re-creating the classical fairy tales in an innovative manner. Spectacle, amusement for the sake of the actors' obvious enjoyment and for amusement's own sake, and simplistic renarrating of the traditional plots that are merely touched up with ornaments are some of the "quality" features of *Faerie Tale Theatre*, and yet amid its glitter and pomp there are some stimulating films. Duvall's policy was one of laissez-faire, so there are many different cinematic styles and interpretations of the fairy tales.

For example, the productions of "Red Riding Hood" and "Beauty and the Beast," directed by Roger Vadim, are indicative of the retrogressive quality of the entire series. Though Malcolm McDowell is amusing in his role as the bungling wolf, the portrayal of Red Riding Hood and her relationship to her father is so infantile, blatantly oedipal, and stupid that the story is reduced to a tract denouncing female gullibility and celebrating male power. The setting and the characterization are one-dimensional and read or view no better than a cheap storybook version that one can buy in a supermarket. "Beauty and the Beast" is not much better. Vadim offers us a slavish imitation of Jean Cocteau's famous *La Belle et la Bête* but without its sophistication, and there is no endeavor to re-create the story line or add to the characterization, as the Disney Studios did in its animated version of *Beauty and the Beast*. Everything is predictable in the film and thus boring, and it is difficult to comprehend why Beauty would want to sacrifice herself for her father or the beast, despite Klaus Kinski's fine acting.

In contrast to these stale imitations of the classical fairy tales, Eric Idle's production of "The Frog Prince" is a superb adaptation because it is a hilarious parody that makes unusual artistic use of puppets and masks. In Idle's script, the story opens with a curse

placed on a baby prince by an old crone who was not invited to his christening because the forgetful queen did not think she would fit in well with the courtly society. Of course the queen and king are aghast to find their son turned into a frog, but there is nothing they can do about it. Many years pass, and we are introduced to another royal household in which an extremely vain princess terrorizes the servants and her parents. Played to perfection by Terri Garr, this princess is so excessively haughty that she is ridiculous—even the servants make fun of her. Once she loses her golden ball, given to her by “an adolescent prince with homicidal tendencies,” she strikes a deal with a talking frog, played by Robin Williams, who is the voice of an adroit green puppet. Of course, the princess breaks her promise and calls the frog a sucker. When the frog pursues her, he is almost cooked by a French chef but is saved by the king, who is afraid of disorder and revolution and thus wants his daughter to keep her promise. The frog turns out to be a charmer at the king’s feast; he dances, sings, tells jokes, and does a Shakespeare routine. When the princess retires for the evening, she is compelled to take him with her. Then, to her surprise, he defends her with sword in hand against an ugly insect. She softens and rewards him with a kiss. All at once, the frog turns into a naked prince, covered only by a towel. Attracted to each other, the princess and prince begin kissing again to see how the charm works. But then the king arrives and refuses to believe that the prince was once a frog. So the prince is thrown into prison, and the princess is sent to a strict boarding school. Later, the old crone who started everything appears to the king in a golden ball and reveals the truth, so the king pardons the prince and arranges for a marriage. The crone promises that will be the end of her frog tricks, but there is a great deal of doubt whether this promise will be fulfilled.

Like the Muppet film of *The Frog Prince*, this film subverts the traditional story line to stimulate the viewer to question the old fairy-tale lines. The language is American slang, and there are numerous sexual innuendos that charge the film with exciting and comical erotic play. Most of the characters undergo change in the course of action, and the puppetry, music, and sets are designed to enhance the humor of the narration. The cinematic portrayal of

the monarchy and court life is clearly critical of the pomposity of royalty and arbitrary use of power. In the process, the beast/bridegroom tale is no longer about the self-sacrifice of a woman who is obliged to save a bestial man but about vanity, hypocrisy, and the power of humor to expose false consciousness.

Aside from “The Frog Prince,” there are other films in the *Faerie Tale Theatre* series such as “The Three Little Pigs” and “Jack and the Beanstalk” that are innovative adaptations of classical fairy tales and other fairy-tale films. However, without a clear educational or philosophical policy, the films are hit-or-miss commodities that may or may not contribute to the creative and critical awareness of young viewers.

Tom Davenport

If there is little systematic thought and thorough reflection behind the philosophical and production policies of Duvall’s *Faerie Tale Theatre*, the opposite may be said of Tom Davenport’s remarkable adaptations of the Grimms’ fairy tales for young audiences. An independent filmmaker, Davenport has carefully elaborated his ideas about exploring fairy tales and folk traditions in films since 1975, and in a recent article about filmmaking, “Making Grimm Movies,” he discussed how his new three-part film series about fairy-tale adaptations is intended to develop the creative potential of his young viewers: “Because film and television have become the primary bearers of myth and storytelling (and, consequently the charter for social action in our country), understanding how to make film and video will empower people who may otherwise feel helpless and manipulated by media. Some teachers are already accepting video reports from students who are eager to explore the power of camcorder, VCR, and computer. Once people begin to understand how the film and television are made, they will fear it less and respect it more.”¹² Indeed, his current work in fairy-tale adaptation for the screen shows a steady progression in innovative experimentation and his concern in educating children about fairy tales and film.

Relying mainly on grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Public Broadcasting Service, and other foundations to further his explorative work, Davenport has collaborated with

actors, technicians, storytellers, and writers to bring out essential psychological and social features of the Grimms' tales in his films and printed versions that are directly related to folklore. He has not "modernized" the tales in a slick, sensationalist manner. Rather, he has historicized the tales and carefully shifted the focus by giving them American settings from the seventeenth century to the present.¹³ By introducing American characters and events in American history, he has shown how such qualities as patience, cunning, and courage help his protagonists overcome poverty, prejudice, and hardship during wars, famine, and depression. Davenport is interested in how people survive oppression, particularly how they survive with pride and a sense of their own dignity. Through his films he conveys these "fairy tales of survival" to give young viewers a sense of hope, especially at a time in American history when violence, poverty, and degradation appear to minimize their hope for a better future.

The first three films, *Hansel and Gretel* (1975), *Rapunzel* (1979), and *The Frog King* (1980), which Davenport coproduced with his wife, Mimi, were all set in the South and Appalachia and are period pieces. Most of the shooting was done on location, with close attention paid to typical customs, architecture, landscape, and dialects. The difficulty with these films is that Davenport relied too closely on the plots of the Grimms' tales. For instance, while *The Frog King* is an obvious attempt to re-create the conditions of antebellum life in the South, there are some racist and sexist implications in its depiction of the servants and the princess. Davenport changed the setting of the German tale, but he reproduced the story line that involves the humiliation of the princess (the traditional taming-of-the-shrew theme) and celebration of male rule. In his early work, Davenport had not yet learned to use folklore and history critically so that more liberating alternatives to oppressive situations could be explored.

However, since the production of *Jack and the Dentist's Daughter* (1983), an original adaptation of an Appalachian folk tale with black characters—one of the only fairy-tale films ever produced with ethnic minority characters as protagonists—Davenport has made original use of the fairy tale and film to enhance viewers'

understanding of storytelling, politics, and creativity. One of his best endeavors is his 1990 film *Ashpet: An American Cinderella*. This cinematic version is about a young white woman named Lily, who learns to reclaim her rights and heritage through the help of a wise black woman whose sense of history and knowledge of oppression empowers the "enslaved" Lily to pursue her dreams. The action takes place in the rural South during the early years of World War II, when people were making sacrifices and being forced



Ashpet: An American Cinderella. Reprinted by permission of Davenport Films.

to separate because of the military draft. But Lily manages to find the strength to overcome isolation and exploitation by piecing together a sense of her own story, which her stepmother and step-sisters had taken from her. Consequently, Davenport's Cinderella story is no longer history in a traditional male sense, that is, no longer the Grimms' tale or a simple rags-to-riches story. Nor is it a didactic feminist interpretation. Instead, Davenport turns it into an American tale about conflict within a matrilineal heritage in



Ashpet: An American Cinderella. Reprinted by permission of Davenport Films.

the South, narrated from beginning to end by a well-known Afro-American storyteller, Louise Anderson, who plays the role of Dark Sally, the magical conjure-woman and fairy godmother. Dark Sally becomes the focus of the film, which shows how her storytelling can lead a young woman to recover a sense of her history and give her the strength to assert herself, as many women are doing today.

The fairy tale as historical document and history as fairy tale are two premises with which Davenport works in all his films. Since his training was in documentary filmmaking, it is not by chance that these films have a unique quality of reportage, as though they were newsreels from the past. Davenport works closely with historians, folklorists, artists, storytellers, and actors to develop a sense of historical authenticity that does not undermine the magic of the fairy tales. Paradoxically, the fantastic occurrences in the film have more impact because of their historical foundation.

In addition to using history and the fairy tale to shed light on social developments and the nature of storytelling, Davenport has published newsletters about each film that are made available to schools. These newsletters are pedagogical tools intended to help teachers and students explore and understand the films in their present context and to go beyond them.¹⁴ In this manner, Davenport demonstrates that he has learned from the responses to his films and tries to incorporate these lessons into each new production.¹⁵

Conclusion

As the work of Henson, Duvall, and Davenport reveals, filmmakers have indeed gone beyond Disney in the adaptation of fairy tales for the screen,¹⁶ and one could point to other interesting fairy-tale films such as Rob Reiner's *The Princess Bride* (1987), Ralph Bakshi's *Wizards* (1977), Wolfgang Petersen's *The NeverEnding Story* (1984), or television series such as *The Fractured Fairy Tales* (1961–1964).¹⁷ Indeed, in one of the more pointed and hilarious cartoons, *Sleeping Beauty*, the handsome prince is a caricature of Walt Disney, and when he discovers Sleeping Beauty, he withholds his magic kiss and builds an amusement park around her called Sleeping Beautyland to make money. The evil fairy wants a cut of the profits, and Walt the Prince tries various ways to have her eliminated. After all, Disney

never wanted to share or have anyone try to go beyond him, but this fractured fairy tale exposes him and demonstrates through its clever humor and animation that there are ways to transcend Disney.

Keeping things in perspective, we must remember that Disney was in fact a pioneer in that he pointed out the great possibilities animation and film had for the effective expansion of the fairy-tale genre into the age of mechanical reproduction. However, instead of fully realizing those possibilities, he became absorbed in their commodification after establishing the fairy-tale film as art form.

Just what is the potential of the fairy-tale film as art form and ideological expression, already realized in part in the works I have discussed? How can fairy-tale films further the autonomy of young viewers and stimulate their creative and critical faculties?

Children are exposed to the social design of reality from the moment they are born. Adult versions of "reality" are imposed upon children to ensure that they are positioned physically, socially, and culturally to experience their own growth and life around them in specified ways. "Reality" is held up to them as empirically verifiable and as an inexorable force. Fairy tales have always balanced and subverted this process and offered the possibility of seeing reality as an illusion. As children become aware of the artifices and machinations in their lives, they gain the sense of alternatives for making their own lives more meaningful and pleasurable. Thus, through the cinematic adaptations of fairy tales reality can be displayed as artificiality so that children can develop a sense of assembling and reassembling the frames of their lives for themselves.

Going beyond Disney is therefore the realization that fairy tales do not begin and end with Disney and that one can make one's own life resemble a fairy tale that transcends antiquated notions of patriarchy and racism. Going beyond Disney means realizing that there are no prescriptions for fairy tales or for happiness. To paraphrase a famous quotation from the German romantic writer Novalis—"Menschwerden ist eine Kunst"—learning how to become a compassionate human being involves learning to live life as an artist—and, I might add, learning to transform our fairy-tale dreams into narratives of our own making.

5

Lion Kings and the Culture Industry

It has been over half a century since Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno published *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. With the passage of time and the continual commodification of culture in America, it seems appropriate to review some of Horkheimer and Adorno's major theses of the concept of the culture industry to see how they have weathered the cultural debates and the rise of post-modernism in the 1980s and 1990s, when daily life has become so overwhelmingly aestheticized that the particular meanings of community and individual identity have lost all significance. Such a loss allows for the shaping of ethnic and national identities purported to be deeply inbred in their members along with false religious traditions that politicians exploit to increase their power within a system that they cannot really control.

Adorno knew—and I am focusing mainly on Adorno because he, unlike Horkheimer, continued to explore all aspects of the culture industry until his death—that the collapse of the division between high and low art would lead to greater violence and the spectacle of victimization. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was generated not only by Adorno's experiences with German fascism but also, and perhaps more significantly, by his encounters with American