

MA Illustration

ADAA7000 Coexistent Perspectives Module

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Question 2: De/constructing the Human: In what ways do contemporary artists and designers challenge and reconfigure dominant constructions of the human subject through lenses such as feminist theory, posthumanism, queer critique, or psychoanalysis? How do such practices trouble the boundaries between self, other, and machine?

Abstract

Fairy tale and its old ideologies often strived to reinforce beauty norms and other sexist, problematic values. The genre of fairy tale pastiche opens new means through which conversation can be had and allows for the insertion of modernised ways of thinking through rewrites and twists. *The Most Beautiful Woman in the World* explores how Male gaze and Beauty Norms are subverted in Korean-animated fairy tale pastiche film, *Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs* (2019). The extent to which the film subverts or reinforces tropes derived from these constructs is assessed through analysis of how visual metaphors, narrative strategies and humour are used as methods of critique. Through the dominant motifs of literal physical transformation, we see - through a more intriguing lens - how identity and the body is thought about and perceived, and the anxieties, desires and personal changes that arise from uncontrollable changes in appearance. Application of key theoretical texts, and a further look into the production and art of *Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs* reveals considerable tension between subversion and reinforcement.

The Most Beautiful Woman in the World: To what extent does Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs (2019) critique or reinforce dominant beauty norms and the male gaze, and how effective are its narrative and aesthetic strategies in challenging contemporary representations of identity and the body?

Introduction

'What if Snow White was no longer beautiful and the 7 Dwarfs not so short?'

Was the mainstream's damaging first impression of Korean-animated Fairy-tale pastiche, *Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs*. Ironically, the intended messaging of this film was the complete opposite to what this infamous slogan would have you believe. Discourse ensued online, many outraged at how the tagline seemed to heavily imply that Snow White is "no longer beautiful" in her original body. It was deemed a "fat-shaming" film before it had even been released. Producer of the film, Sujin Hwang issued an apology statement on behalf of the animation studio, stating, 'Locus Corporation wishes to apologize regarding the first elements of our marketing campaign [...] which we realize has had the opposite effect from that which was intended. That advertising campaign is being terminated' (Serena, Salon, 2017). Unfortunately, the damage had already been done. The film's success was greatly impacted by this marketing disaster, and drove a lot of potential audiences away, its true intentions lost on many (Bailey, NBC, 2017).

In this loosely based pastiche adaptation of the classic *Snow-White* tale, the seven dwarfs were originally princes in a group called the "Fearless Seven", cursed into different forms after they attacked a fairy princess, assuming she was a witch from her features and green skin. Merlin, the leader of this group, is our male protagonist. Their motive is to find "the most beautiful woman in the world" to kiss so they can break their curses. Regina, this adaptation's evil queen, retains her vanity-based motives, and after taking over Snow's kingdom, she waits on a tree that grows shoes with transformative magic; they make the wearer conventionally attractive. Snow White, a strong, fat princess, takes the shoes in a misunderstanding whilst searching for her father and ends up taking on a different form also.

The dwarfs offer to help her, and she feels she must hide her true identity in the – quite rational - fear that they would not have if they were not attracted to her (Hong, 2019).

Decipherable from this synopsis, the overarching message and themes of this film are inner beauty and self-love, explored as far as a children's film could. This essay will take on more complex theoretical perspectives, furthering discussion on the subversion and reinforcement of relevant tropes and narrative techniques. Ways in which Male gaze, Beauty norms and Identity are portrayed in *Red Shoes** will be examined, and Fairytale Ideology will be linked in tandem to provide extra context on why the subversions identified are considered challenging. Key theorists chosen for this discussion include – but are not limited to - Laura Mulvey, Susan Bordo, Rosalind Gill, and Cristina Bacchilega/Jack Zipes.



Figure 1: Marketing debut, Cannes Film Festival 2017.

Theoretical Context

Coined by feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey, the concept of the “male gaze” presents the idea that ‘pleasure in looking has been split between active/ male and passive/female,’ that ‘the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly’ (Mulvey, 1975, p.808). Gaze, therefore, is defined by the objectification of women from the perspective of men, particularly in cinema, demonstrated and framed through the lens of the camera and by the actions and body language of the men surveying. Gaze is a prominent theme in *Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs*, explored seriously in some scenes, and through a humorous and satirical lens in others. As evident in the concept art book, *The Art of 레드 슈즈*, Animation Director, Jin Kim, had clear intentions of portraying gaze.

*Red Shoes is a story about ‘irony’. It’s about seeing things you couldn’t see before through physical changes and putting yourself in someone else’s shoes, not dealing with happenings caused by physical changes. [...] I tried to show more of the conflict Red Shoes experiences because of ‘gaze’. Through this, I wanted to talk about how much influence others’ prejudice can have [sic] (Sam-seong et al. 2019, p.25)**

The gaze goes hand in hand with beauty norms, both oppressive and objectifying. Rosalind Gill criticises the notion that women's bodies are 'always at risk of "failing"' in the eyes of the media, men and even other women (having internalised judgement). Through beauty norms comes the concept of "surveillance", under the same umbrella as the gaze, except it actively polices and expects conformity to these norms; women are expected to prioritise 're-modelling' or to maintain their body to adhere to standards that determine attractiveness (Gill, 2007). This surveillance 'constitutes perhaps the largest type of media content across all genres and media forms' (p.149).

It should be noted that since *Red Shoes* is a Korean film, it is going to adhere towards South Korean beauty standards. Examples of South Korean beauty norms and practices include 'skin whitening, having slim jaws, double eyelids, and a slim-petite figure.' A lot of these are problematic, valuing the thin, white body, a direct influence from the west (Fong, 2012).

In *Difference and Identity* Kathryn Woodward defines identity as something that 'marks the ways in which we are the same as others who share that position, and the ways in which we are different from those who do not', and notes that one's identity is 'most clearly defined by difference' and can be 'marked by polarisation', 'frequently constructed in terms of oppositions' (Woodward, 1997, p.1-2). In *Red Shoes*, the identities of characters are often immediately and recklessly assumed by other characters, constructed by these rigid and trope-y oppositions such as ugly/pretty, fat/thin, good/evil, some of these oppositions (such as looks and morality) often baselessly used to determine another.

Outdated and even harmful literary tropes such as the latter - which *Red Shoes* is mocking - are why Fairytales tend to get rewritten and twisted into fresh adaptations. Characters of

centuries-old are criticised, analysed and rewritten with more depth. Audiences' expectations continue to be subverted through the ever-growing genre of the Fairytale Pastiche. In *The Irresistible Fairytale*, Jack Zipes highlights the fact that 'fairy tales embody worlds of naive morality that can still resonate with us if their underlying dramas are re-created and re-designed to counter as well as collide with our complex social realities' (Zipes, 2012). Think of how beloved DreamWorks' *Shrek* remains to this day despite some of its early 2000's pop-culture references fading into dated irrelevance. Many consider it so fun and witty because it is relentless in its mockery of Fairytale cliches (Basu, 2023). Pastiche and parodies, particularly fairytale ones, are so effective because we can take something that is universally familiar and use it as a vessel for conversation.

In historical adaptations, Snow White is frequently 'crystallised' by the narrative to remain this 'static beauty', seemingly doomed to be stuck with the same "perfect" and idyllic appearance forever in every future version without question (Bacchilega, 2010). She is often defined by her features by the famous line, 'as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the embroidery frame.' (Grimm, 1812). While this Snow White's magical disguise and mis-identity is a static and idyllic beauty, she only serves as a device to expose the biases and prejudices that upheld beauty standards result in. She is not put on some shallow pedestal with direct intention by the narrative; Red Shoes is simply mirroring bias. The pedestal she is placed upon is intended to be viewed as negative. It harbours repression, insecurity and pressure to perform (Given, 2021). The audience should be aware of this lest they find themselves continuing to reinforce the systems and tropes this film is trying to dismantle.

Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs (2019)

The red shoes are a magic transformative tool that function on desire and convention. The wearer can take them off if there is something they desire in the moment more than what the shoes give them. Bordo refers to fictional transformations as ‘Images of bodily eruption’, ‘a new, alien [...] and uncontrollable self’, a literal physical change representative of repressed anxieties related to the self (Bordo, 2003, p.189). In *Red Shoes*, these transformations serve as disturbances to identity and beauty norms. The fairytale genre is arguably a perfect vessel for this exploration, for ‘The idea of personal transformation emerges logically from a genre that draws ceaselessly on shape-shifting and metamorphosis’ (Tatar, 2010, p.60).

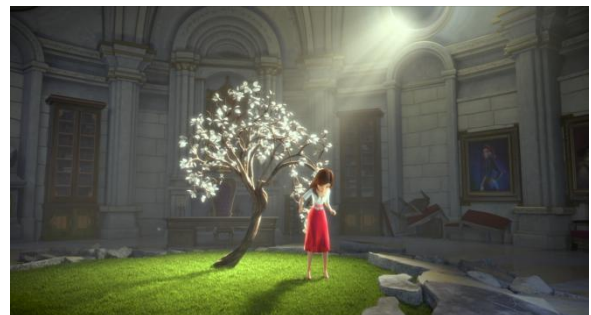


Figure 2: "Opening Exposition" scene [1:41], Hong, *Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs*, (2019)

Figure 3: "Snow Escapes with the Shoes" scene [6:50]

Merlin's transformation uproots anxieties about the loss of his "desirable" body and his agility. He believes he is of no value at all in a body that has turned chubby, 'stumpy and green' (Hong, 2019). The dualistic transformation of Snow White/Red Shoes conjures anxieties about the repression of her identity but, simultaneously, she becomes acutely aware of the obvious favouritism exhibited towards Red Shoes. Though this form misrepresents Snow as a person (and she is shown to act indifferent towards it), she begins

utilising it – almost like a tool - as ‘a means to an end’ (Sneezy Reviews, 2020), and to avoid being ignored and mistreated. Through bodily transformation, Merlin is forced to confront his biases which frequently bleed into and damage his perception and treatment of people, including himself. Once he realises that Red Shoes/Snow White liked him even when he was “unattractive”, he finds that desirability does not just lie in the external.

As mentioned previously, gaze in *Red Shoes* is depicted through satirical humour. Slow-motion close-up shots of Red Shoes are shown when major characters see her in person for the first time and the flow of action freezes, reflective of the time they take to contemplate (Mulvey, 1975, p.809). The soundtrack builds alongside these shots. ‘Sparkly’ chimes sound out and choir leitmotifs play ironically, as she is always caught in the middle of incredibly mundane acts but still gazed upon with the same unwavering intensity. As these scenes play out, the viewer is made to look through the lens of the “camera” from this silly yet objectifying perspective.



Figure 4: "*The Dwarfs meet Red Shoes*" scene [10:15]

The "Halo Effect" (a type of cognitive bias) is the tendency to 'attribute socially desirable personality traits to physically attractive individuals (Batres and Shiramizu, 2022). This type of bias is frequently elicited from Red Shoes' normative beauty and is presented comedically through how the characters seem to become unaware of their surroundings and of possible threat. When Red Shoes breaks into the dwarfs' house after escaping from Regina, they do react accordingly at first to try to strategically apprehend the intruder. However, as soon as they gaze upon Red Shoes, they are completely transfixed and let their guard down, even though they have no idea who she is. Therefore, they immediately decide that Red Shoes is "good" because they find her attractive (Rumsey and Harcourt, 2014).

The animators double down on the absurdity of this behaviour when the secondary antagonist of the film, Prince Average, and his guards see Red Shoes. In a ridiculous slapstick manner, the knights stop charging towards her and all fall on top of each other in a pile.

Average is so distracted by her that he literally traverses the pile-up to reach her, not taking

his eyes off her once. The film utilises humour in this way to convey the powerful grip that beauty norms have on general culture (Bordo, 2003, p.17).

There are notable scenes more serious in tone that present the ways in which Snow White's experience with her dual forms affects her. During a scene where Red Shoes/Snow is trying to escape from being captured, she takes the shoes off to divert her attackers but is then harassed by a group of guards. They mock and shame her, refusing to give her belongings back. After she attempts to defend herself, Merlin helps her but doesn't recognise her as Snow White. A shot lingers of Snow holding the shoes, looking at herself in an old, broken mirror (Hong, 2019). This is the first time we see Snow's relationship with the shoes turn conflicted. She feels invisible yet was just the subject of ridicule moments ago. This phenomenon has been coined "Hyper(in)visibility", 'whereby marginalized bodies are subjected to both an extraordinary amount of attention and scrutiny and are simultaneously completely disregarded and dismissed' (Farrell et al. 2023, p.20). Since Snow White is now aware that she is unrecognisable to the dwarfs and is more likely to be disrespected in her original body, she begins to "desire" the shoes to reach her goal faster, as characters are shown to be overly attentive to her wants and needs as Red Shoes.



Figure 5: *"Town Escape"* scene [33:00]

A clear visual metaphor on the objectification of Red Shoes' body is also presented when (right before the film's climax) Snow White looks down at the Shoes, saying 'He likes you more than he likes me' (Hong, 2019). The viewer is presented with the fact that Merlin has placed more value on a literal object than Snow White.



Figure 6: *"The Real Snow"* scene [1:06:27]

Certain visual and aesthetic choices within the film fit a thematic frame. Bacchilega suggests the nature and fruit motif in Snow White adaptations are symbolic of a natural beauty, which is turned on its head when applied to this version (Bacchilega, 2010, p.32). The transformation and what apples symbolise are anything *but* natural. Snow White is turned unrecognisable into a body that is practically unattainable without magic.

At the beginning of the film when the magic of the shoes temporarily works for Regina, her hair colour is restored to red. The shoes matching the palette of Regina's "beautiful" variant poses a striking visual link, indicating that, much like her, the magic of the shoes are rooted purely in the superficial.

The colour red is a more prominent aspect of *Red Shoes'* overarching theme in terms of character design. Whilst in the form of Red Shoes, Snow White's red skirt and shoes read as shallow symbols of desire and romance, reflective of the surface-level way she is gazed upon and perceived in her magical disguise. (Elliot, A.J. et al., 2015).

When we see Snow White, her red skirt turns more reminiscent of her strength, confidence and authentic beauty. This directly opposes the desired upheld societal standards Red Shoes is a stand-in for, and that Snow does not wish to identify with. When the shoes have been destroyed along with Regina and the rest of her spells, Snow White stands barefoot, which feels additionally symbolic of her ability to express her authentic self again (Lee et al. 2015).

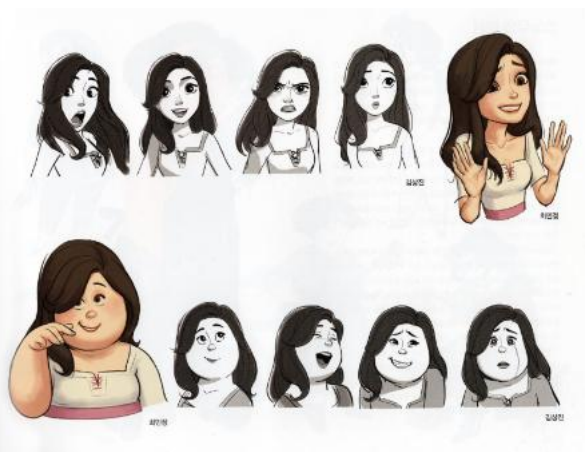


Figure 7: “The art of 레드슈즈”, Jeong and Kwak, (2019) p.52 Figure 8: “The art of 레드슈즈”, p.53

Jin Kim intentionally imbues features perceived as most desirable in Korean beauty culture into the design of Red Shoes. He emphasized that the team ‘endlessly revised and revised the size of Red Shoes’ eyes, the distance between them, the length of her eyelashes, the angle of her chin, her lips, her nose, etc ’ (Sam-seong et al. 2019, p.56). This great attention to detail makes perfect sense thematically, as Red Shoes is meant to represent unattainable, almost fantasy-like standards of beauty.

Synthesis - Subversion and Reinforcement

The decision to make Snow White the more confident, self-assured love interest subverts the romance dynamic of the female love interest needing male validation in accepting her appearance (e.g. The ending of *Shrek*: 'I don't understand. I'm supposed to be beautiful', 'But you *are* beautiful' [Adamson and Jenson, 2001]. This is not to say that Fiona is badly written, she subverts the 'Innocent Persecuted Heroine' trope very effectively [Zipes, 2012, p.81]). It is Merlin who ends up needing the most validation from Red Shoes/Snow White over the course of the narrative as he frequently self-deprecates his dwarf form.

Since beauty norms rely on conformity to remain relevant, Snow White subverts them simply by refusing to conform to a life reduced to a smaller, "more beautiful" body (Gill, 2007). She is not impressed by the shoes' magic. Instead of saying something derivative about preferring this new form, she simply remarks that she looks 'different' and even worries that due to her transformation her father won't recognise her when she finds him (Hong, 2019). She takes advantage of multiple opportunities to remove them, whether that be for personal comfort, her original body's strength, or to evade peril.

Merlin suddenly appears uncharacteristically insecure about his original body for a few moments after the curse is broken, even though he adheres to the beauty standard and is back in the body that he previously believed fully encapsulated his self-worth and identity. Through this arc, beauty norms are subverted: in the end, Merlin desires his and Snow's respective love for each other's authentic selves more than he desires either of them to possess a body that sits in line with conventions.

Bacchilega declares 'Though all popular fairy tales do not inscribe static and "natural" beauties like Snow White, the voices, gazes, and actions of female fairy-tale heroines

inevitably find themselves measured against such a normative frame' (Bacchilega, 2010, p.25). Fairytale heroines reduced to being static and beautiful is equivalent to a type of gaze (though in this case, the gaze manifests in a written form). 'Heroines [...] "unable to act independently or self-assertively"' and which 'solely on "external agents for rescue"' are essentially objectified. They are static and unmoving through their lack of agency, and their beauty is all-too-often the most interesting thing about them as people. They are just there to endure "prettily" like objects while the active male character carries more depth (Kilmer, 2015, p.3-4).

Even in the form of *Red Shoes*, Snow White does not endure or lack agency. She escapes her stepmother, actively searches for help, acts in self-defence on multiple occasions, and rescues Merlin from drowning with the help of her real body's strength. So, though the gaze is present in *Red Shoes*, the message actively discourages it, and Snow White does not surrender easily.

In many traditional fairytales, 'There is a clear link between beauty and goodness, most often in reference to younger women, and between ugliness and evil', and 'while beauty is often rewarded, lack of beauty is punished' (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz, 2003). In *Red Shoes*, these associations are intentionally reinforced through dialogue for the impending subversions to work and to further emphasize the importance of the intended messaging. Characters often verbalise their obsession with "othering" (Woodward, 1997).

Consistent mentions of the characters' biases from lines like 'a princess doesn't look like a witch', 'they said she was a witch, but she was too beautiful to be a witch', and 'I knew a girl this pretty couldn't possibly be a criminal' (Hong, 2019) can start to feel patronising at some point. Sometimes the narrative does not seem to trust the audience to "know" and could benefit from being subtler with some of the satire (Sneezy Reviews, 2020). Furthermore,

when do these satirical lines that are supposed to be making fun of these age-old fairytale tropes start to loop back around to heavily reinforcing the issue of beauty determining morality? Especially considering the pacing of the film and how it takes up a majority of the runtime to get to the point it is trying to make. Of course, subversion requires a build-up of trope reinforcement but worrying that younger audiences might internalise the wrong messages begins to feel justified.



Figure 9: "Opening Exposition/Fairy Princess" [1:18]

Some written reviews of the film reveal that parent viewers stopped the film halfway through, fearful of their children internalising the dialogue intended to be satirical and developing body-image issues.

As a woman who grew up with body image issues, I cannot believe this is even a movie for kids. The movie begins with a "cursed" girl who is on the larger side who finds magic shoes and becomes a skinny princess. This is targeted toward young girls who are at a vulnerable age to begin having body image issues when this is portrayed. I made my 7 year old turn it off.

The first half seems to set kids up for serious body image issues. But the film eventually gets to making the point it wants to make -- it just goes the LONG way to get there.

(Rotten Tomatoes, n.d.)

On the other hand, is it not also unfair to assume that younger viewers won't eventually comprehend the film's positive messages? Younger children may require guidance when approaching some subjects, but this does not immediately equate with a total lack of literacy and comprehension. It is true that the film does take a while to deliver its message fully, but the outright view that it is in complete agreement with old and harmful fairytale rhetoric lacks any merit or structure if the viewer does not possess the full scope of context. This criticism does not serve to blame these parent audiences; children are impressionable, and it is rational to want to protect them from internalising potentially harmful ideas.

Snow White doesn't have a lot of screentime compared to Red Shoes (which makes sense with the context of events and obstacles at play in the narrative). Despite the film's overarching message, beauty norms may still be reinforced through this. We are presented with a fat princess who loves herself, but we rarely see her on screen. She is often in the shadow of her magical counterpart. It is, however, a relief that the production team changed the original premise, as Snow White is not villainised, overly sexualised or played for laughs.

Here, a potentially upsetting question about audience reception and real-world bias is posed. Would fewer people be convinced to watch the film if it was just Snow White instead of Red Shoes on the debut posters? Is it truly necessary to reinforce first in order to subvert?

Conclusion

Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs utilises narrative strategies such as visual metaphors of transformation to explore characters' anxieties and desires surrounding their identities. Bordo's theories were crucial in this analysis. Merlin's transformation was the catalyst for his arc as a character that needs to grow and unlearn his internalised prejudices. Snow White's transformation into Red Shoes brought about awareness of gaze and body politics. Conflict towards her own identity and self-assuredness emerged as a response to alienating experiences with bias.

Snow White is a heroine that not only possesses agency but is fat and loves herself. She does not have to go through an arc of discovery and self-love; she is already self-actualised. Merlin, the male love interest, is an insecure character, and must go through an arc of personal growth. Here, common gendered dynamics are reversed.

The film subverts the subject of male gaze and beauty norms through its ironic and satirical humour. Perpetrators of gaze are actively mocked and intentionally painted as foolish by the framing, soundtrack, and the character's comedic actions. The main characters' cognitive biases and prejudice cause them to problematically conflate attractiveness with morality. Contrastingly, reinforcement of beauty standards and gaze is inferred through Red Shoes' dominance in terms of screentime and promotional materials.

The dominant iconography of the apple in *Snow White* adaptations is subverted. It is still representative of beauty, but a different kind. In older adaptations, the apple motif is conflated with natural beauty, but in *Red Shoes*, it becomes a symbol of unnaturalness and the superficiality of beauty norms.

Overall, *Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs* successfully subvert the tropes it aims to dismantle and adequately challenges and represents depictions of body and self. Apart from some discrepancies like the film's lengthy journey towards presenting its message, and considerable tension between audience and intention, Red Shoes poses intriguing and relevant conversations appropriate for most – if not all – age demographics. Although messages of self-love and inner beauty are often considered “cheesy”, overdone or “preachy”, it is undeniable that they still – and will continue to – hold value.

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Image List

Figure 1: Locus Animation and Finecut Studios (2017) *Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs* at Cannes Film Festival. Available at: <https://breadcrumbs.lmu.build/fairy-tales/fat-shaming-marketing-for-snow-white-movie/> Accessed: 23 November 2025.

Figure 2: "Opening Exposition" scene still [1:41] [Prime Video] Hong, *Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs*, (2019)

Figure 3: "Snow Escapes with the Shoes" scene still [6:50] [Prime Video], Hong, *Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs*, (2019)

Figure 4: "The Dwarfs meet Red Shoes" scene [10:15] [Prime Video], Hong, *Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs*, (2019)

Figure 5: "Town Escape" scene [33:00] [Prime Video], Hong, *Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs*, (2019)

Figure 6: "The Real Snow" scene [1:06:27] [Prime Video], Hong, *Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs*, (2019)

Figure 7: Sam-seong, J. and Jin-yeong, K. (2019), p.52, *The art of 레드슈즈*. Seoul, Korea: Sigongart : 시공사 [illustrations by Jeon Mi-Jin]

Figure 8: Sam-seong, J. and Jin-yeong, K. (2019), p.53, *The art of 레드슈즈*. Seoul, Korea: Sigongart : 시공사 [illustrations by Jeon Mi-Jin, Minjeong Choi and Jin Kim]

Figure 9: "Opening Exposition/Fairy Princess" [1:18] [Prime Video], Hong, *Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs*, (2019)

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1. **Red Shoes* in italics is referring to the film title, Red Shoes in regular is referring to the character.
 2. ⁱ*Quotes ending in [sic] are to emphasize the fact that text has been roughly translated. *The art of 레드슈즈* is entirely in Korean and has no available English translations. Text was translated with the camera on Google Translate. It is likely not exact.