

Imagine That *An Interview with Jack Zipes*

By the Editors of Interstitial Journal

Jack Zipes is Professor Emeritus of German and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota. Former Director of the Center for German and European Studies, he is a leading scholar of the fairy tale genre and children's literature. His numerous books include *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (1983), *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* (1994), *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry* (1997), *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter* (2002), and *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* (2006). His most recent work, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*, analyzes the evolution and adaptability of fairy tales from an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing insights from fields as varied as cognitive and evolutionary science, anthropology, and literary criticism.

To begin, you've often discussed how fairy tale trajectories reflect shifting social dynamics, including adaptation to the insertion of new technologies into people's daily activities. Given that fairy tales articulate and reinforce social codes, how is the normative power of fairy tales being challenged and/or reinforced by the proliferation of new media, and how is the ethos of new media technologies reflected in the modern presentation of fantastical tropes?

What ethos? Do the new technologies contain an ethos? Do mechanical inventions contain an ethos? Well, I suppose some do, like guns and bombs and missiles. But, for the most part, technologies are marvelous inventions that can be used ethically or unethically, depending on who controls them. Walter Benjamin pointed this out many years ago in his famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."¹ To the extent that most technologies are in the hands of large corporations, we can expect that the new technologies will basically function to make money and deplete the normative power of storytelling and fairy tales. I recently gave a talk about the hyping of fairy tales by the mass media, and if you don't mind, I shall answer your question by quoting a longish excerpt from this talk.

The Grimms promoted the collecting of all sorts of folk tales throughout the nineteenth

¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," first published as "L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée," in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Jahrgang V, Félix Alcan, Paris, 1936, pp. 40–68.

century, and they were certain that if other educated men and women began gathering tales from the common people, these stories, especially the fairy tales, would resonate among young and old from all social classes. Indeed, to a great extent, they were right. The nineteenth century, especially in Europe and North America, became the golden age of fairy tale collecting that led to the foundation of folklore societies. By the twentieth century, the fairy tale and other simple folk genres began to thrive not only by word of mouth and through print, as they had for centuries, but were also transformed, adapted, and disseminated through radio, postcards, greeting cards, comics, cinema, fine arts, performing arts, wedding ceremonies, television, dolls, toys, games, theme parks, clothes, the Internet, university courses, and numerous other media and objects. Among the modes of hyped advertising were posters, billboards, interviews, window dressings, department store shows, radio, tv, and Internet interviews, ads in newspapers, magazines, and journals, and all the other kinds of paratexts that accompany a cultural product. As I argued in my book *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*, the classical fairy tales have become memes, cultural bits of relevant information, and the paratexts of fairy tales have formed memeplexes, that is, groups of variants that add to the meaning of the meme.² In correspondence with Michael Drout, who has written a significant book about memes, *How Tradition Works: A Meme-Based Cultural Poetics of the AngloSaxon Tenth Century*, he has suggested: "In memetic terms, I think a para-text is a meme-plex that forms around a text, and the para-textual material can provide extra data about how to interpret what's inside the text. That material, because it stays in its own form, can become separated from its original cultural context, which evolves more quickly than something in a fixed form can. The para-text, then, provides meta-data about how ambiguities in the main text should be interpreted. The most obvious place where this happens is when we get a particular image of an actor or actress (or animation) of a traditional tale, and that image is thereafter fixed in place even when some of the written descriptions might be more ambiguous, but I'm thinking that material like toys, posters, etc., also works to form around the text in this way (I have a box in the basement filled with my daughter's Disney princesses; these dolls lock into place a particular look for fairy tale characters whose descriptions are not quite as fixed as the icon designed to sell merchandise to little girls)."

Today we are inundated by fairy tales that are not only present in the home but are also taught from pre-school through the university in the UK and North America. They are in all walks of life, and to some degree, we even try to transform our lives into fairy tales. They have become second nature, or as Roland Barthes might say, fairy tales have become 'mythic'. They appear to be universal and natural stories of the way life should be while concealing their artistic constellations and their basic history and ideology. In my book *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*, I remarked that it is impossible to grasp the history of the fairy tale and the relationship of the fairy tale to myth without taking into consideration the manner in which tales have been revised, duplicated, adapted, and

2 Jack Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*, London: Routledge (2006).

manipulated to reinforce dominant ideologies and often to subvert them.³ To be more precise, the evolution of the fairy tale as a cultural genre is marked by a process of dialectical appropriation involving imitation and revision that set the cultural conditions for its mythicization, institutionalization, and expansion as a mass-mediated genre through radio, film, television, and the Internet. For the most part, the history of this memetic process is obscured if not negated today by hyping newly produced fairy-tale films, books, musicals, and other products as extraordinary achievements that actually cheapen the meaning of fairy tales that the Brothers Grimm and other nineteenth-century collectors sought to preserve. Hying is the exact opposite of preservation and involves, as I have argued, conning consumers and selling products that have a meager cultural value and will not last.

Some recent fairy tale films produced by the mainstream culture industry reveal how filmmakers and producers hype to sell shallow products geared primarily to make money. They use the mass media to exploit the widespread and constant interest in fairy tales that has actually deepened since the nineteenth century. For instance, in December of 2010, the Disney corporation dubbed the Grimms' "Rapunzel," called it *Tangled*, and announced: "Disney presents a new twist on one of the most hilarious and hair-raising tales ever told." Actually, the Disney promoters should have called the film *Mangled* because of the way it slaughtered and emptied the meaning of the Grimms' and other "Rapunzel" folk tales. When viewed closely, *Tangled* is yet another inane remake of Disney's *Snow White*. The major conflict is between a pouting adolescent princess and a witch. The Disney films repeatedly tend to demonize older women and infantilize young women. Gone are any hints that "Rapunzel" might reflect a deeper initiation ritual in which wise old women keep young girls in isolation to protect them.

Gone, too, are any hints in Catherine Hardwicke's recent 2011 film *Red Riding Hood* that "Little Red Riding Hood" is a serious and complicated tale about rape. Here much of the hype, which cost millions of dollars, began long before the film was even shown. For instance, last November, The Los Angeles Times proclaimed: "Catherine Hardwicke understands impetuous teen heroines the way George Lucas reverse-engineers robot sidekicks. In March, the director of *Twilight* and *Thirteen* will unleash her newest troublemaker upon the world with a dark, sensuous spin on 'Red Riding Hood.'"⁴ However, the only thing that Hardwicke demonstrated is that she understands neither teens nor fairy tales, and her theme-park sets, stereotyped characters, and father-turned-werewolf gave rise to a ridiculous, convoluted plot that bored audiences. The only thing she understands is how to hype and sell herself and all the products connected with the film. Writing on March 8, 2011 in the *Los Angeles Times*, Susan Carpenter reported about the novel and e-book that were issued before the film: "The book debuted at No. 1 on the *New York Times* children's paperback bestseller list when it was released in late

3 Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale As Myth/Myth As Fairy Tale*, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky (1994).

4 Rebecca Keegan, "'Red Riding Hood' director Catherine Hardwicke explains the big, bad sexy secret," *Los Angeles Times: Hero Complex*, November 16, 2010.

January, serving as a sort of multimedia prequel and pump-primer for the film, directed by Catherine Hardwicke. As an e-book, *Red Riding Hood* includes video interviews with Hardwicke and her many collaborators, an animated short film, audio discussion about the set design and props, costume sketches, and Hardwicke's hand-drawn maps of the world where *Red Riding Hood* takes place, among other things...To novelize Red Riding Hood, Hardwicke got the OK from her publisher, Little Brown. She just needed an author to write it. For that, she turned to a 21-year-old graduate of Barnard's creative writing program named Sarah Blakely-Cartwright."⁵ Neither the print novel nor the e-book are worth the paper or screen on which they are printed or beamed. Somehow, however, the celebrity Hardwicke and her producers had to keep trying to make money, and of course, there was a DVD issued in June with special features including an alternate ending to the film, which depicts Valerie, alias Red Riding Hood, with a newborn child in her arms at her grandmother's house, where her lover unites with her. If this were not enough, there was a sequel book to the film and prequel to the DVD, *Red Riding Hood from Script to Screen*, written by Hardwicke and David Leslie Johnson, and published on April 12, 2011. It contains an introduction, notes, and sketches by Hardwicke, the screenplay by Johnson, 96 pages of color concept art, storyboards, and costume evolution and illustrations, and behind-the-scenes photographs. The synergy was completed later in June by the DVD. Profits for a planned blockbuster, which was a critical flop and commercial fiasco, have to be obtained several weeks after the premiere. But nothing could save Hardwicke's film, not even her vapid comments about the tale or the ridiculous hyperbole to foster consumerism.

The expensive, if not wasteful production practices of the recent wave of fairy tale films that involve the use of extraordinary special effects, costly marketing, the hiring of celebrities to attract audiences, and ideologies that reflect a perverse kind of feminism have followed the example set by Hardwicke's *Red Riding Hood*—and here I am thinking of *Mirror, Mirror* (2012) directed by Tarsem Singh, *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) directed by Rupert Sanders, *Hansel & Gretel: Witchhunters* (2013) directed by Tomy Wirkola, and *Oz the Great and Powerful* (2013) directed by Sam Raimi. To impress audiences, the directors of these sensational baroque films that masquerade as fairy tales employ every new digital device to endorse the notion that women must learn to fight and kill like men in order to become 'new' strong women; that is, they all imply that to become a genuine woman today, one must become man-like. There is a certain pernicious joy exhibited by the heroines in these films as they flick swords, wands, and sci-fi weapons to destroy opponents and to proclaim might makes right. In addition, evil in the worlds of these films is rooted in devious women, and women must fight against women to bring about justice. But, in my opinion, the result is only a warped sense of justice when the directors and screenwriters of these films have no clue whatsoever as to how power politics are realistically played out in the hands of men throughout the world.

As for other ridiculously hyped films for young audiences, there is *Hoodwinked Too!*

5 Susan Carpenter, "Red Riding Hood' movie is already a hit as a novel and e-book," *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 2011.

Hood vs. Evil, touted on one of the official websites on October 28, 2009, a year and a half before the film was even released: "This is a film that all children should watch! A fun, exciting movie with a lesson to be learned by the end. The animation is quite exceptional, and the actors as well as actresses do a great job in displaying their roles within the film. The story is a must have for those who enjoy good happy endings. Not to reveal too much, but the story of *Hood vs. Evil* is a very attractive one. Keep your eye on this film because it could be something to talk about for sometime." Yet, this computer animated film is nothing less than an uninspired sequel to the 2005 *Hoodwinked*, which features Red Riding Hood and the Wolf as sleuths, called upon to work together to rescue Hansel and Gretel from a witch. As the AP reporter Jake Coyle has written, "Such mash-ups of fairy tales have become commonplace since *Shrek* and children's books like David Wiesner's *The Three Pigs*."⁶

What is also commonplace, of course, is hype. Ever since the end of World War II, advertising and publicity have exaggerated and distorted the value of all products. We live in a world of hype, but it is also a world that manages to produce works of art that take fairy tales and the Brothers Grimm seriously—and not only the Grimms, but many of the writers of classical fairy tales such as Charles Perrault, Madame d'Aulnoy, Hans Christian Andersen, Collodi, and Lewis Carroll. Their works continue to resonate with us not because of hype, but because of their integrity: They have tapped into our utopian need for the "corrective" worlds of fairy tales. In respecting the integrity of past fairy tale artworks, numerous contemporary filmmakers—such as Michel Ocelot and Catherine Breillat in France, Hayao Miyazaki in Japan, Christoph Hochhäusler in Germany, Yim Phil-Sung in South Korea, Garri Bardin in Russia, and Guillermo del Toro and Tim Burton in the U.S.—have re-created fairy tales with such verve and imagination that, though they need advertisement, do not depend on hype to appeal to audiences. They depend on our hope for changing the world in a meaningful way. The same can be said for some of the remarkable fairy tales written by such talented authors such as Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie, A.S. Byatt, Marina Warner, Tanith Lee, Philip Pullman in the UK, Margaret Atwood in Canada, and Robert Coover, Jane Yolen, Donna Jo Napoli, John Barth, Francesca Lia Bloch in the U.S. They do not need hype to be recognized as storytellers who are keeping the profound tradition of the fairy tale alive. Thanks to them, the Grimms can rest peacefully in their graves, for hype can never destroy the substantial quality of meaningful fairy tales.

To extend my previous question, American networks now air two popular primetime television series that are based on fairy tales, "Grimm" and "Once Upon a Time." Both shows attempt to bridge fairy tales with reality by bringing the conflicts of the former to bear upon the latter, with fairy tale characters becoming inhabitants of the modern world. What, if anything, do these shows say about society's changing affect with regard to its sociocultural condition, as well as our perception of the uncanny?

6 Jake Coyle, "Star-studded voice cast can't save 'Hoodwinked Too'," *Associated Press*, April 26, 2011.

Well, I really wouldn't say that *Grimm* and *Once Upon a Time* attempt to bridge fairy tales with reality. Both shows, slickly produced as spectacles, exploit fairy tale motifs and plots to sell the products (peripherals) that surround the actual screenplays. And here we should also discuss the 'new kid' on the block of fairy tale tv shows, "Beauty and the Beast" (the CW 2012 series) based on the 1987 CBS series. There is nothing relevant in any of the shows that enables viewers to gain a better understanding of fairy tales or the reality of the viewers. One show maintains that fairy tales are real (ABC); the other that reality is not a fairy tale (NBC); the third (CW) is simply an "overheated, badly written, wretchedly acted and unconvincing drama, which makes mincemeat out of the traditional beauty and the beast fairy tale."⁷ The fact is that all three shows are conventional and predictable, if not trite, bricolages of fairy tales. *Once Upon a Time* is perhaps the most trivial and continues a sexist depiction of women fighting other women over men and basically demonizes the witch figure in a Caucasian world that bears little resemblance to any town I have ever encountered in America. *Grimm* has the now typical multicolored detective buddy team, a sentimental story about a young male, whose love for his beautiful girlfriend might endanger the sweet thing, an assortment of werewolves, who never played a role in the Grimms' tale or world, and gruesome scenes that are purposely made to chill our bones, though we know that our heroes will always triumph in the end. *Beauty and the Beast* makes a mockery out of female power, true love, and criminality. These shows only reveal that the major tv corporations merely want spectacles to create more profit and distract us from the more crucial social issues that touch our everyday lives.

In one of your most famous essays, "Breaking the Disney Spell," you argued that Disney recasts fairy tales through the gaze of mass mediation, specifically with an eye toward consumption and commodification. In what ways have fairy tales as a literary genre further collapsed into commodification with the inception of new animation techniques and studios, like Pixar (now owned by Disney) and Dreamworks?

All one has to do is view the more recent Disney, Dreamworks, and other commercial films—*Tangled*, *Hoodwinked Too*, *Puss in Boots*, all the *Shrek* films after the initial one—to understand how the latest animation techniques are being used for commodification. The tales told are stale, even if the special effects are new. This is the contradiction in these productions—while technology makes great advances, the filmmakers dumb down fairy tales and use the technological innovations to cater to the lowest common denominators of taste in America. There are some films like *How to Train Your Dragon* and *The Secret of Kells* and the Russian Bardin's *The Ugly Duckling*, the Czech Barta's *In the Attic*, and the French Ocelot's *Azur and Asmar* that do manage to combine technological innovation with brilliant storytelling, but their films are not widely distributed.

In the past, you've talked about fairy tales carrying forth an emancipatory political

⁷ David Wiegand, "Beauty and the Beast," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 9, 2012.

aesthetic, one that valorizes justice to the extent of, at times, being considered subversive. Can fairy tales challenge modern power relations and, if so, how can they be employed to critique the historical apparatuses upon which today's political discourses are based?

Fairy tales are by their nature subversive. Not all, but most. This is because they depict a counter-world based on naive morality that stands in opposition to the corrupt 'real' world based on the notion that might makes right. The globalized power network is so strong that fairy tales cannot really challenge modern power relations or even be employed to critique present-day globalized capitalism. I don't mean that they cannot do this; that is, offer a critique, as Gari Bardin, Jiri Barta, Jan Svankmajer, Michel Ocelot, and others do so creatively in their films. And, of course, there are large numbers of writers who have adapted fairy tales in extraordinary ways. But we cannot ask of art and artists to do what we must first do through social action in our daily lives. Fairy tales offer hope and plans for social action. We must realize them.

An emergent philosophical movement called 'object-oriented ontology' holds that all objects, human and nonhuman, exist on equal footing with one another and have all sorts of qualities inexhaustible by human usage. Likewise, fairy tales emphasize the life of objects more than many other literary genres, imbuing such things as lamps and mirrors with unique potential. Can you briefly discuss the way objects are used in fairy tales, especially with regard to how they comport or conflict with the actions of human characters, or take on lives of their own?

Among the great fairy tale writers who first used objects were E.T.A. Hoffmann, Hans Christian Andersen, and Oscar Wilde. Of course, in the ancient oral traditions, objects were always endowed with magical, if not lifelike, powers. There was a sense in pagan times and even up to the present that all objects and animals deserved to be revered or treated in the same way that humans treated each other. It is as though humans set the standards for normative behavior that is considered humane behavior. But as you and I know, we humans are not the most humane animals in the world. (My dog is more kind and humane than I am!) So, there is a tendency among fairy tale writers and storytellers to endow objects with special qualities that humans must learn to appreciate; otherwise the objects will work against them. In many respects, this critical attitude can be seen in the way science fiction writers have developed stories that reflect how machines and robots rebel against deceitful and untrustworthy humans. In fairy tales, the magical objects that are acquired by oppressed protagonists come to their aid because these protagonists are kind and decent people.

The last decade has seen a renewed focus on children's literature, owing largely to the commercial success of the "Twilight" and "Harry Potter" book series. Have these works extended the hegemony of the culture industry of which they are a part, and, more generally, how can more pluralistic forms of children's literature overcome processes of cultural homogenization in order to gain an audience?

You forgot to mention all the new tweeny books such as the *Gossip Girls* series or even the *Grimm Sisters* series. I don't think that the artful books for young readers will ever overcome the process of cultural homogenization, but I am not pessimistic because there are hundreds of superb writers and illustrators in the world, who still manage to be published and distributed. I have stated in a talk that 90 percent of children's literature tends to be schlock. Neil Gaiman criticized me and argued that even if children read shit, it's good for them because we use shit to fertilize the land and people. I think Gaiman's popularist attitude is stupid and silly because we don't use human shit, which is what these books are, to fertilize and cultivate the brains and imaginations of young people. Let's face it, if you dumb down children and keep dumbing them down, they will not learn to think for themselves and be encouraged to explore the world and their own talents. So, I think that we need to keep fostering provocative and controversial children's literature, and ironically, many of Gaiman's books fall into that category—not all, but enough so that he should know the difference between schlock and quality literature and what causes cultural homogenization. As long as we support marginal work in the field of cultural production and resist and criticize schlock, there is hope that innovative books for young readers will not be neglected and will keep resistance to cultural hegemony alive.

Part of the power of fairy tales seems to emanate from their ability to highlight the coexistence of, and conflict between, different types of speech. What lessons might we draw from the 'heteroglossia' of fantastic tropes about the need for opening new spaces for dialogue, especially with regard to previously unheard voices?

To answer your question, I want to comment about Heinz Rölleke's recent book, *Es war einmal...Die wahren Märchen der Brüder Grimm und wer sie ihnen erzählte* (2011), whose title in English reads, *Once Upon a Time...The True Tales of the Brothers Grimm and Who Told Them to Them*.⁸ Rölleke is the most eminent and prolific German scholar of the Grimms' tales, and for this book, he collaborated with the talented German illustrator, Albert Schindehütte, a notable Grimm specialist in his own right, who has published two significant books on Johann Friedrich Krause and Marie Hassenpflug, two of the Grimms' important informants. *Es war einmal* is filled with Schindehütte's unique illustrations of the Grimms themselves, 25 of their different contributors and several friends, and 35 illustrations for each of the tales in this collection. The purpose of this edition—and to a certain extent Rölleke has come full circle in his research—is to uncover and pay tribute to the people who provided the Grimms with different kinds of tales in their earliest versions before they were changed and honed, largely by Wilhelm Grimm. It is commonly known that the Grimms did not provide detailed information about their informants and exactly when, where, and how they passed on the stories that they either told to the Grimms or wrote down for them. Even when the Grimms did indicate the sources of the tales, some of their information was misleading.

⁸ Heinz Rölleke, *Es war einmal: Die wahren Märchen der Brüder Grimm und wer sie ihnen erzählte*, Frankfurt: Eichborn (2011).

Rölleke has made it his 'mission' during the past 35 years or so to trace the history of the informants. During the course of these years, his voluminous essays clarified how the Grimms obtained their tales and what their sources were. Finally, in *Es war einmal*, he has published selected tales from 25 informants that can be found in the Oelenberg manuscript or the 1812-15 edition. These tales are truer to the authentic storytelling tradition of their time and quite different from the same tales that the Grimms gradually edited until they reached their polished form in the seventh edition of 1857. Rölleke's plan is to let the informants speak for themselves, true to the present methods of modern folklorists, who generally take care to provide biographical information of the storytellers and the context in which the tales are recorded.

In *Es war einmal*, we now gain a more comprehensive understanding of the background of the tales and how the Grimms worked. As Rölleke demonstrates, most of the early informants were literate; many knew French; almost all were from the bourgeoisie; they were also relatively young. Either their tales belonged to their personal repertoire, or they filtered the tales from an unknown source or their memory as children. In the process of establishing 'appropriate' versions for print, the tales often underwent censorship and self-censorship. And of course, the Grimms contributed to the censorship. Rölleke cites the famous cases of Rapunzel, who is impregnated by the prince who climbs into her tower, and the princess in "The Frog King," who sleeps with the frog in her bed after he transforms himself into a handsome king. These incidents were actually in the early versions of the tales and then eliminated by the Brothers Grimm, who made every effort to 'purify' the tales and make them seem anonymous, as though they all stemmed from the folk.

Rölleke and other scholars have long since exploded the 'myth' that the Grimms traversed the countryside and gathered unvarnished tales from 'genuine' peasants. It is not his intention in *Es war einmal* to repeat what is already known. What is significant in this book is Rölleke's extensive historical recuperation of neglected documents: he supplies as much information as possible about the early informants, showing their contributions that stemmed from their personal interests, and clarifying the intricacies of transcribing oral tales that the Grimms felt obliged to change according to their concept of what constituted oral folk language and storytelling.

I have given you a longwinded answer to your question because I agree with its assumption and because I wanted to present an example of how a collection of fairy tales edited by an astute scholar can show how the power of fairy tales emanates from their ability to highlight the coexistence of, and conflict between, different types of speech. The diverse and dialogic tales that the Grimms collected opened new spaces for dialogue, especially with regard to previously unheard voices, but we must work tirelessly to let these unheard voices speak for themselves.