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## Generating New Meanings: Once Upon the Evolution of the Wundermärchen

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### **Abstract:**

Wondrous and continuously inviting readers to dwell in astonishment, the universe of fairytales is certainly full of marvelous facts. Displaying a long narrative of a passionate evolution in time, the enchantment genre celebrated its compassionate narratives by moving from oral tradition to literature, to the amazing world of cinema. Therefore, this research paper unveils the way this narrative institutionalized itself as a genre both in literature and cinema. The paper first traces the unique evolution of fairy tales from the oral to the written tradition; it then reveals the peculiar migration of the genre to the cinematic field accompanied with the nouveau uprising of the Twentieth Century cinematic genre and the Walt Disney Company.

**Keywords:** Fairytales, Cinema, Literature, Cinematic Genre, Walt Disney Company.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

To extraneous spirits dote of inventive artistic narrations, to purely ardent lovers of voyage and expedition, the universe of literature assorts a refulgent variety for readers to delve in. Elusive and adept, it was avowed that since man has dreamed, he has owned a peculiar taste for reciting stories in the most aspiring and enthralling manner. Rather utile and practical to voice reverence and devastation, to elude ennui and discontent and to echo wounds and desires, that is indeed the way myths were brought forth filled with Gods, who later were rendered monsters or fairies. The myths of Cupid and Psyche have come down the centuries to exalt Beauty and the Beast.

Enchanting tales subsist as well in India, Arabia, and also in China and Africa. In reality, the striking themes and structures of narratives are deemed to be quite universal. Indeed, quite marvellous and wondrous, and born out of a recital passed along by word of mouth, the fairy tale genre in particular earned an unprecedented stature, both as, an imparted divine influence on literature, and as an inspirational device for mass, lucrative entertainment. Recognized as a social rite based on a sort of magic pact acknowledging the storyteller as a ferryman between generations, the fairy tale is made of a splendid world where animals talk, where time and distance diverge, where objects hold magical dimensions and where the “happy ending” is merely the only way to close up the tale.

Hostile but bewitching, the woodland is a prominent feature of the universe of tales. Lieu of ordeals and explorations par excellence, it besets heroes and heroines with brutalization, death and the supernatural. Taking hold of a crucial place in the narrative, fantastic animals further ornament the woodland and create wonderment to the reader. Unicorns, dragons, firebirds, mermaids and talking donkeys, a variety which indeed fascinates and astonishes, contribute in generating an entirely fabulous and chimerical bestiary. However, wonder tales were not born as the magical literary genre recognized today, nor have they always been known as fairy tales amidst the several phases of their development. Fairy tales, henceforth, carry an intriguing history filled with a myriad of riveting facts.

Certainly, to Andrew Teverson (2013) "similar plots and stories began to appear in writing between 1250 and 2000 years before the birth of Christ" (cited in Zipes, 2012, p. 97). Ordinarily told and spread orally, these tales were then registered in antiquity in writing just perchance. They, in point of fact, continued to be recited until the modern era, enabling one to enunciate that wonder tales –in their motifs and themes- are as eonian as the human living's practice of telling stories. Notwithstanding, regarded as a set of greatly recognizable conventions by the reader, the wundermärchen's origins might be traced to Western Europe during the last few centuries: what was just a story commonly propagated orally was rendered an established literary genre designed to reach tremendous applauds for its inventive aesthetic actions. Notably, the fairy tale discourse can be considered a dynamic part of the historical process of civilization in Europe (cited in Zipes, 2012, p. 99). To put it



another way, with Giambattista Basile, Charles Perrault, and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm a real literary genre was institutionalized.

Moreover, displaying greediness and passion, the fairy tale genre did but enlarge its district and embark on the amazing world of cinema. Intriguingly, the wonder tale genre witnessed a peculiar migration to the cinematic field. Cinema likewise asserts its proximity to the genre while often declaring to be presenting the avant-garde in the efficient and satisfying manner. As an ultimate Gesamtkunstwerk (total artwork), cinema celebrated compassionate narratives and triumphantly prompted and spread the fairy tale global influence as a cinematic product mainly through the Twentieth century Walt Disney Company.

Accordingly, the main interests of this scientific paper is to first trace the evolution of the fairy tale in time reckoning the way narrative migrated from the oral to the written tradition. Deemed to be crucial for the progressive establishment of the fairy tale genre, the focus will be mainly put on Giambattista Basile, Charles Perrault and the Grimm Brothers. Then, the second objective of this article is to unveil the nature of the migration of the fairy tale genre in the cinematic field, the novel emergence of the new cinematic genre leading to the important uprising of the Twentieth century Walt Disney Company.

## **2. The Genre of Enchantment Defined**

Charming and enchanting, applauded for its creativity and triumphant for its sophistication, the fairy tale dislocates its readers into a universe full of magic and fantasy. Stemmed from the Latin word “Fata”, the fairy is the prosopopoeia of the marvellous. Historically signifying the Fates, Gods of Hades who swirled the fates of humans, fairy tales are short narratives remarkably full of typical mythical entities, such as giants, dwarfs, mermaids, unicorns and talking animals. Put to govern, influence and direct human fates, the fairy and her evil counterparts; the witch, are a crucial part of the narrative (Zipes, 2006). Filled with ordeals and ambition, dripping with fierceness, determination and perseverance, wonder tales-another alternative term from the German Wundermarchen- display a different world; a counter world wherein social justice and the “happy ending” are more promptly reachable than in the real world.

In his book "The Brothers Grimm: Complete Fairy Tales Grimm VS. Disney", Vincenzo di Kastiaux declares that: "a fairy tale signifies belief in the supernatural, not the suspension of belief. We all believe in the extraordinary of Once Upon a Time"(cited in Zipes, 2011, p. 221). Put differently, being a delighted fairy or old, devilish fairy, fairy tale characters are incessantly immortal and take hold of supernatural powers enabling them to award qualities or curse, protect or condemn to misery and finally punish or confer prosperity. Pictured differently, male figures are projected as disfigured ogres, cunning giants and expedient magicians. Instruments of enchantment, the magic wand



par excellence; being made of ordinary branch or expensive jewel, certainly add magic, mesmerism and much symbolism to the tale. Finally, love is eagerly reached after several overcame ordeals to be ergo placed under the fashionable heading of "they lived happily ever after", as Bettelheim confirms:

Struggling against serious difficulties of life is unavoidable and is an integral part of human experience, but if instead of turning back, we firmly face unexpected and often unfamiliar ordeals, we overcome every obstacle finally end up victorious(Bettelheim, 1977).

Fairy tales, therefore, represent the complex journey of its dashing characters from childhood to adulthood. A wonder tale is simply a tale of some length involving a succession of motifs or episodes. It moves in an unreal world without definite locality or definite creatures and is filled with the marvellous. In this never-never land, humble heroes kill adversaries, succeed to kingdoms and marry princesses (Thomson, 1977).

Certainly, the fairy story has been written down as to encompass the "wonderous element" (Propp, 1968). To put it another way, to pioneering scholars like Vladimir Propp and Jack Zipes, the wondrous element is a supernatural power which brings about change in a character's life. Propp (1968) further asserts that: "plenty of fairy tales do not become fairy tales when written; some produce fables and others become myths or epics. But, for a folk tale to become a fairy tale, it is compulsory to include a wondrous element." Arguably, other scholars affirm that the fairytale primordial characteristic is the marvelous phenomena; an aspect that the professor of German and Comparative literature Jack Zipes (2006) entitles "the celebration of wondrous change".

Fairy tales, therefore, exalt a universe full of magic and wonderment. Embracing audacious heroes and fearless heroines, the wonder tale promises all kind of exploitations and specifically provides a state of escape from misery, malfeasance and dullness. Indeed, a genre endorsing much excitement and appealingness inculcates avidness to explore new corners of its history; a particular desire to unveil the place where fairy tales sprung into being.

### **3. Once Upon a Time: Birth of the Marvellous**

A canonical appui in a time where recounting stories by word of mouth was of grand popularity, the fairy tale is undeniably derivative of the 'folk tale'. Stemming from a story circulated orally among the common folk, the märchen is a sub-class of the folk story. It is the oldest form, from Panchatantra to the Pentamerone, show considerable reworking from the oral form (Swann Jones, 2002, p. 36). As old as the human beings' ability of producing words, the oral tradition of the fairy tale came in fact long before the



spoken versions of stories were esteemed. In other words, fairy tales' furthest origins date from about 5000 years for stories were only spoken and not written down.

Accordingly, earlier and in the same context, Zipes claims that: "though it is impossible to trace the historical origin and evolution of fairy tales to a particular time or place, we do know that humans began telling tales as soon as they developed the capacity of speech" (Zipes, 2012, p. 96). J.L. Dassales continues saying that: "they may have even used sign language before speech originated to communicate vital information for responding and adapting to their environment for survival" (Dessalles, 2007, pp. 139–210). These tales, henceforth, simply delivered knowledge and experience, warned about danger and explained what deemed to be inexplicable in magic, miracles and fantasy.

For this particular reason, Marina Warner (Warner, 2014) commented more than once that: "mass literary in a recent phenomenon"; a claim conjoining the avowal that fairy tales are rooted in oral traditions that eventually engendered literary tales much as those by Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen (Zipes, 2012, p. 96). He further claims that: "these oral tales were never given titles nor did they exist in the form in which they are told, printed, painted, recorded, performed and filmed today" (idem, p. 96).

Moreover, exploiting a route from points further East, the wundermärchen owes much of its origins to the Arabian Nights. Equally known as *The Thousand and One Nights*, the Arabian Nights is an epic collection of oriental stories in the Arabic language. Indeed, *Alf Laila Wa-Laila* (in Arabic) greatly evolved into a powerful medium for Western fantasy authorship since the early eighteenth century. Projecting a fascinating evolution from the oral oriental and literary tradition of the Middle Ages to an adopted classic work of Western readers, the Arabian Nights is deemed to be the owner of a long, convoluted history that reveals the narrative structure's complexity wherein one captivating tale evokes the other so as to continuously perform imagination and never stop enchantment and wonder. Certainly, from the moment Antoine Galland translated and invented *Les mille et une nuit*, the format, style and motifs of the so-called Arabian tales had a profound effect on how other European and American writers were to define and conceive fairy tales (Zipes, 2015, p. 25)

An equally significant aspect in the history of the birth of the marvelous besides folktales and the Arabian Nights as prominent landmarks in the genre's rootage is the conceiving of fairy tales as literature for children. Verily, fairy tales as a unique entertaining literary writing style for children undertakes a crucial place in the birth of the genre. Primarily written for children for the particular aim of amusing them with their enchanting world occupied by its specific characters, it is in fact highly complex to tincture the origin of the first children's wonder tale due to children literature oral



tradition. Interestingly, one early writing of literature for children was the chapbook; a small book made of a single sheet folded several times and containing poems, fairytales and plays. Such books include tales like Jack and the Beanstalk, an authentic delight for children.

"Provocative and persuasive" as designated by The Boston Globe, but also "a splendid achievement brimming with useful ideas, with insights into how young children read and understand, and most of all overflowing with a realistic optimism and with an experienced and therapeutic good will"(cited in Bettelheim, 1977) as denoted by Harold Bloom in The New York Review of Books, wonder tales fit the minds of both creative and average children. In contrast to other forms of literature, fairy tales help the child define his identity and calling through diverse experiences involved in the further development of characters. Despite hardships, fairy tales demonstrate that a rewardful life is for certain of one's reach but only if one dares facing the harsh hazardous obstacles of life. Quite important for reaching a true identity, these tales promise that if a child does not fear confronting and challenging the unknown, he will succeed in attaining truth and peace.

However, deemed to be the Golden Age of the genre's development is the Nineteenth Century. In fact, it is next to impossible to explain how fairy tales, largely during the Nineteenth century were assigned to children in different national cultures (Zipes, 2012, p. 97). As children tales contain moral principles and realistic views of the world, children's stories and fairy tales in particular have migrated to the field of entertainment for all ages. They became the perfect refugee for both children and adults as it suited their needs and desires and delighted their rational spirits.

#### **4. Märchen- Definition of the Genre's Origins**

Somewhere between "Once Upon a Time" and "they lived happily ever after", the fairy tale genre embraces a history full of captivating facts. Through circulating for centuries ago, it is with Charles Perrault, Giambattista Basile and the Grimm Brothers that a literary genre was institutionalized. In fact, if the history of fairy tales is envisioned as a map, the collections of the aforementioned authors dominate their surroundings so astonishingly that they make it very hard to pinpoint other features. They are in truth the basis for the fairy tales establishment as a literary genre.

##### **4.1 The Genesis with Giambattista Basile's Seditions Tales**

Highly challenging to trace the historical origins of fairy tales to a specific time and place, it was, however, in Europe that the genre went through its most significant foundational period. Denoted previously as conte, cunto, cuento, shazka, märchen and so many more, it is between the Fifteenth and Seventeenth centuries "where the formation of



fairy tales as a genre begins" (Teverson, 2013, p. 44). Indeed, although Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron marked indicator lamp for authors for its novella form and specific framework device characteristic, writers as Giovan Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile laid the foundation for the literary fairy tale (Zipes, 2006, pp. 13–28).

Delivered in succinct Tuscan or standard Italian, Straparola's *Le Piacevoli Notti* (The Pleasant Nights, 1550-53) comprise fairy tale motifs and conversation taken from oral märchens. In effect, in amongst the 74 stories, scholars have identified about 15 stories that can be described as literary Marchen, including early variants 19 of Puss in Boots. The Sorcerer's Apprentice and Beauty and the Beast (Teverson, 2013, p. 46). But, a fully inaugurated genre was established within the gigantic publication of Basile's *Lo Cunto de li Cunti Overro lo Trattenmiento de Peccerille*: Basile's tales of enchantment and marvels lightly laid the foundation of the literary fairy tale genre (Zipes, 2012). Filled with striking idioms and metaphors quite complex to decrypt until today, and produced in an elevated baroque style, Basile's narratives are often "bawdy, irreverent, erotic, cruel, frank and unpredictable. The endings are not always happy. Some are even tragic; many are hilarious" (Zipes, 2015, p. 22). According to scholars, therefore, Giambattista Basile may be regarded as the creator of the first complete and integral collection of authored, literary fairy tales in Western Europe (Zipes, 2006, p. 16).

Conversely, in spite of the exerted influence Basile's *Lo Cunto de li Cunti overro lo Tettenemiento de Peccerille* diffused on the latest Seventeenth century French writers, Basile's writings were never deemed as popular as the later author and later German collections.

#### **4.2 Conteuse and Conteur Strengthening the Genre**

In the late Seventeenth century French court of Louis XIX, the next fundamental true period for the fairy tale to become a decent literary genre occurred. Indeed, during a time where various female writers such as Mme d'Aulnoy, Mme d'Auneil, Mme de Murat and Mlle Bernard introduced wonder tales in their literary salons, "the fairy tale could establish itself as a legitimate genre for educated classes" (Zipes, 2015, p. 23). Effectively, French Marie Catherine d'Aulnoy published *Histoire d'Hypolite, Conte de Donglass* in 1690. Encompassing the fairy tale *L'Ile de la Félicité*, since then the genre who 'baptized as fairy tales' (Zipes, 2015, p. 23), giving birth to an established aristocratic practice of "narrating elaborate courtly tales orally at social gatherings" (Teverson, 2013, p. 49) and consequently to a "rash of fairy tales in print" (idem, p. 49).

Accordingly, among a large group of male and female authors –conteurs and conteuses- Charles Perrault published a landmark in the history of fairy tales: the 1697 collection named *Histoire ou Contes du Temps Passé: les Contes ma Mère l'Oye*. Full of moralizing references and marked by a peculiar stylistic immediacy, Perrault's wonder



tales witnessed a worldwide success. Therefore, by the end of the Seventeenth century a recognizable genre was established, and Perrault's line of work prevailed as it was closer in style and plot to the folklore tradition and fully accompanied by true censorship and work ethics (Zipes, 2006).

### **4.3 The Grimm Brothers and the Fairy Tale Institutionalization**

Embarking on the Nineteenth century German authorship, it is a time period where the literary fairytale genre was secured once and for all. First published in 1812, it is indeed Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's collection *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* which fulfilled this task. Highly inspired by the conventions of Romanticism, the German brothers were especially motivated by "the desire to recover authentic German tales that might reflect an 'authentic' German identity" (Teverson, 2013, p. 62). In light of this purpose, the Grimm brothers produced a collection of eighty-six numbered tales from various sources; then immediately proceeded with the second volume as the reception among the public was delightful.

Deemed to be the highest expression of folk heritage, the Grimms substantially reworked their material to suit their own cultural outlook and their own aesthetic standards. The stories were, therefore, read as an expression of the world-view of the Grimms and their social circle. At the same time, however, the brothers mediated, with a degree of fidelity that was uncommon in the period, traditions that were widespread in popular culture and that genuine folk tales therefore remain the *sine qua non* of their collection (idem, pp. 70–71).

The Grimm brothers' publishing of collections diffused a newly enchanting trend in Europe and United States as numerous writers rose to the floor. Greatly influential and tremendously inspiring, the fairy tale genre became the lollipop of a large public and soon made its entrance in the cinematic field. Fascinating in its images and captivating in its animations, the literary fairy tale genre did certainly suit the universe of cinema institutionalizing the genesis of a new trend; the Walt Disney Company.

### **5. From Literature to Cinema: On the Artistic Cohesion**

Embarking on a different world; a world of captivating pictures and moving iconography, the art of motion-picture did certainly overturn the universe of amusement. Defined as "a representation of a story by means of motion pictures" (Merriam-Webster online dictionary), or as "a form of entertainment that enacts a story by a sequence of images giving the illusion of continuous movement" (Word Web Diction), the technology of recording stories by a camera is a form of art deemed highly creative. Suiting perfectly the universe of captivating animations is for certain literature. Verily, while cinema is defined as a great instrumentality which diffuses moving picture and literature as a





creatively recognized body of writing of elevated aesthetic values, espousing the two is but the birth of a true artwork. Possessing a specific way of translating abstract ideas into dreamlike audible and graphic features, the nature of the connectedness between literature and cinema is particular as Omar Rahmoun (2018) explains:

Much has been said about literature and cinema. Although both are abinitio distinct arts that leave us to think that there is no room for any kind of analogy, comparing them seems to be a reasonable endeavor that allows us to discuss their fascinating relationship (p. 50).

The relationship between literature and cinema is truly iconic. In point of fact, literature and cinema share several key points. Like literature, cinema is a very realistic medium of expressing and projecting a unique and surreal vision of the world. Possessing a mutual influence justified by the possessions of two common factors of narrative and storytelling, literature by the power of ink, and cinema as a deliberate instrumentality of interaction of the senses engage the viewer either mentally or visually into an all-encompassing experience of perceiving, interpreting and assimilating elements according to their own understanding and background.

Likewise, the invention of cinema laid down new considerations, techniques as well as approaches to the literary text. As both produce stories which work through temporal successions refer to or connote pre-existent materials. Fiction works through a pre-existent language, film through the raw data of the physical world which its camera records (Orr,1992,qtd in Bane, 2006, p. 12), fairy tales in particular became a crucial part of the cinematic production giving rise to the fairytale film genre and to the genesis of the new trend, the Walt Disney Company.

### **5.1 On the Uprise of the Novel Cinematic Genre**

With its surreal nature and captivating structure, the genre of fairytales made of cinema a major representation platform. Joining a world where action is displayed in motions and words are audibly uttered by characters, wonder tales were among the very first genres to be adapted into films. Indeed, with the technological invention of cinematography, which dates back to 1890s, the wonder of tales, enchantment of characters and magical content of tales declared a revolutionizing turn in film industry. Gaining massive popularity over the written text, the tales' visual side led to the birth of the new cinematographic genre, the fairy tale film genre.

Similar to the way traditional fairytales established themselves as a genre between the Seventeenth and Nineteenth centuries, the early Twentieth century embraced fairy tale movies as a universally fashionable cinematographic genre. Defined as any kind of cinematic representation that employs motifs, characters and plots generally found in the



oral and literary genre of the fairy tale to recreate a known tale or to create an original screenplay with recognizable features of a fairy tale (Zipes, 2012, p. 9), fairy tale movies seemed to be a true passion to prominent directors such as George Mèliés, Ferdinand Zecca, Albert Cappellani and Lucien Nonguet.

Arguably, gone a time where literary writers maintained supreme authority as in the first decades of the Twentieth century, several artists transported magical tales to the screen but "none of the early animators ever watched the intensity with which [Walt] occupied himself with the fairy tales" (Zipes, 2006, p. 196). Embracing tales as they arrived to him through literature, radio and folklore, Walter Elias Disney adapted fairy tales on the screen making sure to catch the public's attention through his highly creative cinematic designs. Strongly propelling the establishment of the fairy tale film genre, the American producer and animated cartoons filmmaker surprisingly substituted the fairy tale itself urging people to adopt his productions as the newly entertaining inventions of the century.

Consequently, creating a forever world's premier entertainment company, the Walt Disney Company was the best-known projector of a disillusioned amusement of the Twentieth and Twenty First centuries. Dealing strongly with fairy tale themes and motifs and adapting various of Grimm and Perrault's tales, like Puss in Boots and Jack and the Beanstalk, the genesis of Walt Disney backdates to the 1920s. Along with the help of his friend and film animator Ub Iwerks, Disney created the Laugh-O-Grams studio in Kansas. Ambitiously craving for further success, Disney then moved to Hollywood and constituted the Disney Brothers studio with his brother Roy. Termed later on the Walt Disney Company, Disney carefully managed to deliver an unparalleled storytelling through the power of highly advanced cinematography techniques.

Meticulously attentive to new technological inventions, and carefully precise about copyrights as royalties of his work, the Walt Disney Company never stopped delighting and never stopped producing and projecting fairy tale adaptations, including Cinderella (1950), Alice in Wonderland (1951), Sleeping Beauty (1959), The Little Mermaid (1989) and The Beauty and the Beast (1991). The Walt Disney Company was, therefore, the staple representer of the fairy tale genre.



## **6. CONCLUSION**

Always captivating and never deceiving, fairy tales have certainly not failed in delighting and pleasing their audience. Attributing much of its roots to the folklore tradition, Arabian Nights and literature for children, wonder tales were certainly not the genre that people reckon today; they do carry a history full of prominent landmarks. Indeed, the fairy tale discourse can be considered a dynamic part of the historical process of civilization in Europe (Zipes, 2006). To put it another way, between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth centuries in particular, the stories commonly spread orally became an established and recognized literary genre meant to divert the world with astonishing stories. With Charles Perrault, Giambattista Basile and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm impressively dominating collections, a real literary genre was institutionalized.

However, the Twentieth century was a time period where fairy tales displayed greediness and passion as they migrated to the cinematic field. Transported to cinema and projected, the rise of the Walt Disney Company granted new meanings and value to the fairy tale genre. Tied to real life experiences, the Walt Disney Company strongly promoted the establishing of the fairy tale movie genre. Dripping with determination, power, optimism and exploration, the Disney industry depicts the great delight and amusement delivered to people as it became the world's first entertainment company.

Perceiving, therefore, the much progress and change the genre of enchantment undergone throughout the centuries only denotes the richness of its history. Migrating from the oral tradition to literature to the Twentieth century cinematic industry, wonder tales do embrace a history full of captivating landmarks and intriguing facts; a history that can but delight, inspire and educate enthusiastic spirits fond of tales of magic and marvel. In truth, it is quite crucial for humanity to proceed narrating stories so that new tales invade the wonder tale map; so that fairy tales may continue mesmerizing as they always did.

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