



A review of **Fairy-Tale Films Beyond Disney**

Rose Williamson

The wonderful, but perhaps misleading, thing about *Fairy-Tale Films Beyond Disney* is that it is not a book strictly about films or fairy tales, although those two themes do act as general guides to what is inside. The preface prepares the reader outright for the myriad of content included within this collection of essays, allowing for a dissolution of definitive borders which usually constrict the analysis of both fairy-tale studies and media studies. The approaches contained here are not only varied in theory but in fairy-tale subject matter: from the obvious, classic fairy tales to works 'inspired by' the genre, and even including discussion of films about fairy-tale authors. The inclusion of discussion on the genre's periphery, as well as television and animation, makes this not a book about 'fairy-tale films' but instead what Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix term 'cinematic folklore' (2010).¹ And this as a whole, with perhaps only one or two exceptions, is successful.

Following on from *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity* (edited by Greenhill and Matrix, 2010) and Jack Zipes' *The Enchanted Screen* (2011), this work further expands on these previous endeavours in order to continue the conversation about the hugely significant role which fairy tales have played in the history of film, television, and animation.² *Fairy-Tale Films Beyond Disney* makes a concerted effort to represent many corners of the world, allowing for the collective knowledge and cultural experience of all the authors included to enrich the discussion of film's remarkable dependence on fairy tales throughout the ages. The book begins with Zipes taking a look at that continually reverberating echo of fairy tales found in new releases. He focuses in on a variety of newer films but does not ignore the colossally popular Disney film *Frozen*, which came out after *The Enchanted Screen*. *Frozen* is situated as a mock-subversion within the context of the Disney formula for a "'well-made" fairy-tale film'. This is Zipes' terminology, an adaptation of Augustin-Eugène Scribe's formula for a 'well-made play'. Zipes' reworking of Scribe's elements will be especially useful for scholars interested in the structure of the stereotypical, marketable fairy-tale film. Zipes posits *Frozen* as ideologically problematic, especially with regard to class hierarchy, an observation which should give *Frozen*'s champions some food for thought.

The paradox of this book attempting to move 'beyond Disney' by first depicting the Disney formula and lastly criticising its grip on American fairy-tale film production is not

blind irony, but a conscious acknowledgment by Zipes of the pervasiveness of the Disney grasp, as he has pointed out in many of his previous works. 'Actually,' he reminds us in the final chapter, even after many wonderful non-Disney films have been discussed, 'we can never get "beyond" the Disney production of fairy-tale films in the twenty-first century. That is, we can never get beyond notions of the well-made conventional fairy-tale film with its stereotypical characters and beyond the commercial exploitation of oral and literary fairy tales and marketing that panders to the lowest common denominator among viewers.' But, nevertheless, many of the chapters detail national histories of film which began before Disney became synonymous with happy-ever-after. This is not to disagree with Zipes, because I do agree that the inescapable influence of Disney pigeonholes a great wealth of fairy-tale films into being considered subversive due to their deviance from the 'well-made' formula, even if the oral or literary source material originally did not conform to this structure. Luckily, for the informed fairy-tale film consumer, filmmakers and television writers have been making subverted stories for a long time, and helpfully a great deal of these have been collated into this volume with insightful commentary. Truthfully I was not quite prepared for the vast array of international fairy-tale films which I had never encountered before. For academics, this book offers insightful analyses which can be cited individually as necessary, but I think many will enjoy reading through the book in its entirety simply for the joy of discovering a treasure trove of films and television unknown to them that can be sought out for the next film night at their house.

The majority of chapters focus on a singular national tradition, ranging widely from Polish to Canadian, German to Japanese. Many of these provide a chronological survey of films produced in that country, helpful for the reader looking for foundational underpinnings of more recent films. Some encompass multinational traditions, looking at a wider geographical scope in order to compare traditions to one another, such as Laura Hubner's chapter on Latin American fairy-tale films. Others are more concerned with the films' content, such as Sofia Samatar's chapter on cross-cultural variants of *A Thousand and One Nights* or Kendra Magnus-Johnston's comparison of quasi-biographical accounts of fairy-tale authors such as Hans Christian Andersen and the Grimm brothers.

Notable contributions include Anne E. Duggan with a well-cited and engaging piece on French postwar films which explores the use of fairy tales to destabilise the hegemony. Cristina Bacchilega also brings her astute scholarship to the table to look at Italian cinema, particularly *Pinocchio*. Her piece ends wondering about the 2015 film *The Tale of Tales*, drawn from Italian tradition. I would be intrigued to hear her reaction after she criticised the lack of 'homegrown oral and literary traditions of folk and fairy tale' in Italy (aside from *Pinocchio*). Also of note is Susan Napier's chapter on Japanese fairy-tale films, a comprehensive exploration of the genre in Japan, from the early animations used for propaganda in World War II up to the internationally acclaimed works by Studio Ghibli. Napier seamlessly weaves together description of the films with analysis of the supernatural *yokai* figures from Japanese

folklore, tying it together with a deft integration of sociohistorical context. Similarly, Marina Balina and Birgit Beumers provide a fascinating sociohistorical glance at Soviet and Post-Soviet folktales as influenced by and competing against Disney, although of course Russian filmmakers and television producers were creating media in a markedly different context.

The above mentioned chapters are only a smattering of the wonderful content contained in this book; to list all the worthy chapters would only be a rehash of the preface. Ultimately, the collection is a valuable interdisciplinary addition to both the fields of film studies and fairy-tale studies, helping to build a more complete picture of the great effect fairy tales have on global culture.

Editors: Jack Zipes, Pauline Greenhill, Kendra Magnus-Johnston.
Routledge (2015), 374pp.

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Notes

1. *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*, ed. by Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Matrix (Utah: Utah State University Press, 2010).
2. Jack Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films* (New York: Routledge, 2011).



A review of
**Seven Miles of Steel
Thistles: Reflections
on Fairy Tales**

Sara Cleto

Katherine Langrish's book *Seven Miles of Steel Thistles: Reflections on Fairy Tales* is a project that grew out of her extremely popular blog, also called *Seven Miles of Steel Thistles*. Langrish borrows this title from an Irish tale 'in which the hero gallops his pony over "seven miles of hill on fire, seven miles of steel thistles, and seven miles of sea,"' an image that Langrish finds potent as a metaphor for both the process of crafting a book and for 'life in general' (3). Throughout the book, Langrish draws

attention to the captivating, enigmatic phrases and images that stud fairy-tale texts, inviting her reader to dwell on their beauty, strangeness, and ambiguity.

Comprised of essays, poems, and reflections, *Seven Miles of Steel Thistles* is written in conversational but spare language – language that frequently evokes the cadences of traditional tales and oral narrative. The entire collection is readable, and its many subsections invite the reader to linger and reflect on each topic before diving into the next chapter. The book is divided into three main sections, plus an ‘Envoi’, acknowledgements and a bibliography. The first section, ‘On Fairy Tales’, addresses themes that appear across a wide range of tales. The following section, ‘Reflections on Single Tales’, explores individual fairy tales, folk tales, and ballads in depth. The final section, ‘Reflections on Folk Tales’, discusses motifs that appear across a variety of different folk tales.

‘On Fairy Tales’ begins with an introduction to the book in which Langrish explains how this project developed from her blog and provides a broad survey of some of the tales and collections that have captured her imagination. The bulk of the section is comprised of essays on a wide array of topics: fairy brides and bridegrooms, enchanted objects, fairy-tale heroines, lost kings of fairyland, colour in fairy tales, geasa (a magically imposed obligation or prohibition) in Irish legends, and the uses of ‘mythical thinking’. While some of these topics are not strictly related to the genre of the fairy tale – the essay on geasa in the Ulster cycle, a collection of Irish legends, is notably far afield – most of them trace motifs and themes across a variety of fairy-tale texts. The section is given additional texture and interest from the inclusion of three poems written by Langrish about some of the topics and questions explored in her essays.

The second section, ‘Reflections on Single Tales’, includes essays on six tales: Briar Rose/ Sleeping Beauty, The Juniper Tree, The King Who Had Twelve Sons, The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry, Jorinda and Joringel, and Bluebeard. Each chapter offers a thoughtful discussion of a single tale that Langrish contextualises rather than presenting in isolation. For example, in her discussion of Briar Rose, she mentions several different versions of Sleeping Beauty (ATU 410), including examples by the Grimms, Basile, and Perrault, as well as other works that speak to relevant themes, such as T.S. Eliot’s poem ‘Four Quartets’. Her essay on ‘The King Who Had Twelve Sons’ is arguably the finest chapter in the book – though it focuses on one specific story from a book called *West Irish Folk-Tales and Romances*, Langrish provides an exceptionally nuanced reflection on oral tradition, tale collection, and authenticity.

The final and shortest of the sections, ‘Reflections on Folk Tales’, includes four essays on broad topics: fairy belief, white ladies, wise fools, and water sprites. The chapter on fairy belief is especially insightful. After discussing W.B. Yeats’ records of his fairy encounters and providing excerpts from other encounters from other sources, Langrish reminds her reader: ‘With every folk tale, with every story, it’s worth looking at who is

telling it and why' (220). Stories evolve and serve different purposes depending on the context, and Langrish renders this aspect of folklore clearly here.

This book is not an academic work – nor does it aim to be – but it is thoughtfully researched and lyrically written. Langrish's interest in fairy tales is perhaps most clearly encapsulated in her discussion of the tale 'The Juniper Tree'. 'So what does *The Juniper Tree* mean?' she wonders, noting that 'it depends on whom you ask and when you ask them' (143). She provides one answer from Maria Tatar, a renowned fairy-tale scholar, who suggests that the tale can be read in terms of child empowerment, particularly in societies that emphasise the power of adult authority over the impotence of children (143-4). Langrish prefers the less rigorous but more evocative response from J.R.R. Tolkien, who refers to the 'flavour' of the tale and its haunting imagery (144). Speaking of Tolkien's assessment, Langrish writes:

Though this too is not my own take on the tale, I acknowledge its power; if Tolkien's response means more to me than Tatar's—it does—this is because however interesting the search for meanings may be, what comes first is the story's 'flavour', the burst of juice on the tongue, the almost physical interaction between us and it. The emotional effect is primary. You can work out why it happens—if you can—afterwards. So I can't tell you what *The Juniper Tree* means, only what it means to me. (145)

Ultimately, Langrish is not as interested in analysing fairy tales as in reflecting upon their emotional influence, the ways that fairy tales speak to us about life's greatest challenges and wonders. 'Analysing a fairy tale can be a deeply interesting exercise, but that is not what the tale itself is for. It works much as music does, directly on our feelings.' (197)

There are a few places where Langrish's lack of training in folklore shows: for example, she writes that 'folk narratives occur in real, named landscapes', though 'folk narrative' is a broad category that encompasses such wide-ranging genres as myth, fairy tale, and legend, among others – and folk and fairy tales in particular frequently take place in imagined, unnamed landscapes (5). Regardless, her treatment of the texts and of complex issues such as the interplay between written and oral narratives is sophisticated. The book will be of particular interest to enthusiastic readers of fairy tales, and educators might consider assigning single essays to supplement other readings.

Author: Katherine Langrish.

The Greystones Press Ltd (2016), 294pp.

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