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Pauline Greenhill, Jill Terry Rudy, Naomi Hamer, Lauren Bosc

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Vanessa Nunes, Pauline Greenhill

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CONSTRUCTING FAIRY-TALE MEDIA FORMS

Texts, Textures, Contexts

Vanessa Nunes and Pauline Greenhill

“Just as we know, almost intuitively, that a particular narrative is a fairy tale when we read it, it seems we know immediately that a particular film is a fairy tale when we see it” (Zipes 1996, 1). In the more than twenty years since he suggested that recognizing fairy-tale media can take place intuitively, Jack Zipes, along with a number of other scholars, has spent considerable time elucidating their constituent elements. But even well before that time, those who examined fairy tales in all their myriad forms often sought to clarify what makes them the kinds of texts—understood in the broadest sense to encompass all audio, visual, and audiovisual forms—that they are. In particular, and for many years, folklorists and fairy-tale scholars have sought the distinctive elements, structures, and contexts that produce traditional fairy tales, as opposed to apparently similar texts like fantasies (see e.g. Butler 2009) or, for that matter, arguably dissimilar ones like documentaries. To borrow from Alan Dundes’s construction, fairy tales have some characteristic texts, textures, and contexts (1980, 20–32)—specifying exactly what those might be, though, has long been a challenge. Most explorations of those aspects are based on traditional narratives, but they have also been applied to literary fairy tales with known creators.

Some fairy-tale scholars and folklorists approach the definitional task by describing the particular elements that make up fairy tales, like motifs and archetypes; others look to distinctive parts but also their connections in broader and more encompassing structures, like functions, binary oppositions, memes, or scripts. More rarely, scholarship goes outside the actual content to consider fairy tale’s performative environments. However, we begin by describing Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) tale types, since contributors to this volume use them where possible when referring to traditional narratives.

Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) Tale Types

Using ATU numbers to identify different tale types refers to *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography*, an index published in 2004 by Hans-Jörg Uther, revising and amplifying previous works by Antti Aarne (1910) and Stith Thompson (1928, 1961). As well as adding new sources, Uther’s update worked within the original system’s constraints, but

rationalized the numbers and names where possible. The index organizes about 2,500 tale types under different categories, not only fairy tales (the latter identified as tales of magic; ATU numbers 300–749), but also animal tales, religious tales, realistic tales, anecdotes, jokes, and other folktales. Broadly speaking, a **tale type** is a narrative structure presenting a brief plot indicating motifs, settings, characters, and actions shared by a similar group of stories. As Dundes explains, “a tale type is a composite plot synopsis corresponding in exact verbatim detail to no one individual version but at the same time encompassing to some extent all of the extant versions of that folktale” (1997, 196).

In addition to offering tale-type descriptions, the index includes references to sources for its variants. The ATU organization system is thus a useful tool to locate different versions of the same tale and to compare them historically, culturally, and geographically. But the index has also been criticized. One complaint is that stories that share motifs and other significant elements may not be classified together under the same tale type. Further, oral tellers’ versions may combine tale types, or may indeed be unclassifiable while nevertheless being very clearly fairy tale (see Lovelace, Best, and Greenhill forthcoming). Writing in 1997, before Uther’s revisions and expansion of the index, Dundes notes that even though this system is not perfect, “the identification of folk narratives through motif and/or tale type numbers has become an international sine qua non among bona fide folklorists” as an aid for comparative analysis (195).

Constitutive Elements

One of the less systematic modes for describing folktale elements (and thus traditional, oral fairy tales) is by **motif**. Stith Thompson, who developed the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1932–1935; revised 1955), saw motifs as recurring characters, locales, occurrences, and actions “worthy of note because of something out of the ordinary, something of sufficiently striking character to become a part of tradition, oral or literary” (1955, 19). Even within a single subcategory, like the (clearly impressionistic) “J. The wise and the foolish,” those striking “some-things” range from J427 “Association of cow and tiger: tiger eats cow as soon as she is hungry,” to J621 “Destruction of enemy’s weapons,” to J1380 “Retorts concerning debts.” Clearly, motifs comprise very different kinds and levels of activities and involve very diverse personae. While Thompson assumed that analysis of folktales (but also of ballads, myths, fables, medieval romances, exempla, fabliaux, jest books, and local legends) would comprise a search for and elucidation of motifs, current fairy-tale scholarship avoids such practices, finding the thinking behind the index flawed and dated and the categories inconsistent. Nevertheless, scholars often invoke the idea of motifs as constituent elements of fairy tales, or note particular motifs in their studies, because they are striking and traditional.

Another vague term, **archetype**, which also includes different levels and forms, comprises emblematic characters, acts, or situations often presumed to represent aspects of human nature. It has been used mainly by Jungians to suggest fairy tales’ psychological relevance. For example, Marie-Louise von Franz explained the archetype as “not only an ‘elementary thought’ but also an elementary poetical image and fantasy, and an elementary emotion, and even an elementary impulse toward some typical action” (1996, 8). Understanding fairy tales as “mirror[ing] the basic patterns of the psyche” (1), she explores archetypes like the shadow, anima, and animus as expressed in particular tales (114–197). In Walter Rankin’s *Grimm Pictures: Fairy Tale Archetypes in Eight Horror and Suspense Films* (2007), the archetypes can be discovered only by implication. For example, in linking Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* with “Little Red Riding Hood” (ATU 333), Rankin discusses cannibalism, the forest path, and emerging from the wolf’s belly. The latter is distinctive to the story, but the other two recur in many fairy tales.

Probably the most (justifiably) famous mode for understanding the constituent elements of fairy tales, applied and misapplied across various genres and forms (see Bordwell 1988), is Vladimir Propp's formalist concept of **functions**. His *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968) sought to systematize the characteristics of ATU 300–749, the traditional oral “Tales of Magic” that comprise the classic fairy tales (Uther 2004, 174–396). Propp derives a syntagmatic (that is, sequential, the horizontal axis of the tale) narrative structure common to Russian traditional oral wonder tales, numbers 50–150 of Aleksandr Afanasyev's *Russian Fairy Tales* (1945). Propp contends that these folktales contain a particular series of thirty-one “recurrent constants” comprising actions which have a “particular place in the course of narration” and are “stable constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled” (1968, 20–21).

Those functions are absention; interdiction; violation; reconnaissance; delivery; trickery; complicity; villainy or lack; mediation, the connective incident; beginning counteraction; departure; donor first function; hero's reaction; provision or receipt of a magical agent; spatial transference between two kingdoms, guidance; struggle; branding, marking; victory; misfortune or lack liquidated; return; pursuit, chase; rescue; unrecognized arrival; unfounded claims; difficult task; solution; recognition; exposure; transfiguration; punishment; and wedding. The functions are undertaken by seven categories of characters/dramatis personae—villains, donors, helpers, princesses (sought-for persons), dispatchers, heroes, and false heroes—in the aforementioned fixed sequence.

This system has obvious advantages in being relatively concrete and evocative while avoiding the inappropriate combination of different levels and forms evident in the motif index. Not all functions or dramatis personae appear in all fairy tales, of course, and their specific manifestations and combinations vary from one to another. Propp himself used the example of “The Swan-Geese” (ATU 451) and clearly expected that folklorists and fairy-tale scholars would apply his system to various tales, analyzing them in terms of their specific manifestations of the thirty-one functions and seven personae. Some have taken up the challenge, often outside the fairy-tale form, for example combining it with Syd Field's (e.g. 1994) much more rudimentary system (first act set up; second act confrontation; third act resolution) to apply to film screenplays (Murphy 2015b). Terence Patrick Murphy offers the **plot genotype** as a “much more flexible interpretation of Propp morphology” (2015a, 161–162), explaining:

In evolutionary biology, the genotype refers to the inherited instructions an organism carries within its genetic code; these instructions may be used to understand how a particular organism is specialized within the group to which it belongs. By extension, the plot genotype represents the functional structure or compositional schema of a particular fairy tale.

(2)

Murphy rejects Propp's view that all fairy tales follow one structural type and argues that the functions are not limited to thirty-one and they do not have identical sequences. Much European and North American scholarship has taken other routes, with researchers such as Murphy modifying or drawing quite selectively upon Propp's system. Some have criticized the schema's obviously gendered prescriptions, noting for example that the sex of characters can change from version to version. The emphasis on functions also limits the meaning to be taken from the tales. Consider, for example, that figures such as dragons or Baba Yaga take roles not only of villains but also of donors and helpers in Afanasyev's fairy tales. Based on a formalist analysis, their ambiguous nature would not be relevant because what matters is the chain of

events and the character function in the tale, an approach that fails to recognize that who the character is also affects the story's perception.

Systems not necessarily developed specifically for fairy tales often prove useful in analyzing them in their many mediated forms. Proppian in its focus on personae (called **actants**) and interest in their relations (called **axes**) is Algirdas Julien Greimas's **actantial model** (1983). Though developed for narratives in general, arguably the facets and axes manifest in particular forms in fairy tales:

- (1) The subject (for example, the Prince) is what wants or does not want to be joined to
- (2) an object (the rescued Princess, for example).
- (3) The sender (for example, the King) is what instigates the action, while the
- (4) receiver (for example, the King, the Princess, the Prince) is what benefits from it. Lastly,
- (5) a helper (for example, the magic sword, the horse, the Prince's courage) helps to accomplish the action, while
- (6) an opponent (the witch, the dragon, the Prince's fatigue or a suspicion of terror) hinders it.

(Hébert)

The subject and object form the axis of desire, the helper and opponent that of power, and the sender and receiver that of knowledge. Since the axes and actants do not manifest in any specific sequence, this structure, however, can be seen as paradigmatic (the vertical axis of the tale) rather than syntagmatic. Greimas did not intend this model to apply only to fairy tales, though it well evokes some of their most recognizable characteristics.

French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955) saw underlying paradigms of **binary oppositions** which apply across different tales (in contrast to Propp and others' ideas that considered sequences unfolding within individual tales). Though Lévi-Strauss was less concerned than most folklorists about distinctions between myths (usually thought to be sacred and true), legends (usually thought to be secular with questioned truth claims), and folktales (usually thought to be secular and fictional), he applied the concept of binary oppositions to fairy tales. Lévi-Strauss's idea that dualistic, divergent contrasts, for example, between male and female, life and death, day and night, are universal human ways of conceptualizing the world has come under severe conceptual and practical criticism. Yet some folklorists have found it compelling.

For example, anthropologist Bengt Holbek (1987) applies implicitly Lévi-Straussian paradigms to the collection of Evald Tang Kristensen (1892) of tales from Denmark: youth or age; low or high social status; and male or female. Holbek argues that fairy tales by definition, unlike other forms of folktales, always end with a marriage. Fairy tales, for him, are about the progress of young protagonists (female or male; low or high status) into adulthood via a series of specific moves, including leaving home, sharing (illicit) love, separation and/or trial of the protagonists, and—as already indicated—a resolution in matrimony and maturity. Somewhat controversial is Holbek's identification of particular tales as masculine or feminine in plot based on their primary protagonists, and his assertion that these types would necessarily be applicable to particular tellers, with men being mainly interested in masculine tales and women in both. Risto Järv (2005) points out empirical and ideological issues with these distinctions, finding historical shifts in tellers' gendered interests in particular tale types. He also notes that Holbek's definition of a tale like "Bluebeard" (ATU 312) as "masculine," based on its primary high status older male protagonist marrying a low status young woman, obviates its presentation of women's points of view.

In yet another system, Zipes applies Augustin Eugène Scribe's concept of the "well-made" (theatrical) play to Disney films. The common structure of Scribe's plays consists of six

prescriptive elements that have been employed by dramatists to make their stories effective (Zipes 2016, 7–8). Zipes argues that Walt Disney “became the Scribe of animated fairy tale films” by finding “the recipe for a universal appeal” (8). Disney’s “**well-made flexible fairy-tale film structure**” consists in the following: 1) traumatic and unfortunate incidents; 2) songs of woe and joy; 3) banishment and isolation; 4) quest, conflicts, and comic relief; 5) peripeteia (sudden reversal of fortune); and 6) miraculous resolution (Zipes 2016, 8).

Equally cross-genre is the idea that fairy tales and fairy-tale media involve particular **scripts**. Sung-Ae Lee (2016) borrows from the field of cognitive narratology to explain that

A script in everyday life is a stereotyped sequence of actions that is part of a person’s knowledge about the world [. . .] comparable to the stereotypic plot structures that readers call upon to anticipate the unfolding story logic of creative works [. . .] such as the suffering and triumph of an innocent persecuted heroine.

(207–208)

This script may involve “a pattern of action sequences [. . .] or [. . .] a single action sequence within a larger pattern” (208). Lee recognizes that “a script may also blend different tales” (208) as she further connects it to Zipes’s discussion of fairy-tale hypotexts.

Hypotext and related concepts from semiotics can be helpful in thinking about the relation between oral and literary fairy tales and media. In his study of transtextual relationships, Gérard Genette (1997) explains that “hypertextuality refers to any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary” (5). Thus a fairy-tale hypotext could be understood as a pre-existing narrative on which a film adaptation, for example, is based. However, as Zipes (2011) writes about fairy-tale films, “the hypotext is more a notion than anything else, somewhat like a meme carried about in our brains” (8). Zipes seeks to account for the fact that fairy tales appear in multiple versions in terms of content and form. Even when filmmakers are taking a very specific fairy-tale variant as a starting point, the story ends up changing based on readings, hearings, viewings, and even childhood memories of all the artists involved in the production and reception process (8).

Zipes’s use of the term **meme** to talk about fairy-tale dissemination requires further unpacking. Drawing upon Richard Dawkins’s concept (1976), Zipes (2006) explains that a meme is “an information pattern contained in a human brain (or in artifacts such as books or pictures) and stored in its memory, capable of being copied to another individual’s brain that will store it and replicate it” (15). Zipes uses the term “to denote a particular fairy tale that has been canonized in the Western world and become so memorable that it appears to be transmitted naturally by our minds to communicate information that alerts us to pay attention to a specific given situation on which our lives may depend” (15). He thus claims that some classical fairy tales have become memes that have stuck in people’s minds and replicated themselves. The fairy tale establishes a non-static symbolic order that “is certainly marked continually by recognizable recurring motifs, topoi, and conventions” (15).

Zipes seeks to address the way that fairy tales sometimes unconsciously structure other narratives. In one well-known example, David Slade’s film *Hard Candy* (2005) as “Little Red Riding Hood,” the filmmakers identified links only after the movie was complete. Recognizing the value of that connection, the producers used it to merchandise the film, including a poster of a girl wearing a red hoodie. And yet even more puzzling, given the relative unfamiliarity of the fairy-tale sources, is Vivian Labrie’s (2014) compelling argument for elements of “The Three Golden Children” (ATU 707) in Joss Whedon’s *Serenity* (2005),

of “The Faithless Mother” (ATU 590) in Michael Caton-Jones’s *This Boy’s Life* (1993), and of “The Prince Whose Wishes Always Come True” (ATU 652) in Steven Soderbergh’s *Solaris* (2002). Labrie’s analysis does not rely on basic plot elements or common syntagmatic structures. It is transversal, connected at different narrative levels, and often linked to real life issues. Labrie’s arguably memetic perspective differs from that of Zipes, who underlines that not all fairy tales actually are memes—only those which have really grabbed the popular imagination.

Labrie’s focus on why lesser-known tale-type structures appear in films connects them, as did the work of historian Jan Vansina (e.g. 1985) and literary scholars Albert Lord (1960) and Milman Parry (e.g. Parry and Lord 1954) and their successors, to memory processes in oral transmission wherein narrators use common structures that foster storytelling. Lord, following Parry, proposed oral-formulaic composition for Homeric and medieval epic, using the example of Serbo-Croatian bards, who sang lengthy, complex tales in rhymed verse from memory. These non-literate bards would orally/aurally learn themes and structures of the tales as well as poetic meter and essentially recompose the epics each time they sang them. Labrie similarly notes the folk basis of fairy tales even in the twenty-first century because most people encounter and explore folktales and fairy tales, at least initially, outside formal education. However, unlike memetic theorists, Labrie sees fairy-tale meaning, rather than being hardwired into human brains, as crucially addressing human experience.

Meme theory has not been entirely well received by folklore scholars. For example, Ruth B. Bottigheimer considers Zipes’s notion of the viral spread of motifs and plots to be “unreal,” and she criticizes what she sees as his tendency to anthropomorphize abstract concepts and attribute agency to them (2009, 369). According to Bottigheimer, “a ‘cultural trait’ is not a real-world entity but an abstraction, a result of thought processes based on observations of what people habitually do. Not being persons, abstractions are not capable of volition and intention. And yet Zipes repeatedly injects volition and intention into memes and fairy tales” (369; see also Schrempp 2014).

Another systematic approach comes from Kevin Paul Smith (2007), drawing on Genette’s theories to identify eight categories of **intertextual use** of fairy tales within mass-produced fictions:

1. Authorised: Explicit reference to a fairytale in the title
 2. Writerly: Implicit reference to a fairytale in title
 3. Incorporation: Explicit reference to a fairytale within the text
 4. Allusion: Implicit reference to a fairytale within the text
 5. Re-vision: putting a new spin on an old tale
 6. Fabulation: crafting an original fairytale
 7. Metafictional: discussion of fairytales
 8. Architextual/Chronotopic: “Fairytale” setting/environment
- (10)

Smith labels these eight as “elements,” a choice of term seeking to reinforce that these categories might be thought of as parts of a complex whole and arranged in different combinations (10). Intertextuality is also in operation even when fairy tales are evoked in an adjectival sense. As Marina Warner (2014) puts it, “The term ‘fairytale’ is often used as an epithet—a fairytale setting, a fairytale ending—for a work that is not in itself a fairy tale, because it depends on elements of the form’s symbolic language” (xviii). In this case, the reference seems to rely on a set of implicit expectations about fairy tales, whatever they might be.

Texture and Context

Scholars have also employed the notion of describing fairy tales in terms of their **texture**. Jessica Tiffin (2009) argues that fairy tales display a distinctive quality “in the sense of a characteristic, instantly recognizable feel or style [. . .] recognizable in the level of structure and content as much as language” (6). According to her, in the realm of fairy tales, “event, psychology, and cause and effect [. . .] are subordinate to the expectations of narrative shape and outcome rather than internal motivation,” contending:

By identifying fairy tale by texture, I am [. . .] invoking a range of characteristics which rely heavily on clean lines, deliberate patterning and a geometry of structure and motif, but also include style, voice, and some aspects of content and mimetic approach. This attribute of texture, rather than language or motif, renders a fairy tale intrinsically familiar and identifiable even through literary manipulation, and it is precisely this quality of identifiability which allows the form to provide such a rich ground for metafictional play.

(8)

Tiffin is ultimately concerned with mediated forms of fairy tales—what patterns and structures are retained in (post)modern literary forms and in filmic narratives. Tiffin makes the point that it is precisely “the extreme adaptability shown by fairy-tale structures across the centuries, and its ability of continually reinvent its voices, settings, and message as well as its medium of expression,” that makes film adaptation easy (179).

The notion of entanglement and rearrangement between constituent parts further resonates with Labrie’s use of **topological analysis** to describe “a form of symbolic investigation which combines levels of character, function, place, and movement” (1997, 153). In particular, Labrie compares the presence of bureaucratic power in both folktales and films that “share a common topology linked somehow to everyday life” (2014, 153). Labrie’s work literally maps the trajectories of characters as they move through stories—the locations in which they find themselves and the routes they take there.

Fairy-tale contexts do not need to narrate the place in which its telling is physically set, or magical and imagined locales would be impossible. Katharine Galloway Young (1987) calls the **Taleworld** “a realm of events not present to the storytelling occasion at all but conjured up for the occasion by the story” (211). Fairy tales invoke the presence of the Taleworld by using well-recognized framing formulae like “once upon a time” to open and like “and they lived happily ever after” to close. Openings can be simply “There was once” while closings tend to be more diverse, including “They remained happy and content/While we still don’t have a cent,” “They remained rich and consoled, and we’re just sitting here and getting old,” “And those who tell this tale and whoever caused it to be told/Will not die a terrible death whenever they grow old,” and many more (Zipes 2013, 75, 238, 511).

But the presence of such openings and closings, and of particular kinds of structures, characters, situations, and acts, indicates what Young calls a **Storyrealm**. That is, the listeners understand that whatever the other circumstances of the performance context may be, what is being narrated is a *story*—rather than another genre of speech like a lecture, a sermon, or even a conversation. The Storyrealm sets up a series of discursive expectations. The time of the Storyrealm is arguably the here and now, the time when the story is being told. The Taleworld could be the present (and it often is in fairy-tale films), but it need not be, and it is always in some sense radically other than the Storyrealm. Parallels can be seen in written fairy tales,

including literary tales. A written publication is paratextually located with a publisher and publishing location (a kind of literary Storyrealm). Again, almost invariably literary fairy tales specifically narrate another space, often one that is imaginably and/or in literal terms nowhere.

Context is also important because, as Elliott Oring notes, folk narratives “must be re-created with each telling” (1986, 123). Folk narratives—a category that includes traditional fairy tales—are “reflections of the societies and individuals which create and transmit them; consequently, they reflect a wide range of human ideas and emotions” (133). Alessandro Falassi’s case study of environment’s centrality in making sense of fairy tales discusses the **performative context** of the Tuscan *veglia*, “the ritualized evening gathering of family and friends by the fireplace” where social events such as fairy tales were performed (1980, xviii). As Roger Abrahams (1980) explains, Falassi employed a method that looks at “the structure of context, in which elements of time, place, and occasion of enactment are brought to bear in the analysis of significant actions and events” (xi). By examining structure of context, for instance, “it has become known that certain times and spaces are endowed with significance by a community” (xi).

Ultimately, there is no such thing as an authoritative magic potion strong enough to encompass all fairy tales into a single formulation. This is a malleable form, after all. And given that fairy tales have been defined in so many ways, it should be no surprise that scholars have likewise employed different methods and approaches in thinking about what makes them, from tale types, functions, and archetypes to memes, textures, and Storyrealms. To trace their distinctive elements and ways of operation seems a step forward from understanding first what a fairy tale is—and that is another equally complicated question.

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Mediagraphy

- Hard Candy*. 2005. Director David Slade. USA.
- Serenity*. 2005. Director Joss Whedon. USA.
- The Silence of the Lambs*. 1991. Director Jonathan Demme. USA.
- Solaris*. 2002. Director Steven Soderbergh. USA.
- This Boy's Life*. 1993. Director Michael Caton-Jones. USA.

Part II

ANALYTICAL APPROACHES

