

• *Book Reviews* •

Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity. Edited by Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2010. pp. 232, black and white photographs, preface, notes, index, list of sources.)

Once upon a time, there were a number of intellectually brilliant scholars who came together to view films based on fairy tales and produce an excellent volume of work on this sadly underexplored subject. When one considers the influence Disney alone—arguably the single largest producer of fairy tale films and inarguably the most visible—has had worldwide, it is somewhat surprising that a volume like this one has not heretofore been produced. *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity* pulls together a wide range of perspectives, ideas, and of course films themselves. Noted fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes, in his forward to this volume, points out that fairy tale films have been largely ignored by academia; the *Oxford History of World Cinema* doesn't even mention them. Thus, folklorists have stepped in to fill the gap, and the authors contributing to this work do so most admirably.

While Disney films necessarily make up a substantial percentage of the films critiqued here, the folkloristic eye also encompasses creations from much farther afield, at times even from outside the realm of strict folklore scholarship. For example, I cannot help but take exception to Zipes' definition of the *Wizard of Oz* as a fairy tale film, because as the deliberate creation of a modern writer, the Oz stories are not strictly "fairy tales" (though the land of Oz does have at least one fairy resident). In the end, however, it is exactly such differences in authorial points of view that make this volume both interesting and academically crucial.

Fairy tale films have evolved from basic retellings of the “original” narratives, such as the silent films of the early 19th century, to the distinctly post-modern perspective that is starting to touch even the films of Disney, of which the movies *Enchanted* and *Ever After* are prime examples. In “The Shoe Still Fits: *Ever After* and the Pursuit of a Feminist Cinderella,” Christy Williams discusses the film’s attempts to bring the Cinderella narrative into a more feminist style while at the same time conforming to the commercial film model.

In “Disney’s *Enchanted*,” Linda Pershing and Lisa Gablehouse look at the same conflict *Ever After* faces as they study an attempt at a post-modern view of the traditional fairy story that brings the animated fairy tale princess quite literally into the “real” world, but without quite successfully breaking the overwhelmingly patriarchal aegis under which most fairy tale films have been created. Analysis of attempts to juxtapose perspectives is also performed by Cristina Bacchilega and John Rider in the first chapter in this volume, as they examine a wide swath of films.

Due to its overwhelming presence, it is impossible for Disney to remain unscathed in a study such as this. Naarah Sawers points out its commodification of the “princess” ideal and the way it presents this imagery to impressionable young girls, while others touch on how it imbues iterations of fairy stories with ideas and concepts that reflect the company’s world view more than anything else; the Disneyfication of fairy tale films is visited either directly or as a locus of contrast in several chapters.

While the Disney view of fairy tales is almost universally light—*Snow White* is probably the darkest of its fairy tale films—it is impossible to do a valid survey and leave out the darker side of fairy tale films. Several writers remind readers that the fairy stories most of us grew up with tend to be glossed over in tradition and memory with a light, bright coat of magic and adventure, but when one sits down to consider the details, they are rife with what might best be described as “horror.” The world of the fairy tale is not a bright shiny place where talking animals help with the chores or make dresses, but one where children go through numerous travails and do not always come out unscathed—I personally have never been able to fully erase the mental image from a story in my childhood of a girl cutting off the little finger of her hand to make a key to free her trapped brother. Even if good triumphs in the end, the villains are often punished in ways that put a lie to all thoughts of sweetness and innocence.

It is in this context that films such as *The Juniper Tree* and *Pan's Labyrinth* are studied. While *Pan's Labyrinth*, like *The Wizard of Oz*, is not a traditional fairy story in the folkloristic sense, it does carry with it all the elements of the genre, even down to the distinct lack of a happy ending, which is one of the aspects examined by Tracie D. Lukasiewicz when she discusses its neo-magical realist take on the real and the imagined. *The Juniper Tree* does present a traditional folk story; it is an Icelandic film based on a Grimm brothers' tale, and Greenhill and Anne Brydon break it down, analyzing the director as much as the narrative itself.

My favorite piece of the collection, by Ming-Hsun Lin, is potentially the most postmodern and feminist of the collection. Fairy stories are traditionally built around the idea of a young girl in distress requiring some sort of heroic rescue, which leads to the counter-hegemonic parallels in many current films, especially when it is pointed out that the “princess” role in what is perhaps the most popular extant series of fairy tale films is that of the title character “Harry Potter.” A similar counter-hegemonic perspective on this aspect of the genre colors the penultimate chapter, a surprising—but ultimately sensible—study of *Eyes Wide Shut* as a fairy story.

These are but a sampling of the many terrific articles in this book, which should become an indispensable volume for any scholar who is remotely interested in fairy tales or fairy tale films. While it is a volume devoted to the cinematic (re)creation of narratives, it is not top-heavy with film-studies jargon, which makes it accessible to a large readership. If you are looking for a collection of articles strictly from the film-school perspective, with critiques of camera angle, filtering, and use of light and shadow, you may be disappointed; if your interest is in the narrative, you shouldn’t miss reading this.

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