

Jack Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen—The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films* (New York: Routledge, 2011)

The chapter “De-Disneyfying Disney: Notes on the Development of the Fairy-Tale Film” pp.16-29

Opens with a long quote from Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney* (New York, 1968): “Indeed, there was something arrogant about the way the studio took over these works [*Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*]. Grist for a mighty mill, they were in the ineffable Hollywood term, ‘properties’ to do with as the proprietor of the machine would. You could throw jarring popular songs into the brew, would could gag them up, you could sentimentalize them. You had, in short, no obligation to the originals or to the cultural tradition they represented. In fact, when it came to billing, J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* somehow became Walt Disney’s *Peter Pan*, and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* became Walt Disney’s *Alice*. It could be argued that this was a true reflection of what happened to the works in the process of getting to the screen, but the egotism that insists on making another man’s work your own through wanton tampering and by advertising claims is not an attractive form of egotism, however it is rationalized. And this kind of annexation was to be a constant in the later life of Disney. The only defense that one can enter for him is that of invincible ignorance: he really didn’t see what he was doing, didn’t know how some people could be offended by it, and certainly could not see what was basically at fault with his insistence that there was only one true style for the animated film—his style.” P.16

Then we get a brief history of illustrations for fairy tale books, and the earliest movie and animated versions, showing the background to Disney, the story being that the illustrations to the book versions were incidental, but that in Disney the image eventually came to gobble up the word.

“Let us examine Disney’s earliest animated feature fairy-tale film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and a later one, *Beauty and the Beast*, as examples. Each film is framed by a prince on a quest for the proper mate, essentially a young virginal woman, a trophy princess, who will serve his vested interests, and the quest ends with a marriage in a splendid castle, in which the prince and princess will be attended by admiring if not obsequious servants. The manner in which the prince attains the goal depends on the collaboration of the underlings, the dwarfs and enchanted objects, and the ingenuity and valor of this sympathetic prince. Songs are strewn along the plot as flowers to enliven and brighten the action, just as comic gags are used to divert us from the serious nature of the business at hand—ruthless competition for power. But everyone knows his or her role, and these roles are all geared to guaranteeing the happiness of their heroes, seemingly born to lead, take power, and to be admired, as fetishist objects. They will eventually reside in a palace, a utopian realm that few people are privileged to inhabit, unless you are one of the chosen servants. The goal is not only a reconciliation of conflict and the defeat of evil, but also acclamation of those who deserve to rule by those who deserve to serve.” P.24

“Disney...divided his workers into separate groups and departments who often worked side by side at desks, as though they operated mechanically serving a conveyor belt in a

factory. They were organized according to their functions: cell painters, animators, musicians, gag men, storyboard producers, and directors. After 1935 Disney did not do animating, composing, or screenplay writing and worked out of his own personal office. However, he supervised almost every film, large and small, and his decision was the final decision for almost all the early productions. To his credit, he sought out the very best collaborators and rarely stinted when it came to improving the technical quality of his productions...Most of all, he conceived many of the ideas behind the films and decided what project would move forward and which collaborators would work on a particular project...it was a shared spectacular vision of efficiency, exploitation, and expediency: how best to use a story to promote one's artistic talents, make money, market oneself, and promote a vision of how social relations should be ordered. The contents and history of the fairy tale were only a pre-text, that is, they provided the materials to be appropriated and adapted for production purposes that served market ends. Behind such purposes, of course, was an ideology commensurate with the capitalist mode of production and commodity fetishism that was intended to shape the vision of audiences so that they would want to see and consume more of the same." P.24

The basis of the charge against Disney, although Zipes never articulates it clearly, is the Marxist one frequently leveled against middleclass novelists, that in seeming to resolve the conflicts in their works, they are complicit in papering over deep-lying inequalities and divisions in capitalist society, a kind of *trahison des clerics*—or “betrayal of the intellectuals”. [Echoes here of Dwight Macdonald's *Theory of Mass Culture*, perhaps?]

Zipes quotes Czech filmmaker Jan Svanmajer on Disney: “Disney is among the greatest makers of ‘art of children’. I have always held that no special art for children simply exists, and what passes for it embodies either the birch (discipline) or lucre (profit). ‘Art of children’ is dangerous in that it shares either in the taming of the child’s soul or the bringing up of consumers of mass culture. I am afraid that a child reared on current Disney produce will find it difficult to get used to more sophisticated kinds of art, and will assume his/her place in the ranks of viewers of idiotic television serials.” Quoted on p.25 Another commentator talks of “banal, routine images of Disney’s films. They are the bankrupt signs of an imagination homogenized by the mass media.” P.25

Zipes comments on “the totalitarian message that almost all the Disney films have conveyed since their origin: the role of the peasants or little people is to help to reinstall kings, emperors, queens, princesses, and other celebrities so that they can rule more graciously But rule they must and should.” P.30

“...*Sleeping Beauty* (1959), as one of the last fairy-tale films he produced before his death in 1966, it is one of the best examples of how he and his huge staff of artists and musicians conventionalized the adaptation of fairy tales so that they became hollow and fluffy narratives and discredited original thinking, that is, the need to rethink the deeper meanings of the tales and their actual value for suggesting social if not artistic change.

The credits listed at the beginning of the film state that it is a ‘story adaptation from the Charles Perrault version of *Sleeping Beauty*’. Nothing could be further from the truth, and Perrault would probably turn over in his eighteenth-century grave if he were to read this...

More prudish than Perrault, the Brothers Grimm wrote a very short, comic version of ‘ Sleeping Beauty’ that has no illicit affairs or violence. The princess and the castle are sent into hibernation for a hundred years, frozen until the right prince comes along. When he does, he gives the sleeping virgin a chaste kiss. She awakens, and with her, all the people in the castle. Prince and princess marry and live happily ever after. Basta. It is a boring fairy tale.

And so is the Disney film. It flattens the literary tradition and transforms a classical fairy-tale about an unusually complex love affair that in the course of a few centuries has involved rape, adultery, illicit love, jealousy and matricide into a banal adolescent love story in which a stereotypical nice-guy prince on a white horse rescues a pure blonde princess who awaits his blessed kiss while lying flat on her back...rendition is so stale, stiff and stupid...

This recipe is easy to repeat, imitate, and digest.

- 1) Begin the film in the first frame with a beautiful gilded book that opens elegantly and a master voiceover as authoritative storyteller and made it seem as though the charming images represent a veritable fairy tale.
- 2) Add music of acclamation with brilliant lyrics such as ‘hail to the king, hail to the queen’, and a glittering or stately castle.
- 3) Introduce three pudgy fairies to bless a new-born princess. Make sure they are cute.
- 4) Threaten the bliss and the stability of the monarchy, and make sure that the threatening figure is an angry female called Malificent, is dressed in black, and has a raven as her crony.
- 5) Let the comic characters such as dwarfs, animals, or pudgy fairies provide a bit of frivolous relief.
- 6) Arrange a prince-meet-princess encounter and have the couple fall suddenly in love in the middle of the forest. Let the girl sing a catchy song, ‘Once upon a Dream’, that recalls Snow White’s ‘One Day My Prince Will Come’. Have her sing a duet with the prince and then dance to a musical score of Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s ballet, *The Sleeping Beauty*. Make sure that they don’t know each other’s identity.
- 7) Throw in some irrelevant comic scenes such as two kings and a jester drinking and arguing about their children. Paint them as harmless daddies, not kings, who dote on their children and act more like buffoons than kings.
- 8) Make it appear that the princess is doomed by the witch’s curse when she is lured to a spinning wheel.
- 9) Add a little drama by having the witch capture the guileless prince and take him to a dungeon in the Forbidden Mountain.
- 10) Let the pudgy fairies come to the prince’s rescue and encourage them to give him a sword and a shield of virtue, truth, and courage.
- 11) Send the prince to battle the witch and make sure she turns herself into a fierce dragon before the prince kills her on a cliff.
- 12) Let everyone rejoice and celebrate that the prince and princess will unite two kingdoms and fulfill their parents’ wishes. After all, it is important that elite

groups preserve their legacies and are adored in acclamation. Make sure that the music is somewhat sacred.

- 13) Close the gilded book to signify a happy ending.
- 14) Remember the recipe: Make sure that the audience and characters in the film worship royalty and acclaim the beauty of a young girl, let her sing her wish for a man to save her, have her persecuted (generally by some one of her own sex), create a grand battle over the virginal body, let the best man win and elitism triumph.

Although the commentators in the two-DVD platinum edition of *Sleeping Beauty*, which celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2007, rave about the artistry and originality of the film, a few concede that it is very similar to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. Not only does Malificent look and speak like the vicious queen who wants to kill Snow White, but the animals and the forest are identical, and the arranged meeting and song of the young lovers imitate Snow White's encounter with her prince. Even the great battle between the prince and Malificent at the end of *Sleeping Beauty* is reminiscent of the dwarfs' battle with the queen. And, of course, the comatose virginal princesses are laid out identically on a decorative bier and sofa.

Great care was taken by many gifted artists and technicians in producing *Sleeping Beauty*, and in some respects it is technically *the* well-made animated fairy-tale feature film: intricate and decorative background designs, surreal color schemes, renaissance architecture, realistically drawn major characters, naturalistic movement, and classical music made modern. Yet, there is no substance or deep humor, just frivolity. The artwork crumbles because it cannot conceal an unimaginative narrative, and even the artwork is faux UPA graphic style (United Productions of America, *q.v.*) mixed poorly with well-rounded, realistic characters. There is a Barbie-doll quality to the leading characters that is upsetting, and needless to say, the patriarchal perspective regarding Princess Aurora's role in life is disturbing.

Sleeping Beauty, a product of the [...] icy Cold-War climate of the 1950s, is very much in keeping with its time. The difficulty is that, even though the Disney Studios stopped producing animated fairy tales until the resurgence in 1989 with *The Little Mermaid*, the artistic and ideological recipe and approach to making animated fairy-tale films in the Disney Studio became cemented in 1959. No matter how the Disney artists and animators have tried—even when they have tried to mock themselves with the pitiful *Enchanted* in 2007—they keep producing the same kind of fairy tale. Basically, they have been reduced to selling a brand and maintaining a mass cultural taste for a particular brand of fairy-tale film.” Pp.88-9.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21L.430 / CMS.920 Popular Culture and Narrative: Use and Abuse of the Fairy Tale
Fall 2015

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.