About Fairy Tales As a Literary Model for Cinematic Storytelling – an Unending Story

Jochen Brunow

Once upon in ancient times, when wishing still worked, a Magic Apparatus was invented. A very clever man put together the stills of photography, the claw mechanism of the sewing machine and the Maltese Cross. The Magic Apparatus transformed the world and its creatures into moving shadows. Ever since then, it has been called cinema. The great magic of this apparatus was that – if handled by a good operator – the shadows could tell something true about the real world.

In his wonderful book "The American Voyage" (you can find a wonderful review of it in our current issue of Scenario) Patrick Roth writes, "When writing, one is searching for a foothold, an image, which already corries everything inside, in the most mysterious way. For an image, which is slowly revealed, understood and put into perspective." Fairy tales are overflowing with these kinds of images. For his prose, Roth finds the necessary inspiration for himself and his writing in film and the perceived threshold between cinematic image and reality. This works especially because of the dissolution of topographic space. Things, places and events are linked together mentally, just like in fairy tales. There was a time when the "Odyssey of the Screenwriter" by Christoph Vogler was all the talk in the film business and even today - as the book has been re-printed several times – it continues to influence the way films are narrated. Vogler's one-dimensional transference of Joseph Campbell's mythological studies tries to translate one mechanical structure to film narration. However, it is worth looking at the symbolic imagery of fairy tales and myths themselves, and to use their openness and freedom of time and space as a springboard to find equally strong metaphors for cinematic narration in out day and age.

In the dawn of cinema, fairy tales were adapted for the silver screen. Urban Gad, a Danish screenwriter and director working for the German Bioscop Film, started as early as 1916 and got his wife at the time, the great Asta Nielsen, to act in the first film version of "Cinderella". At any time in film history countless fairy tale films followed. The Prague based Baranndov Studios in the 1970s and 80s might have marked a considerable highlight of the genre, whereas the current, rather flat productions of the (**German**, not BBC!) public TV stations seem to point to an all-time low. In today's cinema the "pure-bred" fairy tale film has been imposed by fantasy productions such as Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings.

What is it about fairy tales that made and makes them so interesting for cinema? It is certainly not their dramatic logic or rather the lack thereof. How does Iron John know the key to his dungeon is hidden underneath the queen's pillow? For a man like him, this seems like a quite unusual, intimate knowledge of the queen's bedchamber. In the fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty", the cursing of the

beautiful king's daughter happens because his father only owns 12 plates. A king with only 12 nice plates in the cupboard? Everyday logic and a realistic ratio of cause and effect, which is so vital in film narration, are completely reversed in fairy tales. And a psychological explanation for the characters' doings doesn't exist either. So, complex characterizations can't be the reason for the frequent adaptations of fairy tales either.

On the blog of famous film critic Georg Seeßlen I found the following quote by Guillermo de Toro: "There are two kinds of fairy tales – the ones that support the status quo, and the ones that rebel against it, advocating anarchy." Seeßlen adds that de Toro's theory needs to be put to the test. "Can the content of a fairy tale rebel against the status quo without, at the same time, rebelling against the form of fairy tales itself? Is the rebellion already included in the form of the fairy tale? Can a fairy tale of rebellion be lived?" I think that fairy tales and their form contain a great potential for resistance/opposition.

The narration of fairy tales is a truly global tradition of mankind and has survived in all parts of this earth fairly unaltered. It seems they must be capturing something special and very precious to have overcome all the many changes in their political, social und cultural settings. Their effectiveness still lies in their power to transport us into another world, in very few words. A world where the laws of our normal lives have been abolished, and something universally valid about these normal lives is revealed.

Folk tales were only passed on when they spoke to the phantasies, needs and desires of many people and they are the result of a general, universal understanding about life that is consciously or subconsciously shaped and shared by many people. This is why fairy tales have also been called the "philosophy of the people." The wisdom stored up in the fairy tales, their treasure of life experience about universal human problems and, at the same time, the desirable solutions of the latter, should no longer remain unexploited. And the modern medium of film should make its own contribution. The extraordinary ability of fairy tales to travel, crossing national and linguistic borders, makes them evermore interesting as a narrative model. This also explains the current fallback to fairy tales in the fields of cartoon and animation. Is it possible to make use of these characteristics apart from those of the traditional, illustrating versions? It requires taking a closer look at fairy tales and their narrative structure to try to penetrate to their very core which, to this day, hasn't yet been researched conclusively.

Fairy Tale Imagery

Fairy tales are characterized by the vivid visualization of their narrative. They operate with external and easy-to-comprehend visual appearances. The internal characteristics of the active individuals are transported with external markers; the values in question are personified and that way the inner worlds are entirely represented in the outer world. The characters' motivations are always conveyed through action, a requirement we also encounter in the respective tutorials for screenwriting. It must be the strong visual quality that has made the fairy tale a special object of film adaptation time and again. Appropriately, fairy tales are also describes as typical "demonstrative literature".

Fairy tales belong to the so-called "simple" literary forms. They were and are being told, listened to and read everywhere around the world. Their narrative characteristics remain relatively similar and include: a single-thread plot, some three-fold element, a strong typecasting of the characters. Different human attributes appear in one separate character. The narrative style is simple – main clauses are strung together in parataxis leading to a narrative that seems both simple and truthful, and the linear reasoning makes it appear quite compelling. Fairy tales make use stereotypes. There is a lot of direct speech und recurring incantations mark the joint between the magic world and the mundane. Even though the fairy tale universes make a clear distinction between Good and Evil, Cleverness and Stupidity, Faithfulness and Betrayal, they always attempt to do justice to the complex nature of life as a whole.

The language of fairy tale makes use of short, clear classifications, or in Wilhelm Grimm's words: the "children's and household tales" don't contain any "laces or golden borders". The forest is dark and deep, it is never specified as a conifer or broadleaf forest. The dress is golden, but we never learn anything about its length or a possible cleavage. The princess is beautiful, but are her eyes blue or brown? We will never know! The only important information is that she was the fairest of them all. "The king's daughters were all beautiful, but the youngest daughter was so lovely that even the sun, who has seen many things, was struck with wonder every time he shone on her face." The description of "supernatural" beauty serves to show the singular position of the character in her social and family context. She is obviously Daddy's darling, a precious treasure, even for someone like a king.

The Origin of Fairy Tales

In scientific research there are two theories about the origin and distribution of fairy tales. As the authors have remained unknown, the first appearance of the material also remains in the dark. According to the school of mythology, the folk myths are the foundation of our fairy tales. The concept suggests that they contain elements of the early mythological interpretations of the world and were later adapted to contemporary narrative conditions and imagery. This notion was especially popular during Romanticism and the great collectors of the German "Children's and Household Tales", the Brothers Grimm, also contributed to this idea. The artistic and quite complex composition of fairy tales towards one singular solution suggests an individual author, but the formulaic nature and many repetitions of linguistic, ritual commonplace phrases reveal the influence of a long oral tradition. Unlike the myth, the evolution of fairy tales happened in several oral processes which allowed them to develop through the ages. Through this type of folk memory, from generation to generation, the stories underwent an evolutionary development, slowly perfecting their correspondent of form and content.

The monogenesis theory assumes a singular place of origin, mostly India. The distribution and migration of fairy tales, their changes and variations, are explained through the transmission of storytelling material from mouth to mouth and group to group. The increase in collecting, archiving and editing of fairy tales made it possible to classify, allocate and analyze different story types. The aim was to reconstruct an archetype, an "original" fairy tale form which all other variations stemmed from. This research, for example, lead to the collection of nearly one thousand versions of the Dragon Slayer fairy tale.

Advocates of the polygenesis theory reject the idea of one geographic origin as source of all fairy tales and claim instead that habitual ways of thinking, dream interpretation and the customs of all primitive people groups are *all* the originator of fairy tales. The same basic conditions of human existence, similar involvement with the environment and

development of the human soul lead to an agreement of motives and contents. So, the emergence of resembling fairy tales in different parts of the world are not explained through migration, but with the similarity of the basic assumptions about human existence.

The Symbolic Imagery

"Simple visual principles/pictorial symbols (…) appear in their high-contrast form determination as utterly concise, but the fairy tale provides no evidence for their visual organization," writes Fabienne Liptay in her book "Magic Worlds – Fairy Tales in Film" and she attests the specific linguistic style a "dialectic unity of clarity and abstraction." Even though they lack the optical clarity of photographic images, the contrasts that are used in fairy tales are just as indispensable for storytelling in film. "Contrast makes sense – on every level of writing or filming," this is what my screenwriting mentor Frank Daniel used to say. And André Bresson postulated, "Nothing is durable but what is caught up in rhythms."

The *symbolic* imagery of fairy tales often leaves the "pure fairy tale movie" feeling rather naïve and flat as they convert the images too directly. The figures of speech evoke rich images in the reader's mind; images rooted in the fantastic that remain on a symbolic level. The genuine fairy tale film with an illustrating approach to the material, however, shows them as real. What originally was merely symbolic, captured in and through the language, *must be* or *is* mostly depicted only externally. The true value of fairy tales therefor is hidden much deeper in their structure. Truly unfolding its narrative in film requires a transposition that is more than a mere adaptation. And creative analysis can help free the content from its linguistic confinement.

In contrast to legends or myths, the fairy tale never has a divine being intervening the story. Instead, the hero or heroine accomplishes the rescue and transformation/metamorphosis through their action alone. In essence, fairy tales give an encoded account of the difficulties growing up, the problems of adolescence. It is precisely this moment in fairy tales that deeply connects them to the coming-of-age genre in film. Both of them address the discovery of one's sexuality and what it means to gain maturity, find one's purpose, overcome a challenge and make far-reaching decisions for life. All the problems of adolescence are being dealt with.

These encrypted aspects of fairy tales are exactly what children's psychologist Bruno Bettelheim referred to in his book, "Children need Fairy Tales". He exposed the psychic phenomena in infantile growth processes in relation to the imagery in fairy tales, and reminded his readers not to leave the riches of folk wisdom (in the literary tradition) uncultivated. In my opinion, what he desires for literature, is also true for film. The salvation, however, doesn't lie in kitchen sink psychology, that equates a beanstalk growing up into the sky with a magic phallic power. According to this, the wolf is a male seducer, embodying all asocial, brutish tendencies within us. Red Riding Hood's threat then lies in her budding sexuality, and her fatal fascination with the wolf represents the oedipal desire of the girl for her father. A bag of gold und golden eggs visualize concepts of anal property. The turning of the key in the lock symbolizes the sexual act. These one-dimensional psychologizing views inappropriately limit the meaning of fairy tales.

Contemplating fairy tales is not about blindly intellectualized attempts of interpretation, but about visually recognizing the metaphors used, creatively grasping the narrative on a visual, emotionally potent level, as well as possibly translating the internal images to a personal and immediate reality. Ultimately, fairy tales are not just stories for children, but were originally intended for an adult audience. This means, they don't only deal with the problems of adolescence, but also describe the individual's basic experiences in an inhospitable world.

According to Max Lüthi, one attribute of the fairy tale hero is a visible isolation and an invisible connectedness. The isolation of the hero is illustrated by a strict stylization of the situation and his actions, often in addition to verbal repetition. The hero is mostly unaware of his or her isolation. His connectedness with everything and everyone is revealed in a gift, a miracle or unexpected help or rescue. Precisely because of a perceived isolation, the hero or heroine is open for different kinds of ties/bonds. He or she can respond to any contact and thus gains a well-rounded competency in relationships. In a certain way, this symbolizes a general connection of human beings with everything

that surrounds them, the society as well as the animal kingdom and nature. He is depicted as part of "creation". In this sense, fairy tales are the kid brother of myths.

In many fairy tales the challenges the hero has to overcome consist in test questions. The answer to the riddle directly emphasizes the hero's connectedness to the world. The Clever Farmer's Daughter for example poses three questions: Who is the richest? Who runs the fastest? And who is sweeter than every other? The rich farmer answers: his daughter is the richest of them all, his mare runs the fastest and there is nothing more sweet than the honey from his farm. The poor farmer says: nature is richer than anything else, human thought is faster than anything else and the sweetest thing of all is sleep."

Pia Mayer-Gampe even believes to have found a general reflection on the human mind in fairy tales. She understands them as a matrix for the positioning of man within reality. "Even if the content of fairy tales and myths, fantasy and utopias seems arbitrary to us, riddled with magic spells and other implausibilities, the mind's structure that thought them is up is not. While the heroes and heroines are sent out to travel through invented worlds, the mind takes the symbols to walk the same path it daily uses to invent real worlds. If we follow these signs and the wonderings of our figures, we will find the hidden matrix of the human mind in these stories that capture us with their perfectly plausible, creative play." Mayer-Gambe, daughter of the late writer Carl Amery, originally studied forestry. While working on her dissertation about women and the woods, she undertook a little excursion about their connection in depth psychology. While looking at Grimm's Fairy Tales, she noticed that beyond the portrayal of psychological development, the stories in their three-part character related to all three level of human existence: to body, energy and mind. She believed to have stumbled upon a phenomenon that might be as essential "to our self-conception as the discovery of the double-helix." If you take the body and not the psyche as subject of fairy tales, many of the stories will reveal a portrayal of a biological development, outlining the structure of evolution. Mayer-Gambe suggests that fairy tales shatter the notion of creatures as biological machines and connect the organism and its surrounding world to form a living unity.

It's not necessary to follow the author's interdisciplinary ramifications into the worlds of structural anthropology, forestry, physics and theoretical mathematics to understand that symbols tell stories by interlacing the inner and the outer worlds. "In order to grasp the entire meaning of a fairy tale symbol, we have to examine its relations and the story which it appears in, as well as the reason why it is so appropriate for exactly this story. The symbol might break free from the realms of the "purely mental" inner worlds and anchor the fairy tales more in the material reality as a "real symbol" than we have thought possible until now."

Transference

What could the concrete interpretation and transformation of a fairy tale look like? In exercises with students that I have conducted, a helpful approach seemed to be to define a central object as the starting point for such transposition. If we take for example the fairy tale of The Frog Prince, the golden ball would be such an object. The ball might, indeed, be treated as a symbol of wholeness, as Hans Jelluschek suggests in his series "Living with Fairy Tales", a psychological interpretation focusing on couple therapy and love dynamics. He says, "The ball has always been a symbol of wholeness and since the ball is golden, it suggests the perfection of this wholeness. For us, "being whole" is connected to "being unhurt" and – whether we are aware of this or not – we all strive with all our powers to achieve this wholeness. We do everything to overcome the fragmentation of our human existence and to become whole, complete, healed." This purely psychological reading limits the interpretation of the visual imagery of the fairy tales to one singular meaning. But because of its special properties, the golden ball is also a symbol of the father's power and wealth. The fact that the daughter is playing with it outside of the father's reach – beyond the city walls – is a testament to her high spirits, her (childish) carelessness, and she threatens at once her father's status and her own.

In the afore mentioned exercise the central object, the golden ball, was replaced with a very valuable violin. The beautiful, princess-like, arrogant daughter comes from a well-to-do family and her father is a famous musician and humanist. Without telling him, she takes his violin to school, so she can impress her class-mates. On her way back from

school, she is bullied by a group of other pupils and the case with the violin is stolen. Desperate, she turns to another pupil, the immigrant leader of the another school gang. She despises him and would normally never even have a conversation with. He asks what she will do if he gets her violin back, and even at this early point in the development, we can see how the whole dynamic of the fairy tale can be easily transferred to the following course of the story. The fantastic world of the fairy tale changes into a very topical social drama.

The Meaning of Fairy Tales for Society

Far beyond the outside realism, fairy tales narrate something deeply human. The tales live on because we, by implication, will always find contemporaries who seem to embody these human principles : we know people that behave like Rumpelstitskin or Cinderella. That is why the characters become part of our vocabulary, even if we have never actually heard this particular fairy tales ourselves. The fairy tale wants to show us a person, and no matter how artificial and exaggerated, we are sure that a deeply human characteristic has been revealed to us. We are shown something without which there is no life to be had, an insight about the contingency of human existence. Fairy tales use stories to demonstrate the legitimacy of human existence. That is why they are rightly called the little brothers of myths.

If the "worliness" of fairy tales has been recognized, and also the meaning that these narratives hold for a society that needs them for self-confirmation, we might ask how this works for other types of stories we are being told. The more criticism against the program of the public-service TV channels there is, the less receptive the persons in charge seem to become. "The tax-funded TV stations, a fatted 50s illusion of bitter tragedies from the world of the rich and beautiful" seem to have blurred our sight. All this wouldn't matter if the diligence with which the nonsense is produced, wasn't accompanied by a German cultural tragedy and the refusal to tell truly great stories." A statement by Alexander Gorkow for the Süddeutsche Zeitung. Even though he might be right, it makes sense to take a closer look. What are these great stories? Are they the so-called event-movies about historic mega events? Upon close inspection we see that what fairy tales do with their fantastic stories – the location of the individual in the circumstances of the world – is not happening on German TV at the moment. German film critic Ines Kappert, however, has found exactly this aspect to be relevant in the successful and highly acclaimed productions (abroad?).

"... the emotional realism of the new quality TV series – headed up by "The Wire" - interacts with detailed research of negotiation processes in institutions that are essential for our democracies: parliament, court, police and press. Working individuals with a desire to shape society are being scrutinized in relation to their capacity to change existing structures. When ambitious subjective individuals collide with an objective space of action, conflicts are inevitable."

The dramatic potential from this type of collision is almost consciously avoided in the German material. "Coreless" is the word a fellow screenwriter used to describe the stories which make it through the mills of the editorial offices and TV stations. The question at hand is how this is connected to the societal situation is this land? Have the cobwebs of Merkel's politics reached the far ends of artistic production? Have the dramatically "core-less" forms resulted in a societal lethargy, a frightened attitude towards any climate of change? The way we narrate our world tells us a lot about how we see and explain and understand it and, ultimately, how we are going to act in it.

Now, the fallback to fairy tales is certainly no universal remedy for poor storytelling skills, but it can be a way back to a debate about the true problems in our world, or better yet, the problems that we encounter having to live in this world today.

Is there a greater comment about the handling of money in our consumer society than "Hans in Luck"? Saying that not everything can be turned into cash value? Is there a more accurate satire about the rampant greed in the finance sector with its megalomaniac bosses, than the fairy tale of "The Fisherman and His Wife" where the fisherwoman finally wants to be God, but after a flight of fancy lands back in her hovel? What strong contemporary stories would emerge if we managed to transfer the metaphors, images and value used in fairy tales and applied them to today.

And in the not so distant past, the old magic apparatus, called cinema, didn't work according to the old laws anymore. Because a clever man replaces the photographic image which the ancients used to call "heliography", or "sun writing". The new trick was not to use the radiant, vital sunlight to turn the world and its beings into moving shadows anymore, but instead to capture everything in an apparatus with incredible calculating skills, and put it into ever smaller boxes. Even worlds and creatures that our eyes had never seen before, just our imagination, were now turned into moving shadows by the clever apparatus. The old magic, however, remained intact. And when the right person operates the apparatus, it still tells us something true about the real world.

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