

# BOOK REVIEW

## RECEPTION OF FAIRY-TALES



*Hören, Lesen, Sehen, Spüren. Märchenrezeption im europäischen Vergleich. Regina Bendix and Ulrich Marzolph (eds.). Bd. 8. UNI Göttingen: Schneider Verlag Hohengehren GmbH, 2008. 250 pp.*

The reviewed collection is a printed outcome of a series of public lectures delivered at the University of Göttingen. The published presentations mainly focus on the comparative reception and use of fairy-tales in different media. The authors are interested in the changes – concerning the content, form and meaning of fairy-tales – brought about by the transfer of the genre from one media to another.

In the foreword, the compilers refer to the verbs “hear, read, see and sense”, highlighted in the title, aimed at denoting the complex and multi-layered nature of fairy-tale reception. On one hand, the reviewed collection involves scientific papers wherein the subject matter of fairy-tales is dealt with in a relatively classical manner. By way of applying the method of historical narration research (e.g. Lauer, Marzolph, Lundt), the authors manage to reach texts from the distant past. The other main focus is on the audio-visual manifestations of fairy-tales (e.g. Beck, Shojaei Kawan).

The fairy-tale books, by Brothers Grimm, Andersen, Hauff and several other authors of the 18th–19th centuries, have significantly affected the understanding of the so-called classical fairy-tale. The texts by these authors are the core of the entire fairy-tales’ research, this fact is also clearly evident in the reviewed collection of articles.

Gerhard Lauer’s article focuses on the 19th century change in the fairy-tale concept. He admits that the tales by Brothers Grimm have a solid place in our cultural memory, and the fairy-tale genre in the 21st century is understood by relying on the example of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. Lauer gives an overview of fairy-tales known within the European cultural space before the main publication by the Grimms – fairy-tale-related subject matter, obtained from different sources and presented in the literature of the modern times, jokes, tales of Arab and Indian origin, medieval epics in prose, French *fée*-stories and the publication of *bibliothèque bleue*. On several occasions, the author reminds of the fact that all these stories were initially targeted at adults, and became part of children’s literature after the mediation of the Brothers Grimm. The Romantic era treated folklore as the cradle of poetry, which indeed affected the concept of fairy-tales as archaic and popular stories, this being the point of departure for the Brothers Grimm to adapt their fairy-tales accordingly. An abrupt increase in the number of ethnic fairy-tale collections, and the ones by different authors would make the 19th century a specific fairy-tale century, and we are still moving in its after-wave.

As an addition to Lauer's article, Hans-Jörg Uther's treatment provides an overview of fairy-tale publications issued by German Romantics, and the evolution of fairy-tales into children's and youth literature.

Besides the Brothers Grimm collection, the European literary tradition has been greatly affected by the collection of Oriental stories "A Thousand and One Nights", mediated by Antoine Galland. Ulrich Marzolph's thorough study focuses on the history of the tale collection and the image of the Oriental culture. Galland's collection actually comprises the fairy-tale motifs and plots from different countries – India, Iran, Turkey, Egypt – amalgamated into a story within a story at different time periods. Marzolph underlines that the collection was not a unique creation by Galland, instead, similar collections of Arab stories had also been circulating in earlier times, yet the frame – one tale told every night, supposedly originates from India. Thus, the collection is a specific international collection of texts wherein it is possible to differentiate between time-wise and geographical layers (e.g. the texts from the Bagdad or Egyptian epochs). Marzolph specifically highlights the Aladdin story as the epitome of Oriental fairy-tale tradition. The Thousand and One Stories have remarkably influenced the imagination of the West with regard to the Orient.

Bernhard Wiebel's article delves into Baron Munchausen's narratives, a literary tradition wherein new interpretations are being constantly created. Therefore, the figure of the Baron is nothing but constant, sometimes depicted as a fool, a womaniser, and even a party member, in an anti-communist pamphlet. Wiebel refers to the reception of Munchausen's stories in the literature of different countries, in book illustrations and films, stating that even insignificant details, e.g. the title of the publication, could affect the reception. In different publications, Munchausen's stories have been titled as jokes, puns, children's twaddle, fairy-tales, German humour, world humour, fraud and lies.

By way of utilising the feminist approach to fairy-tale research, Bea Lundt shows the depiction of mermaids and water spirits, starting with the medieval texts and ending with the modern iconographic advertisements. Bearing in mind the history of the motif, Lundt pays attention to the depiction of the woman as a mythological mermaid and fairy. As a fixed notion, the image of the mermaid has been sexually attractive, supernaturally beautiful, with simultaneous background knowledge of the calamitous nature of this creature. With this in mind, Lundt presents a number of stories about the positive features of the supernatural woman – e.g. morality, faithfulness, motherly love. However, when living among people, human values are put to the test, and the violation thereof would destroy the ideal partnership. Similar motifs can also be found in Estonian fairy-tales – the mermaid disappears after the husband has revealed her supernatural origin.

Employing the Slovak example, Gabriela Kiliánová elaborates on the modernisation process of fairy-tales, highlighting the two periods when fairy-tales were more actively used in the creation of cultural identity – the first period at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, associated with the emergence of national self-awareness. At the time, fairy-tales were the privileged genre and seen as the cornerstone and source of national literature. The second period is associated with the building of communism after World War II. The author treats tradition as an open

cultural system, affected by different linguistic and ethnic groups, trying to understand how the Slovak multicultural society was affected by the different receptions of fairy-tales and legends. Kiliánová takes a closer look at the figure of death in Slovakia and in the near vicinity, touching upon the concepts of 'traditional' and 'modern', and raises a question of today's treatment of fairy-tales.

Albert Gier observes the use of fairy-tale plots in music theatres, highlighting the important factors with regard to librettos: 1) the length – i.e. when the text is substantially shortened, preference is given to generally known plots; 2) incoherence of time – the course of time can be suspended (aria) or accelerated during the performance; 3) episodic nature of the libretto – each act or scene focuses on only one event; 4) contra-structure – emphasis is on oppositions; 5) concentration – the presentation involves only the issues relevant for the story.

Walter Beck, the former film director in East Germany, provides an in-depth overview of the fairy-tale films produced in the DEFA film industry during the post-war period. Ingrid Tomkowiak's article dissects the reception of fairy-tales in the Walt Disney animations *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, the higher echelon in the Disney world of fairy-tales. The peculiar mixture of reality and non-reality, natural and fantasy are the means of expression in the classical Disney animation, in addition to music and humour. The story, bearing in mind the aims and goals of the main character, would proceed in a linear manner towards the happy ending. The subject matters and values highlighted in the fairy-tale movies involve individuality, laboriousness, optimism, innocence, striving for happiness, romantic love and the battle between the good and evil. Humour is presented in a wide spectrum in such films, involving situation comic, parody, satire and grotesque, black and surrealistic humour. In addition to all this, the fairy tale world is being diversified with several new characters and motifs.

A different approach to fairy-tales and films is employed by Christine Shojaei Kawan, whose research focuses on the film *Chocolat* (Director Lasse Hallstrom). According to Shojaei Kawan, there are film plots which could be analysed as wonder tales as their structure, theme, motifs and stylistic elements tend to be similar. Although the film *Chocolat* is not directly associated with any fairy-tale plots, the film acquires a fairy-tale level by way of the employed narration strategies, motifs and structural analysis.

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