

Fairy tales between transformation and repetition: How audiences rethink the big romantic myth through Disney princess stories

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Abstract. One of the ways in which culture becomes enriched is through reconsideration and reinterpretation of well-known stories, and classic fairy tales provide promising material for investigation of the nature of this complex process. The Walt Disney Company is among the most powerful tellers of classic tales, its line of princess animations being an example of simultaneous development and preservation of the fairy-tale phenomenon in a changing cultural context.

We analyse the dialogue among classic and modern princess stories and the discussions that these stories give rise to in English-language academic criticism and English-based participatory culture. We focus on the interaction among authors, texts and readers, showing how traditional tales balance between mythological and non-mythological consciousness, between innovative and canonical art.

The diversity of fans' practices may be seen as a key to possible explanation of why fairy tales exist in culture as a complex, constantly growing web, not as a limited number of selected final versions. Amateur authors demonstrate their interest in the mythopoetics of classic fairy tale plots. They are attracted by the old romantic myth that stands behind princess stories, participate in the creation of the romantic anti-myth that is supported by the professional critics, and expect the appearance of new modern myths that might be generated by the new productions of Disney. New fairy tales appear, but this does not result in the disappearance of the old ones. Not only the interests towards the plots themselves, but also discussions and conflict around classic stories keep them topical for contemporary heterogeneous audiences.

Keywords: fairytales; repetitions and transformations; mythopoetics; participatory culture; semiotics of culture

According to Umberto Eco (1985), innovation, repetition and innovation through repetition are defining features of postmodern culture. Indeed, contemporary culture becomes enriched through reconsideration and reinterpretation of well-

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known stories, and classic fairy tales² offer promising material for investigation of the nature of this process. Fairy-tale plots are retold in various cultural and natural languages, reflect different social discourses, cause various disputes, and are echoed in texts of all possible genres.

The phenomenon of diverse fairy tale adaptations has been researched by numerous scholars, and several important edited collections have been published recently, such as Kérchy 2011; Schwabe 2016; Greenhill, Magnus-Johnston, Zipes 2016; and Greenhill *et al.* 2018. In addition, monographs that have proved to be of crucial importance in the field have been written by Jack Zipes (1986) and Cristina Bacchilega (1997, 2013). Our article complements the studies, firstly, by including transformative works devoted to classic tales into the diverse landscape of interpretations, and secondly, by adding a semiotics perspective to the research of the fairy tales transformations as influenced by contemporary culture.

The Walt Disney Company (more precisely, its corporate artists unified under the famous brand) is one of the most powerful storytellers that ever turned to classic tales. Through adaptations of texts by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, Disney created its own recognizable artistic language and a new tradition of princess stories which to this day include around thirteen feature-length animations and have become incredibly popular among audiences of different generations. The line of princess stories is a great example of the simultaneous development and preservation of fairy tales in culture.

In order to investigate how the fairy tale exists in the contemporary world, we will analyse not only the dialogue among classic and modern princess stories, but also the discussions that they cause among English-written professional critics and English-based participatory culture. Our methodology is partly similar to the *archive fanfiction* as it was developed and described by Holly Pester (2017), who proposed to deny hierarchical principles in the investigation of materials in feminist research and turn to unconventional sources such as gossip, anecdotes or other texts of popular knowledge. Indeed, we believe that analyses of utterances made by professional and amateur readers taken as something equally valuable to academic discourse may lead to a deeper understanding of the cultural dynamics around the fairy tale and demonstrate how the collective consciousness encounters the attempts to deconstruct and rethink stories that are often perceived as “natural” and “everlasting”. Firstly, this approach gives us a bigger picture of heterogeneous audiences’ reactions. Secondly, the difference between professional

² By classic tales we mean wonder stories that are widespread in Europe, often rooted in traditional folklore, and have literary versions. “Cinderella”, “Sleeping Beauty”, “Beauty and The Beast”, “Snow White” and “Little Red Riding Hood” are a few examples that are the most recognizable by a variety of audiences and also widely represented in contemporary culture.

scholars and fans is not as clear and obvious as it appears at first glance; many scholars may be also fans, and, on the other hand, many fans may be sufficiently educated and insightful to work as professional scholars (Hills 2002; Tulloch 2000). Rather, it is the difference in cultural languages in which utterances in the discourse are made that is significant. If professional scholars usually are more limited by the official language of scholarship and verbal language in general, then fans can be freer in their expressions, use different styles and media. The perspective that includes aspects of participatory culture focuses attention on the interaction among authors, texts and readers, showing transformations and repetitions of texts as part of complex cultural communication (see Lotman 2000; Ojamaa, Torop 2015).

From the perspective of the Tartu-Moscow School, repetitions and transformations in culture may be seen, firstly, as a result of two contradictory, yet coexisting types of cultural consciousness, namely, mythological and non-mythological thinking (Lotman, Mints, Meletinskij 1980; Lotman, Uspenskij 1992); and, secondly, as a result of two corresponding modes in which a work of art may appeal to receivers – that is, canonical and novelty-oriented communication (Lotman 2013[1973]). The fairy tale balances between these two semiotic oppositions, and we will use it to model and analyse the process of retelling. On the one hand, in countless variations of fairy tales we can see the same repetitive stories that reflect already established cultural myths; and, on the other hand, the fairy tale is constantly evolving and turning into something new, topical and consistent with the spirit of the time.

Fairy tales and mythological consciousness

The question of interrelation between the folktale and the folk myth is a complicated matter that raises discussions among scholars. From one point of view, the folktale might be seen as the folk myth's successor that preserves some mythological elements in its poetics; on the other hand, folk myths and tales may be considered as similar traditional stories (Eliade 1963; Levi-Strauss 1969; Meletinskij *et al.* 1969). If the distinction between the folk myth and the tale is accepted and accentuated, then it is usually described through the oppositions of ritualized *versus* non-ritualized, sacred *versus* non-sacred, prehistoric *versus* a-historic, with the implied intention to explain the world order *versus* concentrating on the destiny of particular characters (Meletinskij *et al.* 1969).

The problem of myth understanding, however, cannot be reduced to simple categorization of folklore texts. The interest of Juri Lotman and other like-minded

scholars (Lotman, Mints, Meletinskij 1980; Lotman, Uspenskij 1992) was directed to the investigation of myth as a special type of cultural consciousness or special type of interaction with the world. Mythological consciousness, as opposed to non-mythological thinking, presupposes isomorphism, syncretism and cyclicity; it fuses and folds different cultural languages and plots, turns different stories into one indivisible whole and distinguishes one all-encompassing message. Non-mythological consciousness, on the contrary, tends toward textuality, discreteness, linear development and finality.

From this point of view, the concepts of folk myth and myth in a broader sense do not completely correspond to each other. Myth appears to be a model of the world that is present in collective memory and cannot be reduced to any concrete text or expressed completely in any natural or cultural language, since translation into a discrete system of signs entails inevitable transformation into a non-mythological sphere of consciousness. Thus, folk myths and folktales differ by very blurred criteria, namely, by the degree of the connection to the mythological consciousness. If folk myths reflect more mythological thinking and worldview, then folktales approach the discrete language of literature, being, however, still connected to myths.

Myths are elusive, hardly describable, but at the same time pervasive and influential. The Lotmanian perspective treats them as something predetermined and eternal. The perspective of Roland Barthes (1991) is similar in many aspects; however, the French scholar regarded myth as a cultural construct which many people mistakenly take for granted and perceive as something “natural”. In this article, we do not aim to solve the mystery of the origin of myth. Rather, for us it is crucial that, firstly, mythological consciousness may be fuelled with different texts in different cultural languages (Ferrell 2000: 36); and, secondly, that not only old myths may be preserved in culture, but also new contemporary myths that in some cases function as “anti-myths” (Ferrell 2000: 36) may be formed under the influence of different discourses.

Over centuries, several traditional fairy tales became canonized, received the status of *classic* in the culture, and, according to Jack Zipes (1994: 4–5), people turned them “into the fabric of their lives”. Through repetition and transformation fairy tales acquired the image of never-ending, repeatable stories that tell us something about the world order and affect people’s views on themselves and others. Hence it might be said that “the classic fairy tale has undergone a process of mythicization” (Zipes 1994: 4–5) or, considering Lotman’s ideas, re-mythicization. In the context of general cultural dynamics, fairy tales became a catalyst and material for cultural activity and creativity.

Fairy tales in between canonical and innovative art

Two different types of cultural consciousness appeal to two different modes of a text's communication with the receiver, as distinguished by Juri Lotman. A work of art, firstly, may introduce to a receiver new information, which generally corresponds to the historical thinking in which different texts may form a line of genre/style/discourse development; and, secondly, it may repeat information that a receiver already possesses, which corresponds more to the mythological consciousness in which all texts may be merged into one. In order to do the former, a work of art should violate and change traditional artistic forms. In order to do the latter, it needs to maintain them. If in communication with art oriented toward novelty a reader/listener/viewer mainly receives information from the outside, then in communication with canonical art s/he is predisposed to turn to her/himself (Lotman 2013[1973]). Listening to very similar stories, for example, reading one and the same chapter from the Bible, works as a catalyst to recalling and rethinking a text that was already known before, but known differently. In this instance, the novelty comes not from information that is contained in the text, but from the receiver's changing inner world.

Although Lotman gives folktales and folk myths as examples of canonical art, the discussion of the fairy tale phenomenon in general (considering folktales, their literary versions and other subsequent adaptations in different artistic languages) reveals that the genre is simultaneously oriented at the maintenance as well as the violation of canonical norms; it balances between a high ability for transformation and a high ability for preservation.

Fairy tales as a canonical art

Fairy tales retain their identity and stay distinguishable on the level of common cultural consciousness despite constant contextual changes. Often, fairy tales cannot be equated with concrete source-texts, but rather exist in culture as *text-codes*³ (Lotman 2014[1981]) or ideal models of certain text types. Text-codes are present in different artistic works as repeatable narrative structures; they can be seen as the most obvious manifestations of myth in the culture, or as a connecting link between myths and texts manifested in different cultural languages (Fig. 1).

³ Juri Lotman used the notion of 'text-code' to analyse similar repeatable narratives about St Petersburg that are persistent in Russian culture, but have no single evident source-text.

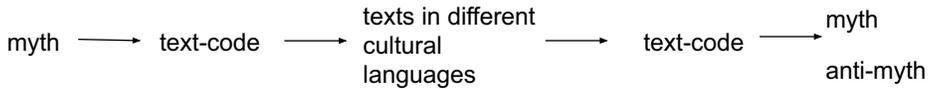


Figure 1. Relations among myth, text-code, and text.

On the one hand, text-codes appear in concrete artistic works; on the other hand, they are never limited to one work of art, but exist also outside of it, in the memory of the receiver. For example, despite all the differences in a variety of performances of the folktale “Cinderella” or in artistic versions of the tale that a modern receiver may actually remember – namely, in stories by the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, Walt Disney – the very general common narrative structure can be distinguished. In other words, in every variant of the tale, an invariant of the “Cinderella” story can be recognized.

The Lotmanian perspective presupposes that a receiver of a text need not be a concrete person, but it can also be culture as a whole (Lotman 2000). Considering culture as a complex holistic system that operates through voices of different people, we may indeed see that some texts have the potential to resonate not only on the level of private reading, but also on the more general level of collective consciousness. Hence, the repetition of the same text-code may reveal changes both in the inner world of a separately taken reader/listener/viewer, as well as in the inner condition of culture. Through new variations of tales made by different authors, the culture as a whole repeats to itself particular text-codes, and reacts to the myths that they represent. Thus, today we can see classic fairy-tale plots refracting through the lens of topical discourses such as feminism, gender, postcolonialism, power relations or xenophobia in movies, animation, theatrical performances, comic-books, novels, poems, advertisements and even pornography. From the synchronic perspective, diverse existing interpretations of tales may be considered as an intertextual web (Bacchilega 2013) that continues to expand with every new text. In this context, not only do concrete fairy-tale plots matter, but the whole tradition of their retelling does. Through complex and versatile dialogical relations among interpretations, we can see how culture uses text-codes in the process of self-reflection. All together, interpretations form a flourishing and versatile meta-discourse around the classic tales.

Fairy tales as an art oriented on novelty

Although it may seem that the stories of “Cinderella”, “Sleeping Beauty” and “Snow White” are “natural” texts of universal values (Zipes 2012: 4–9), complex cultural and historical processes stand behind them. From this point of view, it is the differences among the versions of one and the same tale that are of key importance. An analysis of the genre in the diachronic perspective shows that over time it has transformed on many levels – that is, it has shifted shapes, broken mediums, absorbed new ideas (Greenhill, Matrix 2010: 3). The genesis of the classic European fairy-tale canon has a long and complicated history and remains a controversial topic for scholars. The discussion includes several significant aspects, such as entangled interrelation between oral and literary traditions, ideological views and social positions of different storytellers, canonization of particular tales and their specific variants (see Schenda 1989; Zipes 1994; Bottigheimer 2009; Teverson 2013).

Moreover, the fairy tale has not stopped in its development after the formation of the literary canon, but continues to evolve into something new, while preserving some continuity in its variety of emerging forms. Today we can see, as different types of original fairy-tale texts, diverse authorial artistic works such as *The Little Mermaid* (1837) by Hans Christian Andersen, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) by L. Frank Baum, *The Hobbit* (1937) by J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–1956) by C. S. Lewis, *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010) by Cressida Cowell and many others. In all these texts, different elements of the classic fairy tale (e.g. a magic wonderland, the life-changing quest of a main character, witches and princesses, dragons, castles, etc.) are notably recombined and transformed, but still recognizable.⁴

According to Mikhail Bakhtin (2002[1963]), a genre contains undying archaic elements that connect it to its ancestry in all stages of its evolution. Archaic elements of the genre are renewed in every work of art, as authors transform them in accordance with the unique artistic design of their work and general cultural tendencies prevailing in their time. Consequently, in every particular instance of manifestation, a genre happens to be new and old at the same time. Bakhtin (2002 [1963]: 120) called this feature *a memory of a genre*. Classic fairy tales still echo in the *memory* of modern fairy tales and through them echo code-texts and myths.

⁴ Furthermore, we may recognize traces of the fairy tale in the development of other genres. For instance, some of the texts mentioned above may also be seen as fantasy, and, indeed, formulas of classic tales have a significant role in the elaboration of this genre (see Lin 2018), as well as in the genesis of the romance novels (see Sellers 2001) and horror stories (see Short 2018).

Artistic language, the text-code of the Disney Princess, and the myth behind it

Two coexisting modes of communicating with the receiver create a peculiar situation in which some artistic interpretations of classic tales may be seen simultaneously as fairy tales themselves, as interpretations of the tales, and as stages in the genre development. The cinematic adaptations made by the Walt Disney Company often play all three roles. Firstly, some scholars argue that because of the incredible popularity around the globe, Disney animations have taken the place of classic tales (Schroeder 2016; Stone 1975); and, for example, the Disney adaptation of “Cinderella” may be more recognizable by contemporary international audiences than the Grimms’ fairy tale is. At the same time it is important to remember that in Disney animations, classic tales have undergone creative rethinking and hence display significant changes (see Zipes 2012; Mollet 2013). Finally, the adaptations of tales have considerably influenced the creation and evolution of Disney’s distinctive artistic language and the overall development of the Western cinematic tale (Zipes 2016: 278).

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs was released in 1937. Not only is it the first full-length animation that gained wide international recognition, but it is also the adaptation that initiated one of the most pervasive and successful traditions in the history of the Walt Disney Company – that is, the tradition of the Disney Princess. The history of Disney may be divided into several significant periods or epochs when the company was releasing its most successful hits, elaborating the distinctive artistic style and defining topics and images that became iconic for its general image. In the classic era the company released first animations based on the adaptation of the wonder tales made directly under the supervision of Walt Disney; in the era of renaissance or “Post-Walt” era, after some lull, a new wave of adaptations appeared, which followed, and significantly developed, the patterns that had become established in the previous period; the modern era is represented by the latest animations in which the company not only revives the trends already beloved by the audiences, but also rethinks them. Originating in the classic era, the tradition of the Disney Princess was formed and developed in all subsequent epochs of the company’s existence. *Snow White* was followed by *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959); in the era of renaissance *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998) were released; in the modern era *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010) and *Brave* (2012) appeared (see Haas, Trapedo 2018).

The category of Disney Princesses is ambiguous to a certain extent. On the one hand, we may speak about the franchise owned by the Walt Disney Company

and created by Disney Consumer Products. This franchise works as the brand for production of different commodities (dolls, clothes, notepads, backpacks, etc.) meant mainly for little girls, and is limited to the aforementioned 11 animations. On the other hand, in the most general sense, the story of princesses unifies all Disney movies about female characters who were born as or married a royal. The second perspective allows us to broaden the category and include other Disney female protagonists, such as the newest characters, Princess Anna and Princess Elsa from *Frozen* (2013) and Princess Moana from *Moana* (2016).⁵

Not all stories of Disney Princesses are based on classic tales; for example, they include adaptations that rework the Chinese folk song “Ballad of Mulan” (approximately 6th century) and historical legends about the Native American woman Pocahontas. However, all the animations are made in one distinct artistic language that was born primarily in the process of the adaptation of “Snow White”, “Sleeping Beauty” and “Cinderella”. As Jack Zipes argues, the mystery of Disney animations’ success lies in the mixture of Broadway and Hollywood musical formulas with formulas of classic fairy-tale stories, hence, all animations are made in a similar pattern, involving:

[...] a ‘good’ young man or woman, who finds some magical means to help himself or herself against sinister forces. What counts most in the Disney fairy tale is the repetition of the same message: happiness will always come to those who work hard and are kind and brave, and it is through the spectacular projection of this message and through music, jokes, dazzling animation, and zany characters that the Disney corporate artists have made a profitable business out of the fairy tale. Indeed, the Disney corporation has literally commercialized the classic fairy tale as its own trademark. (Zipes 2009: 30)

Disney adaptations are colourful and funny, always end happily, and propose a clear separation between good and evil. They might be seen as sanitized versions of classic tales and other source texts. For example, inasmuch as Disney animations omit various cruel and bloody moments that were present in the classic tales, for the generations of receivers who grew up on Disney’s texts, the fact that in the Grimms’ version of “Cinderella” the sisters cut their toes and heels to fit into the golden shoe might not be simply unknown, but even shocking. Or, for instance, the original fairy tale “The Little Mermaid” by H. C. Andersen is a complicated text that, indeed, contains an implied princess story, which is,

⁵ The second perspective is more usual for a grassroots understanding of what the Princess line is. For instance, see https://disneyprincess.fandom.com/wiki/List_of_Disney_Princesses, <https://disneymovieslist.com/2018/02/23/official-list-of-disney-princesses/>, <https://geeks.media/15-characters-who-arent-on-the-official-disney-princess-list-but-should-be>.

however, transformed according to the personal poetics of the Danish writer. Many of Andersen's works have a religious subtext, and in his fairy tales many female characters travel the path of ordeals and redemption, while in some cases redemption only comes with death⁶. "The Little Mermaid" (1837) ends tragically: the prince never falls in love with the daughter of the sea king and marries another princess, while the little mermaid dies to become an angel. In Andersen's story, obtaining an innocent immortal soul is considered more important than happiness in romantic relationships (Trites 1991: 145–146). Because Andersen is too mournful and avoids the formula of a good human who always gets a reward in an earthly life, in the Disney adaptation the ending of the original tale is substituted with the wedding of the little mermaid Ariel and Prince Eric. Moreover, in order to make a happy ending unconditional, the other princess from the source-text is turned into the evil witch, so the personal happiness of the little mermaid also becomes a victory over evil. In a similar way Disney reworked all the sources of its princess stories by turning them into distinct Disney fairy tales.

Although separate Disney adaptations contain different text-codes inherited from classic tales, together they create the generalized and renewed text-code of the princess story. In the broadest sense it is a text about a graceful, kind and pure girl in search of happiness, while happiness almost always means true love. The influence of the princess story is not limited exclusively to the field of art and might be seen as a manifestation of the big romantic myth. It affected many generations of children and grownups by creating the pervasive dream of being a princess, marrying a prince and living together "happily ever after" (or finding a princess, saving and marrying her). Disney proposes an idealized image of a heteronormative feminine figure, an idealized image of a perfect man, and an idealized image of romantic relationships. These images have become part of common consciousness and of a diverse mass cultural production; moreover, they affect the ways in which people deal with their own lives and identities (Wohlwend 2009; England, Descartes, Collier-Meek 2011). For instance, according to JoAnn Conrad (1999), the fairy-tale princess is omnipresent in women's magazines and even lies behind the incredible popularity of princess Diana.

The story of the Disney Princess was formed as something holistic and distinctive. During more than 80 years since the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the animations that belong to the Disney Princess tradition have changed significantly. Like any other adaptations, Disney animations are affected by the cultural context of the time when they were made, and in the case of the

⁶ Other examples of this are "The Little Match Girl" (1845) and "The girl who trod on the loaf" (1859).

princesses' stories, the development of the image of the main female character is determinative. The role of the woman in society and her representation in culture has been changing over time, and therefore the Disney Princess has also been changing. The female protagonists from the era of renaissance are much more active and rebellious than the protagonists from the classic era, and the princesses of the modern era are even more independent, adventurous, skillful, funny and generally reminiscent of characters from romantic comedies (see Wilde 2014).

There are two basic narrative lines inherited from the folktale, around which most of the Disney princess stories are built. Firstly, there is the romantic line, and, secondly, there is the character's quest for her place in the world that often implies the traditional formula of prohibition violation (Meletinskij *et al.* 1969). In the animations of the classic era, the love-line is crucial and the line of self-determination is almost absent. Snow White, Aurora and even Cinderella do not dream about what is beyond the horizon; rather, they are princesses who are waiting for true love. In the adaptations made in the era of renaissance, both lines are usually combined, so that the princess's need to understand herself and her thirst for adventure is directly connected with the search for love. Belle is yearning for something more than a provincial life; Ariel is dreaming about the world of humans; Mulan does not fit in the role that prescribed to her by society; Pocahontas feels that she has a special mission. Thus, all characters break the boundaries of the familiar worlds and find their princes in the world of the unknown. Among these animations, stories appear for the first time in which characters fall in love not suddenly in one moment, but in the process of the journey and against all odds. The adaptations made in the modern era are very similar to the renaissance texts; however, in three of the latest animations, *Brave*, *Frozen* and *Moana*, Disney steps even further and understates or even eliminates the romantic component in favour of adventures and searching for the character's personal destiny. Merida from *Brave* fights for her rights to be free and choose her husband (and it is important that he does not appear in the animation) at the behest of the heart at the right time. Moana is only interested in going behind the reef, exploring the world and saving her home island. Although Princess Anna is searching for someone to love, the inner conflict of Princess Elsa is about the uncontrolled magic powers that she possesses and the ability to love in a broader non-romantic sense (see Table 1).

Table 1. The presence of two narrative lines in Disney Princess stories.

year	animation	the romantic line	the line of self-determination
1937	<i>Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs</i>	+	-
1950	<i>Cinderella</i>	+	-
1959	<i>Sleeping Beauty</i>	+	-
1989	<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	+	+
1991	<i>Beauty and the Beast</i>	+	+
1992	<i>Aladdin</i>	+	+
1995	<i>Pocahontas</i>	+	+
1989	<i>Mulan</i>	+	+
2009	<i>The Princess and the Frog</i>	+	+
2010	<i>Tangled</i>	+	+
2012	<i>Brave</i>	- (+) ⁷	+
2013	<i>Frozen</i>	+	+
2016	<i>Moana (or Vaiana)</i>	-	+

Thus, the adaptation of H. C. Andersen's "The Snow Queen" *Frozen* is one of the animations in which both lines are represented, and serves as one of the best examples of how formulas of classic tales are transformed into new stories of Disney's. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella* are made with such components of the classic princess story including the opposition between a pure good-hearted princess and a wicked queen/evil witch, the idea of love at first sight, and the image of Prince Charming who should come and save the heroine. The poetics of *Frozen*, made more than 50 years after the last classic animation, is based on subversion of these formulas. Princess Anna loses her heart to a prince from a faraway land at their first meeting, and he turns out to be a villain – thus the love line is subverted. Princess Elsa almost becomes the evil queen, but is saved by her love towards her sister – this is a transformed self-determination line and a subverted line of the wicked witch. In addition, the connection between the two sisters is shown as no less important than romantic relationships. *Frozen* is simultaneously in dialogue with Andersen's tale and with the whole Disney tradition: in the original "The Snow Queen", the classic opposition between the female protagonist and an evil queen is very important;

⁷ I have put both "+" and "-" here, because Merida's story is based on the denial of marriage of convenience. On the one hand, the story of true love is indeed absent in the animation, and on the other hand, it is present implicitly, as, in a certain sense, the princesses fight for a future true love.

in Andersen (1844), however, there is no explicit romantic line crucial for the rethinking of the princess stories.

If in general the line of self-determination seems to dissolve in the romantic myth, in the latest animations the company tried to emphasize, distinguish and even turn this line into the new dominant (Jakobson 1981[1935]) of the princess stories. Although *Moana*, *Brave* and *Frozen* still contain the text-code about a beautiful princess in search of happiness as it has been told before, the happiness of the protagonists Moana, Elsa, and even Merida is not determined by romantic relationships. These projects became very popular with a wide audience. Firstly, the animations do not simply support the classic narrative, but transform it to the extent that the whole message of the princess story is changed significantly; secondly, we may see them as part of the post-feminist movement discussed below that resonates with feminist discourse around the classic tale.

Tales in feminist and post-feminist discourses: Anti-myth and new myth

The Walt Disney Company is very often criticized for diverse reasons. For instance, conservatives argue that Disney produces morally questionable animations and films, while progressive critics discuss how the messages of Disney productions support patriarchal values and preservation of social inequities. According to Joel Best and Kathleen S. Lowney (2009), the company serves as a target for social problems claims, because its animations and movies have been accepted by a broad audience as an image of trustworthy and decent family-oriented entertainment. Indeed, considering the power of Disney over generations of young viewers and its general influence on culture, there is no surprise that its production has been scrutinized from different points of view (Best, Lowney 2009).

The tradition of the Disney Princess in particular attracts the attention of feminist critics and scholars. Many aspects of the animations that invite criticism are inherited from classic tales and connected to the romantic myth that stands behind the text-code of the princess story, namely, stereotyping the fairy-tale heroines by making them passive and submissive, the transmission of unrealistic body images (i.e. “beauty contest”), fabricated unrealistic images of romance, and representation of physical signs of old age as signs of evilness of the soul (see Stone 1975; Zipes 1986; Bacchilega 1997; Hermansson 2001; Haase 2004; Craven 2017). Progressive critics stand for a disclosure of the Grimm Brothers’ and Disney’s sexist editing strategies, a rediscovery of tales that feature empowered and realistic

female characters, a promotion of female bonding, influences from Marxism on thinking about gender, and influences from lesbian and queer studies⁸ (Joosen 2004: 6). Through their analysis and deconstruction of the artistic language of Disney, the critics subvert the charm of Disney animations, and we may even say that feminist discourse creates an anti-myth to the romantic fairy tale.

Although many researchers have noticed the development of the princess tradition and changes that happened to its protagonists over time, only a small number of critics see these transformations as significant successes in the subversion of patriarchal models⁹ (see Joyce 2013), while the majority still finds manifestations and assertion of different traditional formulas even in the newest Disney animations (see Stover 2013; Wilde 2014; Elnahla 2015; Streiff, Dundes 2017). For example, the critics argue that there still are no princesses who are not physically beautiful and slim.

The attitude of feminist critics towards the new Disney animations may be explained through the interrelations of feminist and post-feminist discourses. Feminist and post-feminist cultural discourses do not completely coincide, since, as Allison Craven (2018: 69) has put it, post-feminist discourse is “a set of representational practices in media”, which encompasses feminist ideas that have become embraced by the masses and interpreted by them. For instance, the combination of beauty and empowerment in Disney animations corresponds to the general spirit of post-feminism and may hardly be seen as a negative issue from its point of view (see Butler 2013). Thus, some feminist critics see post-feminism as an ambiguous phenomenon, and Michael Macaluso (2016) analyses the animation *Frozen* and the wide success of Princess Elsa as a reflection of popularization and distortion of feminist ideals.

Disney's latest animations that are made in the spirit of post-feminism balance between being oriented towards transformation and preservation of the princess tradition. While trying to preserve the general text-code of the princess story and the distinctive artistic language built around it, corporate artists also make an attempt to create a princess of the new generation, and consequently a new contemporary myth.

⁸ See, for instance the work by Leland G. Spencer (2014).

⁹ Juliana Garabedian (2014: 23) proposes a different classification of the princess animations, according to which *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) belong to the era of pre-transition; *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010) to the era of transition. while *Brave* (2012) and *Frozen* (2013) belong to the era of progression.

Audiences and mythopoetics of Disney Princesses

Participatory culture that represents the audience's creativity, utterances and reactions provides rich material for observation of and research into how myths exist in the contemporary world (see Montano 2013). In various blogs and vlogs, in fanfiction and fanart we may see how people operate with different popular texts, to which text-codes they appeal, which ideas disturb them, or, on the contrary, which cultural constructs they reproduce and accept. By means of participatory culture, the audience has the power to amplify, transform and question myths.

Fans' labour presupposes using diverse already existing texts for rethinking of personal and cultural experiences. The classic tales and Disney adaptations are inevitably included in the repertoire of the vast majority of modern readers and viewers. As Cristina Bacchilega (2013: 73–78) demonstrates in one of her books devoted to the retelling and transformation of fairy tales, the contemporary audience is very knowledgeable, often critical, able to make intertextual connections, and aware of the power that Disney possesses over the classic tale. Hence, in other words, it might be said that the audience is involved in the meta-discourse around classic and Disney tales. Today we may find different blogs where authors-fans compare Disney animations to the source-texts¹⁰ or analyse Disney's visual artistic language, teaching the receivers how to imitate it¹¹.

The phenomenon of participatory culture is often described through the notion of convergence that addresses issues such as the intersection of grassroots and corporate media and the interaction of artistic texts' producers and consumers (Jenkins 1992). Many publications that are posted in the popular web-media are devoted to fairy-tale discourse balance between professional and amateur texts. For instance, they might be compiled from memes made by the audience and commented on by the author who works for the website. For this reason, different articles may be illustrated by the same material of fans' creativity.

Participatory culture also presupposes the collision, commixture and fusion of different cultural languages. Texts are rarely considered as something isolated, but rather are juxtaposed to different heterogeneous contexts. The audience receives Disney animations against the background of a wide variety of texts in the semiotic sense, namely, different socio-cultural discourses, life-stories, TV-programmes, books, movies etc. Fans may use the animations of Disney princesses to speak about different social problems such as environmental crises, terrorism,

¹⁰ See, for instance, <https://dettoldisney.wordpress.com/>.

¹¹ See, for instance, <https://design.tutsplus.com/tutorials/how-to-draw-disney-villains--cms-31793>.

refugee crises or even mental health issues. One of the best examples of fans' creativity of this type that is extremely popular (more than 80 millions views on YouTube) is the series of musical parodies *After Ever After*¹² made by Jon Cozart that has been analysed by Kylie Schroeder (2016).

Although there are numerous topics that can be discussed through the subversion of the idealized utopian world of Disney animations, the romantic myth and the representation of women attract the most attention from contemporary creative audiences. The relationships of contemporary readers and viewers with the Disney princess tale can best be described using the term 'mythopoetics', as it was understood by Vladimir Toporov (1995: 5). The term denotes the creative power of collision between mythologization and demythologization.

On the one hand, the web is full of confirmations of Disney's popularity, as little girls dressed as princesses sing songs of Elsa, Belle, Ariel and others¹³, there are cute images of the princesses in childhood with their beloved pets/helpers in hands¹⁴, and we may find pictures with the princesses dressed in modern fashions¹⁵. On the other hand, quite often the audiences' reactions contain ideas that are reminiscent of feminist discussion. Like professional critics, readers and viewers point out that Disney transmits a distorted image of femininity and romantic relationships; however, participatory culture is much more creative in its approaches than the official academic world is. As an example of such creativity we may consider the widely disseminated meme about desperate Disney princesses who seek help from the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (1907–1954), who was famous for her rebellious temper and feminist views, to help them get rid of toxic and patriarchal love templates (Fig. 2).

¹² See Cozart's parodies <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diU70KshcjA>.

¹³ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFLwldVsI7A> or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XswVjjMmHAY>.

¹⁴ See, for instance, <https://mamabee.com/the-most-adorable-recreations-of-23-disneys-princesses/>.

¹⁵ See, for instance, https://www.boredpanda.com/illustration-disney-princesses-modern-fashionistas-anastasia-kosyanova/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic.

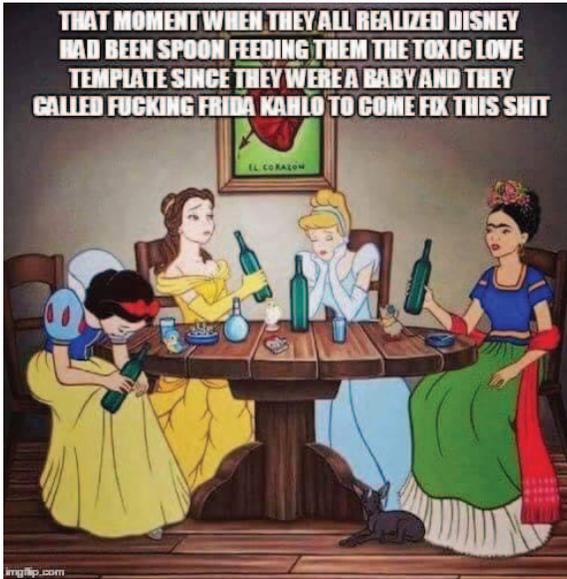


Figure 2. Desperate Disney princesses and Frida Kahlo.

It is also possible to find in the world wide web a variety of popular publications that are compiled from memes making fun of Disney's unrealistic body images and submissive female characters (Fig. 3)¹⁶; there is a selection of bad dating advice from princesses¹⁷; and there are numerous fanfics¹⁸ in which Disney princesses rebel against their traditional world, fall in love with each other, and even become aggressive to the extent that they can win the murderous Hunger Games¹⁹. With their various creative utterances about the animations, the contemporary audience in its own way deconstructs the artistic language of the Disney tale, appeals to the Disney Princess text-code, and rethinks the pervasive romantic myth. The romantic myth touches one of the most sensitive fields of human life, resonates with diverse love stories (romantic comedies, dramas, soap operas) that are told in different artistic languages and affects the reception of Disney animations. Many readers and viewers do not only show that real life is not a fairy tale and that love stories are much more complicated and ambiguous than those in Disney animations, but also demonstrate that they do not yearn for the old tales anymore.

¹⁶ See, for instance, <https://screenrant.com/disney-princesses-memes-funny/> or <https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2009/10/25/disney-princesses-deconstructed/>.

¹⁷ See, for instance, <http://www.livingly.com/Colossally+Bad+Dating+Advice+From+Disney+Princesses/articles>.

¹⁸ See the overview of selected fanfics on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0pVNqbdGx8>.

¹⁹ Survival games from novels by Suzanne Collins. See also the discussion at <https://www.quora.com/Who-would-win-if-all-the-Disney-princesses-fought-Hunger-Games-style>.



Figure 3. A rebellious and independent Cinderella.

In this connection it is significant that, unlike the majority of professional critics, the broad audience not only notices but also admires the line of self-determination in the animations from the epoch of the renaissance and a whole new wave of post-feminist Disney characters. For instance, there is a series of publications wherein the authors try to justify the positive role of Disney in culture by showing how in different (even classic) animations female protagonists are searching for new worlds, new paths in life and their own special destiny²⁰. There are publications with analysis of the evolution of Disney's female characters²¹, and classifications of princesses on a scale ranging from less to more feminist. Still, the latest animations are not always considered to be the most progressive; while acknowledging the revolutionary texts of Princesses Moana and Elsa, author-fans also see Mulan and Pocahontas as powerful and independent heroines²².

The diversity and incalculability of readers' reactions does not allow creation of a harmonious, coherent and complete picture of the reception of the princesses' tales. By its very nature, participatory culture is contradictory, heterogeneous

²⁰ See <https://www.shemazing.net/comment-why-all-disney-princesses-should-be-treated-like-feminist-icons/>, <https://www.hercampus.com/school/jcu/are-disney-princesses-feminists>.

²¹ See, for instance, <https://studybreaks.com/tvfilm/disney-princess-movies/>, <https://www.ballstatedaily.com/article/2018/11/culture-check-how-disney-princesses-portray-feminism>.

²² See <https://medium.com/@gbailen/disney-princesses-ranked-from-least-to-most-feminist-5addd29141b0>.

and constantly renewing. For instance, among the voices of the people who are charmed by *Frozen* are also those who criticize and subvert it²³. Mythopoetics of the tales catalyzes movements in culture, it is the constant process of affirmation and denial that maintains an interest in the texts and provokes the audience's creativity. Moreover, the audiences' contradictory utterances also demonstrate that contemporary readers and viewers simultaneously need the old classic tales and simple romantic stories, are ready for the transformation and renovation of the romantic myth, and expect new stories that may create new myths. Thus, we can find several publications on the web in which the audience guesses whether or not Princess Elsa will be shown as queer in the forthcoming sequel of *Frozen*²⁴.

In conclusion

There are different systems that attempt to describe and analyse the complex relations among texts from the perspective of literary and narrative studies. Thus, for instance, Kevin P. Smith (2007) proposed the eight interrelated elements of intertextual use of fairy-tale material in contemporary postmodern texts. Moreover, the question of setting boundaries between secondary texts and new independent works of art acquires additional meaning in connection with participatory culture, as passionate debates about authorial rights and fanfiction do not subside (see Aufderheide, Jaszi 2011; Tushnet 2007). However, in the most general way relations among classic tales and their interpretations might be represented on a simple scale, at the one end of which there are adaptations created as close as possible to one of the classic literary versions and made in different artistic languages (illustrations, screen adaptations etc.); in the middle there are all kinds of remakes in which the poetics are based on artistic dialogues and may be implemented fully only if the receiver is able to juxtapose them with one of the commonly known versions, while the opposite end of the scale contains works in which associations with the classic tales may be merely allusive.

On this scale, early Disney adaptations such as *Cinderella* or *Sleeping Beauty* may be put closer to the classic tales, whereas the latest animations such as *Frozen* and *Moana* are closer to the new contemporary tales. However, all princess stories still preserve the unifying text-code about a female protagonist in search of happiness that, being constantly repeated, catalyzes cultural self-reflection and creativity.

²³ <https://medium.com/@directordanic/the-problem-with-false-feminism-7c0bbc7252ef>.

²⁴ <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2019/06/11/frozen-2-trailer-elsa-lesbian-pride/>.

The text-code of Disney princesses has an ambiguous position. In animations it exists as two story-lines that are usually merged into one, but when separated, they appeal to different myths (Fig. 4).

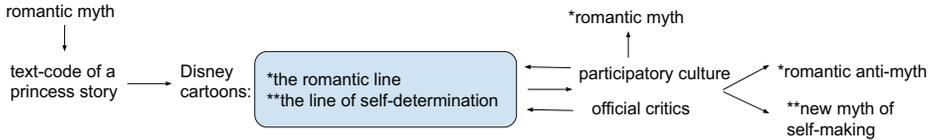


Figure 4. The tale of princess in the contemporary culture.

On the one hand, the text-code serves as a manifestation of the big old romantic myth, and on the other hand it serves as the basis for the modern myth of self-making and self-realization. Although the sources of the modern myth are also noticeable in the classic narrative and poetics of early Disney animations, in the stories of the modern era this aspect is re-actualized, significantly developed and turned into the dominant of animations. Consequently, all Disney fairy tales stay old and turn into something new at the same time – that is, they function as canonical and innovative art simultaneously.

The development of the princess tradition is inseparable from general cultural processes and is surrounded by discussions held in different fields of culture. In the process of transformation and renewal of the fairy-tale tradition, various cultural layers function interdependently and mutually affect one another. Thus, the text-code repeated in the artistic works activates movements in participatory culture and in professional critics, which in its turn may affect a variety of artistic production (see Andrejevic 2008; Jenkins 2004); works of art in their turn provide material for scholarly inquiries and the creativity of audiences.

The interconnection of scholarly discussion and utterances arising from participatory culture cannot remain unnoticed, as even a brief analysis shows the similarity of arguments in both cultural fields. However, there are also significant differences. If in the academic and critical feminist discourse old Disney animations are mainly criticized and new stories are often seen as unconvincing, opinions of the audiences are much more diverse. Contemporary amateur authors subvert Disney animations with fanfiction and memes, but also demonstrate their affection towards the old and new Disney stories.

In participatory culture we may try to find a possible explanation for why fairy tales exist in culture as a complex constantly growing web and not as a limited number of selected final versions. Firstly, even though there is a part of the

audience that rejects the classic tales, there will always be another part who wants them. This means that, although people are ready for new myths and anti-myths, the old romantic myth still stays in power. Secondly, the existence of a fairy tale web motivates contemporary professional and amateur readers to receive stories in a very specific and complex way – that is, paying attention to the dialogue of interpretations, to the development of the tradition, and to the connection of the texts with broad cultural contexts. Classic tales are not only interesting by themselves; it is also the discourse and conflicts around them that attract the attention of the audiences. Consequently, while new fairy tales may appear, they would hardly result in the disappearance of the old ones.

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Сказки между изменением и повторением: как аудитория переосмысляет романтический миф через истории Диснея о принцессах

Переосмысление и новая интерпретация уже известных историй – один из способов обогащения культуры, классические сказки – многообещающий материал для исследования этого сложного процесса. Компания Уолт Дисней известна своими пересказами сказочных сюжетов, среди них истории о принцессах, которые являются прекрасным примером развития и сохранения феномена сказки в постоянно меняющемся культурном контексте.

В данной статье мы анализируем диалог между классическими и современными историями о принцессах, а также дискуссию, которую они вызывают в критике и культуре участия на английском языке. Показывая, как классические сказки балансируют между мифологическим и историческим сознанием, между каноническим и ориентированным на новшество искусством, мы исследуем взаимодействие авторов, текстов и читателей.

Творчество авторов-любителей может быть ключом к объяснению того, почему сказки существуют в культуре как постоянно расширяющаяся сеть интерпретаций, а не в качестве устоявшегося набора конкретных текстов. Авторы-любители демонстрируют интерес к мифопоэтике классической сказки. Будучи поклонниками романтического мифа историй о принцессах, они также чувствуют в создании анти-мифа, который поддерживается профессиональной критикой, и ожидают появления современного мифа, который может быть создан новой продукцией Диснея. Новые интерпретации постоянно появляются, но не вытесняют старые. Классические сказки остаются актуальными для современной аудитории, не только благодаря самим сюжетам, но и спорам вокруг них.

Muinasjutud teisenemise ja kordamise vahel. Kuidas publik suurt romantilist müüti Disney printsessilugude kaudu ümber mõtestab

Üks kultuuri rikastumise võimalustest toimib tuntud lugude ümbermõtestamise ning -tõlgendamise kaudu ja klassikalised muinaslood pakuvad paljutõotavat materjali selle keeruka protsessi olemuse uurimiseks. Walt Disney Company on üks võimsamatest klassikaliste lugude vestjatest ning nende printsessianimatsioonide seeria on näide muinasjutufenomeni samaaegsest arenemisest ja säilitamisest muutvas kultuurikontekstis.

Me analüüsime klassikaliste ja moodsate printsessilugude dialoogi ning diskussioone, millele need lood on alust andnud ingliskeelses akadeemilises kriitikas ja inglise keelel põhinevas osaluskultuuris. Keskendume autorite, tekstide ja lugejate interaktsioonidele, näidates, kuidas traditsioonilised lood otsivad tasakaalu mütoloogilise ja mittemütoloogilise teadvuse, uuendusliku ning kanoonilise kunsti vahel.

Fännipraktikate mitmekesisust võib seega pidada võtmeks võimalikule seletusele, miks muinasjutud eksisteerivad kultuuris kompleksse pidevalt kasvava võrguna ja mitte piiratud arvu valitud lõppvariantidena. Amatöörautorid näitavad välja oma huvi klassikaliste muinasjutusüžeede mütopoeetika vastu. Neid köidab vana romantiline müüt printsessilugude taga, nad osalevad romantilise antimüüdi loomises, mida toetvad professionaalsed kriitikud, ning ootavad uute moodsate müütide ilmumist, mida Disney uued produktsioonid võivad tekitada. Uute muinasjuttude ilmumine ei anna tulemuseks vanade kadumist. Mitte üksnes huvi süžeede eneste vastu, vaid ka klassikalisi lugusid ümbritsevad diskussioonid ja konfliktid hoiavad neid heterogeense tänapäevapubliku jaoks aktuaalsetena.