

## **Preface for Exhibition Catalogue: 'From Grimm to Reality'**

James Frost

Senior Lecturer in the History and Theory of Art  
Department of Media, Art and Design

'Once upon a time': the most familiar of beginnings, and yet so odd. It makes a claim to truth: 'once this happened'. But what follows is a story so fantastical it cannot possibly be taken literally. 'Upon a time' suggests something past but with no particularity. The Fairy Tale world is a parallel to our own 'reality', but unlike our own world, promises are kept, oaths fulfilled, and problems resolved in a satisfying, if sometimes abrupt, 'happy ending'.

Fairy Tales and Nursery Rhymes are anonymous creations, their authors numerous. Importantly they are passed from adults to children, differing from playground rhymes passed from child to child and often parodying their adult sources (Opie, 1959, p.90).

Literary myths, histories and the echoes of ritual are transferred into a tradition of oral storytelling; this is set down in written form, only to be told or sung again as a revived oral tradition. The tales collected by Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Anderson, the Grimm Brothers and, more recently, Italo Calvino were all published with an audience in mind. All were edited and interpreted to some degree, made readable, even censored. An oral storyteller may also embellish and adapt an old tale for a particular audience. Narratives are reconfigured in the telling. What is remarkable about comparisons from one country to another is not the differences in the tales, but their remarkable similarities.

We could see such traditions as collective memory made tangible. As with personal memory, striking motifs and narratives linger, but original meaning might be lost.

The stories are told by adults, especially 'Old Wives'; perhaps for the pleasure of the telling, perhaps as a warning encoded in improbability. Children are ready listeners, entranced by a combination of the violent and ridiculous. As an adult reader, inherent eroticism and sexual threat also come to the fore; the horror of the isolated cottage in a hostile wood, the beasts of the forest as devourers and seducers.

The characters in Fairy Tales have no real interior life, no emotional depth: "One might almost say that the characters in a Fairy Tale are not actually conscious" (Pullman, 2012, p.xiii). Perhaps all the better to understand them as symbols or aspects of ourselves. We see ourselves in the polar extremes of good and evil characters, heroes, monsters and talking animals. We confront the bestial side of ourselves through Fairy Tales.

Marina Warner points out that the word 'fairy' is etymologically connected to the word 'fate': fairies foretell events and give warnings (1994, p.14-15). In Fairy Tales the protagonists (rarely actual fairies) play out their destinies as runaways, exiles, prisoners, abductees, orphans, or the simply

curious. Adult listeners may re-enter their childhood, but the child listener enters the hazards of the adult world.

Bruno Bettelheim explored this practical role for the Fairy Tale from a Psychoanalytic perspective. For Bettelheim, the purpose of these tales is to do with the child's orientation to reality and search for meaning and structure in life. The telling connects to the child's "...formless, nameless anxieties, and his chaotic, angry and even violent fantasies" (1976, p.7). Unlike certain 'safe' or sanitised stories for children, which lack secretive serial killers like Bluebeard, the Fairy Tale "...confronts the child squarely with the basic human predicaments" (p.8). This is how the fairytale speaks 'truth'.

As a child, 'Who Killed Cock Robin', from the Nursery Rhyme canon, had the most profound and memorable impact on me. It is a stark meditation on unlawful killing and the rites of death. There is no redemption, no hereafter; only ritual. It is a confrontation with cold reality.

*Who'll dig his grave?  
I, said the Owl,  
With my pick and shovel  
I'll dig his grave.*

The probable origin of the rhyme has no relevance to its power as verse. It is of only academic interest whether this refers to William Rufus (William II), second son of William the Conqueror (Harrowven, 1977, pp.92-95). Shot by a stray arrow whilst hunting in the woods, his chest turned red resembling Robin Redbreast.

*I, said the Sparrow,  
With my bow and arrow,  
I killed Cock Robin.*

On the other hand, it may be a reflection on the age-old fable that the Robin covers the dead with leaves (Room, 2001, p. 1004). And so, the bird is accorded the same funeral rites that it accords others. If the verse is allegorical, the key to the allegory is lost to every young listener: so its hard message becomes a universal one.

It may be hard to fathom why such things have been recited in nurseries other than to instil adult values or fears. Incy Wincy Spider is a childish Sisyphus, doomed to fall ad infinitum; what better expression of human futility?

Nursery Rhymes once had a specific meaning, now lost through repetition. There is rarely a narrative arc or sense of closure as there is in a Fairy Tale. As in the installations of **Anya Gallacio**, we are left with an enigmatic symbol disconnected from narrative.

In **Paula Rego's** interpretation of classic Nursery Rhymes there lurk, in shadows, the unsettling nightmare visions of Goya. **David Hockney** recognises the casual but bizarre violence of the Grimm Brothers' collection of Fairy Tales, his sparing style matching the economy of the telling. **Ana Maria Pacheco** allegorises herself as 'the sardine' overcoming mythical monsters and journeying to the

underworld. All three approach their subjects in the manner of narrative illustration, but all do more than illustrate. They see in these verses and tall stories a metaphor for human fear and internal conflict.

Fairy Tales and Nursery Rhymes have been attractive to contemporary artists as a subject for reinterpretation, or as an alternative and magical way of seeing the world. That is, seeing the world from the perspective of *Faërie*, “the Perilous Realm itself”, as J.R.R. Tolkien expressed it (1947, p. 16).

**Joel Ely’s** animal disguises and disguised animals; **Tessa Farmer’s** skeletal fairies grappling with preserved insects; **Jane Edden’s** microworlds in birdboxes; **Susanna Majuri’s** submerged worlds. In all these works nature is submitted to the rules of ‘play’. Play has its own internal logic, which to adult eyes may appear illogical. One can make-believe that disguise is metamorphosis. One can enter the kingdom of birds and insects through miniaturization. Or breathe underwater in the kingdom of fish. For Calvino there “...must be present the infinite possibilities of mutation, the unifying element in everything: men, beasts, plants, things” (1956, p.xix).

The imaginary is realized through art. It is made physical; it enters our world.

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