

Fairy Tales on the Big and Small Screen

by Pia Dewar

The realm of fairy tales and storytelling has been with us for hundreds of years. Fairy tales have evolved over time, but have not lost their appeal (especially to children, and young adults). Fairy tales in particular have proven adaptive in the ever-growing variety of media and modern movie remakes. Kroll comments in his article, “studios are endlessly searching for familiar properties with name recognition and spinoff potential” and with several remakes released in the last few years (all of which are listed at the end of this article as pertinent examples) this certainly seems to be true (2011, p. 4). Fairy tales are so malleable, that they allow movie producers to make motion picture remakes that are versatile in terms of content, context, and plot twists, which is what keeps fairy tales relevant to a modern day audience; in this way, moviemakers can provide the flavor of nostalgia, combined with novelty, as fairy tale movies explore darker, and more mature themes.

Since those fairy tale remakes often originate from stories that teens grew up hearing and reading, there is bound to be something that teens will like by virtue of familiarity. The darker versions of fairy tales that have been released recently are more evidence of “the genre’s creative elasticity, potential for exquisite and disturbing imagery and appeal to our audience for transformation” (Harris, 2011, p. 1). This article will examine how and why motion picture fairy tale remakes have become darker, seeming to move away from the safer popularity base of children, and yet are more popular than ever.

Fairy tale movies have appeal because they provide a point of familiarity for a developing teen audience; the plot lines of modern remakes like *The Brothers’ Grimm* (2005), or *Red Riding Hood* (2011) are familiar to what we remember from children’s stories even though the visual presentation and the tone can be very different (Kroll, 2011, p. 1). This alteration to presentation has been popular, given the string of popular remake movies in recent years as Wood notes, “modern fantasy film audiences frequently come to them first as children and keep returning to them throughout adolescence and adulthood, and this blurs the child/adult distinctions,” (2006, p. 287). Beginning with the *Twilight* franchise that “put a modern twist on overly familiar characters,” this shows how we are attracted to novelty with a touch of the familiar (Kroll, 2011, p. 4). This creates something for us to navigate by while it still ‘feels’ new because of the darker side to the stories. Teens can find a point to navigate by from memory that becomes “a symbol for the boundary between childhood and adulthood” (Wood, 2006, p. 282).

Fairy tale movies also create the opportunity for teens to relate to fictive situations, but from a safely detached distance. *Red Riding Hood* (2011), *Stardust* (2007), and *Jack the Giant Slayer* (2013), are examples of “Turning overly familiar fairy tales into angsty youth-targeted entertainment,” because the portrayal of troubled youth provides a point of self-identity for teens (Kroll, 2011, p. 4-5). Despite the darker turn that the modern fairy tale films remakes often take, the elements of realism, and the appeal of likable characters provides much-needed relatability. Monk presents the relevant example of the 2006 film, *Penelope*, starring Christina Ricci (2008, p. 1). *Penelope* is not a

physically violent fairy tale, but it does deal with the more personal issues of being ostracized, and victimized through no fault of your own. A modern teen can root for the young, modern, likable girl who is disfigured by a curse. *Penelope* exemplifies how a modern movie aimed at a teen audience marries the modern day virtues of individuality, inner beauty, and spirit, with a traditional fairy tale plot line and thus, “creates social acceptance combined with a quest for novelty” (Monk, 2008, p. 1).

Navigating by the point of relatability, a young adult audience can then move forward and safely explore the darker themes and imaginative qualities that fairy tale movie remakes often have. When considering the content of fairy tales, it is really important to bear in mind that “these tales were never intended for young ears...’beginning in the 18th century, publishers began....changing and sanitizing them and getting rid of the sex or horror, or making them more religious ... to make them appropriate for what they considered to be the innocent souls of children” as Zipes reminds us (Harris, 2011, p. 1). Harris’ assessment also seems quite accurate when she says that movie remakes are “bringing the classic yarns back to their dark, twisted and sexually provocative roots” (2011, p. 1) because teens have developed a taste for the more dramatic and sensational. *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006), and *Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunter* (2013), are examples of the darker side of maturity in bloodier stories. Similarly, The classic fairy tale *Jack and the Beanstalk* became *Jack the Giant Killer* in the recent 2013 remake; all that changed was the title and it instantly became more interesting, more mature, and more desirable to a young adult audience. Zipes explains that the function of such dark fairy tales is that it allows an audience to safely explore

“illusions of social relations of exploitation based on power,” and this is a concept that teens are just beginning to become familiar with in their interactions (Zipes, 2009, p. 90). Fairy tales are a success when they speak to the child and the adult in someone at the same time. Consequently, teens are a perfect audience for darker fairy tale remakes because teens are caught somewhere between childhood and adulthood.

Fairy tale movies help “take our minds off reality, to enjoy a moment of calm estrangement or titillation, to appreciate the extraordinary in the ordinary, to reassess our values and alternatives to determine social forces,” (Zipes, 2009, p. 79), especially when they are combined with new special effects, graphics, sound effects, and original costumes. They create the impression of familiarity and novelty all at once, which appeals to a very large fan base of moviegoers. We also have “the ability to see films repeatedly, either on video and DVD or on cable/digital/satellite television, [which] allows the experience of watching to be repeated... as such, this represents the power of the audience to utilize traditional material and to shape popular culture in more active ways” and a young adult audience gets more entertainment value out of what they watch (Wood, 2006, p. 281). The movies that have been listed below are all prime examples of classical fairy tales as movies and television series that would appeal to a teen audience by virtue of the darker twists in presentation and content.

Movie/ TV Show Choices

The Brother’s Grimm

Bobker, D., & Roven, C. (Producer), & Gilliam, T. (Director). (2005). *The Brother’s Grimm* [Motion Picture]. USA: Miramax Films & Dimension Films.

Ever After

Soria, Mireille, & Tracey Trench (Producers), & Andy Tennant (Director). (1998). *Ever After* [Motion Picture]. USA: 20th Century Fox.



Grimm (Series)

Barba, N., Greenwalt, D., Hayes, S., & Milliner, T. (Executive Producers). (2011). *Grimm* (Television Series). USA: NBC Universal Television.

Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters

Bale, P., D.M. Latt, & D. Rimawi. (Producer), & Wirkola, T. (Director). (2013). *Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters* [Motion Picture]. USA: The Asylum.

Jack the Giant Slayer

Dobkin, D., O. Marmur, P. McCormick, N. Moritz, & B. Singer (Producer), & Singer, B. (Director). (2013). *Jack the Giant Slayer* [Motion Picture]. USA: Warner Bros.

Once Upon A Time (Series)

Horrowitz, A., & Kitsis, E., Pearlman, S. (Executive Producers). (2011). *Once Upon A Time* [Television Series]. Canada: ABC Studios.

Pan's Labyrinth

Augustin, A., Cuaron, A., Guillermo, T., Navarro, B., & Torresblanco, F. (Producers), & del Toro, G. (Director). (2006). *Pan's Labyrinth* [Motion Picture]. Mexico: Picturehouse (USA Release).

Penelope

Russell, D., Simpson, J., Steindorff, S., & Witherspoon, R. (Producers), & Palansky, M. (Director). (2006). *Penelope* [Motion Picture]. USA: Summit Entertainment.

The Princess Bride

Reiner, R., & Scheinman, A., (Producers), & Reiner, R. (Director). (1987). *The Princess Bride* [Motion Picture]. USA: 20th Century Fox.

Red Riding Hood

Killoran, J.D., DiCaprio, L., & Yorn, J. (Producer), & Hardwick, C. (Director). (2011). *Red Riding Hood* [Motion Picture]. USA: Warner Bros.



Snow White and the Huntsman

Mercer, S., P. Patel, & J. Roth (Producer), & Sanders, R. (Director). (2012). *Snow White and the Huntsman* [Motion Picture]. USA: Universal Pictures.

StarDust

Bonaventura, L., Dreyer, M., Gaiman, N., & Vaughn, M. (Producer), & Vaughn, M. (Director). (2007). *StarDust* [Motion Picture] USA: Paramount Pictures.

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