

ONCE UPON A TIME: FOLK NARRATIVES AND POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract

This study examines how folk narrative stands intertwined with popular culture by way of assimilation, subversion and demystification. The consequence of which has led to the emergence of an alternative space called the 'third reality' which paves the way for subversive and non-subversive discourses. The study would examine how classic fairy tales have been assimilated into popular culture in the age of mechanical mass reproduction, technical advancement and free flow of capital and information. How has it led to discursive understanding of reception with audience/ reader response at the center stage? What implication does it have on ideological formation of the society?

Keywords: narrative, popular, commodification, reality, authentic

Popular culture has traditionally been seen as a space antithetical to the folk narratives. With the emergence of interdisciplinary fields such as cultural studies, folk narratives and media began to be seen as, if not identical, nevertheless, intertwined. By 1970s, scholars of folktales and mythology who strongly objected to the appropriation of folk narratives within the popular culture, began to examine how folklore and popular culture were no longer distinguishable, rather they formed a part of the continuum. They saw how popular narratives followed the internal dynamics of formulaic composition on which were structured these folk narratives. As the scholars from both the fields began to resolve this aforementioned polarisation, they nevertheless led to the discourse of an alternative space where audiences/readers paved the way for negotiated meanings for themselves. Popular culture is now seen as a space where tradition meets innovation and fantasy converges with reality within the ambit of mass production, commodification and reception thereby creating an alternative space, called the 'third reality'.

Keeping these dynamics at disposal, the present study would examine how by way of integration, portrayal and parody, folkloric material has been assimilated into the works of popular culture. The study would also look at whether revisiting/retelling/reduplicating of classic fairy tales (inevitable part of folk narratives) with modernised extravagant layering of exaggerated audio, video, computerised graphic imaging subverts, demystify or rather conform to the conventional tale. Do these modernised take on fairy tales continue to exhibit the erstwhile folkloric features that had distinctive ideological and social function? How the

contemporary adaptation of fairy tales into films or televisualised series reflect on experiential form of reality and how this refracted reality supposedly leads to the creation of a space which houses subversive or non-subversive discourses. Also does this optimism regarding the creation of the 'third reality' holds good for the modern intellectuals and scholars?

The folklores originated as a part of oral tradition which had a storyteller and captive immediate listeners. Later on, with increased dissemination of social and ideological function it served, it began to be adapted and printed as children's literature that worked as an educative tool. As modern technology developed with coming of capitalism, these printed materials began to be animated and produced massively during 1930s to 1950s especially in the era of Walt Disney. And by the turn of the 21st century these fairy tales saw its proliferation and reinterpretation into films and TV series as part of popular culture.

Now to look at the interesting dynamics between the Disnesque version of the conventional tales and the modernised tales would inevitably lead us to see how popular culture deploys narrative strategies to reclaim the 'authentic' under the garb of providing space for subversive dialectics. One could be confronted with two pertinent questions at this juncture. In this narrativisation of the fairy tales, is there mimicking or total departure? Also, in this act of reterritorialization, is there inward virtualization? The recent trend of adaptation and retelling shows how reterritorialization of the 'authentic' operates within the dynamics of "semiotics of mimesis". As modern fictionalised narratives provide space for meta-textual commentary, Critics like Jessica Tiffin writes that fairy tales "exhibits a self- awareness about narrative and a specifically problematized relationship with reality which seems peculiarly suited to the reflexiveness and self- interrogation of postmodernism, as well as to postmodernism's fascination with narrative structure." (Tiffin) Further he explains that in the act of retelling, what we call mimesis, it is not complete mimesis, the contemporary narratives rely more on computer images that though created with the purpose of realist depiction actually works in the favour of the artificial.

This phenomenon of catering to the nostalgic appeal of the mass culture public could be easily understood by the way in which the modernised versions reappropriate the 'Disnesque sanitised version.' For instance, popular shows like '*Beauty and the Beast*', '*Cinderella*' and '*Snow White*' with twisted narratives still expect the women to cherish motherhood and domesticity. This shows that although the elements of 'political correctness' and 'popular moral sentiments' are desirable by the mass culture audience, they act as a facade to conceal the true message behind these tales. So however these remixes claim themselves to be different and transgressive, they ultimately conform to the same ideology under a thin veneer of radicalism.

It is interesting to see how the popular culture medium actually channelizes fairy tales' essential component of 'magic' through the specific intersections of 'pleasure, commodification and tradition' simultaneously. Magic acts as a double-edged sword for the

continuation of the narrative. It may apparently seem charitable to the viewers but it rather relies on the notion of 'freelage' and 'repression.' It requires violence, distortion and obscenity on social level but this misappropriation is compensated with equal weightage on rewards and threats. In short, Magic is power and it always comes with a price. Magic gets naturalised in these modernised narrative constructs much like 'neo-magical realism' that they become banal and mundane as part of everyday lives.

Magic acts as a seduction for mass culture public. The tale of magic generates desire on the part of the viewers who irresistibly just want to gobble up whatever is dished out to them. The veneer of magic as seduction exploits and infantilises the adult viewers by serving them magical resolutions and superheroes like 'Spiderman', 'Batman', and 'Shaktimaan'. This magical seduction carries within itself the conflict of normative function that gets capitalised at the expense of the infantilisation of modern viewers. Magic, thus, becomes a trick to sell products on TV as it confirms the possibility of pursuance of wonder and marvel on the part of the viewers as a sort of curiosity and inquiry that keeps them glued to these narratives based on exaggerated dramatic structure exploiting sentimental emotional reactions continuing one episode after the other, season after season, just like bedtime stories.

And this narrativisation not only limits itself to infantilisation of adult audiences. They go on exploiting sensationalisation of audiences by dishing out to them graphic imagery such as obscene scenes and gory bloodsheds. This leads one to think is there any censoring the way in which fairytale materials are selected, appropriated and transformed? What kind of ideological function this un/censored retelling projects inculcate? Also, to begin with, one could think of why are we so obsessed with violence and obscenity showed on TV. Critics like Dolf Zillman (1998) are of the view that violence augments the audience's 'pleasure of arousal.' He dismisses all reasoning regarding obsession with violence based on aesthetic appeal, catharsis and technological development. According to him, human beings more than enjoying the ultimate pleasure, like to experience that 'moment of arousal' that leads to that climactic moment. Violence creates thrill and excitement among the viewers and this sensationalisation is well described by sociologist called Elias (1982) who is of the view that this excitement and sensation seeking is consequence of the civilising process of human society we are part of.

Earlier people had enough opportunities to witness death and violence in public spaces. But, with the emergence of notion of interiorization and private spaces, the opportunities to witness such gory reality diminished. The chances of experiencing the 'real' narrowed down. Real time experiences like death moved to funeral parlor from family parlor and public spaces for capital executions moved to the four walls of the prison. Thus reduced opportunities and restrictions aggravated the desire to see which was not easily accessible. Therefore, this sensationalisation of the audience really works as a capitalistic tool for the producers to sell their products on TV. This again leads us to a pertinent question: Are the mass culture audiences gullible enough to consume whatever is served out to them?

Critics like Stuart Hall, talk about the idea of how media exercises its control over the audiences. He terms it as ‘ideological effect’ that derives its power not from coercion, pushing the audiences for something they are distasteful of, but, using narrative structures that are not so unfamiliar to the audiences so that they could relate to it very well, thereby, maintaining the status-quo of ‘ideological hegemony.’ Audience studies show that today’s audience personalises the narratives served to them and subvert the message intended by refashioning it to create new meanings for themselves. It is interesting to see how retelling of the fairy tales across the mass media medium in the form of TV series or fairytale films actually widens the ways in which mass culture audiences use tradition to shape popular culture.

For modern audiences, fairytales are no longer a traditional narrative belonging to a specific culture or identifiable community. It is rather a distanced experience already carrying undertones of nostalgia for the past, childhood innocence, utopian societies and magical resolutions. The ways in which the classic tales are revisited and refashioned to suit to consumers of mass culture, it already reflects the power of the consumers to respond, challenge and disrupt the conventions by adding doses of reality, blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy. The personal responses of the viewers reinforced by repeated viewing of the televisualised narratives through websites, merchandise, podcasts, social media accounts like Facebook and Twitter reflects how the interactions of these virtual communities can transmute and insert themselves into daily life through a shared appreciation of the fantasy worlds, the mechanisms by which viewers can actually make it more real and personal, and the visualisation of fairies in TV soap operas and films reflects this process.

Once upon A time, the American fairy tale series that was premiered on October 23, 2011, on ABC (American Broadcasting Company) exists as fairytale pastiche. Here, we have storyworld of all the fairytale characters who are thrown to the town of Storybrooke, the space of ‘third reality’, where the primary and secondary reality, the real and fantastic converge. The fairytale characters, who are victims of a powerful curse, enacted by the Evil Queen, rob them of their identity and memory. The normal assumptions of who control the things are flipped. The archaic world of Disney which maintained belief in idyllic spaces and feudal sensibilities is seemingly subverted in *Once Upon A time*. The modernised take on the familiar tales reflects Americanised, individualistic, counter cultural, capital oriented society that moves toward the American dream. In refashioning the fairytales, the modern audiences have been exposed to the grim sides of the tale, the alternative reality. To understand, how the modernised take subverts the trope, the study would examine three characters from the series.

The catchphrase of episode 13 that says, ‘evil is not born , it is made’, reflects how the Evil Queen and Rumplestiltskin were never always malevolent. The immediate circumstances made them so. As the promo material promises: THE REAL STORY BEHIND ALL THE FAVORITE FABLES WILL BE TOLD, *Once Upon A Time*, humanizes the evil characters

of the fables, gives insight into villains background stories, explains why the Evil Queen and Rumplestiltskin became malicious. It is the loss of the loved one that plays a pivotal role in their choosing the dark way. This evokes in the viewer a strong sense of compassion. The delineation between good and bad is broken down. Evil Queen's love as weakness and Rumplestiltskin's lack of courage become their tragic flaw that pave their way towards the dark forces. The remarkable thing about them are that they are not one-dimensional villains, there is possibility of redemption in the bad characters as well that makes them far more appealing than the good characters. In episode 1, the Evil Queen promises destruction of everyone's happiness, suggesting no more happy endings. This challenges the conventional notion that why should happy endings be always reserved for the good. In episode 15, *Once Upon A Time* retells the tale of Red Riding Hood to reveal why In Grimm's and Perrault's version of the tale, Little Red Riding Hood always wore the magical red hooded cloak. The *Once Upon A Time version*, reveals to the viewers that Red Riding Hood wore the magical red cloak to prevent herself from transforming into a werewolf. It was she who was the werewolf, and like all werewolves, she is immune to any weapon except silver while in the form of a werewolf. All these instances tell us to rethink about the way in which we presume things about the culprits in the very first place.

In fairy tales, the supernatural is never questioned and audience's absolute suspension of disbelief and sacrifice of realism for the sake of enjoyment is required. *Once Upon A Time*, invites viewers not only to revisit the classic tale but also to incorporate their own fictive narratives within the ambit of the structure of the tale. In that act of internalizing or in other words, personalisation, the show suggests that fairy tales are more real than fantasy. The last episode of the first season challenges the classic idea of having magical resolutions to every problem. It is the ending that suggests that the true love's kiss could mend the irreparable and not some magic. *Once upon A time* moves beyond the Disney world and creates an alternative to Disney experience. It not only engages the imagination of the audience but explain, far from ruining the mystique, how reality is created in the fantasy itself. Here the communication happens between folklore and popular culture depending on technology, commercial interest and mass media contexts.

Once Upon A Time has made the fantasy world appear more real by taking advantage of extractability with fan made and ABC made official merchandise, items like posters, mugs, cosplay costumes, fan art, fan apps that are available on ABC store. The fans create their own stories through fan fiction videos. They also create crossover stories with character of other shows/movies. Characters like Snow White and Rumplestiltskin have their own accounts on Facebook and Twitter with millions of followers, where actual actors interact with the fans. The virtual interactions, gossip about the stars, making of the film actually contributes to the making of 'third reality', that create opportunities for participatory culture where in the consumers of mass culture in personalising the tradition actually shapes popular culture actively. They not only demystify the fairy tale formula rather play with the genre reflecting that none of the modern fairy tales are exclusively for children. It act as soap operatics meant

for the grown ups. There is reproduction of isolated fairy tale symbols and images in new contexts used for commercial interests relying on parodying. This leads us to an important question: how should one deal with popular culture text that critiques fairytales while at the same time operates on commercial interest?

ABC studio which claims sole credit for producing the show inevitably deploys the fairytale characters much in the fashion of the authorized Disney version, though ‘Disney’ is never mentioned even once throughout the promo trailer or the series. This explains to us how Disney company attempts at claiming authority over these folk imaginations. This could be seen as an extension of copyright ownership of these European folk imaginations. Even the phrase “Once Upon A Time” has become the patent of Disney Company. This deliberate copyright ownership bothers the folklore scholars like Jack Zipes, who is of the view that , this is irksome because by doing that European and Asian folklores are entirely being Americanized thereby exercising ‘ meta-textual control’ over non-indigenous folkloric narratives, a source of intangible heritage.

Reformulation of the fairytale as ‘postmodern pastiche’ necessarily encapsulates within itself ‘conservative dualism’. As Frederic Jameson, has noted, pastiche is a postmodern (blank) parody and parody entails the idea of subversion and radicalism. But since it is postmodern in nature, it fails at creating any oppositional culture, in ex-centric and hybridized culture. Critics like John Stephens and Robert McCallum , in *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture*, argue that the act of retelling the classic fables are conservative by nature because it indulges in misapprehension and misapplication of meta-narratives. For them, the process of retelling points towards cultural formation. Thus the act of retelling becomes far important than what is retold. The use of the fantastic invokes the reader’s nostalgia for the universal experience. On the contrary, Lance Olsen is quite optimistic about the postmodern use of the fantastic and equates postmodern fantasy as ‘literary deconstruction.’ He further explains that this create a dialectic that tends to explore the unsaid, an alternative version of truth and reality. Keeping both these conflicting dynamics at one’s disposal, one becomes optimistic about the creation of the ‘third reality’ which houses convergence of primary and secondary reality that produces negotiated meanings through reterritorialization of the ‘authentic.’ There is no way out of this simulation. That we consume as authentic cultural product is still a simulacrum. Authenticity is the new ‘obsession’ to be capitalised!

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