

# The Utopian Function of Fairy Tales' Adaptations in Hollywood

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**Keywords:** Culture Industry; The Instrumentalization of Fantasy; The Utopian Function; Fairy tale adaptation films

**Abstract:** From birth to present, Fairy tale adaptations play an important role in Hollywood films. Those adaptation films have been considered as the culture industry because of their pattern adaptations which carrying the same meaning of National Ideology. The Utopian impulse in fairy tales that inspires people's hope, as Ernst Bloch talked, is undermined in Hollywood adaptation films. Hollywood films provided viewers the concreted fantasy, which inspired people's desire and encouraged them to consume fantasy instead of imagine an alternative future. But the utopian function still can be found in Hollywood films, the three aspects may be considered: Firstly, those films named the unnamed things so that we can recognize them; Secondly, lots of cracks between films and the ideology them carried can be found in film texts; Thirdly, viewers of these films are not a monolithic group, the diversity of viewers bring various reading on the films.

## 1 Introduction

From its birth to the present, Fairy tale adaptations play an important role in Hollywood films. There's great controversy among audiences and scholars concerning how to evaluate Hollywood's fairy tale adaptations. On the one hand audiences like these films, but on the other hand most of scholars criticized these films harshly.

There are lots of criticizing voices about the Hollywood's demand of profit. The critics believe that Hollywood produced a large number of similar films for economic benefits, which proved that the essence of Hollywood cinema is Business-Industrialized cinema. And there are also another criticisms questioned the legality of American Ideology spread by Hollywood cinema. Recent years there are also some scholars who defend Hollywood's adapted fairy tale films, such as Douglas Brode[1] and Sue Short[2]. They believe that Hollywood's adapted films provoked positive thinking about American history. This article will take account of both sides in my argument, I will expose the essence of Hollywood as the cultural industry, and how it instrumentalized fairy tale's fantasy; I also want to discover the Utopian function in Hollywood's adapted films.

## 2 The inhibition of Utopian impulse in Hollywood's adaptations

Fredric Jameson, who borrowed Ernst Bloch's concept about utopian spirit, coined the term of "utopian impulse" to refer to the utopian factor of our everyday life. Ernst Bloch believed that utopian spirit appears in our daily life, especially in fairy tales, which can help people break away from the present and lead them to the "not yet"[3]. Jack Zipes regarded this utopian spirit in fairy tale as the needful alienation of daily life to keep people's imagination [4]. Fairy tale has always been considered as a subversive genre because of the utopian spirit it has, which means it has the ability to criticize society through its fantasy of another beautiful world.

The Frankfurt school has no doubts about cultural industry that changing culture produce into commodity proved the social control of advanced capitalism by means of technology. They believed that in cultural industry there "emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe." [5] As a typical

cultural industry, Hollywood's adaptations produced standardizing and modeling products, which depressed the imagination of fairy tales. Hollywood's adaptations inhibited fairy tale's utopian impulse through two ways: one is standardization of film adaptation and the other is replacing the hope of "not yet" with American Ideology.

If a film adapted from fairy tale becomes a blockbuster, filmmakers will view it as a model to imitate and make sure they can copy its success in box office. So there appear many analogue films with similar narration and plot, or the same visual style. Especially in Disney's fairy tale films, as Jack Zipes said that Disney "established a model of conformity that hundreds of other filmmakers have followed up until today." [6] It is a model includes some typical characters such as innocent girl, wicked witch, prince or masculine helpers, and there must have a happy ending. Such model ensured that Disney's fairy tale films benefited its company a huge commercial boon and we still can find it through the films like *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Cinderella* (2015), etc.

These modeling adaptations depressed the "utopian impulse" of fairy tale and replaced the hope of "not yet" with American Ideology in which presented as the "American Dream" of the discourse about personal struggle and indifference classes. The connotation of "American dream" changed along with the development of history, but it's essentially declares American Ideology instead of advocate people's "utopian impulse" in the film.

Ernst Bloch believed that fairy tale is one of the best representation of utopian especially in his definition of utopian: "utopian is an objective-real degree of reality on the Front of the occurring world, - as Not-Yet-Being of the 'naturalization of man, humanization of nature'." [7] He valued the quality that fairy tale yearn for new things. However, when fairy tale adapted into films, its "utopian impulse" has removed, the anticipation of new things replaced by the insurance of "American dream", and "not yet" become nowism.

### 3 The instrumentalization of fantasy

There are many theorists agree with the importance of fairy tale's fantasy. J.R.R. Tolkien believed that the fantasy of fairy tale is based on reality instead of illusion [8]. Ernst Bloch considered fantasy as an important character of fairy tale, which can provide people whom are dissatisfied with their present conditions with the hope about a beautiful future. But in Hollywood's adapted fairy tale films, fantasy has been deeply depressed because these films commit themselves to control people's imagination and turn art into a marketable commodity.

In his book *Breaking the Magic Spell*, Jack Zipes criticized the instrumentalization of fantasy in Hollywood films. He indicated that it is the instrumentalization that forcefully dispelled imaginations in fairy tale to degrade the positive affection of fairy tale [9]. As an audio-visual art, the film to some extent will restrict audiences' imagination because of its visualization nature, but there are also some brilliant films, said by Ernst Bloch, such as *Orpheus and Eurydice* directed by Jean Cocteau released audiences' imagination. However, Hollywood's adaptations are lack of self-examination about film's visualization nature and it even eliminated the subversiveness in fairy tales. The closed film narration prevented audience to imagine other narrative possibilities. The loose storytelling in fairy tales replaced by the logical plot in Hollywood adaptations, Hollywood films will find perfect place for their characters, there are a prince and there must be a princess, they appeared for some reasons and they will married reasonably at the end of the story. The enclosed narration that establishes from 1930s' classical Hollywood films that constantly make audiences indulged themselves in the plots repeatedly present in fairy tale adapted films. In the perfect stories made by Hollywood's adaptations, audiences have no place to imagine another possibility but accept the value of American Ideology, which mainly are embodied as the American Dream.

Fredric Jameson also talked about the instrumentalization from the perspective of art's commercialization, he declared that "we can now formulate their instrumentalization, their reorganization along the means/ends split, in a new way by saying that, by its transformation into a

commodity, a thing of whatever type has been reduced to a means for its own consumption. It no longer has any qualitative value in itself, but only insofar as it can be “used”: the various forms of activity lose their immanent intrinsic satisfactions as activity and become means to an end.”[10] Hollywood adaptations encouraged audiences to enjoy visual spectacles in films. The audiences’ desires built by Hollywood’s films seems to be satisfied in cinema, but these desires would fall through when audiences leave the theater. The idea of consumerism makes audiences believe consumption can make their dreams come true.

In their films, Hollywood sale imagination as if it is a commodity, as if people can realize their fantasy through Hollywood’s commodity. The utopian impulse that dug by Ernst Bloch was removed from Hollywood’s film in which the imagination was replaced by standardization. Hollywood’s adaptations act as a safety valve, controlling people’s imaginations, depressing dissatisfactions with the idea of consumerism, and maintaining the present social order as a result.

#### 4 Utopian function

When talked about utopia and the importance about finding utopian spirit in everyday life, Fredric Jameson declared that “the most noxious phenomena can serve as the repository and hiding place for all kinds of unsuspected wish fulfillments and utopian gratifications.....”[11] His stimulating idea offers us a way to understand what utopian spirit in Hollywood adapted films and how can we dig out Utopian spirit from them. If we keep the resistant attitude to analyze Hollywood’s adaptations, there might be a possibility to interpret these films’ positive meanings.

The Utopian spirit of Hollywood films comes from the three aspects:

Firstly, naming unnamed things so that we can recognize them. Fredric Jameson talked about the importance of naming unnamed things, he said: ...to name something is to domesticate it, to refer to it repeatedly is to persuade a fearful and beleaguered middle-class public that all of that is part of a known and catalogued world and thus somehow in order.” [12] In the process of naming unnamed things, the media represented these heterogeneity phenomena to the public and make them realize the existence of these things even its initial purpose is to inhibit them constantly.

The woman’s desire was depressed also named in Hollywood’s adapted films. For example, early Hollywood’s adapted films tend to represent the heroine as a cute and innocent girl whom wants nothing, but there are also other female roles, especially the evil witch/stepmother full of desire. At the end of the film, the desire of evil woman must be frustrated, and there was always the triumph of heroine. However, the desire of woman was manifested through these evil women.

Secondly, We can discover Utopian Impulse in Hollywood adaptations through cracks between films and ideology they carry. Fredric Jameson believed “to grasp mass culture not as empty distraction or “mere” false consciousness, but rather as a transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies which must then have some effective presence in the mass cultural text in order subsequently to be ‘managed’ or repressed.”[13] For example, crack in *Cinderella* (2015) is hidden behind the stepmother’s characteristics who played by Cate Blanchett, the famous star that played the fairy queen in series film of *The Ring*. The wicked stepmother she played in *Cinderella* was a complicated role with traumatic past that break the stable binary opposition of fairy tale and win sympathy from audiences. Audiences might relate this crack to the class differences with their emotions of dissatisfaction instead of getting satisfaction through the happy ending of this film.

Thirdly, the diversity of viewers bring various reading on the films. The Frankfurt school lost sight of viewers’ initiative and complexity. There are complicated psychological activities of viewers when they faced an adapted film that full of American ideology. Hollywood’s adaptations surely advanced American ideology, but we still have to consider audiences’ acceptance, whether or how they accept the information that are released by films. The queered reading of female roles and its theme song *Let it go* in the film *Frozen* (2013) was a good example.

The emergence of alternative movie-watching styles such as sending barrage during the viewing,

or finding film review in film forum on line, gives audiences more opportunities to make their voices heard. These diversity movie-watching styles bring audiences more space to express their view on film and developed the communication of audiences. The audiences' multiple readings of the films, which refuse the established explanations, also reflect the Utopian Spirit. So it is important to keep a resistant attitude while watching film.

## 5 Conclusion

Hollywood's adapted film carried American Ideology, sale imagination as if it is a commodity and deprived the utopian impulse that carried by fairy tale. And Hollywood's adaptations inspired people's desire and encouraged them to consume fantasy instead of imagine an alternative future. We must remain alert to recognize and criticize the illusional world in Hollywood's adaptations.

But we should also accept the reality that people like Hollywood's adapted fairy tale films. There still have more or less hope to the "not yet" in Hollywood's adaptations. We can find Utopian Impulse through the cracks in these films if we can keep a resistant attitude while watching these films.

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