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Tales of the Unexpected: interrogating the myth of ideal fairy tale femininity.

Gender roles are an overarching concern in both traditional and contemporary versions of the fairy tale, although, of course, the concern is largely left implicit in traditional fairy tales. The most popular fairy tales are often female-orientated and often feature the girl disabled in some manner, either physically or by circumstance, for example, Sleeping Beauty (through imposed sleep) and Cinderella (through class and domestic position).¹ Although industrious, the heroine is often alone; cast out of society, she accepts her situation until discovered and rescued by a male figure. Tales such as these have served to promote the message that girls are passive and alone. In this paper I will investigate how the traditional model of femininity, via codes of beauty, has been revised in contemporary visual renditions of the tales.

The concept for this study is based upon the construction, repetition and dissemination of idealised gender norms in popular fairy tales and how, in contemporary visual re-workings, these conventions of femininity are being challenged. I have selected philosopher Judith Butler's theories of gender construction and performance to underpin my analysis of how gender is formed in fairy tales. The two key points of interest in Butler's theories are the construction of gender norms and the possibility to undermine that construction. Butler's understanding of gender as being constructed of a series of repeated socially consensual performative acts relates well to the repetition of gendered types found throughout the fairy tale genre. For example, the popular tales feature archetypal heroines that emblemise ideal feminine characteristics. This female type is constructed according to a perceived social consensus of ideal femininity—she must be pretty, pure, obedient, youthful and morally sound—a model repeated through a number of tales. Thus the construction of ideal femininity is played out in the popular tales.

Gender, according to Butler, exists in flux and fundamentally in relation to society. I propose that although representations of femininity shift over time the fundamental qualities of *ideal* femininity endure through popular fairy tale characters and plots. Thus, Butler's belief that gender can be challenged and potentially changed through repetition is crucial to this paper. The artworks I address show how subversive repetition can serve to interrupt, challenge, transgress and even reverse conventional attitudes towards gender. My application of Butler's theories to the fairy tale genre, and their constant repetition in literary, and more recently visual, form since the seventeenth century, reveals the potential to change perceptions of gender through subversive repetition. As I will argue, contemporary visual

artists reproduce fairy tales by repeating familiar tropes and symbols; however, in addition, they introduce a subversive element that undermines a conventional understanding of gender. It is this subversive repeat, a mis-repetition that allows for the possibility of change. It is for this reason that Butler is a central reference throughout this paper.

The Beauty Ideal and Constructing Femininity

Judith Butler's theories of performing identity as the attainment or maintenance of beauty is a fundamental performance of gender. In her work on gender, Butler critiques the construction of normative models of masculine and feminine as a repeated and consensual performance. Thus, she excavates the notion of gender being a natural state, exposing instead the artifice of this proposition. As beauty is perceived as naturally intrinsic to femininity, her theories are valuable to expose the contingent foundation of this premise. Although Butler addresses gender identity more broadly, it is possible to apply her concepts to beauty ideals in the millennial age. Butler, citing Simone de Beauvoir's claim that womanhood is not a biological fact but rather a cultural application, comments that gender is not a stable identity and, in fact, shifts over time and within historical conditions.² Butler examines the notion of performing an identity, which, repeated over and over, becomes the accepted constitution of that given identity, in this case female. Thus, the identity is instituted and takes on the appearance of substance, when it is, in fact, more accurately considered a self-perpetuating constructed identity, "a performative accomplishment."³ Establishing gender through a performative act is, for Butler, a strategy of cultural survival. To perform and therefore advertise a discrete gender ensures inclusion; not to perform a gender can function as a way of opting out of a socially given hierarchy (*given* only in terms of the fact that genders are performed).⁴ As Butler observes:

Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions—and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction "compels" our belief in its necessity and naturalness.⁵

Gender is therefore not an innate essence; it can more usefully be described as a social construction based on aspects of bodily style that shift according to historical consensus. However, as Butler points out, the style is never individually designed as it is shaped by history and the social consensus that delimits the expression of gender. Gender norms, according to Butler, are repeated acts of fiction and not actualities or biological fact. The gender performance is exhibited with costume, gesture, attributes, vocal tone, etc., as well as

props appropriate to the role being acted. The beauty qualification associated with and legitimised as belonging to the female gender is therefore self-perpetuating.

According to Butler's model, however, gender norms can be changed. Elsewhere, Butler continues her argument to propose the potential of change through repetition:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylised repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.⁶

If beauty is seen as being specifically gendered, the notion of constituting identity through repeated performances can be observed in beauty rituals. The surface signification of beauty rituals supports Butler's notion that gender is internalised but is not essential: it is a public act rather than a private essence. Yet if, as Butler suggests, gender is reducible to nothing but an act, then the cultural signification is temporary and lacks credence without a sustained performance. In the above quotation, Butler identifies the potential, through repetition, to change the grounds of constituted gendered identity. This potential has been, I argue, tapped in the adoption of the fairy tale by the visual arts in the late twentieth century. Subversive repetition is employed by some artists to expose gender as a construction that takes place via act and image. By intervening in the fairy tale as a repetitive performance of gender roles, artists employ the familiar to reveal the unfamiliar, highlighting the temporal foundations and the contingency of gender as it is experienced and understood in the Euro-American context.

To apply Butler's theory of performative acts and gender constitution to fairy tales reveals the scope of the genre for both purveying ideological standards, but also its potential openness to intervention and critique. However, whilst the Disney Corporation dominates fairy tale production, from films to merchandising, the task of intervention and critique is more challenging. Disney has developed a sophisticated understanding of the power of performing a role. Thus, not only are children able to watch Disney fairy tale versions at the cinema; since the 1970s or 1980s they have had the VHS and, more recently, the DVD versions of the films to watch repeatedly within the home. The various types of cinematic viewing described invoke Laura Mulvey's 1975 psychoanalytic concept of "pleasurable structures of looking"⁷ that, "developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen."⁸ As a function of "ego libido,"⁹ the child becomes fascinated with what she recognises as her like. Add to this Disney merchandising whereby little girls can purchase costumes of her favourite characters, and suddenly young girls are able to perform fairy tale roles as seen on their television sets. These roles, with the

aid of props, are thus literally performed and girls grow up to understand that a show of beauty and composure is sufficient to succeed in life (by succeed, read: gain a rich husband).

Butler's performative act here constitutes a constructed identity that is based on a constructed fantasy in the hands of Disney (predominantly) via the traditional messages of fairy tales. Gender fictions overlap and are sustained as "truth," obscuring what Butler describes as the "phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction."¹⁰ By presenting ideal models of white heterosexual femininity as fact, in short, Disney versions of fairy tales convey messages about femininity to girls which are arbitrary, unrealistic, and based on surface appearance and attitude, thus capable of invoking deep-seated anxiety in terms of their individual worth.

Sleeping Beauty, Snow White and Cinderella

Sleeping Beauty, despite the fact that it narrates the significant attributes of femininity as these have developed in white Euro-American culture, has not been widely adopted by artists or other visual media. The central character is not strong and little happens in the tale. Yet the visual language in the tale is powerful and provides a platform for performance artists to bring into question the notion of beauty as femininity. Cornelia Parker's (b.1956) collaboration with actress Tilda Swinton (b.1960), *The Maybe* (1995) (figure 1), evokes visual readings of *Sleeping Beauty*.



Figure 1 Cornelia Parker and Tilda Swinton, *The Maybe* 1995

Exhibited at the Serpentine Gallery in 1995, the performance piece consisted of Swinton seemingly sleeping for eight hours a day whilst enclosed in a raised glass tank. The visual imagery of this work invokes both the *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White* tales, shifting their language into the twentieth century. Located in the Serpentine Gallery situated in the middle of London's Hyde Park, the site evokes the forest backdrop of the traditional tales. A

royal princess is substituted with a British independent film actress, the significance of royalty in feudal times neatly transferred to the cult of celebrity in the closing years of the twentieth century. In this piece, Swinton is displayed to be viewed and, by extension, valued as a precious object (as was Snow White). The concept derived from the display and value of contemporary celebrity provides one interpretation of this work. However, the contribution of meaning endowed by location (in the middle of Hyde Park), manner of display (in a glass case), and the celebrity status of Swinton demands more interpretation.

The display of the female body has traditionally been associated with beauty; in this piece, Parker and Swinton undermine beauty and the notion of gender. Applying Butler's theory of performing gender, it could be interpreted that Parker and Swinton challenge the constitution of gender by the (non-) performance of the sleeping figure of Swinton. Applying Butler's theories, it can be suggested that whilst asleep neither males nor females perform nor act; the gender constitution that is performed in waking is suspended when sleeping. This reading is further qualified by the gender neutral clothes worn by Swinton. The gender ambiguity in *The Maybe* is further emphasised by Swinton's critical recognition only two years earlier in the title role of *Orlando*, a film based on a novel by Virginia Woolf.¹¹ The character of Orlando is a cross-gender figure who travels through time, visiting various historical periods as initially male and then female.

Parker and Swinton strike an uneasy balance in this work between the fairy tale connotations and the familiar territory of female as an object to look at, and, through looking, possess. At the same time, they undermine the fundamental performance of gender in that Swinton sleeps, absenting the actress from her gendered position, and confounding (to some extent) female objectification.¹²

Conventional fairy tales often teach that feminine beauty is a valuable commodity and is rewarded through little effort by the heroines of the tales—all Sleeping Beauty has to do is lie there and wait for the prince to come and wake her; as Bruno Bettelheim posits, "she is the incarnation of perfect femininity."¹³ The beauty ideal is a potent force inducing jealousy, malicious acts and various types of tribulation—generally visited upon those considered to be the most beautiful. Yet the parameters are strict in terms of acceptable beauty: the girl has to be white, pure, patient, quiet and helpful.

Feminist artists working in the 1980s explicitly addressed the way in which female ideals enacted through fairytales pivoted around whiteness. Carrie Mae Weems (b.1953) has consistently addressed gender and racial stereotyping as methods of oppression in her work since the mid-1980s. In her *Ain't Jokin* series, she interrogates prejudice based on skin

colour. In *Mirror Mirror* (1987-88) (figure 2), she takes issue with the fairy tale *Snow White* from a black woman's stance to highlight embedded cultural stereotyping and prejudice.

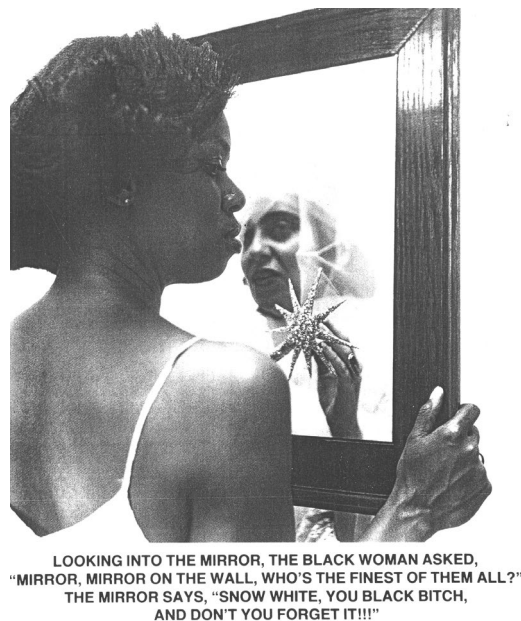


Figure 2 Carrie Mae Weems, *Mirror Mirror* 1987-88

Mirror Mirror combines photograph and text, and parodies the scene where the queen consults her magic mirror. A black woman is depicted holding a frame as if a mirror, yet turns away from it. Within the frame, although not confined by it, we can see another woman of indeterminate race dressed in white and holding a glittered star up to the surface of the mirror (like Cinderella's fairy godmother). The photograph is closely cropped, making the piece claustrophobic and intensifying the aggressively sardonic response of the mirror. The caption that accompanies the piece is: "Looking into the mirror, the black woman asked, 'Mirror mirror on the wall, who's the finest of them all?' The mirror says, 'Snow White, you black bitch, and don't you forget it!!'" Engagement with this piece challenges the viewer, invoking "dilemmas of identification for both black and white women who encounter the work, inviting each to question the notions of beauty in which they situate themselves."¹⁴ Weems has taken here the common understanding of *Snow White* to expose implicit racial prejudice. The black woman is made other in relation to the white feminine ideal. She is not absent in the tales, but not fully present either.¹⁵

Weems' work can be understood as functioning within Butler's notion of using repetition to break the relentless white versions of *Snow White* in particular, and the fairy tale more broadly. The jolt that Weems gives the viewer reveals the brutal inequities of the genre and the blatant level of racism practiced in the repeating of various tales. If the protagonist of

the fairy tale is always described and depicted as white, what relation do black audiences have to the tales, and more specifically the relation of black women to protagonists such as Snow White?

Although not included in his fairy tale collection, in this work from his *Trans-Fashion Lab* series (2006) (figure 3), Rancinan directly references the Grimm's *Cinderella* narrative and explicitly critiques the notion of beauty embedded in the tale.¹⁶ Here the Cinderella character is far from recognisable as the hard-done-by heroine of the popular tale. In this work, Rancinan explores the theme of violence as intrinsic to the beauty ideal, referencing both the fairy tale and the socially accepted beauty rituals that women visit upon their bodies. In this piece, a young woman is cast as a bare-breasted Amazon, overtly sexualised and aggressively defensive. Wearing only a torn and dishevelled skirt, the figure conveys the violence of the *Cinderella* narrative. There is blood smeared on her forehead, hands and feet, significantly coming from wounds on her heel on one foot and the big toe on the other, referencing specifically the Grimms' action played out by the ugly sisters. In this work, Cinderella and her sisters are combined, made one through their extreme commitment to beauty as a vehicle of social ascendancy.



Figure 3 Gérard Rancinan, from *Trans-Fashion Lab* 2006

Rancinan emphasises the theatricality of this work, as well as the sense of claustrophobia. This potential Cinderella is posed within the confines of either an industrial shed or futuristic prism, the inwardly sloping walls serve to increase the sense of containment, evoking the caged animal. The pristine prism is sullied, and violently so. Surrounding the central figure, suspended from the inverted walls or strewn about the floor, are numerous Barbie dolls. These small plastic figures echo the physical state of the young woman. Most are damaged in some way, either through loss of limb, decapitation, torn

clothing, naked, or even morphed into fantastic shapes. To complete this scene of massacre or morbid experimental laboratory, blood (or perhaps nail varnish) is splattered up the walls and on the dolls. The references to beauty are overt in this piece; what is more unexpected is the extreme violence that is apparent, yet this matches the Grimm version. Rancinan's use of tortured (white) Barbie dolls adds a darkly humorous twist.

Conclusion:

Beauty, and by implication ideal femininity, is a perception, a set of physical conditions that meet a historically and culturally arrived at consensus. Yet it is a construct upon which social value is contingent and constantly shifting, especially in the western world. Beauty is a product of a dominant ideological belief; in the Euro-American model, that belief is predominantly patriarchal. In relation to fairy tales, the embedded values of beauty are critiqued and revealed to be constructions dependent on cultural convention, and, used as a method of social control. Without intervention, fairy tales are active in perpetuating ideal (or, in fact, non-ideal) normative beauty standards. As Laura Mulvey argues, the psychological process of viewing a fictional character acts on the ego libido as a form of recognition.

The contemporary and radical artists and film-makers dealing with fairy tale beauty employ a variety of methods, but have in common deconstruction, parody, and intervention techniques. These are necessary to interrupt and expose the seemingly innocent emphasis western society places on physical appearance. Moreover, the methods utilised reveal the conscious construction and reproductive nature of beauty in fairy tales, and, in turn, how these are fed back into society as normative ideals. These ideals are, however, prejudiced, exclusionist, subject to fashionable trends and contingent on a predominant set of ideological standards.

¹ Although the persecuted female features in some fairy tales, not all female characters are victims in this manner. Through editing and selection processes the popular tales tend to feature the female victim. The original literary collections (which have been reduced to a handful of familiar tales) also featured intelligent and active female protagonists.

² Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an essay in phenomenology and feminist theory." in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones, 392-402 (London: Routledge, 2003).

³ Ibid., 392.

⁴ Ibid., 399.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990, 2006), 190.

⁶ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 392.

⁷ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones, 44-53 (London: Routledge, 2003), 47.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 192.

¹¹ The film *Orlando*, directed by Sally Potter, was released in 1993 and was based on the 1928 novel by Virginia Woolf.

¹² The ambiguity of this work reveals the opportunity taken by Parker and Swinton to interrupt the given codes of gendered subjectivity. Both the passive female and the non-gendered figure seem to exist simultaneously in this work, the presence of the latter subverting the former.

¹³ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1975, 1976), 236.

¹⁴ Helena Rickett and Peggy Phelan, *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon, 2001), 137.

¹⁵ Lorraine O'Grady critiques the "West's continuing tradition of binary, 'either:or' logic," that operates an oppositional system in discussing race. She discusses how the black woman always exists alongside the white women in the West's perception of woman and how white women perpetuate this opposite position. If the black woman is not visible, she is, nevertheless, present with the white woman, marking the latter's superiority and the former's difference. This is played out in Weems' work *Mirror Mirror*. Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming black female subjectivity." in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones, 174 (London: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁶ *Trans-Fashion Lab* was a 2006 exhibition/event hosted by the shop La Gauche Divine in Barcelona. Artists and designers contributed works that critically commented on consumer society and fashion. Adriana Karembo, the European *Wonderbra* model poses as *Cinderella* and provides a fitting muse for this subject.