Article

Facing Your Fears: Navigating Social Anxieties and Difference in Contemporary Fairy Tales

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Abstract: In the 20th and 21st centuries, the rise of audio-visual media, particularly cinema and television, brought about new visual techniques and storytelling conventions that have transformed the way fairy tales are adapted for the screen. Initially adapted for a younger audience, newer adaptations often return to the darker and more horrific elements of the source texts; this includes body horror and an emphasis on physiological differences. This article employs structural, cultural, and folkloric interpretive lenses for the analysis of three contemporary, audio-visual fairy tales to discuss the way contemporary fairy tales include disability and difference as social constructs that are shaped by cultural attitudes and anxieties. The stories' plots are driven by the protagonists' "otherness", and these texts feature transformations that provide clues to understanding current standards of beauty and normality. I argue that newer adaptations place an emphasis on finding resolutions to difference that challenge the traditional idea that if one has a face or body that strays from the standard of the norm, one must die, relegate oneself to the margins, or join others like oneself.

Keywords: fairy tale; disability; adaptation

1. Introduction: Mutilations and Monsters in the Context of Disability Studies

Once upon a time, blood, bodily mutilation, and body parts were a standard fixture of fairy tales, and audiences faced body horror long before it became a recognized fixture of the horror genre. However, as the field of disability studies emerged in anglophone academia, the trope of body horror has taken on a different, more nuanced significance. The depictions of transformations, mutilations, amputations, disfigurement, disease, and parasitic infections reflect the lived reality of perhaps 15% of the world's population today (WHO 2011, p. 7). Many consider the effects of these conditions a disability—a difference in cognition or physiology that can limit certain actions or interactions with others. Often, bodily differences in fairy tales are interpreted as symbols or metaphors for something else. However, confronting the depictions as representations of bodily difference can reveal deeper understandings of the social standards and behaviors on which fairy tales comment.

Body horror can be seen as a form of physical and emotional trauma experienced by people with disabilities who are often stigmatized, dehumanized, and subjected to the imposition of medical interventions without their consent. Fairy tales that feature body horror, then, can be read through the lens of disability studies as narratives that reflect the anxieties and fears of societies that often marginalize those who deviate from the norms of the able-bodied. These tales can reveal much about the cultural constructions of appearances and how people with differences have been historically portrayed and treated. In particular, thinking about the tales in this way challenges the persistence in fairy tales to use physical ability and beauty to highlight a character's moral virtues or positive attributes, while physical impairment and ugliness are used to mark a villain or marginalize those considered "outsiders".

In this study, I employ structural, cultural, and folkloric interpretive lenses for the analysis of three contemporary, audio-visual fairy tales to discuss the ways fairy tales include disability and difference as social constructs that are shaped by cultural attitudes and anxieties. The stories' plots are driven by the protagonists' "otherness", and I explore the transformations these characters undergo and how those around them react. These tales are Ana Lily Amirpour's "The Outside", which is an episode from Guillermo del Toro's *Cabinet of Curiosities* (del Toro 2022), Paul Feig's *The School for Good and Evil* (Feig 2022), and Domee Shi's *Turning Red* (Shi 2022). I argue that these adaptations and original stories place an emphasis on finding resolutions to difference that challenge the standard of literary and film texts throughout history, that if one has a body that strays from the standard of the norm, one must die, relegate oneself to the margins, or join others like oneself. There is a need to challenge the storyline, as Amanda Leduc claims, where it is always the individual who must change, never the world (Leduc 2020, p. 12). I am interested in examining the underlying structures that shape the narrative and character development of these stories—including how they reflect some of the traditional fairy tale genre tropes—and I explore how the tales reflect the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which they were created.

One thing that fairy tales and horror have in common is their tendency to feature different and mutilated human physiognomy, including facial physiognomy, and to take advantage of negative connotations of such differences to depict "badness" or evilness". While this tendency is increasingly criticized through campaigns such as the 2018 "I Am Not Your Villain" campaign from the British organization Changing Faces, which calls on the film industry to "stop using scars, burns, marks, and other visible differences as a shorthand for villainy", I would like to examine the particular cultural meaning such faces have for fairy tales and their horrific renditions. It seems that, as much as "ugliness" is a marker of evil character or a warning to behave a certain way, it also reveals the enduring biases we have for aesthetic faces and their currency in society, as well as the latent fear of losing this currency when we have it.

For this article, I am interested in the uncanny nature of differences and the response of horror people may have to the differently faced or differently bodied as a result of a fear of the unknown, social conditioning, or evolutionary instincts. Fairy tales are one of the few spaces for children and adults to explore these feelings of horror. As Bruno Bettelheim argued, children need fairy tales in order to know they need not fear monsters, even the one they see in themselves (Bettelheim 1989, p. 120). While one could say that fairy tales encourage the viewer to declare "at least it is not me", it also provides a safe "frame" in which to read, watch, and judge the "other" without judgment—alternatively stated, that which is normally uncomfortable is conquerable. Thereafter, one can do as Ato Quayson suggested, which is "close the gap between representation and ethics, making visible the aesthetic field's relationship to the social situation of person with disability in the real world" (Quayson 2007, p. 24).

While not everyone would classify my three chosen texts as fairy tales, they belong in part, if not in whole, to the genre due to their suspension of disbelief about magic and their reliance on the wish-fulfillment and transformation tropes. Overall, by examining these fairy tales through multiple theoretical lenses, I hope to demonstrate some of the structures of contemporary fairy-tale adaptations and the ways in which the stories both reflect and shape our understanding of social issues and fears, including those related to disability and difference. Leaning on Maria Tatar's theory of the "pedagogy of fear" (Tatar 1992), I argue that fairy tales, especially their new remediations as tales of horror, can be used as a tool for empowering individuals to confront and overcome fear of difference, and to critically engage with societal issues of judgement and marginalization.

2. Fairy-Tale Adaptation and the Visual Emphasis

Classic versions of fairy tales are known for featuring few specific details of physical characteristics, although characters are often described as "beautiful" or "ugly". However, while individual storytellers may always have added embellishments to interpret what beautiful or ugly looks like, little is left to the imagination once translated to the screen. Specific visuals of people, places, or things are selected to communicate the unsaid. Body differences that are not specified in text are presented on the screen. Since most screen time focuses on the faces of people, due, in part, to the emphasis of the visual medium on facial expressions for communicating ideas, this means that, when discussing bodily difference in audio-visual media, one is often talking about facial difference.

In 2017, medical doctors Julie Amthor Croley, Vail Reese, and Richard F. Wagner completed a study to determine the prevalence of dermatologic finding among movie heroes and villains. They discovered that, while six of the all-time top 10 US film villains had dermatologic findings, none of the top 10 heroes had anything, which they suggest has to do with facial difference used as a shorthand to show the dichotomy of good and evil in film: "Dating back to the silent film era, facial scars have become a stock traits to classic villains and represent the most prevalent skin condition observed in film" (Croley and Wagner 2017, p. 562). This shorthand, Croley et al. argued, results in a greater tendency for prejudice against those with such dermatologic findings (missing hair, bags under the eyes, birthmarks, facial scars, pimples or warts, or deep wrinkles).[1] They outline much of what is known by now about the shorthand, which is that difference is supported to "illustrate underlying immoral depravity" (Croley and Wagner 2017, p. 559) or "evoke in the audience apprehension or fear of the unfamiliar and provide a perceptible parallel to the villainous character's inward corruption" (p. 559). Most people can recognize that the correlation between difference and immorality is discriminatory and involves possible negative bias toward actual people with facial differences, yet it persists, and discontinuing this shorthand, especially in the fairy tale and horror genre, seems to be a challenge.

William C. Shaw explored the complexity of the relationship between facial difference and folklore in a 1981 paper focusing on the origin stories of some congenital defects. Also a medical doctor (orthodontist), he wrote about various studies that were written to help identify the folklore that surrounds facial "deformity" and the origins of facial prejudice. Shaw elucidated the possible causes for an instinctive rejection of those with facial difference: sexual aversion (grounded in natural-selection-shaped behavior), fear, confusion, and stereotyping (Shaw 1981, p. 258). The fear is not so much of the unknown (though that too), but of the threat to one's unconscious body image, "in as much as [one] identifies to some extent with [the other] person" (p. 237). Furthermore, while "[d]istortions of the human form associated with evil and terror were part of oral and written tradition long before the arrival of horror films" (p. 238), folklore has been used to reinforce prejudices and stigmatize individuals with facial differences. Given the goals of contemporary societies to become more inclusive, new mediated forms should do more to break down the stereotypes and push against prejudice.

In my introduction, I claimed to use the folkloric method; doing so allows me to discuss how the tales have been adapted and transformed over time. Generally, when thinking about fairy-tale adaptation, I ask the same question as Cristina Bacchilega: "How and to what uses [are] fairy tales [. . .] adapted to the 21st century?" (Bacchilega 2013, p. 6). In particular, it seems that Bacchilega is interested in the way these adaptations often result in "remixes" or generic complexity (p. 112). These tales use more than one genre and, thus, result in different combinations of "specific histories, social forces, and knowledge" (p. 112). Mixing genres will affect coded expectations and the ways these films are marketed to their audiences (p. 113).

In this sense, remediation can be seen as a dynamic and creative process of cultural adaptation, as media forms are continually transformed and reconfigured over time. Remediation is not simply a process of replacing one medium with another, but rather a complex and ongoing process of negotiation between different media forms. Each new medium must contend with the legacies of earlier media, incorporating and adapting their conventions, practices, and modes of expression (Hutcheon 2006). This is especially evident in fairy tales, which not only experienced a transition when the oral tales became transcribed, but when the print or oral story became adapted for newer media such as films, television shows, and video games. Each new adaptation is influenced by the new techniques and conventions of the medial form it takes and also seeks to remediate earlier versions of the story by updating the setting and descriptions, adding new characters and dialogue, or altering the plot.

Audio-visual media may perhaps allow for more critical positions. Distinct from some of the original transcriptions of fairy tales, audio-visual media would not necessarily struggle with a demand to be "organic, healthy, alive, and embodied" (Schmiesing 2014, p. 26). Notably, transcriptions of the fairy tales, such as the popular Brothers Grimm collections, perform an illusion of directness while attempting to "preserve" the voice of the story tellers. Audio-visual media, on the other hand, is blatantly cultivated and subject to intervention by many agents, including producers and directors. However, it is also often rooted in the collective imagination and experiences of a people. Stuart Hall's cultural studies model of television explains that media consumption is an active process where the viewer interprets and negotiates the meaning of the content (Hall 1991, p. 127). This agency is a departure from the passive model of consumption where the viewer is simply fed information, and it allows for the viewer to actively engage with the content and bring their own experiences and interpretations to the process of viewing. Mediated fairy tales, thus, operate on a thin line between the preserved "static" nature of the written tale and the organic possibilities of oral storytelling.

Laura Hubner's interpretations of gothic horror and her study of "the uncanny transformations in film" (Hubner 2018, p. 7), derive from the distinction between the higher-quality, immersive experiences provided by big-screens as opposed to the small-screened, fragmented, and distracted viewing experience at home. However, as home-theater systems become more sophisticated, the contrast between movies produced for streaming and those intended for theatrical or home theater release may continue to blur. Yet, home technologies have some other unique features cinema does not. Due to the ability to pause and resume playback and watch on multiple devices, streaming television often allows for a deeper exploration of the psychological aspects of horror. Viewers can engage in a more refracted way with the story, necessitating stronger, more complex plot lines and more character development, which may include characters who directly comment on their difference, both their own awareness thereof and the response of others.

For film makers like Guillermo del Toro, "fantasy serves as a vehicle to introduce political and social topics, to elaborate metaphors around fear and hatred, and to revalue a series of characters that have suffered rejection or marginalization" (Goig and Pérez 2019, p. 139). The source text of his production "The Outside", Hans Christian Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling", already thematizes rejection and marginalization, but the remediation allows one to examine how the core themes and motifs of the story have been preserved or altered in a 21st century context. One can observe similar concerns in the casting choices of recent Walt Disney Studios adaptations such as the 2021 *Cinderella* and the 2023 *The Little Mermaid*, which strive for greater representation of the ethnic diversity of postcolonial societies.

However, most distinctly, adaptation and remediation in the audio-visual medium emphasize the visual depiction of something previously unseen or unspecified. Considering that television is often treated like a metaphorical window on the world and confused with reality, but that the fairy tale is considered "an allegorical window into an imaginary timeless land", as Laura Hubner put it (Hubner 2018, p. 4), one must acknowledge the way the visual marking of disability and difference comments more on reality than the possibilities of magic. The translation of the fairy tale to the screen determines that the producer is challenged, together with the makeup artist and cinematographer, with providing a specific interpretation for the viewer, and the viewer is confronted with difference in a new way to what is left abstract or overlooked in the oral or written tale. This means that, even if the Grimm brothers' editorial amendments in their transcriptions of the fairy tales often enhanced or added portrayals of disability (Schmiesing 2014, p. 2), this depiction was still stronger in the audio-visual medium. It still, as Ann Schmiesing argued in her book *Disability, Deformity, and Disease in the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Schmiesing 2014), could work as a "prosthetic exercise" to demonstrate that the "'wholeness' of their texts is nevertheless just as unstable and constructed as are conceptions of bodily wholeness" (p. 3). The visual depictions of the transformations in contemporary audio-visual fairy tales do a similar work.

3. Transformations

Transformations often play a role in the lack and lack-liquidation model of fairy tales. In the context of disability studies, fairy tale theorists often point toward Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Fairy Tale*, where he described the structural tendencies of the tale to start with an "initial misfortune or lack" (Propp 1968, p. 53). The liquidation of that lack results in equilibrium being reestablished, the enchantment being removed, and, in the case of disability, the transition from "disability to ability and bodily perfection" (Schmiesing 2014, p. 2). Ato Quayson elaborated on this to say that we can find this use of physical or social deformation at the beginning of most story plots, even if it does not show itself in the story right away (Quayson 2007, p. 20). He placed this trend in the trajectory of the realist literary movement, where the "real" became divided into the binary of normal and abnormal, and the strive to represent the world with verisimilitude resulted in depicting able-bodied as the norm, when it is really only an ideal.

Transformations, as Marina Warner laid out, can be divided into three kinds: shape-shifts, temporary changes forced as punishment or impediment, or the taking on of a more "ideal" or "perfect" form (Warner 2002, p. 4). In fairy tales, the transformation can be used to challenge the idea of a fixed or stable identity, highlighting the fluidity and mutability of the self. At the same time, the experience of feeling at home, or not, in one's transformed body invites consideration of the uncanny. The concept, famously expanded upon by Sigmund Freud, describes the unsettling feeling that arises from encountering something that is simultaneously familiar and strange, known and unknown, or human-like yet not whole (Freud 2020, p. 74). Laura Hubner summarized it as the state when the "'homely' becomes terrifying" and as a familiar domain for the "repressed, hidden, and dangerous" (Hubner 2018, p. 7). In human interactions, this experience is often based on physiognomies, where differences can evoke a reminder of something society has trained one to repress. While Freud focused on the doppelgänger or boundaries of fantasy and reality, life and death, I extend this term to transformations in the fairy-tale context.

When the transformation involves physical violations of the human body that are viscerally depicted to evoke feelings of disgust, terror, and helplessness in the viewer, one can speak of body horror, which invites the viewer to share in this experience of the unhomely. Body horror finds its roots in gothic horror and refers to the physical transformation or deformation of the human body, often caused by disease, mutation, or supernatural forces. It has a tendency to blur boundaries of the body and remind the viewer about the body's unpredictability and vulnerability, but it also challenges the viewer to recognize themselves in the other in a quite physical way.

Physical changes in fairy tales would not generally be called body horror, since they are often immediate, less viscerally involving, or off-screen. However, they confront the viewer with difference that the viewer must reconcile with the image of the previously seen figure, thus evoking a sense of uncanny or unhomeliness. Meilin (Mei) Lee in *Turning Red* "poofs" in and out of her red panda form, Sophie in *The School for Good and Evil* undergoes multiple transformations—first in clothing and hair changes, then a slow transition to an old and facially-marked woman, followed by an instantaneous reversal, and finally as a split-second shapeshifter—but her peers and her best friend transform as well. Perhaps the most interesting transformation is Stacey in "The Outside" (Armipour 2022). First, she develops a rash after putting on a beatification cream, the increased use of which makes her skin develop increasingly larger and more raw red spots. However, in the climax of the story, her complete transformation from "ugly duckling" to "swan" occurs off-screen, with the beginning of this process only implied underneath the opaque surface of a bathtub full of goop, and the aftermath involving the peeling and scraping off of a congealed substance.

4. Ambiguous Gothic Horror in "The Outside"

Of the three case studies I discuss in this article, "The Outside" is the only truly gothic fairy tale that allows for the exploration of multiple gothic tropes, such as the doppelgänger or split self who brings into relief the boundary between internal and external, self and other. It also challenges the viewer to continue to see Stacey—both optically and character-wise—in her transformed form at the end, thus highlighting the contradictions inherent in matching internal (character) to external (physical) values.

"The Outside" belongs to Guillermo del Toro's *Cabinet of Curiosities*, which is an anthology horror series that premiered on the global streaming platform Netflix from 25 October 2022 to 28 October 2022 (Scherer 2022, p. 6). The series is named after del Toro's own collection of oddities and macabre objects, which he has been collecting for many years (del Toro and Zicree 2013). The streamed anthology format found much success in products such as *The Black Mirror* series (2011–present), to which *Cabinet* is very similar. Both series work with the lack-lack-liquidation structure (Propp 1968) and provide commentaries on human desire. However, del Toro traded the discussion of the effects of scientific and technological advancement for a look at the more mysterious powers of enchantment and wonder.

"The Outside" episode, released on 26 October, was directed by Ana Lily Amirpour and set straight to stream. The story, based on a web comic by Emily Carroll (2016), delves into horror and fairy tale, but is also a remediation of "The Ugly Duckling". However, unlike the swan in the classic fairy tale, Stacey's character in "The Outside" changes as much as her physical appearance. Starting as a married woman in her thirties with a stable job as a bank teller who spends her evenings watching TV alone or with her husband, eating microwaved frozen meats, she transforms into a woman with above-average beauty and fashion sense, but she also murders her husband. Using a "miracle" cream called Alo Glow, recommended by her colleagues, she loses the physical differences that could be considered unaesthetic, such as bulbous eyes, crooked teeth, and uneven skin (these are created for the viewer through prosthetics, make-up, and digital editing). However, unlike for her colleagues, the cream draws an allergic reaction in Stacey, and, despite her husband's pleas not to use it, she has hallucinations while watching TV that convince her to continue using it (22:41–25:30). While her husband is supportive of her and appreciative of her looks and talents, she fails to see this and, furious with what she sees as him getting in the way of her happiness, kills him (48:01–50). At the end, although she is accepted, even admired by her colleagues, the closing shot of the episode emphasizes the uncertain nature of her happiness: a concentrated frame of her face while laughing and a look of confusion can make one wonder, "could she really be happy?" (1:01:00–1:02:00).

The show is marked by characteristics of the abject, which Colette Conroy argues is similar to the uncanny in that it can offer a "sensation of horror that connects us viscerally to the experience of repression and the process of subject formation" (Conroy 2009, p. 106). Conroy focuses on fragments and substances that cross boundaries and "pollute the clarity of intersubjective relationships because they belong to both inside and outside" (p. 106). While the protagonist of "The Outside" has taxidermy as a hobby, which involves taking out all the insides to focus on the outside, we see a fascination with the inside. When Stacey is invited to a Secret Santa, she is most excited to see the inside of her colleague's house (10:59). The taxidermist's work represents the juxtaposition of death and mortality, and their ability to bring lifeless creatures back to a lifelike state plays into the theme of resurrection and blurs the lines between life and death. Yet, the episode also features a disgusting substance, the cream, which is supposed to represent Stacey's new outside self. The horror experienced is that this plastic substance, meant to mold around Stacey to give her a new face and body, expunges Stacey's subjective self; she becomes an object, looked at and talked about by others, but no longer experiencing any agency of her own.

Stacey's experience runs counter to the Andersen fairy tale where the swan is more comfortable with its new-found belonging and continues to be humble about his beauty (Andersen 1914, p. 219). This can be explained through the different motivations of the two characters. The cygnet was forced to move out into the world through his original rejection. While the ugly duckling was persecuted, he did nothing to change his looks. He looked for a group to belong to, who would accept him the way he was. Then, when they did accept him, he doubted them, at first. Stacey, on the other hand, was comfortable in her home and routines, but forced out of this through the hope of being accepted into a group from which she was previously excluded. She covered herself in a cream to change her looks, so that she would be included in that group, even though she had already found belonging with her husband.

It is, perhaps, concerning that the contemporary remediated story upholds the impression that Stacey must change to be accepted, and that her acceptance relies on her appearances, since it attests to the enduring relevance of anxieties about appearance, but the format also allows for multiple layers of complexity. When del Toro connects to "recurrently old formulas such as archetypal folk and fairy tale motifs and characters", he "adapt[s] them to contemporary culture and society" (Goig and Pérez 2019, p. 138). In this case, reimagining the story in 1980s US suburban American helps develop the commentary on the way society sets difficult boundaries for those who do not fit a certain image of beauty and sophistication; hence, when something comes along that grants one access to this, such as a marginally affordable cream, one is more likely to use it—even against one's better judgement. Andersen was also interested in "innovative narratives that explored the limits of assimilation in a closed social order" (Zipes qt. in Yenika-Agbaw 2011, p. 92), and his exceptional skill was arguably in his capacity to convert his personal struggles into figurative narratives that tackle broader societal issues. The script for "The Outside" takes this one step further, suggesting that such an acceptance is not possible.

"The Ugly Duckling", originally published in 1843, makes for a productive disability narrative in light of the social model of disability. While the medical model views disability as a personal health issue and a means of determining how far people diverge from statistical norms, the social model, developed in the late 20th century, shifts the focus to the social and environmental factors that contribute to someone being disabled in an action or experience. "The Ugly Duckling" clearly constructs the other animals and people around the cygnet, not the cygnet, as the flawed beings (Andersen 1914). For Tobin Siebers, this is the definition of disability, which is "the product of social injustice, one that requires not the cure or elimination of the defective person but significant changes in the social and built environment" (Siebers qt. in Yenika-Agbaw 2011, p. 94). While Andersen's duckling was not disabled through a defect or disfigured body, it was received as such amidst the norm of the ducks around him. The same is true of Stacey, whose features make her less objectively beautiful, but no less worthy of inclusion than anyone else.

The narrative can be read as a metaphor for the experiences of individuals with disabilities who often face discrimination, isolation, and marginalization because of their differences. Like the ugly duckling, people with disabilities are often excluded from social and cultural norms of beauty, ability, and productivity, which can lead to feelings of dejection, shame, and low self-esteem. Stacey in "The Outside" feels this same way. While one does not always think of "ugliness" as a disability, the way society responds to it with fear or rejection can make it disabling in certain social situations, and, unfortunately, while society is becoming increasingly more inclusive of people with physical disabilities, the disabling behaviors toward people who stray from the norm in objective beauty standards continue. "The Ugly Duckling", as Vivian Yenika-Agbaw rightly emphasizes, "has tremendous universal appeal because of the societal obsession with appearance" (p. 98).

However, unlike "The Ugly Duckling", which offers a message of hope and acceptance as the cygnet ultimately finds out he is a swan, not a duck, and learns that, while he was different, there were others like him and his beauty even surpassed theirs (Andersen 1914, p. 218–19), Stacey is celebrated at the end for changing her qualities to match those of her peers. The acceptance Stacey found with her husband, who thinks she is "lovely inside and out" (41:42) and praises her humor, talents, and beauty (45:28–46:28), is misplaced by the desire to fit in with her peers. The duckling realizes his beauty, but does not take it for granted and is humble. He finds belonging and is "so happy" (Andersen 1914, p. 219). Amanda Leduc characterizes this as an anti-cautionary tale, promising the audience that better times are to come to those who deserve it (Leduc 2020, p. 148). "The Outside" is more of a cautionary tale, the old adage "Be careful what you wish for". The ending of "The Outside" implies Stacey is more confused than happy, and the viewer sees that Stacey's solution in "The Outside" is no respite at all.

Taking a closer look at the transformation gives some clues as to the differing outcome. The duckling's transformation in his story is presented as the biological process of maturing from adolescent to adult; it is without magic. He happens to change without realizing, and he desires to belong somewhere as himself. Stacey's desire, on the other hand, is to be like the others. She also wills the change and is encouraged therein through collegial gossip and television advertisement. The cream raises its own challenging questions about the choice for people with disabilities or bodily difference to undergo aesthetic-treatment surgeries that are technically no longer deemed medically necessary. Plastic surgeries and wrinkle removal creams are increasingly socially accepted, even if restricted to a certain class, yet they represent the pursuit of an idealized beauty standard. Beauty-enhancement procedures and products can contribute to unrealistic expectations, poor body image, and low self-esteem in all people, not just those with birth defects or suffering from the result of accidents.

Stacey's Alo Glow cream is not a mere beauty-enhancement cream. In her basement, the dozens of tubes open autonomously, and goop starts slowly squirting out to collect together in a mass. It turns into a dripping, squelchy humanoid figure whom Stacey embraces, and even kisses before facing off and ultimately killing her husband. In a story that is otherwise rather realistic, the animation of the cream represents the magical element, adding depth and complexity to the story and asking the viewer to interpret the symbolism of the cream. If there is sexual imagery in the behavior and appearance of the cream, this is not accidental. One can interpret it to represent Stacey's desire for fitting in with her co-workers; it is the wish-fulfillment fantasy that Bruno Bettelheim famously argued lies at the heart of fairy tales (Bettelheim 1989).

While "The Ugly Duckling" can be seen as a call for greater social acceptance and inclusion of individuals with disabilities and a recognition that difference and diversity are valuable and essential aspects of human experience, "The Outside" challenges this possibility. This celebration of difference and diversity does not seem possible in a world where television blurs the line between fiction and reality, a woman's worth continues to be measured in her beauty and sex appeal, and advertising and marketing work to make all people feel ugly and inadequate.

5. Pushing Binary Boundaries in *The School for Good and Evil*

Paul Feig's *The School for Good and Evil* (Feig 2022) provides another opportunity to see how the contemporary viewer is ready for more nuanced representations of physical difference and diversity when it comes to fairy tales. Rated lowly on the IMDb (5.9/10 based on 33k+ ratings on 5 August 2023), one could ascertain that its treatment of certain topics and use of various tropes disappointed many viewers. However, at its core, the movie remediates the primary expectation of the fairy tale genre, as Laura Hubner described: fairy tales have a tendency for a "fixed understanding of polarities" (Hubner 2018, p. 4). This tendency comes with "ramifications" when the tale's "simplicity" is "tallied with the misconception that this implies shallowness" (p. 4). While *The School for Good and Evil* has this same tendency, there is still more than appears at the surface.

At first glance, the movie seems to uphold the equations of ugly = bad and beauty = good, as well as what makes ugliness and beauty: agedness, scars, dark clothes, and unkemptness versus smooth complexions, colorful clothes, and well-groomed hair. All it takes to turn the Prince Charming character (Tedros) into a "Never" is to draw a few red lines on his face and change his clothes from white to black (1:54:07). Examining the movie under a more critical lens, one can see that there are limits to how fairy tales can embrace bodily difference.

The feature-length movie, set straight to stream on the Netflix platform, is based on the first volume of a fantasy novel series by Soman Chainani (2013). It follows the adventures of two best friends, Sophie and Agatha, who are brought to a fairy-tale academy divided into a school for "Evers" (those who believe they will live "happily ever after") and "Nevers" (the villainous counterparts). Sophie, who is convinced that she is destined for the School of Good, is dismayed when she is sorted into the School of Evil, while Agatha, who considers herself an outsider and is treated as such, finds herself sorted into the School of Good.

Amidst the drama of finding their roles in their respective school and saving the world from destruction, the girls attend "beatification" and "uglification" classes as based on heavily gendered expectations. When Sophie first questions the need for villains to be ugly (48:25), she receives the answers "Not caring how you look forces you to use your intelligence" (48:37) and "Ugliness is freedom" (48:44) When she rapidly ages, gains a large nose, warts, and red eyes, she echoes the claims of the uglification class teacher: "It's disgusting, and I don't care. And that is power!" (49:01). Parallel to this class, the women in the School for Good are taught that one becomes a "truly powerful woman through beauty" (49:12) and "A lady's smile is a sword in the battle for life and true love" (49:28).

However, the movie is self-aware of the way that aesthetically pleasing appearances and goodness are often equated. The words and dialogue often run counter to the visual imagery. The technique, made especially apparent through the medium, is used to disrupt the binary oppositions. In one of the earlier scenes, Agatha's mentor figure declares, "One doesn't measure one's goodness just by how one looks" (24:40), and, in the next moment, she sets Agatha down in front of a mirror. The "just" becomes emphasized here, as Professor Dovey proceeds to disdainfully flick through Agatha's hair and suggests she must have great power. The viewer is given to understand that appearance does, in fact, play a role in the impression of one's character. All the same, viewers are also shown how love and loyalty can be found in the School of Evil, and good is not always pleasant; there are dark smoke creatures with red eyes, bird carcasses that fly, fairies and flowers that bite (19:50; 58:02), and a cupid statue that first seems idyllic and quickly turns intimidating and violent (37:50–38:39). Moreover, horrifying things that happen to those who do not conform to the expectations of either side (47:57; 1:10:18–1:12:40, 1:20).

The challenge this movie poses under a disability lens, however, is that it fails to totally disrupt the idea that ugliness is bad or beauty is good. The closest it comes is when one examines Sophie's fashion interest, apparent in the early scenes of her room, which looks like a designer's workspace (5:00–5:20), the minute-long collage of different outfits she creates (1:24:00–1:25:00), and her claim that "whether good or evil, beauty is a full-time job" (1:04:03). The movie suggests that specific choices made by characters can

be used to determine the way they want their character to be seen and treated. The movie meta-fictionally states that the tale is a way to teach people "of the outside world to make choices; to find their way" (34:03). Sophie's interest in fashion is one of her most prominent characteristics, and she makes her way through these choices. The viewer knows that Sophie loves the story "Cinderella" not for the rags-to-riches happy ending, but specifically for the beautiful dresses Cinderella gets and wears (11:25). However, while the woman in the classic fairy tale changes her fate through a different appearance made by clothes (Perrault 2015), Sophie changes her fate through a character transformation, which, though represented through physical changes, works to show that it is possible to have an "Ever" appearance while belonging to the "Nevers", and that the distinction between the two groups made by appearance is superficial.

Nevertheless, on its most accessible level, the movie supports the enduring tendency to associate scarred, older, or abnormal faces as villainous. At the same time, it works counter to this impression, which becomes evident as Sophie and Agatha confront the expectations of their respective schools. They are already marked as outsiders at home, where the village boys call Sophie and Agatha "freaks" (8:28). Then, in the school, Agatha declares to know that she is not what one expects of a student at the School of Good, but that "this is what a normal girl looks like" (33:02), which earns her the ironic nickname "normal girl". On the other hand, Sophie is also called a "freak" by two "Nevers" (19:35; 1:02:08). The term "freak" is often used to refer to a person who is seen as different or abnormal due to their physical, mental, or emotional characteristics. The term has a negative connotation, not just for the hurt that name-calling can inflict, but also for its socially ascriptive nature of marking non-belonging; it is often used to describe individuals who do not conform to mainstream societal norms or expectations.

Historically, people with body differences were often put on display as "freaks" in circuses, sideshows, and other forms of entertainment, which perpetuated negative stereotypes and reinforced the idea that they were abnormal or less human than normal or able-bodied individuals. At the same time, the shows worked as a mirror for the audience. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson summarized the effects of P. T. Barnum's "freak shows" in her seminal disability study, *Extraordinary Bodies* (Garland-Thomson 1997). She claimed that "by highlighting ostensible human anomaly of every sort and combination, Barnum's exhibits challenged audiences not only to classify and explain what they saw, but to relate the performance to themselves, to American and collective identity" (Garland-Thomson 1997, p. 58). This means that the affront displayed in fairy tales does not call out the abnormality of the different-bodied, but rather the variety of bodies possible; this could be considered a positive message.

Something happens in the exhibition, or performance, that allows for a different kind of engagement that arguably is also attempted in *The School for Good and Evil*. It highlights the constructed relationship between appearance and character and turns abnormality, and the girls not fitting into their respective schools, into a good thing. Tedros's compliment to Agatha halfway through the movie is that she is "definitely not normal—in a good way" (56:25). Further scenes help send a similar message as that of "The Outside", which is that the focus on appearance is mislaid. The climax of Agatha's development occurs when she saves a girl from swimming in an eternal pool of wish-granting fish and cures the punishment for those who fail to meet "impossible expectations" (1:13:18). Her mentor figure explains that she has proven to be the only truly good thing in an "age of self-centered perfectionism" (1:13:38).

However, unlike "The Outside", wonderful costume design and very clear aesthetic choices never allow the visuals to fall into the grotesque. The explanation for this may be the same as for why classical fairy tales endure. Fairy tales reflect the dominant perspective and interests of the social groups that "control cultural forces of production and reproduction" (Zipes 2006, p. 2). While influential women writers have voiced anti-patriarchal concerns since at least the French *conteuses* in the 1690s, who critiqued the idealization of finding love as a happy ending (Reddan 2020), classic fairy tales can be seen as overtly patriarchal and

politically conservative in nature, as Jack Zipes pointed out (Zipes 2006). Society is obsessed with appearance, and, because the majority of people in Netflix's production groups are of working age and likely normally face and figured, they are more apt to reinforce different representational devices than someone who has wrinkles or facial scarring.

By emphasizing the correlation between physical beauty and moral goodness, the movie perhaps highlights the ways in which fairy tales have historically reinforced harmful stereotypes about physical difference. Confronted with this correlation, the viewer is faced with the challenge of grappling with issues of identity and difference and the realization that our understanding of these concepts is constantly evolving.

6. Embracing Difference in *Turning Red*

Unlike "The Outside" and *The School for Good and Evil*, Domee Shi's *Turning Red* [provides] a positive outcome for someone with bodily difference (Shi 2022). It is especially notable for the fact that it ends with the protagonist keeping her difference. The movie, which was produced and distributed for theaters by Disney and Pixar before being set to stream, is not based on a fairy tale, nor does it have many of its elements. However, there is magic that appears in the form of the protagonist's transformations. Meilin "Mei" Lee is a teenager growing up in Toronto who proudly self-asserts her ability to be successful in school, in social circles, and at home (1:36–3:11). One morning she wakes up as a giant red-panda and learns that the female relatives in her family all have this same ancestral blessing/curse. By the end of the tale, Mei decides to keep her ability to transform into a red panda, even when pressured by her family to perform a ceremony that would stop the transformations from happening.

As discussed throughout this article, this kind of enchantment is often present in fairy tales, especially with regard to the way the actions of one generation affect the next. It reflects the personal growth characters undergo when trials ultimately lead to a better understanding of themselves and their place in the world. In *Turning Red*, having a single female protagonist to identify with and watch in her development fulfills one of the basic tenants of the fairy tale, which is to provide a character for the reader or viewer to empathize with and support. This allows the audience to experience the protagonist's journey and growth—even if character development is not typically part of the fairy-tale genre. These aspects ask the viewer to expand their idea of the fairy tale, since, while the movie does not meet certain genre-specific characteristics, it still provides a sense of wonder (Colebrook in Bernheimer 2009, p. 3).

There are no monsters in *Turning Red*, but there are many examples of the monstrous: mothers encroach on their children's personal space, people turn into giant animals, and people get hurt. Few would consider the main character's transformation into a cuddly, eight-foot-tall red panda monstrous, but Mei's mother, Ming, undergoes a terrifying transformation that shows the potential danger of this state. Ming's red-panda has a darker color, is building-tall, features a deep voice, and is accompanied by threatening anger. She gave Wu, Meilin's grandmother, the bright-red (likely to make it more visible) scar across her right eyebrow. The nature of this scar and how it occurred is important to the plot of *Turning Red*, where mothers' overbearing natures result in daughters who feel they are not good enough for their mothers and eventually lash out, usually in their panda form.

Mei is also frequently referred to as a monster or something similar (24:30, 1:05:10). Each time people meet her for the first time, including her best friends, she scares them, and ominous music is played. One of the first questions she is asked is "Are you a werewolf?" (32:23), revealing that her monstrosity has its roots in the indeterminate state of being human. Laura Hubner also engaged with the concept of the werewolf, an "indeterminate creature" by virtue of being neither human nor wolf: "The wolf bursts out of the human, shattering fixed boundaries and challenging any sense of a unified self, or a private, true self within" (Hubner 2018, p. 9). The traditional understanding of the werewolf as a metaphor for the tensions between repression and liberation also applies to Mei, who is undergoing typical teenage urges.

The red panda in *Turning Red* is often understood as a metaphor for puberty, with the director herself claiming she pitched the movie as a story about a girl going through "magical puberty" (Brown 2022), but the red-panda form serves many functions. The experience of puberty in itself is often temporally disabling for children; therefore, one can deal with the metaphor as such. However, I also believe that the red panda is treated as a disability in the movie and shows the inherent uncanniness of having a disability. One is faced with the prospect that "the horror upsurges from within—devastating boundaries between the self and 'other' and preconceived concepts of 'home'" (Hubner 2018, p. 7). Having a disability can disrupt one's sense of identity and place in the world, as it challenges the normative expectations of what a body should look like or be able to do. This disruption can lead to feelings of alienation, anxiety, and fear, as the individual is forced to navigate a world that may not be designed for their needs. The uncanny nature of disability can, thus, upend one's understanding of boundaries between the self and other, and disrupt one's preconceived notions of "home" or belonging. Notably, her Chinese-Canadian identity means that she experiences other forms of difference that also result in these kinds of tensions of belonging.

Mei could be disabled by multiple things. As argued earlier, visible bodily differences are inherently easier for people to understand than invisible ones, and that is why they get drawn on so frequently. Meilin's hereditary curse is also similar to a hereditary illness such as bipolar disorder. Both come as a result of mood swings; both seem compulsive, scary, and even dangerous to those around them. Both are seen as a curse that will eventually happen and the sense that it is fate or destined. Moreover, like bipolar disorder, there is no cure. The advice of Mei's father is perhaps as suitable for a person who is bipolar as it is for Mei: "The point isn't to push the bad stuff away. It's to make room for it; live with it" (1:05:30). The difference, however, is that transforming into a big red panda is visible and alerts others to the change. A bipolar diagnosis is invisible.

In order to mitigate the effects of the "curse" of the red panda, those "blessed" by the ancestor Sun Yee must undergo a "containment" ceremony. Called the Red Moon Ritual because it must occur during a full red moon, the ceremony involves the participation of multiple people to sing a chant to help the person enter the "astral realm" and separate from their panda, whereupon the spirit can be sealed in an object (1:06:00–1:09:22). The Lee family hosts Mei's female relatives, who have all had their red panda transformation abilities contained.

The "containment ceremony" evokes the experience of surgical procedure for a facial difference, club foot, or many other kinds of physical difference. There is substantial pressure to undergo the procedure in order to achieve "normalcy", and there is uncertainty that it will work. There is a fear of the pain and that, after all that, one will still look different. There is also a hope that all one's problems will go away. We see these complex emotions very clearly in the look of apprehension Mei gives as she enters the room of the ceremony (1:05:56) and the discussion with her father just previous. In the movie, one also sees how the people around oneself often have a harder time with the "disability" than one does oneself, perhaps because they imagine something different for the person who has the disability. During the two ceremonies completed during the movie, one sees how Mei's relatives must hug their red pandas in order to leave them behind. Mei embraces it in another way, deciding to keep her transformation ability. She also recognizes that she is "never going to be perfect" (1:22:55), and that the hardest part about being different is figuring out who one is with that difference.

In watching *Turning Red*, the viewer is asked to consider the transformation of a human, specifically a Chinese-Canadian girl, into an anthropomorphic animal and back again. This could be seen as a representation of the complexity and hybridity of cultural identity in a postcolonial context. The use of a red panda, native to China and the Himalayas, as a transformation invites interpretation through cultural symbolism and mythology, drawing on the rich cultural heritage of both Chinese and Western traditions, and highlighting the ways in which cultural traditions can be merged and transformed in a postcolonial context.

The experience of turning into the red panda represents a form of reclaiming cultural identity despite a pressure for cultural assimilation or erasure, but Mei's early desire to transform back into a human suggests the similarly successful pressure of assimilation. Then, her final choice to keep the option of turning into the red panda (1:26:50), despite her family's disapproval, can also be interpreted as the success of developing her own hybrid identity. Additionally, the choice to keep this ability can be read as a way of subverting and challenging the dominant Western narrative of what it means to be human, which has historically been used to justify the subjugation and exploitation of non-Western cultures. By embracing her posthuman identity and rejecting the binary distinction between human and animal, Mei can be seen as challenging and subverting these colonial power structures.

Mohamad Saripudin et al. theorized that the movie has to do with upholding a culture of peace, and they claimed that "the media plays an important role in peace education" (Saripudin et al. 2023, p. 151). They cited Ilfiandra et al. to state that "the message is to teach how to live as global citizens by presenting scenes that bring a culture of peace. The latter refers to value, attitudes, and behaviors of refusing violence, preventing conflicts, and resolving problems by negotiation" (p. 151). The story emphasizes "the value of respecting and living in harmony despite the differences" (p. 151). While Saripudin et al. focused on race and religions, this could apply to any difference within a diverse community. They also emphasized the values of "self-awareness" (p. 152): "Understanding helps to achieve inner peace, reflecting relationships with others in society" (p. 152). That being said, one could extrapolate the differences experienced in the female body to general bodily difference, and changes that occur after birth, such as facial scarring that occur due to accidents. Regardless of the cause, the message of the movie is about celebrating uniqueness, indicated through the primary song "Nobody Like U".

Ultimately, I believe *Turning Red*, more than the other two texts in this article, removes the stigma attached to the anomalous body by the end. The subsequent monetization of the form (Mei and her friends, and later her parents, use the popularity to make appearances and merchandise) moves along the fine line of "freak show" to a new model of dealing with difference. Including *Turning Red* as a part of this article's case studies has to do with its work as one of the few fairy tales where the transformed monster stays that way. One of the most recent examples before *Turning Red* is Dreamwork's first *Shrek* movie (2001), directed by Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, where the protagonist, Fiona, maintains her ogre appearance even after finding "true love". Arguably, in *Shrek*, the final message is still that "like finds like". However, in *Turning Red*, the monstrous "other" is embraced as a part of oneself and a diverse group.

7. Conclusions

By way of a conclusion and a "happily ever after", one could introduce the productive idea of the "mutilated" tale and the need to engage with new fairy tales with new lenses. Ann Schmiesing explored at length the means by which Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm attempted to retain and "prostheticize" the oral stories in their transcription. She claimed that, although the Grimms attempted to maintain the oral tradition in their transcription of fairy tales, they were also influenced by the cultural and social norms of their time, which led to the exclusion and alteration of certain elements from the source texts. Schmiesing argued that the Grimms' efforts to prostheticize the oral tales resulted in a shift in the portrayal of characters, particularly those with disabilities, and a reworking of the stories to fit the desire for "wholeness" (Schmiesing 2014).

In adapting and creating new tales, aspects of classic fairy tales are inevitably sliced away, cut through, disemboweled, and put back together again in new orders, with additions and subtractions that mirror that Frankensteinian process of creating the monster. History is full of mutilated narratives of the oppressed by the oppressors. Michael Baffoe, Lewis Asimeng-Boatang, and Buster Ogbuagu described the way white people routinely traveled to Africa, studied them "objectively", and returned with "blended and sometimes mutilated narratives" (Baffoe, Asimeng-Boatang, and Ogbuagu qt. in Said 2018, p. 127).

However, letting go of the idea of non-difference to define "wholeness" returns a wholeness to it. This continues to fulfill one of the main purposes of fairy tales as outlined by Jack Zipes, which is to reflect the human desire to take action and shape the world according to our needs, as well as our aspiration to adapt ourselves to fit into the world (in Leduc 2020, p. 38).

Transformation in fairy tales can serve as a powerful tool to challenge ableist and beauty norms by promoting acceptance, respect, and inclusion of all individuals, regardless of their physical appearance or abilities. By exploring the experiences of characters who undergo transformations, fairy tales offer a unique opportunity to question societal expectations. In watching "The Outside", *The School for Good and Evil*, and *Turning Red*, audiences are invited to engage with the unique experiences and perspectives of individuals who are often marginalized or discriminated against, and one can say that contemporary tales work to promote more positive and inclusive narratives about diversity.

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Note

[1] The authors used the medical terminology for these conditions; however, for ease of reading, I refer to the colloquial terms throughout this article.

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