RECREATING FAIRYTALE CONTEXT THROUGH THE IMAGINARY

Cristina Raluca BARNA

It is common in anthropology nowadays to speak of imaginaries instead of cultural beliefs. For Castoriadis, the imaginary is a culture's ethos. This article examines the way this concept is to be found in the revitalised Arthurian legends in Germany by king Ludwig II and the way in which this concept is found in modern times in Disney's movies. The Arthurian legends reveal the medieval ideals and institutions such as knighthood and chivalry which were part of a shared cognitive schema (Anderson and Taylor) of the time. These ideals were a source of inspiration for king Ludwig II of Bavaria who tried to model the reality of his times after this Arthurian myths by building a fairytale castle at Neuschweinstein over which presides his statue as an Arthurian knight, a castle whose rooms are thematically decorated, where Arthurian rituals took place and the minnesingers interpreted Wagnerian scenes with subjects that combined myths, such as Venus and Tannhauser. All that in an attempt to have a life according to his imaginaire, which, like Don Quijote's, o to the new, cognitive schemata of his time, but which ended tragically, with him being declared insane and dying in suspicious circumstances. However, today's Disney's approach is different. Current anthropological uses of the imaginary inherit from Castoriades a tendency toward cultural abstraction, reification and homogenization. Lacan's, Anderson's, and Taylor's applications of the imaginary are better used for person-centered methods in order to study real rather than abstract cultural subjects. We should take into account the psychological processes involved. Lacan's imaginary of desire is a process of substitution: slippage of signifiers under signifieds. The Arthurian signifiers are slipping under the signifieds of ancient German mythology, refurbished by Wagner.

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The King is trying to substitute a world of romance for the drab, uninspiring reality of his time. As in Lacan's mirror stage, he identifies himself with an image: the Grail knight. Disneyland is a cultural artefact, it is part of the Lacanian symbolic order. Common to both is the vanishing of the real under empty signifiers of desire.

Key words: imaginaire; cognitive schema; schema theory

Although, according to a long-standing tradition, Charles Perrault was credited with the invention of this genre, Lewis C. Seifert's more recent approach - *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France. 1690-1715-* relocates the genesis of the fairy tale within the incipient feminism which dawned upon France in the century preceding the Bourgeois Revolution. It was Marie Catherine d'Aulnoy who first included a *conte de fee* in her novel, *Histoire de Hypolite* (1690). The study of the genre was thus opened and expanded so as to accommodate feminist perspectives: a woman's need to escape the dry rationalism of the French, Cartesian philosophical outlook, the normative bend of neoclassic poetics, as well as the rigid frame of the patriarchal family that frustrated female desire of an imaginative life and of social emancipation. The new discourses of utopian projections dawning upon the Age of Enlightenment uneasily combined with nostalgic incursions into past ages favoured the emergence of a new literary genre, reminiscent of the medieval cult of the supernatural, yet loaded with an interest in travestied social relationships of the time, and satirizing, in a veiled way, the meanness, the oppressive and arbitrary conduct of the representatives of the ancient regime (kings and aristocrats). In Perrault's *Sleeping Beauty*, for instance, we can hypothesize a veiled allusion to a woman's destiny in the patriarchal society, completely dependent upon a man's love and marriage, in the absence of which her life is like sleep, wasted. The observation of the mechanism of desire prompted by traumatic unconscious

contents caused by social deprivation, the promotion of alternative models of social relationships or of family life, studies in the sexed, classed and raced bodies of the fairy tale cast, of the way fairy tales have been rewritten to serve a feminist agenda, etc. have lately expanded the traditional frame of fantasy and narrative theory through which fairy tales were filtered and analyzed, opening vistas to psychoanalysis, social criticism, gender, race, postcolonial, New Historicist or cultural studies.

Castoriadis's imaginary is a schizoid world, a superposition of individual fantasy, yet free from the perils of autism by its anchorage in the intersubjective order of society, and of instrumental rationality. Let us compare two cases of overlap which seem to prove Castoriadis' right.

In the full bloom of modernity, that is in the late nineteenth century, German society saw itself ruled by a king whose ambition was to resurrect the Arthurian and German legends, not only on his private stage, which accommodated Wagner's musical performances, but also in his lifestyle, the decorations of his palaces, his attire, the manners imposed to his guests which emulated the ways of medieval chivalry. Did he feel the need to seduce his people through the imaginary in order to outshine his powerful rival Bismark, like the Catholic clergy of the Counterreformation trying to win back, through art and music, the congregations they had lost to their protestant rivals? Or was he a real-life Don Quixote living by models of times gone by? The fact is he embraced the medieval ideals and institutions such as knighthood and chivalry which were no longer part of a shared cognitive schema in his time, yet not a case of autism either, as Wagnerian opera disseminated such mythical representations among his massive audiences. These ideals were a source of inspiration for king Ludwig II of Bavaria who tried to model the

reality of his times after these Arthurian myths by building a fairy-tale castle at Neuschweinstein, over which presides his statue as an Arthurian knight, whose rooms are thematically decorated, where Arthurian rituals took place and the minnesingers interpreted Wagnerian scenes with subjects that combined myths, such as that of Venus and Tannhauser. All that in an attempt to lead a life according, not to his individual imagination but according to the imaginary reified in the cultural order of another age. They are emptied of the meaning they had had back then, which allows their mix and rewriting. The Arthurian signifiers are slipping under the signifieds of ancient German mythology, refurbished by Wagner. The King is trying to substitute a world of romance for the drab, uninspiring reality of his time. As in Lacan's mirror stage, he identifies himself with an image: the Grail knight. He is also aware of his artifices, of himself producing neotypes – Neuschweinstein – rather than a return to origin as in religious rituals. Artefacts are part of the Lacanian symbolic order. Common to both is the vanishing of the real under empty signifiers of desire.

The opposite case is the Disneyland of the Hollywood film industry in the mid-twentieth century.

In *The Dark Mirror: German Cinema Between Hitler and Hollywood* (2002), Lutz Koepnick speaks about the Hollywood dream industries which at the time were drawing heavily on two turn of the century myths: agrarian populism – a phenomenon also present in Romania – and urban progressivism (p.205-208). They opposed the big government and the business world through appeals to Edenic images of agrarian life, reminiscent of the Nazi adulation of land as a "mythical source of racial identity". Koepnick's example is the movie entitled The First Legion produced by *Douglas Sirk*, based on Emmet Lavery's

homonymous play and script. The action is triggered by a faith crisis among the Jesuits of a seminary. Father Quarterman had travelled to India, where he had shot films showing how holy people there were capturing the believers' souls "by capturing the imagination" (Koepnick, 2002, p.212). A non-miraculous event – Father Sierra's recovery of the walking function– causes collective hypnosis through combination with the cinematic image of an Indian scene. "It induces the priests to reshape the real as an imaginary space of wish fulfilment and plenitude" (Koepnick, 2002, p.212).

The Walt Disney productions too are affected by populism. Moral values are associated with commoners, therefore Snow White, for instance, who is envied by her mother but not forced to slave her life away like Cinderella, can be seen laundering he floor in the opening scene.

In another Disney production, Sleeping Beauty, the Perrault story is combined with Briar Rose by Grimm Brothers, both of them possessing a touch on historical realities. In the Grimm version, the spell is cast by a fairy who had not been invited because the girl's royal parents only had twelve golden dishes instead of thirteen. The revenge of the discomfited fairy recalls the legend about the beginning of the Trojan War, which is proof of the free circulation of motifs between high culture and folklore:

> "The sea-goddess Thetis, Achilles' mother, married the hero Peleus, the father of Achilles. Unfortunately, Eris, the goddess of discord, was not invited to the wedding. Out of rage, Eris catered to the **Greek pantheon's sense of vanity** by throwing a golden apple onto the banquet table and saying that it belonged to the goddess that was the most beautiful. Naturally, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite all challenged each other for the apple. Zeus decided the vain

goddesses needed a mediator and **chose Paris**, the prince of Troy and the most handsome mortal man alive, **to judge** which goddess was the most beautiful. Each goddess decided to **bribe him** to turn the contest in the goddess's favour. Hera bribed him with power; Athena bribed him with wealth; and apparently **Aphrodite** offered the most tempting bribe-the most beautiful woman in the world as his bride. Paris, also guilty of a great sense of vanity, accepted Aphrodite's bribe and chose her as the most beautiful goddess. In return, Aphrodite gave Paris the **promise of Helen as his wife**, the world's most beautiful woman. The problem was that Helen was **already married to King Menelaus**, king of Sparta, also known as Mycenae and referred to as Achaea in the Iliad. But Helen's known marriage could not stop Paris's vanity, who soon sailed to Sparta to **whisk Helen away from Menelaus.** Naturally, when Paris refused to give Helen back, **Menelaus declared war on Troy** to win her back. Hence, according to legend, the **Trojan War** was **started by** the feelings of **vanity, conceit, and arrogance that dominated the gods and goddesses** of the Greek pantheon as well **as Paris**". (What caused the Trojan War referred to in Homer's Iliad and The Odyssey?, 2013)

It is also the Grimm tale that focuses the action on an extraordinary castle surrounded by inaccessible thickets and bushes which imprison and kill trespassers. It is only the prince who walks into them determined and fearless – the very image of the activist hero advertised by American progressivism – that manages to get to the castle and wake up its sleeping inmates. The separation of high, courtly life and commoners is suggestive of the presence of the castle and of villagers at Neuschweinstein– close in physical space but situated at the extreme of the social hierarchy. The image of the prince with sword and shield can be seen on the roof of Neuschweinstein Castle, the statue embodying Ludwig's image of himself as Arthurian knight. With

so much graphical fantasy, could we imagine that the Disney team had run out of imaginative resources being forced to use the real image of Neuschweinstein Castle? The more appropriate answer is that Hollywood populism associated royalty with feelings of **vanity, conceit, and arrogance.**

The Disney producers introduce a wicked fairy who is absent from both originals (in the Perrault version, she is just an old fairy, the eighth, for whom there is no golden casket left. In the Hollywood version, she is named after a horrific witch, Maleficent, the Evil Doer, created by the Catholic witch-hunt, Stanley Stepanic (2014) explains in his "Demonology: A Study of What Is Not" (Skeptical Inquirer).

> "'Demonology' first came into usage in the English language in roughly the mid-1500s, though it may have originated in conjunction with developments in what is known as the 'witch craze'. The witch craze stemmed from a variety of factors, including political upheaval through the end of feudalism, religious conflicts against various heresies, and social collapse through disease, urbanization, and the breakdown of the family from effects of the Black Death (Kieckhefer, 1976). Some of this frustrated energy of the Europeans was directed toward the symbolic entity of the 'witch'. This led to the grand delusion of the existence of witchcraft and the subsequent mania that caused the torture and death of hundreds of thousands of people, mainly women (Ben-Yehuda 1980), starting in the late 1400s with the publication of the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* (*Hammer of the Witches*, *Hexenhammer* in German), which came almost 100 years after Pope John XXII's proclamation against witches in 1326" (Ben-Yehuda, 1980).

The reason for choosing *Snow White* over other Perrault and Grimm stories might indicate one more populist affiliation to poor and hard-working people contrasting with royal murderers.

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According to Eckhard Sander, a German historian, the character of Snow White was based on the life of Margarete von Waldeck, a German countess, the daughter of Philip IV (born in 1533), who, at the age of 16 was forced by her stepmother, Katharina of Hatzfeld to move to Wildungen in Brussels. Her father owned several copper mines that employed children. The poor conditions caused many to die at a young age, or to look stunted and deformed, and who were often referred to as the 'poor dwarfs'. (Exploring the True Origins of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 2015).

Summing up, the overlap of history and fantasy to be found even in a non-factual world like that of fairy tales is a powerful argument in favour of a mixed poetics of the imaginary-real and renders the search for historical and discursive contexts a legitimate concern.

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