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## Towards a Theory of the Fairy-Tale Film: The Case of Pinocchio

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **Towards a Theory of the Fairy-Tale Film: The Case of *Pinocchio***

*Jack Zipes (bio)*

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“Animation should be an art, that is how I conceived it . . . but as I see what you fellows have done with it is making it into a trade . . . not an art, but a trade . . . *bad luck.*”

(Winsor McKay, addressing young animators in 1927)

Just as we know, almost intuitively, that a particular narrative is a fairy tale when we read it, it seems we know immediately that a particular film is a fairy tale when we see it. We recognize its generic qualities without necessarily interpreting it as part of a genre. It is almost as though it were natural that there be fairy-tale films since fairy tales are so much part of our cultural heritage as oral and literary tales. This “natural” process of recognition and consumption, however, makes it all the more important that we historicize the reception of the fairy-tale film to understand what has gone into its making. When did it come about? Why? What are the consequences? Of course, these questions cannot all be answered within a short essay, but by using Walt Disney’s adaptation of Carlo Collodi’s fairy-tale novel, *Pinocchio*, I want to suggest possible approaches toward developing a theory of the fairy-tale film as genre. Before I do this, however, I should like to present five brief theses about the development of the fairy tale as film.

1) As we know, storytelling is thousands of years old, and there are many types of tales. In the oral tradition, the “magic tale” generally centered on a miraculous transformation or occurrence that enabled the protagonist to triumph over evil forces or overcome obstacles to win a bride/groom, obtain wealth, or gain recognition within a tribe or community. **[End Page 1]** The oral tales were told and still are told, in many different settings—in all sorts of tribes and communities, in homes, at taverns, in the fields, at sea, in weaving circles, and so forth. No matter what the situation may have been, the teller was present among a group of people and told tales to share experience, to amuse, and to enlighten the listeners. Most importantly, the close personal setting of storytelling created a bond between teller and listeners and often reflected upon customs, norms, and values within the group. Since one had to be artful

in the telling of tales, and since most people were not particularly “artful” or articulate in days of old, as Rudolph Schenda has maintained,<sup>1</sup> the tale teller was highly regarded within a community. Telling tales, using words and symbols, endowed the speaker with authority and power. A magic folk tale did not only concern the miraculous turn of events in the story, but also the magic play of words by the teller as performer. And each performance by the same teller was different, even of the same tale. The tale teller would also change in the telling of the story, and could shift his or her identity like the remarkable trickster of the folk-tale tradition. Telling a magic folk tale was and is not unlike performing a magic trick, and depending on the art of the storyteller, listeners could be placed under a spell, as if in awe. To be in awe is to be in a special place linked with the teller and other members of the group, transcending reality for a brief moment, to be transported to extraordinary regions of experience.

2 ) There is evidence of magic folk tales in all the sacred literature of the world. That is, the motifs of magic folk tales were incorporated into all the early texts such as the Bible, *The Iliad*, and *The Odyssey* that concern the origins of gods and/or initiation rituals. Another early classical example in the West is Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*, in which we find the complete magical tale of *Cupid and Psyche*. However, despite the existence of such magic folk tales, one cannot speak about the literary fairy tale as genre until the invention of the printing press, the growth of literacy and vernacular languages, and the establishment of genres as institutions...



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