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Through the Looking Glass: Fairy-Tale Cinema and the Spectacle of Femininity in *Stardust* and *The Brothers Grimm*

> In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
> Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.
> —Sylvia Plath, "Mirror"

In the conclusion of the 2007 film *Enchanted*, a gently parodic and self-referential retake of Disney animated fairy tales, Giselle must make a choice between contemporary Manhattan and the animated fairy-tale world of Andalasia. Although she chooses Manhattan, the film makes clear that the influence of the Disney fairy tale has pervaded the contemporary world.[1] The film attempts to outline a clear distinction between the two until Giselle's influence begins to be felt. In an early scene immediately before their meeting with Giselle, Robert (solicitor and love interest) informs his six-year-old daughter, Morgan, of his decision to propose to his current girlfriend, Nancy. In order to soften the blow of the announcement, Robert gives Morgan a present of a book titled *Important Women of Our Time,* which Morgan does not appear to be overly impressed with—she had wanted a book of fairy tales. Robert states that Nancy, his prospective fiancée, is a lot like the women in the book. However, it is a woman from a different type of narrative that instead prevails in the life of Robert and Morgan: Giselle, the fairy-tale heroine. As domestic ultra-innocent child-woman (several references are made to her ignorance of sex), Giselle is positioned as the ideal wife and mother for this family. Although we later see Giselle reading *Important Women* in a scene that could suggest the book's influence on her later heroic action in dispatching the evil Queen Narissa, the tension between the "important women" and the world of Disney fairy tale is

ultimately resolved in favor of the latter. Career-woman Nancy and the "important women" of the book are, in the overall logic of the film, deemed unimportant. Nancy abandons her job and Manhattan for the animated fairy-tale world to become Prince Edward's bride. The evil Queen Narissa is defeated. The world of the Disney fairy tale wins out against cynicism, "important women," and the wicked queen.

It is the tension between older "important women" and the youthful heroine that I want to explore in this article in relation to two films, *The Brothers Grimm* (2005) and *Stardust* (2007), which, like *Enchanted*, initially appear to challenge fairy-tale conventions but ultimately revolve around conflict between female representatives of age and youth. In *Stardust* and *The Brothers Grimm*, these confrontations are staged explicitly in terms of the visual and its emphasis on female beauty.

Jack Zipes contends in *Why Fairy Tales Stick* that "we use the classical fairy tales in mutated forms through new technologies to discuss and debate urgent issues that concern our social lives and the very survival of the human species" (xiii). If these films suggest anything about contemporary concerns, they point to an abiding anxiety in relation to regulating the spectacle of the aging female body. The relationship between telling fairy tales and inculcating obedient behavior, particularly gendered behavior, through inciting fear has a long history. Critics such as Zipes and Marina Warner have explored the role of fairy tales as socializing narratives that inculcate adherence to contemporaneous gender roles.[2] However, it is also true that women writers such as Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, and A. S. Byatt, among others, have used the fairy-tale genre to engage with and uproot patriarchal representations of femininity and sexuality. The fairy tale thus offers a potent space in which to negotiate questions of gender and gendered representations.[3] It is this tension between the conservative/patriarchal impulses of the fairy tale and the subversive potentials that the genre can also offer that this article examines, with specific focus on two recent films. *Stardust* and *The Brothers Grimm* both play with the fairy-tale genre and gender and exhibit various similarities in their themes, their reuse of particular fairy-tale tropes, and their positioning of female protagonists.

Stardust, directed by Matthew Vaughn, is based on a novel by Neil Gaiman, and the screenplay was written by Vaughn and Jane Goldman. *The Brothers Grimm* is an original screenplay, written by Ehren Kruger and directed by Terry Gilliam. Both films are consciously self-reflexive in terms of the fairy-tale genre, and both offer ironically humorous takes on the genre relying on the audience's familiarity with its tropes and motifs, *Stardust* more successfully than *The Brothers Grimm*.[4] Where both films lose their humor and irony, however, is in relation to the older woman. Both films take as their main fairy-tale referent the story of "Snow White," and both stage confrontations between

older threatening women and younger heroines. At stake in the confrontations in the films are beauty, longevity, and power for the older women. Neither succeeds. Though intergenerational female conflict is endemic in fairy tales, and "Snow White" is exemplary of this type of story, it is worth asking why these contemporary films return to and restage this relationship. The repetition of this trope in the films points to particular unease concerning, among other things, the maintenance of beauty through artificial means and the position of the older women within such a beauty economy. The films also often echo a conservative impulse to erase and destroy the older, and often more powerful, women in favor of youth and beauty.

The films' engagement with the "Snow White" paradigm is also interesting because of the centrality of the visual to the story, particularly the predominance of the mirror and the Queen's reflection, which both films emphasize and play on. Links between cinema screen and mirror are noted by Laura Mulvey in her landmark essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (486).[5] This conceit is implicit in *The Brothers Grimm* and, to a lesser degree, in *Stardust*. The role of the mirror in *The Brothers Grimm* is to show the young and beautiful body of the immortal but aging Mirror Queen. It is the place where she possesses the most power, associated with her beauty, and becomes a type of cinema screen in the film, depicting the Mirror Queen's actions in contrast to her aging body lying prone on her bed. In one scene, Jacob Grimm stares transfixed into the mirror, watching as the youthful Queen in the mirror caresses his reflection. In the room outside the mirror, in which Jacob stands alone, the decaying body of the Queen lies behind him directing her own mirror image. The mirror in *Stardust* functions more as a means of communication between the three witch sisters than as a cinema screen, but it is also the place where the main transformation of the witch Lamia from hag to beauty is displayed. The Disney film, *Enchanted,* also makes explicit this connection between cinema screen and the enchanted mirror when Prince Edward identifies the television in his hotel room as a magic mirror. Thus, the mirror, central to both *Stardust* and *The Brothers Grimm,* references the cinema screen, the vanity of the "Snow White" Queen, and the predominance of the visual as the primary realm in which the queen signifies. Indeed, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out in *The Madwoman in the Attic,* the Queen's magic mirror in the tale of "Snow White" is the place where the conflict between the two women takes place, the conflict being between the two images of women reflected in such texts: angel and monster (36–37). The realm of the visual, then, is one in which women are pitted against each other, and the question that this article is interested in pursuing is whether this conflict is maintained in these films despite their ironic playfulness and potential critique of the fairy-tale genre.

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Stardust emphasizes the visual from its opening sequence, in which Ian McKellan, as narrator, poses the question: "Are we human because we gaze at the stars, or do we gaze at them because we are human? Pointless really. Do the stars gaze back? Now that's a question." Accompanying this voice-over are shots of the night sky before the camera brings us from the lens of a telescope through to the eyepiece and into a room in the Royal Academy of Science in the nineteenth century. These opening shots establish the film's interest in the gaze, and more particularly, anxiety concerning who it is that is doing the gazing: "Do the stars gaze back? Now that's a question."[6] It is an overwhelmingly male perspective that we are exposed to in this sequence; we hear a male voice and see an image of a room filled with nineteenth-century gentlemen scientists. Mulvey characterizes the cinematic gaze as male, associated with knowledge and mastery: "the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (487). Women within cinema, and culture in general, are coded as occupying the place of the image, as "connot[ing a] to-be-looked-at-ness" (487). *Stardust* replays such a visual dynamic, articulating an unease concerning female relationships to spectacle and spectatorship.

The film concerns the story of a young man, Tristan Thorne. That *he* is the focus is signaled by the narrator, who tells us, "This is a story about how he becomes a man." The narrative is set in an alternative nineteenth-century England in which Tristan travels beyond the wall separating his village, named Wall, from the magical country of Stormhold to bring a fallen star back to Victoria, a girl he loves but who does not love him. The star, who turns out to be a woman called Yvaine, played by Claire Danes, is also being sought by a witch, Lamia, played by Michelle Pfeiffer, and a prince, Septimus, who needs the necklace that knocked Yvaine out of the sky in order to become king. Lamia seeks the star in order to kill Yvaine and remove her heart, which she and her two sisters, Empusa and Mormo, will eat to become young again. In order to undertake the journey to find the star, Lamia eats the last remaining piece of the heart of the previous anthropomorphic star that they had killed and is transformed from hag to her former beauty. This transformation scene takes place in front of a large mirror, which is also used by the sisters to communicate. These instruments of the visual are also significantly gendered in the film—the telescope, instrument of discovery and science, is associated with the male scientists and male narrating voice,[7] while the mirror, instrument of vanity, is both a female tool of communication and constant reminder of Lamia's degenerating beauty throughout the film.[8]

The symbolically loaded names of the three sisters are worth dwelling on briefly, as they constitute one of the changes made from Gaiman's novel in which the sisters are unnamed or called the Lilim, while the Lamia character is referred to only as the witch-queen. The names chosen by Goldman and

Vaughn emphasize the sisters' bloodthirstiness, dangerous sexuality, monstrosity, and associations with vampirism.[9] More pertinently, Lamia and Mormo are child murderers in Greek mythology and literature and, as Diane Purkiss points out, encode fears of the aging female body (23–30).[10] John Keats's narrative poem *Lamia* adds a further dimension, one that is particularly relevant to this article—namely, the issue of artifice and illusion for which his Lamia must be punished by losing her beauty and disappearing. The artificiality of the beauty and youthfulness that Pfeiffer's Lamia possesses in *Stardust* will similarly need to be penalized, and, as in Keats's poem, there is a connection between Lamia's artifice and female creativity that provokes anxiety.

In a lecture on cinema and the fairy tale in 1992, Marina Warner noted, "The cinema's investment in female beauty also creates an affinity with fairy tale, where beauty usually represents the side we should be on, and ugliness represents the enemy" ("Women" 71). However, in *Stardust*, echoing Keats's *Lamia*, it is the acquisition of beauty through artificial means and Lamia's attempts to control her representation that represent the enemy rather than simple ugliness. Associations between femininity and artificiality have a long history.[11] Joan Riviere, for example, argued that there is no difference between "genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'" (133). For film theorist Mary Ann Doane this idea that "it is femininity itself which is constructed as mask" troubles the patriarchal gaze, which relies on "the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as precisely, imagistic" (502). Masquerade, as performance of an excess of femininity, Doane writes, "destabiliz[es] the image . . . [and] confounds this masculine structure of the look" (503). In *Stardust*, and equally, as we will see, in *The Brothers Grimm*, it is the aging woman who simulates ideal femininity who is penalized in the narrative and whose masquerade must be exploded. Furthermore, it is not only the masquerade of youth that is punishable, but more so the women's desire to appropriate the visual order. Although Warner also notes that "the old and haggard crone storyteller or gossip is also a crucial figure in the actual telling of stories," the women in these films who attempt to control the gaze in order to tell their own story and transform themselves from crone to maiden are ultimately denied this role ("Women" 71).[12]

Lamia is a gifted practitioner of illusion and metamorphosis; besides her star-assisted cosmetic surgery, she transforms men into goats, then into women, and conjures an inn from a wagon. She is also able to control other characters' access to the visual. In punishment for tricking her into telling the truth, for instance, she removes Ditchwater Sal's (a minor witch) ability to see, hear, or touch Yvaine, the star. Lamia attempts to circumvent the story, largely through means of the spectacle, in order to suit her own narrative drive toward youth and beauty. As we are well aware, the generic conventions of the fairy tale that

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Vaughn and Goldman are telling us will ultimately refuse her this power. Furthermore, as Doane points out, women in cinema who attempt to control the gaze or who actively look rather than being looked at are "constructed as the site of an excessive and dangerous desire," a desire that is threatening, as it undermines the structure of representation that relies on woman as object of the gaze (504).[13] Ironically, though, in Stardust and The Brothers Grimm the women attempt to control their representation in order that they might fit conventional ideas of feminine beauty. There is a tension in the films between an awareness of the beauty economy, in which older women must aspire toward untenable constructions of beauty, and a concomitant critique of these women who desire to control their representation. In Stardust the screen of the mirror serves to document Lamia's exaggerated aging process, as her youth and beauty are lost each time she exerts power, which largely comes through her attempts to control the visual order by means of her various illusions. For example, in one scene Lamia's attempt to restore her youthful appearance through magic merely results in her breasts drooping. As Doane notes, cinema tends to punish women who attempt to appropriate the gaze (504). Stardust and The Brothers Grimm exert this punishment visually, on the women's appearance.

Lamia is defeated eventually, not by Tristan, who until this point has been the main protagonist, but by Yvaine, the star. Significantly, Lamia's punishment must be at the hands of the younger female character, and the confrontation between the two is another major difference between book and film.[14] The final meeting between Yvaine and the witch-queen in Gaiman's novel is an anticlimactic one in which the witch-queen has diminished in power and stature and merely realizes, in conversation with Yvaine, that the star has given her heart to Tristan and is therefore inaccessible to her: "You have a good heart, child. A pity it will not be mine" (190). The film, however, stages a much more dramatic conclusion, allowing Lamia to maintain all her menace. This confrontation takes place in Lamia's palace in a hall walled with mirrors. Lamia, who is now utterly haglike, initially attempts to kill Tristan and Yvaine by systematically exploding these mirrors, attempting to explode the realm of the visual, in which she is now depicted as aged and like a crone. Yvaine succeeds in defeating her by shining so brightly that Lamia herself explodes. This defeat of Lamia is interesting on several counts, but particularly in terms of the role of the visual in her demise. Lamia is killed by Yvaine's excess as spectacle, and, significantly, it is the gaze that ultimately kills her. The sight of Yvaine's shining body proves finally fatal for Lamia, and, in a sense, the exposure to the image of the youthful body is her destruction.

However, Yvaine, when shining, is invisible to the viewer. Her body is obscured by this surplus of light. Ditchwater Sal's enchanted sight, which fails to register Yvaine's presence, is indicative of the way in which she as character is

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presented to us in the film; she seems important in the plot merely as love object for Tristan and object to be devoured by Lamia and her sisters. Doane's arguments concerning the difficulties in theorizing female spectatorship are interesting here. In light of Mulvey's identification of woman as object of the gaze, Doane argues that "for the female spectator there is a certain over-presence of the image—she *is* the image. Given the closeness of this relationship, the female spectator's desire can be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism" (499). In *Stardust* Lamia is punished for this narcissism, which is linked to her desire to circumvent the visual order, to control her representation, albeit within the beauty economy. It is the excess of the image of ideal femininity—youth and beauty—embodied in Yvaine that finally kills Lamia, but this is also an image that, when at its most powerful, disappears, much as Yvaine's body does. The over-presence of the image obliterates itself.

The image, specifically the mirror image, is at the center of Terry Gilliam's version of a story concerning an older woman who needs to devour younger women in order to restore youth and beauty, *The Brothers Grimm*. Here, the queen is linked explicitly to the mirror; she is even called the Mirror Queen. The film is again a parodic postmodern take on the genre, referencing a variety of fairy tales and fairy-tale motifs, not limiting itself to those collected by the Grimms.[15] The plot centers on an enchanted wood, in which a five-hundred-year-old queen, played by Monica Bellucci, lies sleeping in a tower. Young girls have steadily been disappearing from the nearby village, and the Brothers Grimm, played by Matt Damon and Heath Ledger, are dispatched to the wood in order to solve the mystery of the missing girls. These brothers, who bear no resemblance to the historic Grimms, are no longer folklore scholars but instead confidence tricksters who travel the country to exploit folk beliefs in the supernatural. They stage illusions of the local folk legends and then appear to defeat the chimeras they have conjured up. The Grimms' use and abuse of the spectacle, by staging the public's fears and simultaneously constructing themselves as heroes within this fantasy, can be read as analogous to certain uses of the cinema. Indeed Warner, in a review of the film, reads it as bringing "into focus the issue of mass media, charlatanry and commercial exploitation," but argues that it is also a film that "rejects this identification to hold up the truth of story-telling against the truth of reason" ("Dark Arts" 6). In the film the brothers, Wilhelm and Jacob, represent rationalism versus belief in the world of the fairy tale respectively, but it is the latter that the film appears to side with as the brothers' lives begin to imitate their "art" when they encounter the "masquerade" of the Mirror Queen's wood.[16] The Grimms' entry into the enchanted wood marks their loss of control over the spectacle as they puzzle over the lack of visible mechanics when faced with enchanted moving trees. This menacing wood is controlled by the Mirror Queen, who was granted eternal life but not

eternal youth and, as the Grimms discover, has been kidnapping young girls from the village in order to drink the blood of twelve of them in order to effect the transformation from crone to beauty.[17]

The brothers are aided by a feisty trapper named Angelica, who has lost her father and two sisters to the Mirror Queen. Angelica, though positioned as love interest for both brothers, refuses the conventional gender stereotyping: she is a hunter (we first meet her skinning a rabbit), and she is the only villager capable of navigating the enchanted woods. However, unlike *Stardust*, the final confrontation is not between Mirror Queen and Angelica, but instead involves Jacob and the Queen, shifting the emphasis to the conflict between rationalism and folk belief. Symbolically, before he can defeat the Queen, Jacob (folk belief) must stab Wilhelm (rationalism), who tells him, "This is your world, Jake . . . You can stop it. You know the story." Angelica instead, despite initial potential, becomes the twelfth victim of the Mirror Queen, supplying the twelfth drop of blood needed to complete her spell, and must be woken from her enchanted sleep by a kiss from Jacob. However, she in turn wakes Wilhelm with a kiss, and the competition between the two brothers relating to Angelica is never resolved.

The Mirror Queen's final defeat is enacted through the shattering of her mirror, in which her reflection had maintained youth and beauty in counterpart to her decaying body in the room. The doubling of the image of the Queen as crone and beauty signals investment in the duplicity of the female figure and the unease of its associations with masquerade and artifice. The Mirror Queen's desire is, similarly to Lamia's in *Stardust*, constructed as dangerous and unsettling to the structure of the gaze. The sight of her beauty in the mirror mesmerizes the gazer. Men become enthralled by her image, and defeating her involves destroying her mirror image. Jacob Grimm's fracturing of the mirror is simultaneous to the destruction of the Queen's own newly youthful body, as she shatters into mirrorlike shards. This effectively entails the exposure of her as an image and demonstrates that she is hollow and exists only as surface. As Doane writes, "The woman's beauty, her very desirability, becomes a function of certain practices of imaging—framing, lighting, camera movement, angle. She is thus . . . more closely associated with the surface of the image than its illusory depths" (497). Thus, the film insists upon the Queen's status as merely image and attempts to undercut the anxiety provoked by her powerful manipulations of the gaze and her representation. When exposed as image, as object of the gaze, the Queen should be rendered powerless. However, the final scenes of the film maintain and underscore the disquiet associated with the female gaze.

The final frame of the film is the image of one shard, carried by a crow, in which we see the still-blinking eye of the Queen, doomed to live perpetually in

glass shards; a lingering Lacanian image of an eye/I in a mirror, eternally frag-
mented. Warner, in a review of the film, reads this image as "a familiar alle-
gory: of fantasy and desire, and of stardom on celluloid, which outlives time"
("Dark Arts" 6). Mulvey, too, makes an explicit connection between screen and
mirror, particularly the Lacanian mirror in which we misrecognize ourselves
(486). The image of the Queen's eye in the mirror also, I would argue, points
to an anxiety concerning the aging female body and its representation. The
frame shown before this image tells us that everyone lived happily ever after.
We then see the image of the Queen's eye in the mirror fragment and are told,
"Well, maybe not everyone." A certain ambiguity remains here as to whether
this refers to the Queen or to the rest of the characters, but there is an implica-
tion that she may return and that her presence remains a menacing one. This
final image is a threatening image of the female gaze turned back to look at the
audience—a gaze that both films present as destructive and dangerous.

Clearly, these two fairy-tale films punish the aging woman, especially she
who attempts to maintain beauty artificially, which is presented as potentially
fatal to the younger woman who must prevail. That *Stardust* stages the final bat-
tle as one that takes place between evil queen and younger heroine serves to
emphasize this unease surrounding the older, more powerful woman who must
be replaced by youth, innocence, passivity, and domesticity. Furthermore, the
films both stage an anxiety concerning women who attempt to take control of
their own image and representation, and such desire is presented as dangerous
and ultimately self-destructive. Both films maintain a tension between a critique
of the beauty economy in which the older women must participate and an in-
dictment of the women who seek control over their representation. The women
are punished both for their vanity and their attempt to intervene in the spectacle.
The female gaze must be fractured and will not live happily ever after.

Notes

1. *Enchanted* is ostensibly the story of Disney's *Snow White* but also references Dis-
ney's *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*. It is clearly structured as a Disney fairy-tale film,
in the paradigm of the Hollywood musical, but is transposed to contemporary
New York City.
2. See Marina Warner's *From the Beast to the Blonde* and Jack Zipes's *Fairy Tales and
the Art of Subversion*.
3. See, for example, Bacchilega and Haase.
4. The latter film is a confused and rambling one, clearly suffering from a variety of
rewrites. Ehren Kruger is credited as screenwriter, though Gilliam and Tony
Grisoni rewrote considerable sections of his original screenplay. The film also suf-
fered from disputes and delays concerning the final cut. Warner comments, in
her review, that the film bears "scars all over it from the cutting room, dozens of

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loose ends, and a faltering tone between nasty-for-real and blithe, ghoulish satire" ("Dark Arts" 6).

5. See also Metz for discussion of the relationship between screen and mirror.

6. The stars in the film are all depicted as female, so this emphasis on the question of who looks at whom becomes more pertinent.

7. We might also add that it is associated with imperialism, for closely allied with the telescope in the visual register of the film are maps and wide-angle bird's-eye-view images of the landscape, often presented with a male body in the foreground as spectator.

8. In Gaiman's novel the mirror of the Lilim reflects younger versions of themselves: "There were three other women in the little house. They were slim, and dark, and amused. The hall they inhabited was many times the size of the cottage . . . The three women, and their hall, were in the black mirror. The three old women were the Lilim—the witch-queen—all alone in the woods. The three women in the mirror were also the Lilim: but whether they were the successors to the old women, or their shadow-selves . . . none knew for certain, and none but the Lilim could say" (51–52). The youthful image in the mirror in counterpart to the aging body—a motif also used in The Brothers Grimm, in which the Mirror Queen's decaying body bears the reflection of a young and beautiful self—inverts the paradigm of Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray and Sylvia Plath's poem "Mirror," which details the fear associated with appearances of aging.

9. In Greek mythology Lamia and Mormo particularly are predominantly associated with murdering or sucking the blood of children and are used as nursery bogeys to frighten children into good behavior. Empusa is a shape-shifting demon that primarily preys on women and eats human flesh.

10. Purkiss also notes that the name "Empousa" (or Empusa) seems to be associated with fear of the aging female in Greek literature (30–31).

11. For a further discussion of the associations between femininity and artifice, see Tseëlon, chapter 2.

12. See also Warner, From the Beast to the Blonde 12–26.

13. Lamia is the only female character to appear in shots that echo the male images of gazing over landscapes predominant in the film.

14. I do not discuss Tristan's mother here, who is another significant character, yet one whose role has been much reduced in the adaptation from book to film. She is a much more developed character in Gaiman's novel and indeed ends the book as ruler of Stormhold.

15. As well as "Snow White," other fairy tales alluded to in the course of the film include "Jack and the Beanstalk," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Hansel and Gretel," "The Gingerbread Man," "Cinderella," "Rapunzel," and "Sleeping Beauty."

16. The film is set at the beginning of the nineteenth century in French-occupied Germany, and running alongside the contrast set up between the two brothers in the film is one between French enlightenment and German romanticism.

17. The numerical significance of twelve girls as well as the circular layout of the twelve stone coffins in which they sleep alludes to the Queen's attempts to defy time. The Mirror Queen's need to drink the blood of young girls in order to regain her youth also echoes legends surrounding the historical figure Countess Erzebet Bathory (also known as Elizabeth), who was said to bathe in the blood of virgins to maintain her youthful appearance.

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