

Article

Don Draper Thinks Your Ad Is Cliché: Fairy Tale Iconography in TV Commercials

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Academic Editor: Claudia Schwabe

Received: 11 March 2016; Accepted: 28 April 2016; Published: 6 May 2016

Abstract: When examining the history of fairy tale iconography in advertising, folklore scholar Donald Haase's fairy tale encyclopedia compared the Pied Piper of Hamelin to a symbol of advertising who could "play his pipe ever so sweetly and the consumers following him without resisting his charming and manipulative music." In contrast, a 2012 episode of *Mad Men*, advertising luminary Don Draper shoots down a shoe commercial pitch featuring Cinderella, calling the idea "cliché". The temptation for advertisers to rely on fairy tale figures and iconography continues today and many ignore Don's aversion for cliché because it still gets the job done. However, there are some ads featuring fairy tales which avoid cliché and are truly innovative for their time. I'll examine how, and for whom, these fairy tale figures have been adapted decade by decade in order to examine popular culture's commercialized and hypnotic relationship with fairy tales in the most direct format available: television commercials.

Keywords: fairy tale; iconography; advertising; commercial; TV; television

1. Introduction

For as long as television has been around commercials and sponsorships have operated as the stealth lifeblood pumping cash and life into the medium. In recent decades, additional revenue streams like syndication deals, DVD sales, and streaming rights have buoyed up the television industry, but there is no more important or influential facilitator of the TV industry than commercials.

The goals, restrictions, and lengths of commercials have varied dramatically over the years, but the premise has remained unchanged: a finite and small amount of time to sell a product, good, or service. Advertisers have precious little time to say what they want to say and to connect with their audience. Because of their limited time they've learned the shortcuts to attract attention and gain sympathies: peppy music, pretty people, cute animals, and a memorable tagline. The shortcut I'll be examining in this paper, however, is the strategic use of fairy tale iconography in commercials.

For many of us fairy tales play significant roles in the first stories we hear, the first movies we see, and the first television shows we watch. Our first brushes with heroes and villains, right and wrong, and the very concept of wonder often originate with fairy tales in one form or another. It didn't take long for advertisers to discover the tremendous relatability, love of, and staying power of fairy tales for the vast majority of the general public. Decade after decade advertisers have capitalized on this public awareness and love of fairy tales figures to sell us toothpaste, insurance, produce, and everything in between.

In this post-modern and increasingly media literate age, this reliance on fairy tale iconography in ads has not gone unnoticed by consumers and other creative professionals. In an episode of *Mad Men*, Madison Avenue 1960s-era advertising superstar Don Draper shoots down a shoe commercial idea featuring Cinderella, calling the idea "cliché" [1]. You can probably think of, and even remember, similar on-the-nose uses of fairy tale figures yourself.

The temptation for advertisers to rely on fairy tale figures and iconography continues today and many ignore Don Draper's aversion for cliché. With ads getting both louder and shorter due to rapid changes in the television industry is it even possible for contemporary advertisers to find fresh ways to feature fairy tales in advertising campaigns? In my research I'll be examining the intersection between fairy tales and TV commercials to answer these and other related questions.

2. Introducing America to Commercials

Let's start by looking at some of the earliest ads and promotions to feature familiar fairy tale iconography. On the first day of July in 1941 a few lucky New Yorkers with televisions tuned in to the WNBT station to see their Brooklyn Dodgers take on the visiting Phillies. The handful of baseball fans who got to their television sets early for this broadcast were about the experience history: they were about to see the first ever paid television advertisement.

Instead of the usual test pattern clock that was displayed between programs, viewers saw a modified test pattern clock modeled after Bulova brand watches, complete with the company logo and the tagline "America Runs On Bulova Watch Time". What lacks in the unimaginative tagline is made up for with the clever, almost too obvious, use of product placement in a familiar way. American television viewers saw a test pattern clock daily on their TV screens and it wouldn't come as too much a shock to any of them to see the same clock in a new context. Perhaps the advertisers for Bulova knew they would have to slowly teach American viewers what a TV advertisement was and how the viewers should respond.

Commercials as a medium were heavily influenced by the media that came before them, especially the cartoon short. Long before cartoon characters showed up on televisions in the family room they were appearing in movie theaters across the country. In this era before home television, feature films were shown with newsreels, movie trailers, and cartoon shorts. Animators like Chuck Jones, Ub Iwerks, Pat Sullivan, and Walt Disney made their bones early with specifically this kind of media. When television entered the scene it didn't take long for these cartoon shorts to migrate, both as featured content and mimicked in the commercials.

When this migration of cartoons to TV finally occurred during the 1950s, a taxonomy of commercials was established. Commercials had an average length of 1 min and were typically animated. They featured jingles (usually full, original songs) and a steady stream of declarative information about the products and the stories used to tell them. And so we come to the first few commercials that quickly turned to familiar fairy tale iconography. (See Figure 1)



Figure 1. 1950s Bab-O Sink Smog Commercial.

This Bab-O Cleaner commercial is a textbook example of the 1950s television commercial. But even more interesting (for the purposes of this paper, anyway) is that this commercial acted as a primer for the series of Bab-O spots that would follow it—a series that featured figures from history and fairy tales interacting with the product. Below we see how Cinderella meshes with the 50s-era TV commercial style. (See Figure 2)



Figure 2. 1950s Cinderella Bab-O Commercial.

Integrating fairy tale motifs was handled without much elegance in the 50s. The figures of Cinderella's world use the same language and style as the declarative copy used in the first ad in the campaign. The fairy tale figures are secondary (by a long shot) to the goal of explaining what a product is and what it can do for the American shopper. Cinderella is inserted into a commercial and is nothing more than a familiar name. The same is essentially true of Pocahontas and John Smith's inclusion in a later Bab-O commercial.

This sloppy combination of ads and fairy tales wasn't a localized problem for Bab-O. Submitted for your viewing is a 1952 commercial for Halo Shampoo featuring Goldilocks and the 3 Bears. (See Figure 3)



Figure 3. 1950s Goldilocks Halo Shampoo Commercial.

Again, the idea of a folklore or fairy tale figure was repeated for this campaign, including other inelegant uses of mermaids, elves, and (again) Cinderella.

In her 1997 article “Fairy Tale Motifs in Advertising”, Patricia Baubeta attempts to answer the question of why advertisers so quickly turned to fairy tale iconography and why they continue to decade after decade. She points out fairy tale figures are familiar, cute, and feel-good, but there is a factor even more important: “If we ask why advertisers use fairy tale motifs, the answer is obvious. Because they work” ([2], p. 37). And in the sixties the commercials had a lot more going for them in addition to the simple inclusion of fairy tale figures.

3. The Artistic Revolution of the 1960s

In Donald Haase’s “The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales: A-F” Wolfgang Mieder uses the tale of the pied piper of Hamelin to explain the practicality and efficiency of using folklore and fairy tale iconography in advertising. He likens the pied piper to a “symbol of the world of advertising” who would “play his pipe ever so sweetly and the consumers following him without resisting his charming and manipulative music” ([3], p. 5). While this is certainly true categorically of fairy tale-themed commercials, the tunes played and pipers playing them went through some drastic and experimental changes in the 1960s.

There are three key figures in the 60s advertising world that shaped the creative revolution: Doyle Dane Bernbach, David Ogilvy, and William Bernbach. Doyle Bernbach was the mind behind the infamous lemon Volkswagen ad campaign that cleverly presented all the criticisms of VW’s cars as benefits. In his book “Confessions of an Advertising Man”, David Ogilvy began to establish a taxonomy for modern advertising—a taxonomy founded on ethics and honesty [4]. And William Bernbach was one of the first advertisers to embrace the youth culture that was changing just about every other aspect of society in the 60s. Advertisers were getting to their audience in new ways through humor, honesty, and attempts at a genuine connection. The industry shifted from proclamations and lecturing consumers about their products to the idea of relationships and artistry.

In print media and on television there was a focus for increased visuals and less copy, fewer words. There was a desire to find new ideas, new characters, and new ways of selling products. Both the programming and advertising on television followed suit. Let’s take a look at this TV spot for Ajax laundry detergent soap featuring a fabled White Knight of European lore that straddles the line between the showing of the 60s and the telling of the 50s: (See Figure 4)



Figure 4. 1960s Ajax Soap Commercial.

The middle section betrays the energy and finesse of the start and end of the commercial. The TV spot ran in 1965, right when audiences were growing accustomed to the new, fast paced editing techniques while still familiar with the stilted delivery of 50s ad copy. In the 50s, the White Knight would have been named, would have directly addressed the audience, or simply would have been more explicitly involved. Instead, the knight streaks across the screen and the audience is supposed to connect the dots themselves between the majesty of the hero and the cleaning power of Ajax.

Next, let's take a look at an advertisement that attempts to blend humor with a fairy tale figure. This time it's the Fairy Godmother, breaking the fourth wall to publicize a prize giveaway from Crest in connection with the 1965 television broadcast of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella* (See Figure 5).



Figure 5. 1960s Crest Cinderella Sweepstakes Commercial.

What works about this commercial is that the fairy tale connection is played only for laughs. The visible wires, the malfunctioning wand, and the Fairy Godmother speaking directly to the stagehands controlling the pulley system keeping her up undercut any sense of majesty, wonder, or actual magic typically used to push products via fairy tale figures. Sure, she speaks directly to the viewer, but she does so with energy and personality.

It would be misleading to say that all or even most commercials of the 60s strove for artistry over clarity or suggestion over description. Take for example this ad for Hidden Magic hair spray starring Wanda the Wonderful Witch (See Figure 6).



Figure 6. 1960s Wanda the Witch Hidden Magic Hair Spray Commercial.

This commercial operates like a 50s commercial in many ways (abundance of ad copy, directly addressing viewers, catchy jingles, *etc.*), but it does show some signs of its decade. For one, the spot is live action as opposed to a cartoon. But for our purposes the most interesting and timely aspect of this ad is the character herself: Wanda the Witch. She was a character created whole cloth and not some existing figure shoehorned into a shoe commercial. She is undoubtedly modeled after *Bewitched's* Samantha (and even relies on some of the same trick photography commonly used on Samantha's show), but there was at least some attempt to make her original. The same is true for Ajax's White Knight (again, it's not much, but it is there).

Where the 50s relied on and named known fairy tale figures in TV spots, the 60s borrowed more iconography than characters. This was mostly due to the artistic revolution sweeping creative fields. Following the late 50s debuts of Tony the Tiger, Mr. Clean, and the Trix Rabbit, demand was high for more original commercial mascots. The 60s delivered with still-popular figures like Ronald McDonald and The Pillsbury Doughboy. In general, the trend in the 60s was to rely on new, or at the very least more recently created, pop culture icons.

For the 1960s that meant instead of Red Riding Hood and Cinderella hawking wares, TV audiences saw Alvin and the Chipmunks repping Post Cereal, The Muppets selling Dog Chow, Rocky and Bullwinkle pushing Cheerios, and Bugs Bunny as a mascot for baseball cards.

4. The Many Pivots of the 1970s

The 1970s is a decade characterized by many historians as a "pivot of change" for America politically, economically, and socially. There are few places that better show this drastic change in U.S. values and societal attitudes than the television programming of the 70s. At the beginning of the decade once powerhouse shows like *The Ed Sullivan Show* (the show famous for introducing The Beatles to American audiences) and *Gunslinger* were canceled, effectively ending the reign of the Western as a TV genre. These shows were first replaced in popularity with family-focused shows including *Happy Days* and *The Brady Bunch*, then by more sexed up shows like *Charlie's Angels* and *Three's Company* all leading up to a wave of "social consciousness programming" like the female-centric and empowering *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Sanford and Son*, one of the first shows about an African American family.

American culture in the 70s as a whole was moving away from the strong societal pull of community that blossomed in the 60s towards a reframing of the individual as the basic unity of society. Again, we can turn to television programs to see this change, but this time in the advertisements airing between the original programming.

In fact, television advertising has rarely worked as memorably or effectively as it did in the 70s. Advertisers doubled down on the value of the individual to unprecedented success. Take for example the now famous "I'm A Pepper" and "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke", campaigns for Dr. Pepper and Coke respectively. Both emotionally promote feelings of self-esteem and individualism (look no further than the word "I" that starts and anchors both campaign ideas).

With these movements and shifts in mind we can turn our focus at last to the fairy tale figures still being heavily incorporated the ads of this era of self-consciousness. Let's begin with a spot for grocery store Safeway (See Figure 7).

In this ad Snow White is positioned as the head of a household who takes grocery shopping very seriously. The ad copy spoken by Snow White alternates back and forth from playful winking at the familiar story to speaking directly about her needs as an individual. Her line, "I serve my family with confidence" effective positions Snow White as an avatar for atomized individualism.

For all the progress advertisements can capture in the moment with ads like Snow White's Safeway spot, media is too often painfully behind societal movements like feminism. A renewed push to secure social equality for women was well underway in the 70s and this movement helped women join the workforce in droves (including women like Mary Tyler Moore). Let's look at this series of anti-smoking Public service announcements (PSAs) featuring Rapunzel, the Frog Prince, and Sleeping Beauty that illustrates the reductive ways the media has depicted women via fairy tales (See Figure 8).



Figure 7. 1970s Safeway Snow White Commercial.



Figure 8. 1970s Rapunzel/Frog Prince/Sleeping Beauty Smoking PSA.

“Give it up, because it stinks” is an effectively simple focus for an important campaign like this, but ultimately what these commercials are really telling their audience is that women need to give up smoking to please men. This campaign touches on a troublesome nerve of the antiquated gender roles in fairy tales that has only become increasingly problematic since second wave feminism of the 1970s.

This practice of going broad and conservative in commercials is well-explained by Linda Dégh in her chapter of fairy tales in advertising from “American Folklore and the Mass Media”. Speaking of the over-reliance on cliché and old-fashioned values, Dégh explains that “the advertising industry knows what dosage of primitiveness, awkwardness, and bad taste is called for to satisfy public demand. The results of penetrating market and laboratory research vouch for the efficacy of these commercials among the majority of consumers” ([5], p. 48).

There are plenty 70s commercials that skew heavily towards the awkward and primitive. In one commercial two children infiltrate a giant’s castle and rely on the strengthening power of Cheerios to escape. In another ad, a weeping Cinderella deals with a Fairy Godmother who grants wishes in as literal a way as possible. The spots are cute and mostly harmless, but they do little more than use familiar settings and characters to get in and get out with their pitches—and that’s exactly how the advertisers designed them.

5. Back to Basics in the 1980s

In 1984 Jack Zipes published “Folklore Research and Western Marxism: A Critical Replay” in which he summarized the research of several folklore scholars and ran it through a Marxist lens. In that article he concluded that fairy tales in television and film “exploit folklore to evoke images of the attainment of happiness through consumption” ([6], p. 334). And while Zipes doesn’t specifically include television commercials in that article, the TV commercial is a perfect encapsulation and culmination of the exploitation of folklore iconography. Fairy tales and commercials mashup to show, through familiar faces, just how easily happiness can be bought. While happiness wasn’t necessarily a defining theme of the 1980s, the decade was certainly livelier than the one it preceded. Earned or not, the 80s brought a renewed sense of enthusiasm through economic and technological advancements, reflected in media as what can only be described as an aggressive amount of energy. This was the decade MTV launched, the decade cable television became more accessible and popular, and the decade that saw video games go mainstream.

Apple’s iconic 1.5 million dollar Super Bowl ad announcing the arrival of the Macintosh computer is the most famous television commercial from the 1980s. The ad was successful for many reasons, chief among them that it was such an outlier in the advertising conventions of the time. The trends Apple avoided include a hard resurgence of the jingle extended to commercial-length original songs, the co-opting of rock music heavy with synths, and a manic pace. Look no further than the Kool-Aid campaign from the 80s for evidence of these tendencies. The reason for these trends is understandable given the success of “I’m A Pepper” and “I’d Like to Buy the World a Coke” from the 70s, but in turning these concepts up to 11 the originality was lost. Let’s look at a Sugar Free Dr. Pepper campaign from the 80s that dates itself in the first few frames with headbands and spandex (See Figure 9).



Figure 9. 1980s Little Red Riding Hood Sugar Free Dr. Pepper Commercial.

This first spot uses the story of Little Red Riding Hood with just small bits of originality. Red’s optics are certainly modernized and she capably stands up for herself to the wolf, but these ideas are put on the back burner and eventually give way completely to romance once the product shows up. Another TV spot from this campaign uses a genie character with even less imagination, but features more blown-out hair.

Next let’s examine a 1980s multimedia Huggies campaign built around the tagline “happily ever after” with a commercial starring Sleeping Beauty (See Figure 10).



Figure 10. 1980s Sleeping Beauty Huggies Commercial.

The fairy tale angle ends up being nothing more than bookends to a by-the-numbers diaper commercial. Sleeping Beauty is introduced as sleeping for 100 years and dreaming of leak-free diapers, an inelegant combination of fairy tale jargon with straight ad copy. Some credit can be given, I guess, to the fact that no Disney-inspired design is used, but that might be more for copyright reasons than innovative ambition. Things just get more arduous with this Lucky Charms ad (See Figure 11).



Figure 11. 1980s Three Bears Lucky Charms Commercial.

The bears, from Goldilocks' story though she is absent here, don't show up till the commercial is halfway done and they are never even named. And saddest of all they are summoned into existence by the magic of the cereal pitchman and only speak to talk about everything they love about Lucky Charms. Their entire role in the commercial is to exist only to sell happiness through products. Again, fairy tale figures aren't the only ones being mistreated and achingly marginalized in their own commercials. Just check out the way Roger Rabbit is used in this commercial for Diet Coke and how Slimmer, of *Ghostbusters* fame, became the face of a new Hi-C flavor. This isn't the first time this instance of slim traces of originality gave way to decades-old pat strategies has shown itself in television commercials. From previous research it is becoming clear this is the disappointing pattern and 80s was no time for exception and maybe even had the worst showing. At the very least, one can hope the coming decades won't bring commercials as tired as Fairy Tails, the unsuccessful My Little Pony spin off.

6. The 1990s Corporate Takeover

In Marina Warner's short history of the fairy tale, "Once Upon a Time", she posits that one of the primary functions of the fairy tale is the sharing of familiar stories with an audience. She goes on to explain "the stories' interest isn't exhausted by repetition, reformulation, or retelling, but their pleasure gains from the endless permutations performed on the nucleus of the tale, the DNA as it were" ([7], p. 45). While fairy tales have a long history of corporate usage, it is during the 1990s that the very DNA and nuclei of fairy tales became increasingly co-opted by media companies, by Disney in particular. Disney wasn't just using the Little Mermaid to sell shampoo, they were attempting to establish their version of the Little Mermaid to the public as the definitive take on the tale. Again, Disney had commercialized popular fairy tale figures before to great success, but the 1990s was a unique decade of interrupted commercial and critical success. This decade has been described as the Disney Renaissance, a span of years where the studio released 10 animated films, including *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), and others. During this decade, advertisers relying on fairy tale figures had to differentiate themselves stylistically from the Disney versions of the tales, both to establish their own unique place to sell products and presumably to avoid any legal action from the House of Mouse. So, while Disney's fairy tale figures were showing up unceremoniously in McDonald's Happy Meal commercials, other brands had to find new ways to exploit fairy tale iconography. In the *Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, Jack Zipes explains, "fairy tales are well suited to television commercials because they are popular and easily recognized. Their familiar motifs can be truncated and adapted for brief commercials while still remaining meaningful" ([8], p. 610). A perfect example of this truncated style of storytelling can be seen in a 1999 Ford commercial featuring the Three Little Pigs (See Figure 12).



Figure 12. 1990s Three Little Pigs Ford Commercial.

This story is told without narration or dialogue, instead relying entirely on familiar iconography and recognizable animation styles. The only narration comes at the end: simple ad copy naming the product and connecting it to the tale with a quick pun. In a sense, Ford responded to the Disney takeover by featuring Looney Tunes and Sesame Street characters in their commercials for their latest Windstar minivans, a halfhearted attempt to set themselves apart. A 1997 Honey Nut Cheerios commercial uses a truncated version of the Little Red Riding Hood story, starting right in the middle of the familiar story without explanation, assuming audience familiarity with the tale. The story is quickly and literally interrupted by a corporate mascot (See Figure 13).



Figure 13. 1990s Little Red Riding Hood Cheerios Commercial.

It is notable that even in this ad featuring lighthearted music, that also presents the wolf as an amusing if not comedic character, it still ends with an ominous reminder that the wolf ate Red's grandmother. The dark nucleus of Red's story survives, even as BuzzBee's rattles off the superlative qualities of Honey Nut Cheerios. One of the more interesting fairy tale-adjacent commercials of this decade comes from Levi's. The commercial opens with an image of a clock striking midnight and cuts next to the image of a woman running down stairs, leaving behind a shoe. The iconography is unmistakable and immediately recognizable as a Cinderella story (See Figure 14).



Figure 14. 1990s Cinderella Levi's Commercial.

After 7 or 8 s of these kinds of traditional establishing shots, the story starts to take unfamiliar turns. The prince charming figure chasing after Cinderella is scared away by another man on a motorcycle. The motorcycle man leaves behind an article of clothing himself as he quickly exits, leaving Cinderella to pick up the pair of jeans and begin her search for this illusive man. The commercial digs into this subversive gender-swapped narrative, empowering Cinderella with active agency as she looks for her perfect match. The men in the commercial are increasingly objectified to the point where when we finally see the motorcycle man again he is shirtless, sweaty, and shot in slow motion. This Levi's ad succeeds where so many other commercials featuring fairy tale iconography have stopped short. It knowingly comments on the tropes of fairy tale and updates them with modern sensibilities all while artfully remaining true to the DNA of Cinderella's story. And if that wasn't enough, it does all of this with artistic and imaginative shots and edits while additionally relying on depictions completely separate from the corporate-owned versions permeating the culture of the time. Would that all fairy tale commercials were this innovative.

7. The Digital Age of the 2000s

In the new millennium the buzzwords of the first decade were globalization and technology. Across the globe the internet, computers, and cell phones were bringing people together and changing the way people lived their lives. A pair of studies at the start and the end of the decade showed a jump from 6% to 62% of Americans having in-home internet access [9,10]. Cell phone popularity surged as well, fueled by advances in text messaging and mobile internet accessibility. In a very real way the world was changing. These sudden changes didn't come out of thin air—they had to be sold. And once again advertisers turned to fairy tale iconography to sell these new technologies. Using fairy tale stories to sell these innovative products was a natural fit, as Jack Zipes describes in his *Oxford Companion*, “basic fairy-tale elements like magic, transformation, and happy endings lend themselves perfectly to the advertiser’s pitch that the feature product will miraculously change the viewer’s life for the better. Products act as magic helpers who assist the heroes and heroines of the mini-fairy tale overcome whatever dilemma they face” ([8], p. 610). Cell phone commercials flooded the airwaves and haven't left since. Fairy tale types like Hansel & Gretel and Cinderella were inserted into commercials for AT&T and Cingular Wireless to explain their miraculous features and to humanize the gadgets. And one particular commercial from Nokia went long by comparing their phones to all the different kinds of magic in the fairy tale realm (See Figure 15).

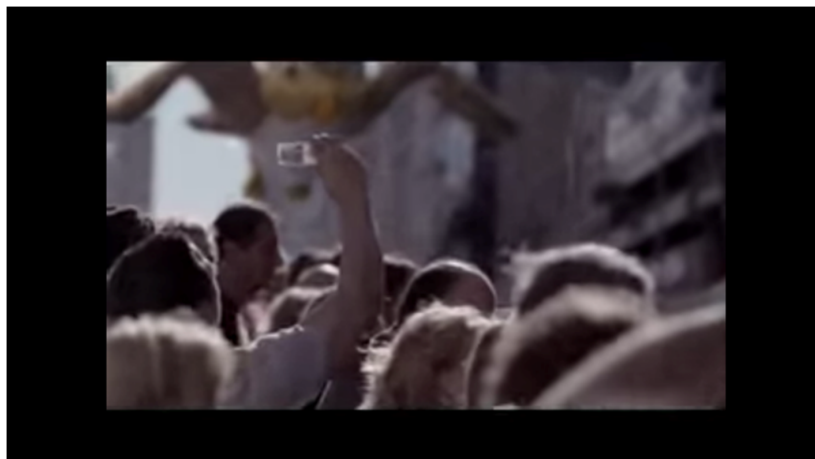


Figure 15. 2000s General Fairy Tale Nokia Commercial.

In the commercial Nokia's cell phones are described as magic wands, shining stars, and hidden treasures promising to reveal secret worlds. Cell phones are perhaps the best modern example of the product-as-magic pitch described by Zipes. Even if the products advertisers were pitching weren't as easily marketed as life-changing, they still combined this message with fairy tales. For example, this Mercedes-Benz commercial featuring Peter Pan (See Figure 16).

In the ad, Peter returns to a grown-up Michael and invites him come fly again. Smash cut to Peter riding shotgun while Michael drives a new Mercedes across the English countryside by moonlight. “It's never too late to fly”, says Peter in the ad. In other words, it's never too late to transform your life back to the happiness of youth through spending money. Other clichés from previous decades like sexualizing fairy tale figures continued, as seen in this Pepsi One commercial featuring Kim Cattrall as Goldilocks with the Chicago Bears. On the flip side, commercials like this 7 Up Red Riding Hood spot pushed back on those genre expectations by having Red head-butt the wolf stand-in at the end of the commercial. And other commercials, like this one from Adidas, went for an artistically bold modernization with a stripped-down narrative (See Figure 17).



Figure 16. 2000s Peter Pan Mercedes Benz Commercial.



Figure 17. 2000s Little Red Riding Hood Adidas Commercial.

The wordless and almost monochromatic ad (only the shoes and the wolf's eyes are shown in color), focuses on style and tone instead of product or story. The commercial is selling a personality and not a product. Product descriptions had been slowly become obsolete, as a result of branding becoming the main focus of commercials decade by decade. Meanwhile, Disney was successfully branding their fairy tale heroines as a collected franchise targeted at young girls and other companies were looking to share in the profits. Playmobil marketed a fairytale kingdom Sleeping Beauty play set, but the advertising goes out of its way to avoid the phrase "Sleeping Beauty". Barbie relaunched their direct-to-video film series with adaptations of the then-Disney free stories Rapunzel, Swan Lake, and Thumbelina, always releasing a new line of dolls to go along with the DVDs. Fairy tales figures in popular media were becoming increasingly gendered while fairy tale stories were leaned on heavily to sell everyone on joining the new digital world. The 2000s was a brave new world, but it still had room for fairies.

8. Fairy Tales in the 2010's Remix Culture

Harvard law professor Lawrence Lessig published a book in 2008 titled "Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy", which hypothesized about the societal effect of the internet, specifically for the way in which it gave rise to the remix culture [11]. Lessig recognized a trend in the rising popularity of derivative works that combine or edit together existing materials to produce something new. (One quick example is Pogo's "Alice", a song spliced together from images

and sounds from Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* film.) What was a hypothesis in 2008 became a reality in the 2010s—remix culture was everywhere. Sampling became an inescapable trend in music, Wikipedia became a de facto source of knowledge, and Hollywood was continually attempting to reboot old intellectual properties into new franchises. At the same time originality was still very much present. In the opening months of 2010, Old Spice released a commercial that is still being adapted and repeated six years later. “The Man Your Man Could Smell Like” shot the advertising world with a bolt of manic energy, resulting in a privileging of the weird and the funny. Originality was still present, but it’s copied and run into the ground with increasing speed. While Old Spice has doubled down on weird and funny ad campaigns, within a few years the tone-stealing derivatives have shown up less and less. Other brands like Geico settled back into controllable and innocuous humor, like this recent ad featuring Peter Pan (See Figure 18).



Figure 18. 2010s Peter Pan Geico Commercial.

There were, of course, still unimaginative campaigns that featured individual variations on fairy tales with specific products (for example Red Bull featured Aladdin, Rapunzel, and the Frog Prince; Security Service Federal Credit Union relied on Snow White, Cinderella, and Red Riding Hood; and Sky Link used Aladdin, Frog Prince, and Princess & the Pea stories). But remix culture would manifest itself in television commercials with ads that featured half a dozen fairy tale types all at once, like this one from PNC Bank (See Figure 19).



Figure 19. 2010s Fairy Tale Mashup PNC Bank Commercial.

The ad depicts a wedding attended by unicorns, teddy bears, ballerinas, soldiers, hummingbirds, and magically blooming flowers. The father, who walks his beautiful princess down the aisle, watches as his daughter marries prince charming. In the end it turns out the commercial takes place in the mind of a father watching his young daughter while she reads a book of fairy tales. Commercials like these are complicated by Marina Warner in “Once Upon a Time”, where she comments on the fairy tale’s spotty history with gender representation. “Current fairy tales on stage and screen reveal an acute malaise about sexual, rather than social, programming of the female, and the genre continues ever more intensively to wrestle with the notorious question Freud put long ago, ‘What do women want?’” ([7], p. 173). The PNC Bank spot is perhaps a bit too Freudian as the father imagines what his grown daughter wants most as a fairy tale wedding, prompting him to open a new savings account to prepare for that eventuality. With this question of gender representation in mind, this Christmas commercial from Marks & Spencer (M&S) becomes almost painful to watch (See Figure 20).

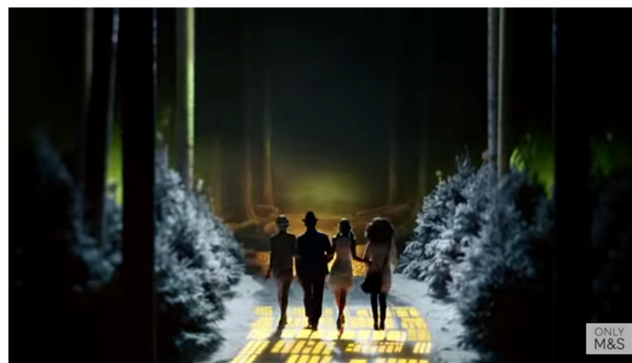


Figure 20. 2010s Fairy Tale Mashup Marks & Spencer (M&S) Commercial.

This commercial is a paragon of remix culture, as the main character morphs into Alice, Red Riding Hood, Gretel, a carpet-riding beauty, and Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. In the first minute alone the main character has five costume changes and two of them manage to present her slow-motion in just underwear. Marks & Spencer posits that what women want is purses, clothes, and (above all) shoes. When women are unmistakably in charge of using fairy tale imagery to tell stories the gender representation issues tend to be much less problematic. For example, an-all female college-prep academy created an ad campaign with the tagline, “Life’s Not a Fairytale”, which featured ad copy like “Don’t wait for a prince”, “Mirror, Mirror on the Wall. Be more than just the fairest of them all”, and “You are not a princess”. Another playfully perverse challenging of these dubious genre tropes came from comedian Amy Schumer. In the sketch “Princess Amy” from her television show *Inside Amy Schumer*, the realities of being a princess are explored: you have to marry a first cousin at age 14 to preserve the purity of the royal bloodline and are threatened with death if you can’t produce a male heir. More than halfway into the 2010s, it is clear we aren’t free from the same questions and concerns that have been raised by fairy tales for centuries. And for every innovative and subversive fairy tale-themed commercial produced, three (or more) cliché-ridden ads appear at the same time.

9. Conclusions

In his 1979 book, “Breaking the Magic Spell”, Jack Zipes shared the story of Priscilla Denby, a researcher who spent an entire day watching TV in 1969 logging all the traditional folklore and fairy tale items featured in shows and commercials. In 1969 Denby logged 101 themes in one day of television ([12], p. 119). In 2016 we live in a time described (sometime jokingly, other times seriously) as Peak TV. As more channels and online content providers attempt to stake out ground and cement their place in the media landscape, more and more television shows are being produced. According to research done in 2015 from the television network FX, there has been an unprecedented rise in programming from all television networks and content producers in the last few years [13].

In 2009 there 211 original scripted series, 217 in 2010, 267 in 2011, 288 in 2012, 343 in 2013, 376 in 2014, and 409 in 2015 (See Figure 21).

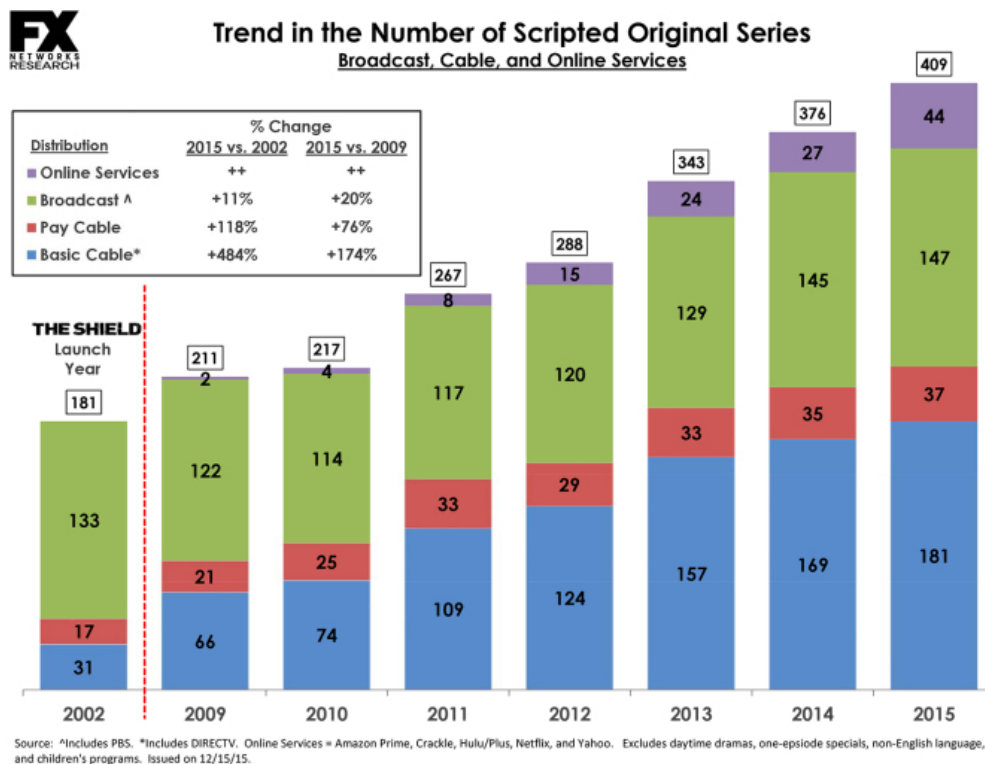


Figure 21. FX Peak TV Chart.

One can only imagine what a study like Priscilla Denby’s would look like in 2016. In 1969 there were only a handful of channels and now there are hundreds. With more commercials and shows than ever before fairy tales have more opportunities than ever to show up on the small screen. In the introduction to “Channeling Wonder”, a book exploring the fairy tale’s role in the age of Peak TV, Pauline Greenhill and Jill Rudy explain, “television seriality works especially well for establishing the horizon of expectation while keying on a fluid relationship of fantasy and reality. Wonder invokes and responds to this fluid relationship, helping to illuminate fairy tale’s persistence in, and even conscription of, new media.” ([14], pp. 13–14). Television advertisements are by nature temporary and ethereal; it is impossible to quantify this genre collectively as a whole or even viewing most of them, however, it is still beneficial to examine and catalogue the wonder and storytelling operating within these artifacts when possible. The digital age and the new media it’s brought have created an ideal environment for the fairy tale to adapt. The call Jack Zipes made in “Breaking the Magic Spell” is more relevant than ever as fairy tales find new places in commercials and television programs. According to Zipes, to counter the “corporate inundation of our imagination, the familiar fairy tales must be made strange to us again if we are to respond to the unique images of our own imagination and the possible utopian elements they may contain” ([12], p. 118). While Zipes was speaking specifically against mind-warping TV advertisements featuring fairy tales, there are still those rare commercials that genuinely make the tales strange to us again by commenting on the genre or showing us their place in the modern world. To close out this series let’s examine one last commercial that manages to comment on online journalism, social media mobs, police brutality and militarization, privacy rights, conspiracy theories, insurance fraud, and the financial crisis. And the framing mechanism for all of this? The familiar tale of the Three Little Pigs (See Figure 22).



Figure 22. 2010s Three Little Pigs The Guardian Commercial.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Abbreviations

BYU Brigham Young University

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