

An Enduring Enchantment: The Fairy Tale in the DDR, from the Brothers Grimm to ‘the Singing Ringing Tree’

John Callow

Abstract

The *Marchen/Fairy Tale* films produced by the state DEFA studio in East Berlin have proved to be among the DDR’s most enduring cultural achievements. This article examines at the ways in which the works of the Brothers Grimm were brought within an explicitly socialist pedagogy and how official Marxism attempt to comprehend and refashion folk and fairy tales. It is argued that this was most surely accomplished through the creative partnership of Anne Geelhaar, an East German writer, and Francesco Stefani, a West German director. Their creation, in 1957, of the apparently timeless but in reality entirely new tale of ‘The Singing Ringing Tree’ – despite an element of official opposition – has enjoyed enduring popular success and, through its inclusion within the BBC’s ‘Tales from Europe’ managed to circumvent and transcend the suspicions and stereotypes fostered by the Cold War.

Keywords Grimm Brothers, folklore, witchcraft on film

Some forms of enchantment endure. A journey across the moors above the Lancashire town of Darwen reveals one of the most haunting and unexpected monuments to the cultural legacy of the Cold War. If the wind rises, on a clear day, the chimes from a shim-

mering metallic construction sing and ring-out across the rocks, the mosses, and the heather. If you explore further along the path then concrete boulders, already beginning to wear smooth with the rain, depict a story of hidden kingdoms, an enchanted bear, a stooped troll, and a captive princess. In an area which, otherwise, has struggled to come to terms with de-industrialisation, recession and austerity, this 'Singing Ringing Tree' and the accompanying images of a fairy tale have become a popular tourist attraction. Yet, the instillation owes its inspiration – and the affection in which it is held – to the memory of a children's film that, through its immediate reception in East Germany and its subsequent syndication by the BBC was able to transcend the ideological prejudices and harsh mundanities of a divided Europe in order to reveal something of the depth of engagement, and power, that could still be exerted by the 'traditional tale' in post-war society.

If the Lancashire sculptures and indeed the film, itself, have become divorced from their original ideological and national contexts and subsumed within a wider fabric of folklore, family entertainment and pedagogy then it is testimony to the adaptability of the fairy tale as a genre and its ability to present that which is new and challenging as timeless and palliative. The recourse to the fairy tale in times of marked uncertainty, in this case against the backdrop of both the reconstruction of a war-ravaged East Berlin and a post-industrial Lancashire, is singularly arresting and a restatement of the belief championed by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm that the fairy tale, far from being trivial or infantile, was one of the finest and most significant products of a common European culture.

Such a vision was every bit as attractive to the filmmakers at the government's DEFA studios, in their search to reclaim a progressive and anti-fascist message from German history and culture, in the 1950s, as it was for BBC's children's department a decade later in its search for an alternative source of imaginative drama that was affordable and enlightening. In both cases, the common denominator was the attempt by state broadcasters to shine a light upon

an *a priori* European tradition of storytelling and folklore, that celebrated communality and which stood in opposition – and as a bulwark – to the dominance of North American popular culture with its emphasis upon the individual and the cloying commodification of the genre by the Disney corporation. Thus, the BBC stressed that these were ‘Tales from Europe’ and the head of pedagogy at DEFA consistently emphasised the studio’s faithfulness to the spirit of the Grimms’ canonical texts. In contrast, the tales of d’Aulnoy, Perrault, the Grimms and Andersen were homogenised, across the Atlantic Ocean, stripped of their specificity and authorial voices, and rebranded as ‘Disney’ fairy tales. Seeking to resist this trend, if in nothing else, the impulses and priorities of DEFA and the BBC suddenly coincided.

However, the recovery of the fairy tale (or *Marchen*) and the rehabilitation of the Brothers Grimm, in order to claim a progressive pedagogical position and to place them in the service of the nascent German Democratic Republic (DDR) was neither inevitable nor straight forward. The fairy tale and the fairy tale witch, had retained their power to disturb and to evoke terror. It was far from an easy literature and one which frequently dealt with adult themes, such as hunger, abandonment, religious faith, anti-Semitism, sex and violent death.¹ Moreover, in the immediate post-war context, the smoking oven of Hansel and Gretel appeared as the savage herald of the crematoria of the Holocaust as witnessed at Auschwitz, Dachau and Belsen.² As a consequence, as part of the overhauling of the pre-existing Nazi system of propaganda in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the works of the Brothers Grimm (and in particular the *Nursery and Household Tales*) were banned outright in the liberated sectors controlled by the British and American armies as being representative of the literature of fascism.³ The critique was certainly not confined to the education corps of the British and US armies and was expressed by a number of prominent liberal German authors, including Gunther Birkenfeld, who explicitly linked the *Nursery and Household Tales* to the Holocaust.⁴

The Grimms, themselves, had been acutely aware of the allegation that unnecessary violence was implicit in their work. Indeed, in reviewing the publication of the first edition of their *Nursery and Household Tales*, in 1815, Friedrich Ruhs had proclaimed that whatever its merits for an adult readership, it was certainly not a book that should be put in to the hands of children as it evoked ‘uncomfortable’ and unrestrained feelings.⁵ Yet, set alongside this association with debasement and violence was another reading of the Grimms and their work that emphasised the struggles of the majority of their heroic protagonists who were, at the start of their tales, invariably young, wronged – in some way or another – poor, yet clever, and highly socially mobile. Therein lay a markedly progressive trait, in as much as society and hierarchical order were far from immutable. As Ernest Bloch noted in the early 1970s:

courage and cunning in fairy tales succeed in an entirely different way than in life ... While the peasantry was still bound by serfdom, the poor young protagonist of the fairy tale won the daughter of the king. While educated Christians trembled in fear of witches and devils, the soldier of the fairy tale deceived witches and devils from beginning to end – it is only the fairy tale which highlights the ‘dumb devil’.⁶

In this manner, the stories recorded and popularised by the Brothers Grimms acted as a palliative against hunger, a check upon fear, and a hope for justice in an unfair and, often, unfathomable world. Such an appeal was certainly appreciated by the exiled leadership of the KPD as they contemplated the possible reconstruction and refashioning of post-war Germany during their conferences held in Moscow in the spring of 1944. If they were quick to distance themselves from the avant-garde experimentation of Left-wing artists during the Weimar Republic, were wary of modernism, and prepared to acknowledge that the overnight embedding of Marxism was unlikely in a people rendered brutal and traumatised after

more than a decade of Nazi totalitarianism, then they needed to rapidly evolve a notion of a 'new' German culture that drew upon a progressive reading of a shared past. The focus was, therefore, placed upon converging the currents of anti-fascist, humanist and democratic (by which we might choose to read Stalinist) thought.⁷ As a consequence, the Grimms – perhaps surprisingly – secured a place within the cultural pantheon of an anti-fascist Germany.⁸ Significantly, from the very outset questions of the promotion of 'authentic' or 'suitable' folktales as pedagogical tools were framed alongside discussions of the use of film as a means of mass communication.

Thus, the academics and pedagogues who began to explore the topic of folklore in the Eastern Sector of Germany after May 1945 possessed both official sanction and a measure of protection for their researches, being able to build upon the considerable achievements of Soviet cultural anthropologists since the 1930s and to deploy a screed of justificatory, if sometimes tenuous, quotations from Engels, Lenin and Gorki to validate their work.⁹ The first fruit of this academic impulse was showcased at a folklore conference held in July 1952 (some three years after the formal establishment of the DDR as a separate state) at the Hotel Johannishof, in East Berlin. It heralded a thorough-going rehabilitation of the Brothers Grimm and their works, and marked the publication of a new, heavily revised two volume edition of the *Nursery and Household Tales* that was to serve as the 'canonical' or approved text during the first two decades of the DDR's cultural life.¹⁰

The very problems which the Western Allies and academics operating in the FDR had expressed were acknowledged and addressed through the effective bowdlerisation of the tales. The violence and casual brutality that overlaid the stories were toned-down or omitted. The three anti-Semitic tales were excluded from the collection, while witches were no longer to be automatically burned or tortured to death and, sometimes, were even favourably recast. The problematical *Hansel and Gretel* – with its themes of parental

abandonment, child abduction, cannibalism and the violence of children against an elderly woman – was too well-known and tightly structured to be revised and so was quietly dropped from inclusion or discussion. At the same time, the stories were re-worked – sometimes crudely and sometimes with a marked subtlety – in order to introduce ideas of class struggle. Preternatural occurrences were suspect and overtly religious references disappeared. Stories of giants, talking ravens and miraculous children were banished, wandering princes were transformed – by the more earthly magic of the editors’ pens – into travelling journeymen or peasants, while princesses became the daughters of plain and bluff farmers. In this manner, the *Nursery and Household Tales* were recast as seminal historical documents which enabled an otherwise hidden agrarian past, dominated by class struggle, to be revealed and recovered.¹¹

The tendency to disengage from the imaginative and mystical aspects of the Grimms’ tales and to accentuate the narrative, the literal and the material would have profound implications for the creative development fairy tale story and film in the DDR, as the 1950s progressed. However, the emphasis on historicity was perhaps not as crude or as deadening an expedient as might be thought. In essence it was as a hurried ‘rescue’ operation in order to salvage the humanist tradition of Grimms’ *Nursery and Household Book* from the wreckage of an approach to folklore studies during the Nazi period that had institutionalised racial theory and sought to project a sentimentalised and valorised picture of the German ‘Volk’ onto the politics of the present.¹² Indeed, the most innovative twist in his re-orientation of folklore research in the DDR was the attempt to downplay the disjuncture of the industrial revolution and the move to integrate rural studies and folk beliefs within a wider schema of working class history, whereby the peasant, the artisan and the proletarian worker were no longer at loggerheads but were forged by the same cultural sources. Thus, the study and history of labour as both a class and a force could be back-projected into the Early Modern period, or even into the Middle Ages,

with an emphasis upon the ‘democratic’ and ‘oppositional’ nature of folk literature and tradition. It also solved a thorny historiographical problem for the writers of school and college textbooks in offering further threads of continuity through the suggestion that the peasantry was a ‘class in waiting’, as the precursors to the modern-day proletariat. The history of the working class did not, now, have to begin with 1848, or even 1789, but could be charted back via an oral tradition, primarily preserved in story and song, that came to symbolise the ‘genius’ of both the fairy tale and the labouring people.¹³ This idea of a dynamic, underground oral tradition of dissent running as a counter-culture to the overturning of Prussian liberalism and the rise of empire and militarism, as the Nineteenth Century progressed, was as seductive for the DDR’s Folklore Commission as it was for the cultural ministers of the SED. Therefore, it effectively permitted a progressive expression of both high culture (through the likes of Goethe and Schiller) and a low culture (as revealed by the Brothers Grimm and Wilhelm Hauff) across Germany, which were held by the state to have an equal claim to validity and support.

It was this which informed the approach of the new national film company, DEFA (Deutsche Film-AG, which had been founded in 1946) to the Grimms’ folktales and guaranteed them a special and protected place within production schedules for the entire course of the DDR’s existence. Furthermore, Steinitz’s acknowledgement of the possibility that folk tales held the capacity to mutate, to develop and to regenerate to the delight and enlightenment of successive generations provided a creative impulse – a political ‘green light’ – to authors like Anne Geelhaar to adapt, re-stage and re-work the stories outside of the confines of their strict canonical texts. Within the context of a film studio: when academic research and state policy conjoined, the freeing of large production budgets and the exercise of a measure of freedom in artistic expression followed. This helped to create a climate whereby capable and experienced directors discovered that work on the *Marchen* films provided a creative

and imaginative outlet for their talents, which – in areas like magic, witchcraft, and myth – they would not otherwise have a chance to explore, while established box office stars could take on roles in children's films without the risk of damaging their acting careers.

Plans for the reconstruction of the German film industry had begun in the Soviet Sector within weeks of the fall of the Third Reich, while a meeting convened at the Hotel Aldon in East Berlin, on 22 November 1945, brought together film producers who had newly returned from exile (in both Eastern and western Europe) and the party leadership, with the aspiration to 'make films which breathe a new spirit' into Germany.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, attempts to define and regulate that which made a 'good' or worthwhile children's film were not slow to follow or be circulated within the pages of film industry journals. The standards were set by the guidelines laid down by the, then, minister of Education, Hans-Joachim Laabs, and by the pedagogical director of the children's film department at DEFA, Hellmuth Hantzsche. Laabs sought to make a clear distinction between 'instructional' films and films which were there to entertain, as 'unique' works of art. This practical division had the added advantage that it permitted considerable leeway for artistic licence, emphasised the high store that the State placed upon children's film, and encouraged a creative and child centred approach to drama. Hantzsche's contribution, re-enforced through a thirty-year career at the helm of DEFA's pedagogical output, was more proscriptive. It was his view that DEFA *kinderfilme* should embrace the same outlook and have the same grounding in socialist realist aesthetics as adult works and he appears to have constantly looked to the Soviet Union for acceptable formulas and guidelines.¹⁵ In the future, this would cause serious problems for the reception of the first of the Grimms' tales to be filmed by DEFA.

However, the immediate problem lay in the fact that the fabric of the pre-war UFA studios lay, literally, in ruins and that much of the AGFA colour stock had been carried away to the East for use in the

Soviet film industry. Therefore, the first films to be screened after the end of the war were Russian language films, hastily dubbed for German audiences. Furthermore, even though a number of world famous writers such as Berthold Brecht, Anna Seghers and Friedrich Wolf did, indeed, return to the Soviet sector, as David Bathrick has pointed out, the great majority of the 1,000 or so actors, film technicians and directors who had fled to the West after the destruction of the Weimar Republic did not.¹⁶ Therefore, a high proportion of the technical staff (73 per cent of camera operators, 62 per cent of directors, and 60 per cent of producers) employed in the 'new' DEFA studios between 1949-52 had worked, and had often learned their craft, under Nazism.¹⁷ Yet, there were other solutions to the problem that, in the years from 1949-58, were actively explored in order to make good the shortfall. The first expedient was to import existing technical expertise from West Germany, while the second – and longer-term solution – was to nurture and fast-track young, home grown talent. It was this sense of the vitality of youth and generational change, accentuated by death on the frontline and by the discrediting and frequent discharge of those who had served the Nazi film industry.¹⁸

This focus on the potentiality of youth to deliver the aspirations set by the party certainly honed the priorities and the demographic of the DEFA studio. Indeed, despite all the difficulties and conflicting priorities, it is significant that the third film to be made in the Soviet Sector and released in 1946, was a movie made expressly for children. However, unlike the later *Marchen* films that later characterised DEFA's output for children and made it world famous, *Somewhere in Berlin* belonged to an earlier category of 'rubble films' that confronted the immediate and frequently harsh realities of living in what had been until very recently a war zone. However, it was not until December 1953 that a dedicated children's production group was created within DEFA.¹⁹ This reflected increasing concerns over the direction of education and propaganda, after the predominantly working class uprising of June

1953, and a relative period of autonomy for the studio following the death of Stalin. Both developments served to re-ignite the search for new forms of cultural expression capable of providing a satisfactory national heritage for a state that had not initially been envisaged in wake of the fall of Berlin but which, increasingly, looked as if it might become a permanent feature of a divided Europe. Industrial and political unrest, among the very groups that the SED had looked upon as its natural supporters, pressures to complete the first Five Year Plan and the need for some form of escapism now combined with the work of the Folklore Commission in order to prompt a change of artistic direction. The gritty social realism of the 'rubble films' was set aside in favour of that which appeared more subtle, comforting and entertaining: namely, the *Marchen* (or fairy tale film) as a separate genre.

These films, and there were forty-four of them plus sixteen 'shorts' produced by the studio between 1950-89, attempted to reflect and inform something of the lives of the middle and lower strata of society, and – in the words of Jack Zipes – to use the function of magic paradoxically, 'not to deceive ... but to enlighten'.²⁰ These were fairy tales that also sought to elevate the audience from the frequently grim mundanities of everyday life and provided a utopian vision of a fictive society in which ordinary, hard-working people would be rewarded, in a world which stood outside the ethos of nineteenth century industrial capitalism and celebrated the collective world of the village, as opposed to the individualised world of the city or market. It was a link to a German past that was not 'failed', set against the stark backdrop of an all-too real present characterised by frequent shortages, attempts at cultural conformity, the constant surveillance of the security services, increasing pollution and lives led on the fault-lines of an ideologically and militarily divided Europe. Within such a context, these tales offered the possibility if not of complete individual freedom at least of imaginative licence. They were something different: opulent, strange and challenging, and just a little bit dangerous.

By the same token, the fairy tale – with its appeal to one dimensional archetype, a superficial lack of ambiguity and binary opposites – suited the dictates of socialist realism remarkably well. If that irony was sometimes lost on the SED's functionaries, then they certainly understood its utility as a vehicle that was suited to conveying moral concepts simply and directly. The good were clearly to be cheered and emulated, the bad were obviously irredeemably wicked and to be shunned. The former was invariably rewarded success, while the latter were inevitably doomed to failure and destruction. Furthermore, by its very nature the fairy tale is transformative – and it was this sense of transformation that the cultural departments of the DDR were attempting to effect upon the young and their citizens, in general, throughout the entire lifespan of the state. If this was not enough, then the image of a contented, folksy, rural population that lived in harmony with their superiors held more than a little in the way of attraction and reassurance for career politicians within the party. Therefore, at a glance, the *Marchen* could appear as being the ideal introduction to the themes, forms and conventions for children of school age.

Yet, they were more than that. Fairy tales were, after all, intended as spark the imagination, to excite and to be a treat. Thus, the DEFA studio – and, for that matter, the authorities themselves – were quick to emphasise that ‘Children for their labours and individual acts of kindness’ should be taken to see the *Marchen* at the cinema or clubhouse.²¹ Herein lay a major difference in the consumption and reception of fairy tale film in the two Germanys. In the West, a law passed in 1957 forbade children under the age of six from going to the cinema, severely limiting the reach and appeal of *Marchen* in as much as it had effectively served to exclude the target audience. As a consequence, the fairy tale film tended to be experienced within the individual home, watched on the television set and defined at least until the 1970s by relatively cheap production values when compared to the far more popular Disney versions that were freely imported and often screened to coincide

with public or school holidays. (It was not until the 1980s that DEFA's *Marchen* were regularly aired by the FDR's TV channels).²² By way of contrast, in the East – with far less access to choice at hand – the *Marchenfilme* was intended to be viewed as part of a communal experience, in theatre or pioneer halls, often as part of a regular Sunday matinee programme, untroubled by commercial rivals and staged as a one-off event that brought together (within the context of a cinema) both the old and young. Put simply, the *Marchen* was central to early year's pedagogy in the DDR in a way that was not possible, desired or realistically achievable in the West. This privileged position was strengthened, as the 1950s wore on, by increasing concerns by the SED's cultural departments about the erosion of German 'traditions' in the face of US pop culture and mass consumerism. Indeed, the republication of the Grimms tales, the promotion of handmade folk crafts (in opposition to factory produced designs) and the protection and celebration of some aspects of minority folk cultures (such as the costume, song and dance of the Sorbs) was part of the same ideological drive to differentiate and 'preserve' the DDR from its Western neighbour. If that separateness was challenged in one area, it might translate into a homogenisation with Western cultural values and the eventual erosion of 'existing Socialism', itself.

The need was, therefore, to find a distinctive expression for the Grimms' tales upon film that was 'authentically' German, capable of espousing progressive, humanist values and that also had the capacity to entertain. By the time that the first DEFA *Marchenfilme*, *The Cold Heart* was released, in 1950, the fairy tale had already had a long pedigree as a subject for filmmakers. George Melies had premiered his own version of *Cinderella* as far back as 1899 and had followed it with two more adaptations of Perrault's tales, *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Bluebeard* in 1901.²³ These films, relying upon theatrical spectacle and employing a mixture of puppetry, animation and silhouettes effectively set the standard and laid the ground rules for all subsequent tales produced for European cinemas

until the outbreak of the Second World War. Live action tended to be frowned upon, as being a less imaginative (as well as a more expensive) expression of the art, while the Left during the Weimar Republic had created an impressive number of 'new' fairy tales that used the genre to criticise and mobilise for social change through parable, puppetry and song. However, none of these themes were acknowledged or developed by DEFA in the post-war period due to the party's abandonment of agit-prop and the far more withering debates that raged around formalism between 1949 and 1952. In a similar fashion, the stunningly creative work charted by both the silhouette films of Lotte Reiniger (produced in Germany until the end of the Second World War and then in Britain, in the 1950s, for the BBC) and the puppet films pioneered in Czechoslovakia, in the late 1940s-50s, by Jiri Trnka were not accepted as models for further exploration and development.²⁴ DEFA did, indeed, possess a children's animation centre based in Dresden but this was never funded, promoted or celebrated in the same way as its Berlin studios, and its productions (though never acknowledging the fact) were often highly derivative recycling's of Reiniger and Trnka's earlier work.²⁵ Instead, a ready-made blueprint was provided for DEFA by Aleksandr Ptushko's live action film, *The Stone Flower*, which was shown to great popular success and critical acclaim across the Soviet zone in 1948. The picture embodied many of the themes later developed – and surpassed – by the East German studio, most notably a sense of the conflict between the powerless and the powerful, the importance of community and shared labour, and an expression of the beautiful and wondrous, in terms of the glittering, Jem-studded caverns of the 'Copper Mountain'.²⁶ The film's imprint registered with DEFA productions as different as *The Singing, Ringing Tree* (1957), *The Devil's Three Golden Hairs* (1977), and *Bearskin* (1985).

If Cold War politics made stories from Western Europe less desirable and, as a consequence, Perrault was excluded from the cannon (unless his source material cross-fertilised with that of the Brothers Grimm), then the fairy tale operated in the DDR within

the broader concept of a common *a priori* culture and language of ‘the people’ (or peoples’) that knew no borders, and that had once been general but was increasingly suppressed by the advent of capital and industrialisation.²⁷ As such, it certainly possessed imaginative and emotive appeal for the SED, as it appeared to prefigure many of the features of modern Communist internationalism. In this way, tales loosely woven about the fabric of the *1,001 Nights* provided a comparatively safe source of inspiration for DDR writers and directors, as the material fell outside of the struggles to define what were – and were what not – national, canonical texts. DEFA produced *The Story of Little Mook* (1953), *The Story of Hassan* (1958), *Hatifa* (1960), and *The Golden Yurt* (1961) from the perspective of international – and internationalist – storytelling which transcended German parochialism, celebrated difference, and sought to depict the victory of the ‘small’ man or woman over the great, and the triumph of natural justice over social inequality or blind misfortune. Therefore, *The Story of Little Mook* – though owing more than a little to Alexander Korda’s *Thief of Baghdad* – was set in Arabia and was sensitive to both Islam and to the strained relationships between children nearing adolescence and the elderly. Unlike the classic Disney re-imaginings of folktales, the hero decisively rejects the riches that he has gained through his adventures, preferring a quiet life as a potter, secure in the knowledge that his sharing out of accumulated wealth among the people has acted as a benefit to them all.²⁸

Perhaps surprisingly, given the sense of the deeply-held Christian beliefs of the author that pervade so many of his stories and that Hollywood had already released its own musical biopic starring Danny Kaye, DEFA had no difficulty in appropriating Hans Christian Andersen as a ‘proletarian’ and auto-didactic author. *The Tinderbox*, released in 1959, follows the written text far more closely than many DEFA tales, but was distinguished by superior art direction, strong scripting, and a superb performance by Rolf Ludwig (one of the major box office ‘stars’ of the DDR) as ‘the soldier’,

who combines warm-hearted innocence, with courage and a judicious sprinkling of cunning.²⁹ *The Tinderbox* successfully realised a number of features inherent in Hans Christian Andersen's original story, not least a profound sympathy for the plight of the poor and a sense of sorrow at the soldier's unjust treatment, and death sentence. It was certainly the most barbed and politically radical of Andersen's tales. As a result, it succeeded both artistically and ideologically for DEFA as it responded not so much to a clear party, or pedagogical 'line', but to Andersen's own concerns: to speak to children, about children, and all that concerns them, both the good and the bad. That represented a revolutionary development in the history of literature and pedagogy and required no further embellishment to curry favour with the state.³⁰

The engagement with the works of the Brothers Grimm was, however, something of a 'double-edged sword' for DEFA. On one side, as we have seen, the value placed upon their tales elevated the whole genre of the *Marchenfilme* to new heights and prevented a sickly-sweet rendition such as MGM's *The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm*, that proved a US box-office smash but an abject critical failure in 1962. On the other, the bowdlerised version of the Grimms' work, as compiled by Pollatschek and Siebert, stood as a monolith on the intellectual landscape, a signifier of intellectual and cultural worth but occupying a space that denied to others the freedom of departure and true experimentation. Thus, in approaching the Grimms' work filmmakers had to contend with official expectations that were raised to a very high and, often, impossible level.

Some films, it is true, worked better than others. DEFA's version of *Snow White* (1961) appears as little more than a live action transposition of Walt Disney's 1937 blockbuster: the exception that proved the rule, as the studio sacrificed its own vision in order to chase Hollywood's shadow. As a result, it stands as a rather slight, and unmemorable, pastiche of the Disney studio's greatest work. By way of contrast, *Rumpelstiltskin* (1960) provided a new

and thoroughly subversive re-telling of the familiar Grimms' tale. The dwarfish figure was no longer the villain of the piece but a somewhat child-like hero, who kidnaps the baby prince in order to protect him from becoming corrupted by society's materialism and the lure of gold. In this manner, Rumpelstiltskin acts as an unlikely substitute for the traditional fairy godmother, celebrating family values, redistributing wealth (just like Andersen's 'good soldier') and acting as the catalyst for redemptive and restorative social justice. It is thus both the most polemical and the most freely rendered of DEFA's re-imaginings of the Grimms' tales. It certainly gives the lie to the accusation that the studio was unsympathetic in its stereotyping of those with restricted height, or disabilities.³¹

However, the most original and enduring of the DEFA *Marchenfilmes* was *The Singing, Ringing Tree* (*Das Singende, Klingende Baumchen*) which was filmed on a Berlin soundstage over the summer of 1957 and released to coincide with the Christmas holidays. It claimed the mantle of a Grimms' tale and has often, since, been discussed purely within those terms by both DEFA studio executives and Western academics. However, this at once validates the authorial skill in cloaking a new tale in the mantle of tradition while obscuring the screenplay's undoubted radicalism within both the studio's forty-year output and the wider history of the fairy tale on film. Consequently, though the establishing title sequence proclaims it to be based upon a 'traditional' tale of the Brothers Grimm, *The Singing Ringing Tree* was an entirely modern – and in some respects, modernist – creation. Though conceivably fashioned from elements of *Beauty and the Beast*, *Snow White and Rose Red*, *The Juniper Tree* and *The Singing, Soaring Lark* – and borrowing from the familiar language of the Grimms', with Princess Thousandbeauty's name echoing that of another heroine, Thousandfurs – it was the product of a single, fertile and sensitive imagination rather than of the cumulative folk memory and collective wisdom of the German peasantry.³² Indeed, where the question of authorship has been discussed it has often been accorded to the male director as opposed to the actual the

female writer.³³ This is more the pity as it has served to divorce it from feminist discussions of the fairy tale that have centred around the works of Angela Carter and which have their close parallels in *The Singing, Ringing Tree*.³⁴ Many of the themes that were newly embroidered into the tale – a sense of feminism, independence and a clear stance against animal cruelty – would inform and shape both the DEFA studio's last great enterprise, *Three Wishes for Cinderella* (released in 1973) and its reflection in Hollywood, with *Ever After* that starred Drew Barrymore as a far from passive heroine, in 1998. However, by the same token the submerging of more radical themes with a general ambiance of respect for existing source material permitted the creation of an 'old', new *Marchen* and added a sense of timelessness to the film, which was suggestive of the 1450s, as opposed to the 1950s. It is this sense of timelessness, and – if not of the a-historical, certainly a narrative that is removed from an immediately apparent or single historical context – which accounts for much of its lasting appeal.

The actual author, it transpires, was Anne Geelhaar (1914-1998) who was to enjoy a long and highly successful career as a children's writer in the DDR, specialising in stories – such as *Fortunat und Seine Sohne* and *Der Prinz von Hovinka* – that took their inspiration from traditional folktales, or, like *Der Kleine Kommandeur* and *Der Brief aus Odessa*, tried to make sense out of Germany's all-too recent past for youngsters traumatised by the legacy of the Nuremburg rallies and Auschwitz.³⁵ Her personal warmth, love of animals, and commitment to a humanistic brand of socialism, were constants that hallmarked all of her books and film scripts. However, it was within the context of the 'enlightening' folktale that Geelhaar had carved out her career as a children's author.³⁶ It was these pedagogical books which seem to have brought her to the attention of DEFA and she was employed as one of the comparatively few women scriptwriters.

From the outset, then, *The Singing, Ringing Tree* appeared as one of the heterogeneous *Marchenfilmes*, in terms of the talent deployed

both behind and in front of the cameras. Both Francesco Stefani, who directed the film, and Richard Kruger (who played the ‘evil dwarf’) lived and worked in West Germany and were hired-in by the studio as ‘guest’ talent. Stefani (1923-1989) had just launched a film version of the popular, if savagely humorous, children’s story *Max und Moritz*, which combined stylised sets with modern dance and proved a big box office success. However, while this brought him justified recognition and much critical acclaim, it was probably his earlier work on *The Dwarf’s Nose*, in 1952-53, that had attracted the attention of the East German studio. In some respects, this short film prefigures some of the themes – not least those of transgression, transformation, and the figure of a reviled dwarf – that run throughout *The Singing, Ringing Tree*. Thus, in *The Dwarf’s Nose*, we encounter Jacob, a little boy who helps his mother selling fruit and vegetables from her market stall. One day, he is told to help an old lady carry home her shopping basket. He cruelly taunts her on account of her long nose, without realising that she is a witch. Childish name calling fades into silence and tears as the witch curses him, changing him into a misshapen dwarf with a long nose that matches her own. Now, he can see how he likes it! Reflection, empathy and restitution eventually lead to the breaking of the enchantment but the idea that juvenile behaviour – in particular, mockery of those older, less fortunate, or simply different to themselves – could be ameliorated and dispelled, through improving stories that championed reason, would become a central motif guiding DEFA’s fairy tales.³⁷

Superficially, Anne Geelhaar’s screenplay for *The Singing Ringing Tree* centres around traditional archetypes: the prince is ‘handsome’, the princess is known as ‘Thousandbeauty’, and the dwarf is irredeemably ‘evil’. Yet, through a closer reading of the text, the creation of vast *papier mache* sets, the use of brilliant colour (lost on BBC audiences in the 1960s but certainly reminiscent of the Duke of Berry’s *Book of Hours* and King Ludwig II’s grotto at Neuschwanstein to German cinema goes) and the innovative use of an early synthesiser

to create brooding, or discordant, walls of electronic sound, there was much that was entirely new. When we first encounter her, Princess Thousandbeauty (played by Christel Bodenstein) is spoiled and petulant and spurns the attentions of the prince who wants to win her hand in marriage.³⁸ She demands the seemingly impossible gift of the fabled ‘Singing, Ringing Tree’ and when the prince (played by Eckart Dux) accomplishes his quest and presents her with her stated heart’s desire, Thousandbeauty is thoroughly disappointed seeing no more than an ordinary, unremarkable, and rather puny sapling. Thinking only of herself and oblivious to prince, the courtiers or even her own doting father, she commands the tree to sing for her. When it remains silent, she attempts to compel it to please her through violence, shaking it vigorously. At this point, the allegory is clear: namely, that love can neither be bought nor bidden.



Christel Bodenstein as ‘Princess Thousandbeauty’

This applies equally for the prince, as the princess. His pride and self-confidence prove to be his undoing. He should have been suspicious of the bargain he had struck with the dwarfish ruler of an enchanted, cobweb-choked kingdom in order to gain the tree. Furthermore, he should have heeded his steed's warning as the animal immediately sensed and shied away from the malign witchcraft entombed within the rock walls of the land, which – perhaps tellingly – lies to the west of home. More importantly, the prince should have been reflexive enough to realise that the princess would not simply, or suddenly, fall in love with him on the presentation of a magical tree. As a result, he is left to face the consequences of his failure and, unseen amid the throng, slips away from the palace. As the last of the sun's rays fade away, the dwarf laughs at his heart-break and transforms him from a man to a bear.

However, misfortune seems to bring a combination of wisdom, practical sense and an added edge to his character. Thus, when the old king attempts to defraud him (in plot twists suggested by both Old Testament sources as well as by the Grimms' tales and, in particular, *Hans My Hedgehog*) the bear refuses to allow himself to be cheated, and carries off the princess to his new home in the dwarf's kingdom. Once there, Thousandbeauty continues to order everyone around and to demand affection and obedience from the animals. However, the rules have changed. The bear, who has resigned himself to his fate and form, refuses to pander to her whims, and stoically works away with his own hands to improve his surroundings and gather food. The animals remember all-too-well her cruelty to their brethren, while she was at the palace. She chased away the doves from her tower, kicking the hunting dogs out of the way, and worst of all, emptied a fishpond to provide a garden urn in which to place her prized magical tree. The sight of the dying goldfish, gasping and flapping upon the gravel, is perhaps one of the film's starkest images and one that forcefully underscores the princess' imperviousness to the plight of others, as self-obsession turns to cruelty.³⁹

The birds will not feed from her hand, as they do from that of the kindly bear, and the enormous magical fish that swims in the pools underneath the waterfall, wisely, keeps its distance from her. Yet, when the bear patiently explains that this is because the animals see the inner substance of her nature, rather than the outward show of her beauty, the princess becomes the author of her own downfall by demanding to see exactly what they do. Impervious to the bear's frantic and fearful attempts to silence her, the princess repeats her wish – three times over, in true magical fashion – which is overheard by the dwarf who has burrowed his way into a nearby crevice, on the off-chance of causing trouble. He casts a spell, which matches her body to her soul: lining and souring her face, fading her blonde curls to lank brown, and disfiguring her nose, so that it turns up to a point, like a rotten turnip.

From the depths of her grief and despair, her redemption is incremental. Her pride begins to lessen as she offers to help the bear with his work, and she willingly shreds the sleeves of her own dress in order to carry away the stones from the cave that he has been digging to provide them with a home. The couple now begin to work together, for the common good, and through their own toil and labour build a better life for themselves, and those around them. The absence of comfort, status and privilege has – despite their altered forms, loss of status and effective proletarianisation – made them both better, and more useful, human beings.

These unexpected developments infuriate the dwarf, who cannot abide goodness or the pair's growing sense of happiness. Like evil, itself, he always appears when, and where, he is least expected. Thus, he emerges from the inside of enormous conch shells, eves-dropping behind corners, and – through his unnatural witchcraft – burrows backwards into the stone and the mosses, closing the ground about him. His hatred expresses itself through spiteful attacks on the animals that live in the valley, as his magic brews-up storms that injure one of the doves and creates the snow – which he gleefully shoves down from on high, just like one of Lucas

Cranach's or Baldung Grien's weather witches – to freeze the giant fish in the lake, and to trap a magical horse – possessing antlers and a golden mane – in the growing drifts. However, harmful magic can also rebound and, unwittingly, the dwarf blinded by his hatred, has provided the princess with a test. With every good deed, she progressively frees herself from his enchantment. Thus, in rescuing the fallen dove and nursing it back to health, she breaks part of his spell and restores her nose to its original shape. When she selflessly crosses the ice to free the fish, and then risks her own life in digging the horse free from the snows, she completes her own internal (and, therefore, external) transformation, regaining her former beauty. Through these selfless deeds, she finally gains the trust and love of the animals and settles down to a life of contentment with the bear, decorating their cave with all-manner of Jem stones, ferns and brightly coloured shells.

Now it is the turn of the dwarf to fail to learn a lesson. The failure of his *maleficia* should have taught him that love is a stronger emotion than hate. However, his spite drives him onwards. He finds the happiness of others unbearable and decides to ruin things, split-up the couple and condemning the bear to a fresh misery, on his own. Therefore, he attempts to ensnare her in his lies, appearing before the princess who has not seen him before. Unaccountably – and here the coherence of the script falls down - the bear never seems to have mentioned to her either dwarf's existence, or the real cause of their predicament. Innocently, Thousandbeauty listens to the dwarf's claims that he was the 'true' ruler of the land before the bear had arrived to imprison and badly treat him. However, this initial stratagem fails: the princess cannot believe that the bear could be so mean or do such things. Next, the dwarf tries to tempt the princess to return home with thoughts of the luxuries of her old life, her crown and feather bed. However, Thousandbeauty no longer cares about mere objects, she would rather stay with the bear. She turns to go, and the dwarf becomes desperate and fashions another string of lies with which to trap her. This time, he succeeds

because they do not prey upon her greed or gullibility, but upon her love. When he tells her that her father, the king, is calling-out for her on his deathbed, the princess rushes off to be at his side.

The bear returns to find his cave destroyed and Thousandbeauty gone. The dwarf taunts him and his isolation is, seemingly, made complete as the stone bridge collapses behind him, sealing-off any chance of his return to the human world. For the first time since his bewitchment, the prince / bear gives himself over to despair. In the meantime, the princess has reached her father's castle only to find it deserted. A sleepy guard, who fails to recognise her as the result of her inner transformation, explains that the king was in good health but had left, months ago, with all his men in an attempt to find his lost daughter. Thousandbeauty now understands that she has been lied to, and begins to put the missing pieces of the puzzle together, in a series of revelations: it was the dwarf who was evil - and the bear that was good; the bear was really the enchanted prince; and that she loves him with all her heart. At this point, the magical tree - which had long lain neglected in the palace garden - begins to sing, and to ring. Purposely snatching it up, the princess hurries back to the dwarf's realm in order to reclaim her love.

Now it is the turn of the dwarf to experience fear and despair. He magic's an endless thorn hedge to bar Thousandbeauty's way but the antlered horse comes to her rescue, leaping over it in one bound, and returning with the princess on his back. Next, the dwarf floods the plain, but the giant goldfish appears, to help in his turn, and swims her across. The dwarf then drains all the water away, leaving the fish to suffocate but, in contrast to her earlier actions, the princess comforts him and promises to save him. Just then, the doves appear carrying a garlanded swing, and fly Thousandbeauty over the mountains and back to confront her tormentor, who is driven to distraction by the thought of love that is signalled by the singing and ringing of the tree. In a final attempt to halt her progress, he conjures-up a ring of fire to surround the little tree but the princess steps through it, unharmed, and breaks his power. With his

magic gone, the dwarf – who had been circling in triumph above her – falls to the ground and is swallowed up by the earth, never to return. His enchantments are broken and the bear, reunited with the princess, is returned to human form, as the ‘handsome prince’. His faithful horse (who had been turned to stone) is similarly restored to life and re-appears, in the final scene, to offer the lovers a swift means of returning home. As they turn to leave the valley for the last time, the prince suggests that they take the magical tree with them. Thousandbeauty thinks for a moment and then decides that it would be far better if it were to be left behind, to help others to love, in the way that it had helped them.

It is significant, and fitting, that the princess should have the last word. The story is, after all, largely seen from her perspective and it is her journey from a selfish childhood, to an altruistic maturity, that is key to both the tale’s sense of drama and charm. Even the source of witchcraft is re-gendered, with the dwarf taking the place more usually occupied in traditional tales by the figure of the witch, the ‘bad queen’ or the ‘wicked fairy’. His inability to love both fuels his malice and seals his doom. In this way, Anne Geelhaar’s script is concerned with self-realisation and an adult acceptance of one’s own sexuality, and sexual power over others. On this level, it is perfectly rational for Thousandbeauty to reject the prince as a suitor at the outset of the film. Subconsciously, she may be aware that she is not yet mature enough for any kind of sexual relationship and sending her would-be lover away on a quest might function as a sensible delaying tactic, postponing the moment of decision and sexual awakening until a time of her own choosing.⁴⁰ Both her father and the prince should have been aware of this, and the inappropriateness of their own designs. That they were not is shown to have occasioned the initial chain of disasters that engulfed all concerned. As a consequence, we can choose to read Anne Geelhaar’s fairy tale as an allegory about the shedding of childish and irrational impulses, and the realisation that sexual fulfilment stems as much from playing a full role within society and

finding a common cause with a partner, as it does from a sudden and purely superficial sense of attraction. Just like a later Angela Carter heroine, *Thousandbeauty's* sexuality is far from passive. She triumphs, despite lacking magical powers or other extraordinary properties, through her gradual adoption of moral principles – not least of which are a belief in co-operation over greed, and a kindness towards animals – and the rejection of the self, in favour of the liberating practice of reason. In stepping through the dwarf's fires, to claim the tree, she symbolically conquers her fears and arrives at an adult conception of her own sexuality, which makes possible the traditional happy ending of her union with the prince.

Released in time for Christmas, 1957, *The Singing, Ringing Tree* was an immediate commercial success and through its screening at foreign film festivals and distribution throughout both Eastern and Western Europe the film brought much-needed hard currency to the DDR.⁴¹ However, the initial favourable reception accorded to the film by East German critics faded along with the Christmas good will and disappeared as rapidly as the New Year's snows. An initial salvo was launched by Charlotte Ewald in the pages of the January 1958 edition of *Deutsche Filmkunst*, claiming that the film was no more than 'a mendacious fairy tale romance which is not suitable for the character formation and development of our children'. Worse was soon to follow as over the course of the Second Film Congress of the DDR, held in July 1958, the *Singing, Ringing Tree* was criticised for both its 'idealism' and its 'flight into petit bourgeois idyll', while the most trenchant criticism – and certainly the most long-lasting – came from Hellmuth Hantzsche who re-iterated his opposition to the film's 'idealistic conception' and 'lack of socialist-realist interpretations' at regular points from the early 1960s through into the 1980s. As Qinna Shen has highlighted, his pedagogical background, position within officialdom made his conclusion that the film ought 'to be rejected' as a 'failed fairy tale' particularly damaging.⁴²

At this point, we should ask ourselves what had gone wrong? The

studio and the SED's cultural supremoes had given their individual and collective approval to the script and signed-off the budgets. There had been no attempt to 'pull' the film from release, as was to happen in 1965 when a whole year's worth of production at DEFA was suddenly suspended. The initial press comments and reviews had been breathlessly favourable. Clearly, something had changed within 'official' cultural circles between the commissioning of the film, the approval of its script and initial release, in 1957, and its critical mauling by the SED functionaries in 1958. Three interconnected reasons present themselves, all of which relate to the shifts in the wider political and ideological landscape and the debate over 'formalism' in the arts.

This had raged at its most savage in the Soviet Union during the early 1930s with the assault upon 'bourgeois modernism' but had re-ignited in 1948-52, against the background of Stalin's final purges and the breakaway of Yugoslavia. Within a specifically East German context, it had been actuated by the declaration, in March 1951, of the Central Committee of the SED's stance in a paper entitled *The Struggle Against Formalism in Art and Literature* and by the publication of Georgy Lukacs' book, *The Struggle of Reason*, in 1952, which combined visceral attacks upon his 'idealistic' opponents with a proscriptive version of that which constituted 'objective reality' and the function of art. It took time for these debates to filter down to the film industry and – counter-intuitively – they exploded at DEFA during the period of Khrushchev's thaw in the USSR, as opposed to Stalin's last terror. This, in itself, prevented the fall-out from being life-threatening but it still meant that, as far as the producers of the *Marchenfilme* were concerned, that their careers could be destroyed if they were judged to have fashioned works that were 'idealistic', 'regressive' or 'kitsch', and which celebrated dangerously escapist or wholly irrational ideas and impulses.⁴³

The trouble was that, in the context of the fairy tale, 'formalism' could (if a critic was willing to be vicious) be taken to mean almost

any exercise in imagination or creativity. The fantastical with its potential to undermine the rational was, by its very nature, uncontrollable and unable to be neatly straightjacketed into a dominant schema of historical materialism, with its emphasis upon progress and change, as opposed to the variability of social conditions and essential continuity embedded within the seasonal rhythms of agrarian cultures. There were now 'genuine' folktales and there were 'false', inauthentic or, perhaps more accurately, politically incorrect ones. Even Vladimir Propp, the most significant and innovatory of Soviet folklorists, to deflect criticism and save his career, if not his life, had gone into print with the declaration that 'the context of folk poetry is always struggle'.⁴⁴ This buzz-word effectively chimed with the government level pronouncements on the nature of art but it left the *Marchenfilme* in general, and the *Singing, Ringing Tree* in particular, wide open to censure.

Consequently, the first problem with the film lay simply in the choice of Geelhaar's guiding motif. The story was about the realisation and redemptive power of love. It did not deal directly with questions of the possession of political power or of the 'struggle' to be waged by either classes or individuals. If the traditional fairy tale quest for wealth has been replaced by the heroine's coming to terms with adulthood and a self-realisation actuated by shared work – with shifts in social status, sexual awareness and the collective and individual consciousness signalled through physical transformations – then these themes appear to have been far too subtle or impressionistic for both *Deutsche Filmkunst* and DEFA's own departmental chiefs to grasp. Rather like the attempt to thread a snowflake upon a chain, that which you would seek to preserve and analyse melts away in an instant before the gaze and the iron touch. Indeed, the distancing of Geelhaar's voice as author and the complete absence of a mention of *The Singing, Ringing Tree* in her festschrift volume might well have been a calculated ploy to recast the film as a pre-existing Grimms' tale, thereby deferring some of the worst elements of personal criticism.⁴⁵ If professional critics,

film historians and academics have overlooked her authorship of the screenplay then it seems that, until the early 1990s, she preferred it that way.

The second problem concerned not the screenplay but the direction of the film, with criticism of the stylised set design and Francesco Stefani's rejection of naturalism in both the framing and the pacing of the narrative. As folktales concern and, indeed, depend upon preternatural occurrences – the actions of God, devils, the figure of Death, the appearance of mythical or talking animals, and the operation of magic – it had made sense to Stefani to abandon 'realism' and to translate the essence of a brightly coloured picture book onto the cinema screen. Action moves from one side of the screen to another, evoking the illustrated page, while scenes dissolve or blend into one another, and the boom of proto-synthesisers evokes the magical otherworld separated from the soothing acoustics of humanity. By translating the *Marchen* from an oral to a literary tradition and then, in turn, reworking it as mass media through the lens of the film camera it might be argued that the space for naturalism had already been artificially collapsed by the change of idiom and technology. Certainly, Stefani considered that both the medium of film and the operation of magic were unnatural acts and, as such, might be better suited to the creation of stylised, storybook sets and modernist soundtracks rather than to dry attempts at capturing 'realism' within an entirely make-believe world.

Consequently, while the studio's *faux* tales from the Middle East passed muster (as presumably no one examined too closely the debts incurred to Korda, Justin and Sabu) both of DEFA's Grimms' inspired films were judged to be inadequate on ideological and educational grounds. Yet, while the force of the criticism was blanket, its' specifics were contradictory or, at their worst, incoherent. *The Little Tailor* was damned for having too great a socialist content – breaking with the spirit of the Grimms and their own specific historical context, thus 'vulgarising' Marxism – while *The*

Singing Ring Tree was felt to have failed precisely on account of its lack of explicit socialist content and avoidance of all consideration of the class struggle.⁴⁶ There was a sense, here, of knowing what you did not wish to see in the dramatisation of the tale rather than what you would, and a more abiding sense that, in common with many professional critics (and not least Lukacs, himself) it is far easier to weigh and to judge the work of others than to actually create a work of art, that was capable of bringing pleasure, yourself. This, however, is to judge the reception of DEFA's *Marchen* by aesthetic standards as opposed to political imperatives.

At this point, it is worth unpacking Hantzsche's criticisms in a little more detail. His dislike of *The Singing, Ringing Tree* enabled him to project onto it plot devices that did not even exist, while his over-riding critique of Stefani's failure to develop 'a new form and content' once again seems to be at odds with the imagery projected onto the film screen.⁴⁷ His criticisms, in their own terms, make very little sense. He is in effect criticising that which is not there. However, if instead we choose to view his criticisms of the film through the distorting lens of the Cold War, then we are on firmer ground. Consequently, the third and probably most compelling reason for Hantzsche to turn his ire upon *The Singing Ring Tree* was avowedly political and more than a little chauvinist. The film had, after all, been directed by a West rather than an East German and the cast and the crew bridged the divided city to an extent that was far more pronounced than in the rest of the studios current, or subsequent output. That Anne Geelhaar was an avowedly socialist writer, close to the SED, or that Christel Bodenstein possessed a textbook CV as a child and teenager growing-up in the DDR, combining studies at ballet school with membership of the Young Pioneers, the FDJ and the Society for Soviet-German friendship, seems to have counted for little.⁴⁸ What does seem to have mattered was that the deterioration in East-West relations in Germany expressed itself in an enduring criticism that was aimed full-square at Stefani. Certainly, the most stinging of Hantzsche's

invectives followed hard on the heels of the building of the Berlin Wall and would later resurface with President Reagan's bullish rearmament and the siting of cruise missiles in Western Europe. As it was, *The Singing Ringing Tree* appeared as a 'failed' *Marchen* purely because it was created from a common German cultural heritage that transcended borders and appeared to ignore the specificity of the genre to the confines of the DDR. As we have already seen, during the early years of the studio actors, directors and technicians from the FRG had been regularly utilised, through necessity as the studio simply did not have the artistic talent and technical ability to function self-sufficiently. The only stipulation seems to have been that these individuals had not been members of the Nazi Party. However, the numbers of West Germans employed at DEFA had begun to drop significantly by 1955 and between 1956-1958 seems to have been systematically reduced as a conscious act of policy. Francesco Stefani was, therefore, among the last 'guest' directors to be employed at DEFA and it is likely, as Qinna Shen has suggested, that the critical attack upon his film was a particularly blunt device by which 'West German elements' at the studio might be humbled, 'disciplined', and ultimately dispensed with.⁴⁹

Having said this, the effects of Hantzsch's personal animosity towards the little film and the impact of the debate on 'formalism' can be overstated. As even he was forced to admit, 'the film was liked by children'.⁵⁰ Herein lay its success. Despite all the official carping, *The Singing, Ringing Tree* proved to be DEFA's greatest box office draw (in terms of the *Marchenfilme*) at film festivals across not just Eastern but also Western Europe and was rapidly syndicated throughout the Eastern bloc, with dubbed versions premiering in Romania, Bulgaria, the USSR, Czechoslovakia and, later, in Yugoslavia. Its reception at the Edinburgh Film Festival of 1958 also demonstrated that, at times, the Iron Curtain could be remarkably permeable when it came to cultural expressions and products, and it was this screening that set in train the series of events that – forty years later – would plant the sculpture of *The Singing, Ringing*

Tree on the Darwen hillside. The film was never withdrawn from syndication or removed from official discussion and celebration of the *Marchenfilme*. No one was imprisoned, apparently ‘blacklisted’ or reviled as their result of their participation in the production and more careers appear to have flourished rather than stalled.⁵¹ The renewed interest in *The Singing, Ringing Tree* after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the purchase of DEFA’s archive by a US university and the re-issue of its filmstock by *Ice Storm*, a Canadian company, from the 1990s onwards, provided Anne Geelhaar with a measure of critical recognition and financial security in her final years and, in what amounted to an ‘Indian Summer’, she finally ‘owned’ the authorship of the story in book form ⁵².

In some respects, Anne Geelhaar found a mirror image, and a kindred sister, in Peggy Miller (1919-1993), a BBC producer of similar creative energy and talent. Miller was confronted at the BBC by the problems of a limited budget and the withdrawal of support for the commissioning of original, live action drama. At a time when the strength of the dollar and the balance of payment deficit effectively precluded the import of films and TV series’ from Disney and other North American studios, the BBC was forced through a combination of necessity and a commitment to artistic standards to look towards its European neighbours for both content and inspiration. Miller, in particular, seems to have been committed to encouraging the development in children of a feeling for a pan-European culture that bridged Cold War divisions and propaganda, and which stood in conscious opposition to the consumerist ideals, rampant individualism and often subliminal violence that characterised the dominant cultural values and studio output of the United States. Fluent in French, Italian, German, Polish and Czech, and possessing the skills of the scriptwriter and adaptor, she was uniquely placed within the BBC to make good use of the plentiful, high quality and comparatively cheap films and TV drama series’ being produced across Europe and behind the Iron Curtain.

While her official title of ‘Assistant Foreign Films, Children’s Programmes’ did not sound particularly exciting or exalted, she was given considerable artistic freedom to source and create material for the national broadcaster, and there was hardly a major children’s series aired on the BBC from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s that did not bear her direct imprint.⁵³ However, it was in the adaptation of Eastern European, as opposed to home-grown, fairy tales that Peggy Miller excelled and is, probably, best remembered for. Between October and December 1964, BBC1 broadcast four individual folk tales under the collective title of *Tales from Europe*, that were dubbed and re-scripted under her direction. The series was prominently scheduled, filling a tea-time slot each Thursday between the station’s ‘flagship’ programmes for children and adults (*Blue Peter* and the *Six O’ Clock News*, respectively) and quickly gained a large and appreciative audience. Frequent repeats – together with the addition of two more films to the series in December 1966 – helped to keep *Tales from Europe* in the consciousness of a generation of children and their parents, with its rotation ensuring that younger sisters and brothers were introduced to the stories, just at the point that their older siblings were beginning to grow out of them. From the point of view of the corporation, it was an extremely cost effective way of programming, which continued on into the late 1970s, with *Three Wishes for Cinderella / Drei Haselnusse für Aschenbrodel*, (released in 1973 as a DDR/CSSR co-production and periodically repeated by the BBC for almost a decade) providing a last flourish and a fitting coda to the project. On a wider level, *Tales from Europe* succeeded in embedding a vision of the European folk tale within British cultural life that, for almost two decades, had the power to challenge and supersede the pervasive commercialisation and cloying Disneyfication of the genre.

Of these six tales broadcast between 1964-1966, one – *The Boy and the Pelican* – was made in the USSR, one – *The Proud Princess* – hailed from Czechoslovakia, and the other four – *Snow White*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *The Tinder Box* and *The Singing Ringing Tree* –

were all filmed in East Germany by DEFA. Of these, *The Singing, Ringing Tree* seems to have proved the most popular and enduring, being repeated as a 'stand-alone' mini-series on Sunday mornings, having been divided by Miller into three separate episodes that were more suited to the brief programming slots available for children on the BBC. A lack of money led to a simply dubbed, narrative, soundtrack being overlaid on the existing German language soundtrack and this, together with the stripping away of the film's magnificent colours – as the BBC initially screened it only in black and white – undoubtedly lost some of the impact of the original. Yet, at the same time, it also benefited from Peggy Miller's sympathetic script editing which tended to speed up the action, iron-out any apparent ambiguities and downplay the violence towards animals. Even the transference to monochrome led, curiously enough, to a heightened sense of atmosphere, with the exaggerated play of light and shade inducing a heightened sense of fear and foreboding.⁵⁴ In this manner, the dwarf's ice storms that in the original coloured version are shown to be quickly dispelled, appear – in black and white - to hold the valley in their grip until the final scenes and the breaking of his bewitchment by the princess. Only then could the flowers bloom again, and the waterfall run free.

Therefore, for British audiences *The Singing, Ringing Tree* was a tale mediated by Peggy Miller's subtle and sympathetic reshaping of the narrative, and the Lancashire monument stands as much in tribute to her inspiration as to that of Geelhaar and Stefani. Yet, this – within the context of the *Marchen* – is strangely appropriate. If the folktale is indeed 'the result of a story being shaped and reshaped' by constant retelling, then the East-West partnership wrought by the words of Anne Geelhaar and Peggy Miller, and the imagery of Francesco Stefani confirmed *The Singing, Ringing Tree* as being within both Bruno Bettelheim's definition of a 'true' fairy story, as 'a unique work of art'; and J.R.R. Tolkien's criteria which synthesises 'Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, [and] Consolation'.⁵⁵ Its innovations within the genre (and extremely stylised, storybook

format) seem, paradoxically, to place it outside a strict periodisation and to imbue the film with a tremendous feeling of weight, and authenticity. It is true to the Grimms' vision, not least because – like their work – it represents a highly creative mediation of popular themes, fears and thoughts, via the imagination of an educated and highly literate interpreter. 'Looser, less fettered than legend', argued Jacob Grimm, 'the Fairy-tale lacks that local habitation, which hampers legend, but makes it the more home-like. The Fairy-tale flies, the legend walks, knocks at your door; the one can draw freely out of the fullness of poetry, the other has almost the authority of history'.⁵⁶ Despite bouts of official criticism and frequent condescension, this remarkable collective work and shared vision fulfilled all these qualities and shone a sharp light upon attempts to bend the genre, and the workings of the human imagination, to the dictates of ideological imperatives. In this way, *The Singing, Ringing Tree* marked the apogee of DEFA's popular and artistic success, and created a point at which the fissures of a divided Berlin, and a divided Europe, might be transcended for a brief and enlightening hour, through the images projected upon a cinema screen, and through the words which encouraged each individual to find the means to realise her, or his, own potential: not by the barrel of gun or through the acquisition of property, but through the gift of imagination and by the call of the heart.

Notes

1. R. Fasold & B. Lauer (eds.), *Ideologie und Phantasie. Grimms Märchen in der DDR*, Brothers Grimm Museum & the Theodor Storm Literary Museum, Kassel & Heiligenstadt, 2012, p25; C. Kamenetsky, *Children's Literature in Hitler's Germany. The Cultural Policy of National Socialism*, Ohio, Ohio University Press, 1984, pp92-93, 194.
2. S. Naithani, *Folklore Theory in Postwar Germany*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2014, p35.

3. Kamenetsky, *Children's Literature in Hitler's Germany*, pp70-74; M. Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1987, p15; J. Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy Tale Films*, London, Taylor & Francis Ltd., 2011, p341; & J. Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm. From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World*, Basingstoke, Palgrave/Macmillan, 2002, pp231-232. Ironically, the stories had also been banned almost a century earlier in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where it was feared that they would foster superstition and threaten the progress of the Enlightenment. See: M.E. Hammond, *Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. The Fairy Tale Brothers*, London, Dennis Dobson, 1968, p101.
4. Naithani, *Folklore Theory in Postwar Germany*, p35.
5. Tartar, *Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, p15.
6. Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm*, pp114-115, 122.
7. Bathrick, 'From UFA to DEFA', pp170, 172.
8. M.J. Moore-Rinoluceri, *Education in East Germany*, Newton Abbot, David & Charles, & Archon Books, Hamden, Connecticut, 1973, pp20-21; D. Haase (ed.), *The Reception of Grimms' Fairy Tales. Responses, Reactions, Revisions*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1993, p190; K. Vanovitch, *Female Roles in East German Drama, 1949-1977. A Selective History of Drama in the GDR*, Frankfurt am Main & Bern, Peter Lang, 1982, pp17, 19; Fasold & Lauer (eds.), *Ideologie und Phantasie*, pp25-26.
9. Q. Shen, *The Politics of Fairy Tales. DEFA Fairy-Tale Films*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2015, pp7-8; V. Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, ed. A. Liberman, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984, pp. xlv-xlv, 157-158.
10. W. Pollatschek & H. Siebert (eds.), *Der Kinder- und Hausmärchen der Bruder Grimm*, 2 vols., East Berlin, Der Kinderbuch Verlag, 1952).
11. D. Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech. The Politics of Culture in the DDR*, London, University of Nebraska Press, 1995, p168; J. Zipes, 'The Struggle for the Grimms' Throne: The Legacy of the Grimms' Tales in the FRG and the GDR since 1945', in Haase (ed.), *Reception*

- of *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, p.191; Fasold & Lauer (eds.), *Ideologie und Phantasie*, pp.12-14, 17; G Kahlo, *Die Wahrheit des Marchens, Halle*, Niemeyer, 1954; W. Woeller, *Der Soziale Gehalt und die Soziale Funktion. Deutschen Volksmarchen der*, Berlin, Humboldt University, 1955; Fasold & Lauer (eds.), *Ideologie und Phantasie*, pp18-19, 30.
12. D. Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech. The Politics of Culture in the GDR*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1995, p173.
 13. Fasold & Lauer (eds.), *Ideologie und Phantasie*, pp25-26.
 14. D. Bathrick, 'From UFA to DEFA: Past as Present in Early GDR Films', in: J. Hermand & M. Silberman (eds.), *Contentious Memories. Looking back at the GDR*, New York, Peter Lang, 1998, p169; Bathrick, *Powers of Speech*, p168.
 15. B. Blessing, 'Defining Socialist Children's Films, Defining Socialist Childhoods', in: S. Allan & S. Heiduschke (eds.), *Re-Imagining DEFA. East German Cinema in its National and Transnational Contexts*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn, 2016, pp250-251.
 16. Bathrick, 'From UFA to DEFA', p173.
 17. Bathrick, 'From UFA to DEFA', pp171, 181.
 18. S. Allan & J. Sandford (eds.), *DEFA. East German Cinema, 1946-1992*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 1999, p.119.
 19. S. Fritzsche, "'Keep the Home Fires Burning". Fairy Tale Heroes in an East German Heimat', *German Politics and Society*, Vol.30 no.4, Winter, 2012, pp46, 56; Blessing, 'Defining Socialist Children's Film', p250, M. Silberman, 'First DEFA Fairy Tales: Cold War Fantasies of the 1950s' in: J.E. Davidson & S. Hake, *Take Two. Fifties Cinema in Divided Germany*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2007, pp106, 109; Heiduschke, *East German Cinema*, pp41, 45-51.
 20. J. Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen. The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2011, p1.
 21. Anon., 'Das Singende, Klingende Baumchen', *Film Spiegel*, Vol.IV no. 13, 1957, p12
 22. Silberman, 'First DEFA Fairy Tales', pp108-109.

23. Silberman, 'First DEFA Fairy Tales', p107; Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen*, p39.
24. P. Hames, *Czech and Slovak Cinema. Theme and Tradition*, Edinburgh, (Edinburgh University Press, 2009 rpt. 2010), pp190-191, 194-195, 201; Silberman, 'First DEFA Fairy Tales', p107; Allan & Sandford (eds.), *DEFA*, pp31-33.
25. The identification of the puppet show and film with Nazi educational programmes which, unlike the experience in Czechoslovakia, had destroyed progressive currents and appropriated and monopolised what was left of the genre may have been another contributory factor. See: Kamenetsky, *Children's Literature in Nazi Germany*, pp205, 208, 210, 213, 215; Fasold & Lauer (eds.), *Ideologie und Phantasie*, pp62-64.
26. Fritzsche, "Keep the Home Fires Burning" p48; Zipes, *Enchanted Screen*, pp324-325, Silberman, 'First DEFA Fairy Tales', p109.
27. Bathrick, *Powers of Speech*, p173; Kamenetsky, *Brothers Grimm and their Critics*, p27.
28. Heiduschke, *East German Cinema*, pp.53-54, 58; Koenig, Wiedemann & Wolf, *Marchen*, pp.21-27; Wiedemann (ed.), *Die DEFA Marchenfilme*, pp.24-29, 50-53, 62-67, 82-83.
29. H. Christian Andersen, *Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales*, London, Ward & Lock Ltd, n/d c.1930), pp78-85; Munz, *Die DEFA Marchenfilme*, pp56-59; J. Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion. The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*, (London, Heinemann, 1983), pp81-82. See also the splendid re-issue of the *Tinderbox* in DVD format by Ice Storm in: *Tales from Europe – The Singing Ringing Tree and the Tinderbox*, (Box Set 7952096, Ice Storm / Network, 1957 & 1959, reissued 2003). It is notable that in re-issuing the films for the UK market, Ice Storm retained Peggy Miller's 'Tales from Europe' collective title.
30. J. Andersen, *Hans Christian Andersen, A New Life*, (trans.) T. Nunnally, New York, Overlook Duckworth, 2005, pp243-244 & 246-247. Significantly, when a British author of teenage fiction attempted a novelisation of *The Tinderbox*, he divorced the story entirely from Christian Andersen's imagination and claimed,

- instead, that it was based upon an, earthier, Grimms' tale. See: J. Reeves, *The Cold Flame*, Harmondsworth. Penguin Books, 1967 rpt. 1970, p.i and back cover.
31. F. Munz, *Die DEFA Märchenfilme*, DEFA-Stiftung und Zweitausendeins, Frankfurt on Main, 2012, pp.76-79, 92-95; Petrie (ed.), *Cinema and the Realms of Enchantment*, p.122; A. Graham, 'The Truth is Out There', *Radio Times*, (10-16 May, 2008), p.136. See also: A. Smith, 'Fast Forward to Fear', *The Scotsman*, 24 May 1999, for an article that entirely missed the point, and thoroughly trivialised the genre.
32. Anon., 'Das Singende, Klingende Baumchen', p.12; & A. Geelhaar & K.-H. Appelmann, *Das Singende Klingende Baumchen*, Berlin, Kiro-Verlag, 993, passim. Selina Hastings has tracked-down other sources drawn from Slavic folklore and Sorbian stories. She notes that: 'A Story called *The Little Singing Ringing Tree* was published in 1801 in a book of fairy tales collected in Braunschweig, a city in Lower Saxony. A reference to the story and the collection appears in the 1812 edition of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's book *Kinder- und Hausmärchen (Children's and Household Tales)* in a note to the tale *Hurleburlebutz*'. See: S. Hastings & L. Brierley, *The Singing Ringing Tree*, New York, New York, Henry Holt & Company, 1988, p.ii.
33. Shen, *Politics of Magic*, p135.
34. Haase (ed.), *Reception of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, pp19-20; Zipes, *Irresistible Fairy Tale*, p143; Paradiz, *Clever Maids*, p189; Kamenetsky, *Brothers Grimm and their Critics*, pp279-287.
35. A. Geelhaar (ed.), *Fortunat und Seine Sohne*, Kinderbuchverlag, Berlin, 1963; A. Geelhaar, *Der Brief aus Odessa*, Kinderbuchverlag, Berlin, 1971; A. Geelhaar & G. Zucker, *Der Kleine Kommandeur*, Kinderbuchverlag, Berlin, 1976; A. Geelhaar, *Der Prinz von Hovinka*, Kinderbuchverlag, Berlin, 1977; D.I. Meyer-Rey (ed.), *Anne Geelhaar – Zum 70 Geburtstag*, Kinderbuchverlag, Berlin, 1984, pp.25-28.
36. A. Geelhaar, *Till Eulenspiegel. Abenteuer und Erlebnisse eines Bauernsohnes*, Kinderbuchverlag, Berlin, 1953; A. Geelhaar, *Der*

- Gebornte Siegfried und Andere Volksbucher*, (Kinderbuchverlag, Berlin, 1956); A. Geelhaar, *Die Stolze Gigaka*, (Kinderbuchverlag, Berlin, 1956).
37. S. Heiduschke, *East German Cinema. DEFA and Film History*, (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013), pp.53-54; Munz, *Die DEFA Marchenfilme*, pp.24-29; & I. Konig, D. Wiedemann & L. Wolf, *Marchen. Arbeiten mit DEFA-Kinderfilmen*, (KoPad, Munich, 1998), pp.21-27.
 38. S. Bergemann, *Gesichter der DEFA / Faces of DEFA*, (Edition, Braus, Heidelberg, 2008), pp.30, 179; Munz, *Die DEFA Marchenfilme*, pp.44-47.
 39. Certainly, it is a scene that has stayed in the consciousness of the present author since he first saw the film as a 5-year-old child.
 40. M. Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde, On Fairytales and their Tellers*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1994, p297; & Petrie (ed.), *Cinema and the Realms of Enchantment*, pp9-10.
 41. Heiduschke, *East German Cinema*, pp22, 25-26.
 42. Shen, *The Politics of Magic*, pp.131-132, H. Hantzsch (ed.), *Und ich Grusse die Schwalben. Der Kinderfilme in Europaischen Socialistischen Landern*, (Henschelverlag Kunst und Gestellschaft, East Berlin, 1985), p.253.
 43. Allan & Sandford (eds.), *DEFA*, pp.7-9, 95, 121, G. Lukacs, *The Destruction of Reason*, trans. P. Palmer, (Merlin Press, London, 1980); Fritzsche, "Keep the Home Fires Burning", pp.48-49, Bathrick, *Powers of Speech*, pp.174, 176-177; E. Bahr & R.G. Kunzer, *Georg Lukacs*, New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1972, pp44, 54, 85, 89-91, 105.
 44. Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, p157.
 45. Meyer-Rey (ed.), *Anne Geelhaar*, passim.
 46. Shen, *The Politics of Magic*, pp92-95, 97; Hantzsch (ed.), *Und ich Grusse die Schwalben*, pp.253-254.
 47. Hantzsch & Stock, *Eine Dokumentation Kinder- und Jugendfilm*, Berlin, Herausgegeben von der Hochschule fur Film und Fernsehen der DDR, 1976), pp51-52.
 48. Bodenstein, *Einmal Prinzessin*, p14.

49. Shen, *The Politics of Magic*, pp136-137.
50. Hantzsche & Stock, *Eine Dokumentation Kinder- und Jugendfilm*, p.52.
51. A. Geelhaar, *Kjambaki. Afrikanische Marchen*, Berlin, Verlag Junge Welt, 1970; A. Geelhaar, *Vogel Titiako. Africanische Tier-Fabeln*, Berlin, Kinderbuchverlag, 1982.
52. Geelhaar, *Das Singende, Klingende Baumchen*; A. Geelhaar & K.-H. Appellmann, *Das Singende, Klingende Baumchen*, Berlin, Kiro-Verlag, 1993.
53. BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading: G. del Strother to C.F.G. Max-Muller, (5 December 1955); J.H. Mewett to C.F.G. Max-Muller, (21 December 1955); & C.F.C. Max-Muller to J.H. Mewett, (23 December 1955); P. Miller, *Belle and Sebastian*, London, BBC Books, 1967.

See also: BBC Written Archives Centre: C.M. Tatham to Peggy Miller, (17 July 1959); A.G. Finch to Peggy Miller, (15 August 1960); A.G. Finch to P. Miller, (11 May 1961); A.G. Finch to P. Miller, (6 June 1961); J.B. Gray to Peggy Miller, (9 November 1961); C.S. Mortimer to Peggy Miller, (14 December 1961); & C.S. Mortimer to P. Miller, (1 May 1962).

54. A more pronounced example of Peggy Miller's skill as a film and script editor can be seen in her treatment of *Three Wishes for Cinderella*, which was also broken into three parts by the BBC. She cut scenes that impeded the flow of the narrative, and which showed the suffering of a fox caught by the huntsmen's hounds. This turned an ambiguous statement by the Czech director, into a forceful example of Cinderella's humanity and concern for the rights of animals; as an earlier scene in which she prevents the prince and his laddish companions from killing a young deer was retained, by Miss Miller, and celebrated.

See also: M. Hudson, 'Return of the Teatime Terror', *The Daily Telegraph*, 30 March 2002, Arts & Books Supplement. The long term impact made by *The Singing Ringing Tree* was registered, in 1988, by the production of a children's book by a British author and illustrator that reproduced the script of Geelhaar and Miller;

and also in the course of a Christmas radio phone-in about 'Lost Children's Film', in 2014. See: Hastings & Brierley, *The Singing Ringing Tree*; & *The Paul O'Grady Show*, BBC Radio 2, 28 December 2014.

55. B. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment. The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, London, Penguin Books, 1975 rpt. 1991, pp12, 150; J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', in *Tree and Leaf*, London, Unwin Hyman Ltd., 964 rpt. 1988, p.44.
56. J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, trans. from the 4th edition by J.S. Stallybrass, London, George Bell & Sons, 1883, Vol.III p.xv.