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Cautionary Tale: Stories Made and Distributed through the Internet

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the journey that experimental texts must undertake as they migrate from other mediated forms of representation to the digital. It will explicitly explore the Internet as the primary context and it will use my first digital text *Red Riding Hood* (6amhoover.com, 2001) as a device to not only talk about my own relationship with mediating existing texts into that which might be considered experimental but also to appraise the evolution and in turn the changing mediation power of the Internet.

KEYWORDS

folk; fairytales; digital culture.

RESUMO

Este artigo explora a jornada que os textos experimentais têm de empreender quando migram de outras formas mediadas de representação para a forma digital. Para isso, explorará explicitamente a Internet como contexto primário e usará o meu primeiro texto digital, *Red Riding Hood* (6amhoover.com, 2001), como um dispositivo para falar não só sobre o meu relacionamento com a mediação de textos existentes para uma forma que poderia ser considerada experimental, mas também para avaliar a evolução e, por sua vez, o poder de transformação da mediação da própria Internet.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

folclore; contos de fadas; cultura digital.

Mediation (as seen through my art-school lens) meant the interposition of influence of media either on a concept or on the object/practice itself. As you worked 'with' mediation in your art you honed a particular acumen for the particular semiotics of media and all those levels of encoding that the broadcast, publication or Internet streamed message endured. My peers and I played and experimented with strategies for the decoding act ultimately developing a finely tuned media literacy and resultant scepticism on the influence media systems have on content and context.

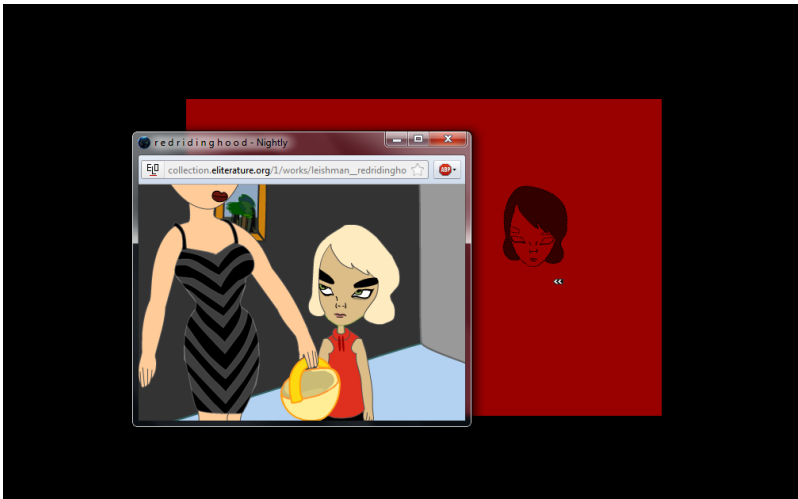


Figure 1. Donna Leishman, *RedRidinghood* (2001) by/on 6amhoover.com.



Figure 2. *Little Red Riding Hood* published London 1810 hand coloured chapbook, British Library. Predates the Grimm Brothers by two years.



Figure 3. Still from 'Rue Faubourg Chanel N°5' Commercial, casting the model Estella Warren as Little Red Riding Hood (2002), director Luc Besson.

The mutability of folk stories through significant cultural and media epochs, such as Orality / Print / Film / Gaming / Internet / Mobile Technologies, is impressively resilient. Like a biological species they descend and modify

throughout their journey down the ages, interweaving and recharging their viability with the necessary interjections from culture, history, additional and or adjacent narratives. Part of this journey has seen folk stories also become an intrinsic part of consumer culture, and in the collective socialness of orality the publisher, producer or broadcaster also became content curators harnessing mediation for commercial (or sometimes critical) advantage and often channeling the decoding act to neatly dovetail into the audiences' expectations. In the context of mass mediated communication, decoding could simply entail the successful 'understanding' of the message (and subsequent sale of a commoditized idea), and within this more cognitively passive approach the characterisations and the *mise-en-scène* of the folk story could become homogenised, lacking some of the psychological shock or attraction that older predecessors contained.¹

With strong natal origins in oral preprint cultures, *Little Red Riding Hood* starts its journey already bathed in referential multiplicities coming to the reader (in terms of narrative structure, associated imagery etc.) as a palimpsest of symbolism and moralizing very much dependent on cultural and geographical context (Zipes, 2001). This plurality interested me when back in 2000 I was researching a narrative to migrate towards becoming non-linear and interactive in form. At the time of *RedRidinghood's* launch early in 2001 the Internet / Web 1.0 was transitioning into Web 2.0 and a somewhat rhizomatic distribution platform populated by personal websites and disobedient or disruptive media art forms. This period provided significant structural opportunity for artists and writers — an almost (in monetary terms) free yet global platform. For me it was also an interesting arena in which to play with hybridising populist/democratic tastes rather than the somewhat de rigueur (for someone art school educated) post-structuralism /critical theory / performative theory axes, but even then there was the sense that one's 'audience' was a loose concept, as readers/viewers 'surfing the Internet'² were relatively (to other mediated channels) free to explore their own tastes and interests, finding new communities, and very much curating their own online experiences. Thus ethnographically observing and understanding this new audience (to create a decoding strategy) became somewhat counter to the mediated characteristic. On hindsight (and perhaps reminiscent of the archetype Narcissus) many of us were simply making / publishing that which we ourselves would enjoy discovering.³ Eventually these individual acts of publishing became semi-mainstreamed via taste making quasi-broadcast platforms and community blogs and then curated and categorized by exhibitions, journals or specialist conferences (Leishman, 2012).

1 The Grimm Brothers can be credited with the beginning of fairy-tale sanitation (Zipes, 2007), whereas Walt Disney carried their moralising standard into the 20th century with the 'Golden' Age Disney productions — giving rise to the colloquial (and negative) term 'Disneyfication.'

2 Early Internet specific metaphor of readers/viewers 'surfing the Internet' was reportedly coined by a US journalist Jean Armour Poll around 1992. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Armour_Polly. With possible earlier origins within Marshall McLuhan (1962) who mentions the image of "Heidegger surf-boards along on the electronic wave as triumphantly as Descartes rode the mechanical wave."

3 As a work around for this intriguing unknown audience *Red Riding Hood* (Leishman, 2001) contained at the end a built in 'What Did You Think' email prompt via a simple href=mailto:girl@6amhoo-ver.com providing a direct email as conduit for insight and feedback.

As the Internet became its own identifiable yet still nebulous media form (i.e. meme cultures, aesthetics of machine vision, fanfiction, etc.) one also witnessed an enfolding of Internet culture (such as it was) with the rise of the paradigm making Dot Com, Information Technology, E-commerce and social media cultures.⁴ If we fast forward to today some sixteen years on, contemporary and popular usage of the Internet now finds a highly monitored, big data (mined) commoditized distribution environment dominated by mass social media and mobile apps/platforms — which in turn offers up different questions around social reality and interrelatedness/ relatedness for remediation texts. Yet I propose something interesting has endured throughout this maturation period, directly linked to natal era Internet practices — people have got accustomed to creating their own playlists, deciding what friends to follow, what pictures to post, and what to say (even if covert commercial manipulation of that agency makes it questionable / aporic). Nobody feels satisfied with traditionally curated content anymore. Nor feels the need (read legal obligation) to necessarily pay for published material.⁵

Another offline impact from Internet practices has been detailed in a recent report commissioned by the BPI (British Phonographic Industry) and ERA (Entertainment Retailers Association) which outlines research findings that young Millennials (up to age 19) use *YouTube* as ‘the’ pervasive platform not only as a video destination but also as a “music app, social platform and educational resource” (Mulligan, 2017) indicating that the hegemonic power of *Facebook* and *Twitter* may soon be over. *YouTube* — the newly crowned pervasive platform — does however create some of its own insidious problems with their AdSense (similar to Amazon’s profitable item-to-item collaborative filtering) and its attempts to nudge us towards a (more) appropriate/relevant/convenient content and contextualised advertising which makes the Millennial’s actual agency a complex matter. Yet the offer of either curating what we want for ourselves or enjoying the convenience of computationally powered suggestions also comes with the promise of when we want it — the always on/available is enabled by the mass uptake of smart phones, mobile computing and Wi-Fi on more the ubiquitous 4G networks. This offers a different kind of mass-ness to experience, some have termed this phenomenon as the “digital deluge” (Coplin, 2014), a term used to categorize the lived experience within the increased (and unending) proliferation of file/content sharing all of which ultimately influences changes in representation, interpretation of expression and communication strategies.⁶

4 See recent examples of World’s Top 10 Internet Companies:

<http://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-25-largest-internet-companies-in-the-world.html> or <http://www.investopedia.com/articles/personal-finance/030415/worlds-top-10-internet-companies.asp>.

5 That said — Netflix.com is clearly leading the way with ‘on demand’ as commercial success — based on the sell that for small fee audience received maximum convenience in accessing both arrange and quality streaming content. Recent developments within Netflix have also seen the company develop their own episodic dramas and Cinema scale films, arguably heralding a return to traditional TV ‘channels’ as platform broadcasters.

6 An impact that has given rise to interesting practices such as ask.metafilter.com, a community resource used to organise and access trending content, images, and hashtags; or Reddit.com, an American social news aggregation, web content rating, and discussion website.

Marina Warner (1994) in *From the Beast to the Blonde* states that to fully understand folk tales you must be aware of the environment they were told or written in: “I began investigating the meanings of the tales themselves, but I soon found that it was essential to look at the context in which they were told, at who was telling them, to whom, and why.” Apply this consideration to the context of Folk narrative and today’s Internet culture (full of the contextually opaque yet ‘actionable’ *Pinterest*, *Tumblr*, etc.) and it becomes hard to ascertain the who, to whom and even the why.

Bruno Bettelheim (1975), when considering the meaning of folk/fairy tales, posited that they “carry important messages to the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious mind, on whatever level each is functioning at the time.” Pre Internet most audiences would have received (and decoded) their folk stories within culturally defined and possibly even learning context.



Figure 4. Walter Crane's 1875 Illustration (p5) offering intertextual interpretation.

Very much in keeping with Bettelheim's notion I discovered — at some formative stage of my creative consciousness — Walter Crane's six penny book published by George Routledge & Sons in 1875. This version of *Little Red Riding Hood* was dominated by Crane's Art Nouveau illustrations, and page 5 in particular shocked me as it depicted a slaving anthropomorphic Wolf. His visualization of the Wolf was a significant interjection deviating from the chapbooks of the era as well as the likes of his contemporary Gustave Doré,⁷ all of whom typically portrayed the wolf very much as a naturalistic creature.



Figure 5. Gustave Doré's Romantic style illustrations appear in an 1867 edition entitled *Les Contes de Perrault*.

⁷ Gustave Doré's illustrations appear in the Perrault 1867 edition.



Figure 6. Gustave Doré's Romantic style illustrations appear in an 1867 edition entitled *Les Contes de Perrault*.

Crane's image did more for my narrative imagination than Charles Perrault's (1697) moralising endnote:

Children, especially attractive, well-bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf. I say 'wolf' but there are various kinds of wolves. There are also those who are charming, quiet, polite, unassuming, complacent, and sweet, who pursue young women at home and in the streets. And unfortunately, it is these gentle wolves who are the most dangerous ones of all.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary audience is now very likely to come across these types of latent narrative images on their screens and via their mobile technology devices – they could be searching them for a purpose or have them algorithmically presented to them as potentially similar to another query – quite different from the serendipity once experienced within an analogue library. A quick UK network Google search for *Little Red Riding Hood* in the 'All' field yielded a modern Google E-book (for purchase) alongside some Wikipedia and British Council resources. The Google 'image search' yielded a sanitized mix of comic and cute imagery offset with some adult goth cosplay outfits – the latter arguably a new kind of signifier to the complexity of this mutable folk tale.

It's hard to predict the next evolutionary turn: Folk tales may be renewed, given the ubiquitous sharing, but they are also more uncoupled from any *a priori* knowledge/contextualised moral teaching. In addition, the rich historical image bank(s) are seemingly diluted by current commercial appropriations. Will these narratives lose their cognitive charge or will the new wave of artists and writers respond by creating new digitally literate/mediated de/re-coding strategies that will re-engage the attraction or even will they simply need to research original context harder? In my introduction I highlighted that mediation as practice yielded in its practitioners a well-crafted media literacy (and dutiful scepticism), thus perhaps as the Internet's culture — and in turn mediation — influences content and context, nimble new generations of artists and writers could also respond by developing a level of creative meta filtering and, like a younger me, locate their own equivalent to Crane's slaving wolf.

Hannelore Daubert (2004) proffered: "For the young people of today, living in a pluralistic world and having to adapt to different sets of values, the ability to formulate one's own judgement and evaluate critically one's environment is more important than ever." If once upon a time preliterate culture's survival depended on its collective social memory (which was passed down to be memorized and constantly re-presented), an even more optimistic perspective would consider that in today it sees an extension of this pre-literate practice, in that the digital deluge provides unprecedented (albeit from your bedroom rather than from a gloomy recess of a cave or around a flickering fire) and instant access to numerous special collection archives⁸ framed by the search engine's accessible cornucopia of artistic treatments — all of which can be democratically shared and then reposted. Could this be considered a different kind of collective imagination (if not memory)? If so, the folk tale skips ahead, ready for another evolutionary moment.

***End Matter**

RedRidinghood (2001) like many of my experimental texts on 6amhoover.com shall imminently face its mediated extinction as the Flash Plug-In required to interact with the project is no longer 'sandboxed' but is outright blocked by mainstream Internet browsers. In the spirit of fully embracing the Internet evolutionary extinction/obsolescence, I have concluded my presentation at the Electronic Literature Organization Conference 2017 by offering attendees a sample of *RedRidinghood* (2017) a new trans-mediation that takes the 2001 era digital text (image, interaction and sound) into analogue format.⁹

⁸ British Library available: <http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts>. Also see the Bodleian and the Harvard Libraries whose archives are digitized and freely accessible to the browsing public.

⁹ Please contact the author via d.leishman@gsa.ac.uk if you'd like to receive a copy in the mail.

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