

Reality, Magic, and Other Lies: Fairy-Tale Film Truths, by Pauline Greenhill

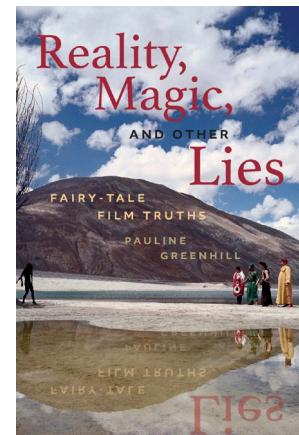


Megan Spring

Pauline Greenhill. *Reality, Magic, and Other Lies: Fairy-Tale Film Truths.*

Wayne State University Press, 2020. Paperback. 268 pg. \$32.99. ISBN 9780814342220.

In her book *Reality, Magic, and Other Lies*, Pauline Greenhill posits that while the terms “fantasy and reality,” and “magic and science” might seem mutually exclusive and at odds, the two sets of ideas should be considered, at times, synonymous. Greenhill equates the English verb lie as synonymous with “*story, fairy tale, and folklore*” in order to expose the nuance between how individuals perceive deceit and how they might perceive narrative in the form of fairytale and folklore (Greenhill 13). She plays on the conception of truth as it is revealed through fictional fairy stories—stories that require the audience to engage with some type of “lie” perpetuated by the creator in both film and book in order to attain truth.



Greenhill’s book is divided into two parts containing a total of eight chapters. Part one, “Studio, Director, and Writer Oeuvres,” discusses films with fairy tale-esque elements, each chapter dwelling explicitly on the relationship between the fantastic and the real world, always exposing the intersectionality between the two. In chapter two, Greenhill closely analyzes four films from LAIKA entertainment studios (*Coraline* [2009], *ParaNorman* [2012], *The Boxtrolls* [2014], and *Kubo and the Two Strings* [2016]), discussing the symbolic overlap between stop-motion animation and the malleable nature of human beings. She ultimately comes to the conclusion that “the linking of animation with reality also thematically connects it to real-world concepts—how films instantiate hegemonic or anti-hegemonic viewpoints, and sometimes both...” (65), thus nuancing her thesis that while fantastical in nature, fairytale speak more truth to the “real world” and its power structures than perhaps participants actually functioning in the real world. In chapter three, she again highlights the intersectionality between the fantastic and reality. Greenhill progresses from animation to focus on live-action media (*The Fall* [2006], *Mirror Mirror* [2012], and *Emerald City* [2017]) by Tarsem. Greenhill focuses more specifically on the intersectionality of magic and science in this chapter, referring to claims she introduced early in the book that magic and science can be synonymous. Building upon her argument in chapter two, in which she posits the relationship between animation and reality as a means to express the relationship between fantasy and reality, in chapter 3 Greenhill presents issues of heterospatiality and heterotemporality as they are manifested in *The Fall* and *Mirror Mirror* respectively, in order to convey a synonymous

relationship between magic and reality. Similarly, she uses *Emerald City* as a means to further her initial claim that depending on one's situated history, science can be seen as magic or vice versa, appealing to her argument that fantasy and reality are foundationally rooted together. Chapter four functions as Greenhill's lynchpin as she moves from animation to live-action and then finally includes herself in the action through a pseudo-autoethnographic study of Luc Picard's work (*Babine* [2008] and *Ésimésac* [2012]), as she travels to Saint-Élie-de-Caxton to record and experience the real life and fictional aspects of Picard's films, who quite literally creates fantastic tales based upon real people and events.

In part two, "Themes and Issues from Three Fairy Tales," chapters five through seven shift from analysis of specific films to use of queer, feminist, and critical race theory to analyze modern renditions of the popular fairy tales "Hansel and Gretel," "The Juniper Tree," and "Cinderella," respectively. Greenhill furthers her argument by looking at perpetuated narrative as a means to decode how reality is represented. Through her readings of the tales, she equates reality (manifested through accepted norms) with a type of fantasy in and of itself. She asserts that accepted reality exists as a means to deceive, as it perpetuates the fantasy of hetero, patriarchal, and Eurocentric norms. Her reading using the aforementioned literary theory adds another perspective to the fairytales, again muddying the line between fantasy and reality even further and, thus, evidencing her initial claim regarding the intersectionality between fantasy and reality, magic and science, deceit and truth. This section of the book answers the call put forth in the title to address the "Other Lies" perpetuated throughout society manifested through the relationship between fantasy and reality.

While no doubt the generally curious would benefit from reading this book, the text is best suited to those with an interest and background in folkloric studies, as some of the jargon and theory (especially in the second half) would require substantial supplementary reading for the lay reader. In addition, while the concept of narrative as fluid irrespective of medium furthers her argument regarding the transcendence of magic, some of Greenhill's nuance could be lost on those not at least somewhat familiar with the films and stories presented throughout the book, even with her ritual plot synopses.

These synopses leave Greenhill's style paradoxically brilliant and mundane, perhaps purposefully so, as her argument is founded on the paradoxically synonymous nature of the fantastic and reality. The self-referential nature of her overarching structure combined with the repeating structure within the actual chapters (she introduces the primary film/story, offers context, then plot summary, and concludes with analysis) serves to represent the repeated formula of fairy tale. While Greenhill's writing can appear formulaic at times and, as a result, become a tad monotonous to wade through, the formulaic structure also serves to facilitate her argument rather brilliantly. Siphoned into two parts (each part containing three subsections) with an introductory and concluding chapter, Greenhill's book essentially mirrors itself—an homage to her cover, which features a shallow pool reflecting the pictured landscape. She quite literally reflects her argument through her structure—fairytales reflects reality...or is it reality that reflects fairytale? Regardless

of the question Greenhill leaves the reader to answer, one can conclude the two are the same. Her autoethnographic journey exploring a remote town in Canada in chapter four poses this question, as it symbolically functions as a portal, a “through the looking glass” scenario where the second half of the book mirrors the first, thus structurally mirroring her argument regarding the blurred boundaries between fantasy and reality, fiction and truth as she moves from animation to actual participant and scholar, getting closer to the fantasy she writes about and the questions she poses.

Megan Spring is a PhD student in Florida Atlantic University's Comparative Study Program with a concentration in the intersectionality of language, literature, and culture. Her research interests include the dualistic binary that exists between folklore and literature, ghostlore and possession in American culture, and narrative structure within American literature. Megan's creative contributions appear in the *Cedarville Review*.