

FAIRY-TALE REALISM. HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN AND THE MODERN WORLD OF
THINGS

REALISMO DE CUENTO DE HADAS. HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN Y EL MUNDO MODERNO
DE LOS OBJETOS

FREDERIKE FELCHT

Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Universität Greifswald/Humboldt Universität zu Berlin
Frederike-Felcht@gmx.de

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Abstract: According to recent research in literary studies, literature has a specific knowledge about things. My contribution supports this thesis by analyzing the world of things in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales. Exemplary readings reveal how Andersen's texts acknowledge the power of things in modern life and how these texts thus question scientific and philosophical concepts of subjectivity that dominated in the nineteenth century. The agency of things in Andersen's texts challenges the ideal of a rational subject that acts autonomously. Current theoretical approaches, notably Actor-Network-Theory, allow us to understand the realism of acting things in Andersen's work. That which is marvelous, which is prevalently used to define the genre Fairy Tale in literary studies, is inherent to modernity. The relationship between magic and modernity is different than expected: modernity consists of an interplay between enchantment and disenchantment.

Key Words: Hans Christian Andersen, fairy-tales, agency of things, modernity.

Resumen: De acuerdo a investigaciones recientes en el ámbito de los estudios literarios la literatura se presenta un conocimiento específico de los objetos. Mi aportación a esta tesis se basa en el análisis del mundo de los objetos en los cuentos de Hans Christian Andersen. Interpretaciones arquetípicas nos revelan cómo la obra de Andersen reconoce el poder de los objetos en la vida moderna y cómo estos textos, por lo tanto, cuestionan concepciones científicas y filosóficas de la subjetividad dominantes en el siglo XIX. En la producción de Andersen la agencia de los objetos desafía el ideal de un sujeto racional que actúa de forma autónoma. Enfoques teóricos actuales, en especial la teoría del actor-red, nos ayudan a comprender el realismo de los objetos actantes en Andersen. Lo maravilloso, usado habitualmente en los estudios literarios para definir el género del cuento de hadas, es inherente a la modernidad. La relación entre lo mágico y lo moderno difiere de lo esperado: la modernidad consiste en una interacción entre el hechizo y el desencantamiento.

Palabras clave: Hans Christian Andersen, cuentos de hadas, agencia de los objetos, modernidad.

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1. Introduction

Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales have a specific knowledge about things. Research of literary scholars like Uwe Steiner (2008: 237-238) or Dorothee Kimmich (2011: 33-34) support the thesis that literary texts explore the agency of things long before cultural studies and sociology (e. g. Böhme 2006; Latour 1995) have discussed this issue intensely. The first part of this contribution focuses on the relationship between modernity and marvelousness in *The Great Sea-Serpent* (1871); the second part shows how *The Red Shoes* (1845) challenges the ideal of the rational subject that acts autonomously.

2. Marvelous Modernity

The beginning of the fairy tale *The Great Sea-Serpent* takes us down into the sea: A "little sea fish of good family" swims together with hundreds of brothers and sisters in the ocean.

"As they were swimming along at their best and thinking of nothing in particular, there sank from above, down into the midst of them, with a terrifying noise, a long, heavy thing which seemed to have no end to it; further and further it stretched out, and every one of the small fish that it struck was crushed or got a crack from which he couldn't recover" (Andersen, 1949).

"What kind of thing was it?" is repeated several times in *The Great Sea-Serpent*, and the little fish starts systematic inquiries in order to answer this question. It investigates the origin of the thing; obtains opinions of other sea dwellers, and gets to the bottom of the problem by swimming to the sea ground and looking closely at the thing.

The readers of the fairy-tale, in contrast, get to know immediately which kind of thing the fish deals with: It is the transatlantic cable that people have sunk between Europe and the USA. However, the cable is a questionable thing not only for fish.

The sea dwellers question the cable, but it remains silent. "[I]t had its own private thoughts, which it had a right to have, considering that it was filled with other's thoughts" (Andersen, 1949; Danish original: "Touget rørte sig ikke, det havde sin aparte Tanke, og en saadan kan Den have, der er fyldt med Tanker" – Andersen, 2003b: 293).

According to this quotation, the privacy of the cable has a complex structure: on the one hand, the thoughts of the cable are separated, impenetrable; on the other hand, they are

other's thoughts. Furthermore, the privacy ('private thoughts') of the cable indicates that it gains independence from its human producers and users. Media transmission transforms the messages that have been sent out. The cable generates a new form of communication: the sea dwellers investigate the functions of the cable and thus resemble the humans of the nineteenth century who discussed the transatlantic cable as a media event.

Finally, the fairy tale characterizes the transatlantic cable:

"The great sea serpent has long been the theme of song and story. It was conceived and born by man's ingenuity and laid on the bottom of the ocean, stretching from the eastern to the western lands, and carrying messages as swiftly as light flashes from the sun to our earth. It grows, grows in power and length, grows year after year, through all oceans, around the world; it is beneath the stormy seas and the glass-clear waters, where the skipper, as if sailing through transparent air, looks down and sees crowds of fishes resembling many-colored fireworks.

Deepest down of all lies the outstretched serpent, a blessed Midgard snake, which bites its own tail as it encircles the earth. Fishes and other sea creatures clash with it; they do not understand that thing from above. People's thoughts rush noiselessly, in all languages, through the serpent of science, for both good and evil; the most wondrous of the ocean's wonders is our time's" (Andersen, 1949).

Helge Kragh, a Danish scholar in science studies, states with reference to this quotation that Andersen's texts always give a positive image of the electromagnetic telegraph (Kragh, 2005: 16). But the passage quoted above is far more ambivalent than Kragh recognizes. The telegraph comprises good and evil. The Danish original supplements "conceived and born" ("født og baaren") with "jumped out" ("sprungen ud") (Andersen, 2003b: 295) and thus emphasizes the dynamic, active character of the cable and its separation from human intentions. The metaphor of "Velsignelsens Midgardsorm" (Andersen, 2003b: 295), which I prefer to translate as "Midgard snake full of blessing" instead of "blessed Midgard snake", combines strong oppositions, since the Midgard snake is a very dangerous figure in Nordic mythology (Sturluson, 1971: 68-74). The Serpent of Science points to the biblical fall of mankind.

This new piece of technology transforms the environment it has entered. The laying of the cable is an encounter with an unknown foreign power:

"further and further it stretched out, and every one of the small fish that it struck was crushed or got a crack from which he couldn't recover. All the fishes, the small and the big as well, were thrown into a panic. That heavy, horrible thing sank deeper and deeper and grew longer and longer, extending for miles – through the entire ocean. Fishes and snails, everything that swims, everything that creeps or is driven by the currents, saw this fearful thing, this enormous unknown sea eel that all of a sudden had come from above.

What kind of thing was it? Yes, we know! It was the great telegraph cable that people were laying between Europe and America.

[...] There were great fear and commotion among all the rightful inhabitants of the ocean where the cable was laid" (Andersen, 1949).

The description of the violent invasion into the natural environment, an environment that seems to have no history, shows parallels to situations of colonial conquest. But the text states the rightfulness of the original inhabitants and the violation of their interests: "There were great fear and commotion among all the rightful inhabitants of the ocean where the cable was laid" (Andersen, 1949). Whether blessing or harm predominates, remains undecided. But the growth of global interconnectedness and power relations is clear; it happens "year after year, through all oceans, around the world" (Andersen, 1949).

Andersen's fairy tale is a "fairy tale of the present age", as it is labeled in its first printed version that was published in the magazine *Illustreret Tidende* in 1871. In 1870, *Illustreret Tidende* had covered the telegraph cable in a long article. Many of Andersen's fairy tales take place in a clearly defined temporal setting. Their relation to concrete historical or contemporary cultural phenomena distinguishes them from the timeless and non-individualized world of things in so-called *Volksmärchen* (folk tales) (Lüthi, 2004: 28, 30, 177-8; Lüthi, 2005: 13, 20-21, 25, 30-31, 39, 55-6). But Andersen's fairy tales differ from the often precisely described historical or contemporary settings of the German *Kunstmärchen*-tradition, represented by E. T. A. Hoffmann, Ludwig Tieck and other authors, too. Literary studies often define the genre of the fairy tale by its marvelous elements (Apel, 1978: 14-28; Klotz, 2002: 10-12; Mayer & Tismar, 2003: 2-3; Neuhaus,

2005: 11-18; Wühl, 2003: 2-3, 5-24). Usually, marvelousness transgresses natural laws. Whereas the so-called Volksmärchen do not justify the existence of marvelous elements, the German Kunstmärchen usually explain their appearance: For example, only the main fictional character perceives the marvelous elements, or they turn out to be part of a dream.

In Andersen's texts this is different, since marvelousness (das Wunderbare) comprises modern technologies, everyday culture, and science. That which is marvelous does not appear in the form of something supernatural, but is part of modern culture: "the strangest fairy tales come from real life" (Andersen, 1949) states the narrator of tales in *The Elder-Tree Mother*. This characterization is also valid for Andersen's fairy tales, since their marvelous elements form no opposition to natural laws, but are connected to their scientific investigation and revision. The root of marvelousness is the expansion of agency through the interplay between human beings and things.

Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory originates in science studies. According to Latour (2007), social science has neglected the agency of things in social processes. Following Latour, Hartmut Böhme (2006) traces back the neglect of the important role of things to philosophical concepts of subjectivity that became influential during the nineteenth century. Andersen's texts, in contrast, acknowledge the agency of things and the enchantment of the world by means of technological inventions.

3. The Invalidity of the Autonomous Subject

A powerful thing is a key element of *The Red Shoes* (1845), a fairy tale which resembles a traditional folk tale at first glance. Space and time seem to be unspecified, which is typical of folk tales according to Max Lüthi (2005: 20-1). But a closer look reveals that the red shoes which attract little Karen's attention and increasingly control her legs situate the fairy tale in a precise historical constellation.

Karen is a poor orphan. A rich lady adopts her and tries to educate her. Karen is supposed to become a neat, Christian and chaste girl. On the occasion of her confirmation, Karen gets new clothes. The shoemaker presents his commodities in a modern way: "In his shop were big glass cases, filled with the prettiest shoes and the shiniest boots. They looked most attractive [...]" (Andersen, 1949). The presentation of the shoes gives them aura in Walter

Benjamin's sense. According to Benjamin, aura is "the unique appearance of a distance, however close the thing that it calls it forth" (Benjamin, 1999: 447). The shoes take possession of Karen; their aura lends them power. The presentation of the product takes place after having been rejected by an earl; the shoes are not produced for Karen, but have entered the market as a commodity. They are an object of transition between traditional manual production and capitalistic form of sales. Thus, they reflect the economic structure of Denmark in 1845, which is characterized by industrial modes of production in agriculture and an increasing significance of commerce, but a relatively late industrialization of other branches of production (Busk-Jensen et al., 1985: 16-17; Løkkegaard, 1994: 6-52; Sørensen, 1973: 57-59).

The shoes have the status of a transitional object in many regards: Karen's social advancement is connected to the shoes, and the shoes gain importance on the thresholds of Karen's life course which are linked to rites of passage like the confirmation.

Even though she is forbidden to do so, Karen wears the shoes in church. In her perception, the shoes and the chalice become indistinct. In this scene, the separation between holy and profane – which is most important for the definition of religion according to Émile Durkheim (1994: 61-68) – loses its potential to structure society. The shoes carry the magical power out of church instead. Henceforth, the shoes move Karen and her feet do not have power any longer – the things subject the human being. The empowerment of things and the disempowerment of human beings, the libidinous connection between customer and commodity and the permanent movement of the shoes that begins soon after the church scene remind us of Karl Marx's descriptions of commodity fetishism and the circulation of commodities (Marx, 1962). However, in contrast to Marx, the text does not relate the power of the shoes and their permanent movements to the capitalistic abstraction from production processes enabled by money, but rather it indicates that the shoes have power for various reasons.

When Karen visits a ball with her shoes instead of taking care of her adoptive mother, she cannot stop dancing. Her shoes dance her into a dark forest, where she meets a grim angel holding a sword. The angel tells her:

"Dance you shall! [...] Dance in your red shoes until you are pale and cold, and your flesh shrivels down to the skeleton. Dance you shall from door to door, and wherever there are children proud and vain you must knock at the door till they hear you, and are afraid of you. Dance you shall. Dance always" (Andersen, 1949).

Karen has to dance through the nights alone, and she is injured by the plants around her.

Finally, she asks the executioner to cut her feet off and he makes a prosthesis for Karen. He teaches her the psalms of sinners and she kisses his hands before leaving. She enters the family of a pastor as a servant and lives there humbly, serious, faithful, and quietly; but she does not dare to visit the church. The fairy tale ends with a vision shortly before Karen's death, which she experiences in her little room. She sees the angel again, but his sword has become a "green branch, covered with roses".

"He touched the walls and they opened wide. She saw the deep-toned organ. She saw the portraits of ministers and their wives. She saw the congregation sit in flower-decked pews, and sing from their hymnals. Either the church had come to the poor girl in her narrow little room, or it was she who had been brought to the church. She sat in the pew with the pastor's family. When they had finished the hymn, they looked up and nodded to her.

'It was right for you to come, little Karen,' they said.

'It was God's own mercy,' she told them.

The organ sounded and the children in the choir sang, softly and beautifully. Clear sunlight streamed warm through the window, right down to the pew where Karen sat. She was so filled with the light of it, and with joy and with peace, that her heart broke. Her soul traveled along the shaft of sunlight to heaven, where no one questioned her about the red shoes" (Andersen 1949).

Peer E. Sørensen (1973: 195) qualifies the fairy tale as a regular, pietistic story of conversion and points to the motive of the poor girl that aims for social advancement, suffers for her ambition and finds the right place in the end, as a servant. Eigil Nyborg (1962: 167-8) interprets the angel as the law of rationality that prevails in the end. But Finn Hauberg Mortensen (1993) contradicts interpretations that judge the end as Karen's

successful re-integration in existing social structures, since they naively overlook the brutality of the fairy tale.

I agree with Mortensen. To underline his statement, I suggest taking a closer look at the role of things in the fairy tale. Nyborg and Sørensen implicitly define society as an association between human beings. Their interpretations include the ideal of the autonomous subject, an ideal that understands human action as independent of, or even in opposition to the material world of things. Latour (2007) has shown that this concept of society is dominant in modern sociology. In contrast, Andersen's text shows the impossibility of such autonomy.

Social order is radically restituted at the end of the fairy tale. The cutting off of her feet re-establishes Karen's low social position. The association of social advancement with the shoes is still valid with their loss: Karen's social decline is irreversible. Whether Karen's servant position is the right place, remains unclear. "It was right for you to come, Karen", says the family – the Danish original writes "Ret", the capital letter indicating a noun (Andersen, 2003a: 353). "Ret" oscillates between being right and being law. In our world, "Ret" has the form of the sword of the angel or the axe of the executioner. The law of rationality that demands the repression of material desire has become excessive and thus lost its rationality. In her inspiring interpretation, which is based on a positive understanding of fetishism, Erin Mackie (2001: 234) declares: "the censure of Karen's fetishism itself works through fetish supernaturalism". The red shoes do not only fascinate and control Karen, but also her environment. The anti-fetishism of human society is no less obsessive than the fetishism it promotes by new forms of presenting its products for sale.

In his first appearance, the words of the angel are of utmost cruelty – maybe the cruelest words even in Andersen's complete fairy tale collection that comprises more than hundred texts. Karen's attempts to free herself from given roles and pursue happiness are punished. She has to pay for the power that she allows her shoes. But the only possibility to escape the power of the shoes is the loss of a part of her self, its replacement by a prosthesis, and extreme poverty. Salvation and death occur at once.

The presentation of commodities generates demand; the shoes symbolize social advancement and they allow the realization of personal interests. Longing for the shoes

cannot be suppressed without amputating the self. The autonomous subject that subordinates sensual pleasures entirely to the fulfillment of duties is an invalid. And even the amputated self remains under the spell of the thing that Karen once longed for, the continuously dancing shoes.

The moment of mercy is reached when nobody asks for the red shoes. Karen cannot reach this moment in this world. Thus, the text acknowledges the power of things and expounds the problems caused by the social neglect of this power. From this perspective, Andersen's text shows parallels to Hartmut Böhme's *Fetischismus und Kultur* (2006). In his cultural theory, Böhme investigates and criticizes discourses on fetishism by emphasizing the important role of things in social structures. Anti-fetishism is no less problematic than fetishism.

4. Literature: A self-reflexive commodity

The amputation in *The Red Shoes* indicates that there is no alternative to the link between human beings and things, even though this relation is full of risks. Literature, however, is part of this relation and can critically reflect on it at the same time. *The Red Shoes* and *The Sea Serpent* deal with the power of things in modernity and reflect its ambivalences.

Other fairy tales like *The Flax* (1848), *The Rags* (1868) or *Auntie Toothache* (1872) develop a self-reflexive dimension by pointing to their own materiality. These fairy tales tell the biographies of texts, biographies that include the industrialized production of paper or the painful process of writing texts. From an optimistic perspective, the self-reflexive dimension of this commodity literature offers an alternative to forgetting the origins of the commodity in general, which is criticized by Karl Marx.

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