

The psychology of enchantment

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Transfixed
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Scope

Myth and fairytale imagery has long been used in communication campaigns. From Sex and the City's Kim Cattrall as Goldilocks in an Andersen-inspired Pepsi commercial to Cinderella meeting her Prince Charming in a 'priceless' Mastercard ad. And then there was Luc Besson's magical Little Red Riding Hood campaign for the Chanel No 5 fragrance. The only thing as iconic as a bottle of Chanel No 5, it seemed, was a fairy tale.

Hairstyling brand ghd used the characters Rapunzel, Red Riding Hood and Cinderella in their 'Twisted Fairytales' campaign. And adorning Cornish brewery Skinner's Christmas Ale is an illustration of a Cornish Tin Mine Fairy – an effective weaving of myth into the brand story. According to folklore, fairies would make knocking noises in mines to guide the miners to the richest seams of tin.

Most recently, cult author Neil Gaiman ran a collaborative fairytale experiment on Twitter. The finished (edited) tale, *Hearts, Keys and Puppetry*, is being released as a free audiobook on the BBC's site and iTunes. There were 10,000 tweets submitted for inclusion in the tale – an "overwhelming" response testament to the public's lasting fascination with myth.

So, fairy tales clearly work in pulling in an audience. But why? We asked Thought Leader and semiotician Alex Gordon to talk us through the psychology of enchantment.

Why are fairy tales so engaging?

There are two main reasons; one, they take us back to our childhood and back to the first impressionable story we heard which enabled us to orient ourselves in the world and understand the human condition. In adulthood, they take us back to these very primal emotional moments when we first heard them, and they remain very powerful ways of communicating with adults because they tap into highly charged emotions which were formed in childhood.

The second reason they work so well is because their structure weaves in powerful psychological conditions which affect all of us. It's a reminder of childhood emotions, and a prompt to adult psychological conditions – fear, love, hope, pleasure, challenge, reward, victory, overcoming of problems. All of these fairy tales are a classic narrative form which we live out in our lives.

There is therefore a very compelling reason for using them in campaigns. For one, they take us back to Jungian psychology in many ways, following what Jung called the collective unconscious – they are shared values, shared attitudes, shared emotions. Because a mass audience has heard these fairy tales – and this is often across cultures as well – they're very good ways of communicating a lot of information in a very short period of time to a large audience who share common cultural codes.

Can you think of any particularly effective examples in advertising?

The most recent campaign I can think of is Smirnoff's 'There'. Any advert set in a deep forest suggests a removal from the conventions of normal life, and the expression of pleasure, fear and heightened emotion – which is an escape from the everyday. And Smirnoff have leveraged this with images of people going into a forest and wearing masks of animals and extravagant characters (like snow queens) so they communicate the Smirnoff brand as an escape from ordinary life and a challenge to convention, and also a narrative of fear, excitement, etc.

The second one is a brand which has leveraged fairytale imagery successfully over a long period of time, and that's Nurofen in the UK. Nurofen have consistently used images of feral beasts in a forest, or minotaurs in a labyrinth, all of which are mythic images which tap into very deep Freudian and Jungian psychic archetypes. These signal traumatic experience and pain which Nurofen acts as an antidote to overcome, and, crucially, by using those images they signal that Nurofen is not merely relief of a headache but relief of a deep psychological trauma. And that's why they're the market leader as opposed to key competitors like Anadin, who haven't used similar imagery and therefore only connote basic headache relief. Nurofen dominate and own 'pain' because they're offering to suppress a trauma –

rather than just cure headache, which is merely the symptom of the trauma.

Why do you think they work in the current climate?

In semiotic terms, the updating and reworking of fairy tales is a well-established technique for communicating how stories about fear challenge a range of emotional responses in adult narrative.

In childhood, fairy tales effectively do two things: they work unconsciously and consciously to support and free the child. So they tell the child that the world is full of fear and danger, but that danger can be overcome. And it works in precisely the same way for adults. Where fairy tales support and free the child, brands will use fairy tale imagery to position the product as the supporter and freer of the adult. Those brands which use fairy tale imagery in their communications take on the role of fairy tale for adults.

It's been suggested that all stories are dependent on the classic semiotic construction of fairy tales – that is, the hero overcoming trials or the image of the Princess, for example. That is why, in this context, adults respond very powerfully to fairy tales. And the reason it's so relevant now, in advertising, is that we're in a state of tremendous social, political, economic and cultural flux – because of climate change, because of the economy, because of war. And it's in those conditions of flux that human beings are at their most anxious. Use of fairytale imagery – with its supporting and freeing the child, and there's usually a positive ending – enables humans to empower themselves and find positive endings in times of difficulty. And a brand which positions itself as a positive brand is essentially positioning itself as a solid antidote, representing comfort in an era of deep psychic uncertainty.

A narrative of fear and excitement
Smirnoff ©

Further reading

Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, available [here](#)

Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, available [here](#)



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