



A Wolf's Queer Invitation: David Kaplan's Little Red Riding Hood and Queer Possibility

Author(s): Jennifer Orme

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David Kaplan's *Little Red Riding Hood* and Queer Possibility

Notwithstanding the cross-dressed wolf, the story of "Little Red Riding Hood" has not been perceived to be a particularly queer tale. Rather, since at least the publication of Charles Perrault's canonical version, it has been interpreted as the definitive cautionary tale to never stray from the path. Queer reading, however, is all about straying from the path, particularly one built on binary oppositions between masculine and feminine, active and passive, and heterosexual and homosexual.¹ Just as the multiple versions of the oral folktale and the literary fairy tale make finding a universal meaning or purpose for any tale difficult and problematic, queer theory resists stable definition or easily repeatable reading practice.²

What can be asserted relatively confidently is that, following the most well-known versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" by Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, the tale is usually recognized as the quintessential instantiation of stranger danger, which typically opposes an active male predator to a passive female victim. A queer reading of any particular version of the tale should focus on the ways that sexuality, gender, and desire trouble the tale's putative warning. My reading of David Kaplan's 1996 short film *Little Red Riding Hood* explores the ways in which the representation of the wolf figure, a reordering of cinematic narrative structural hierarchies, and the presence of celebrity intertexts offer what I call a queer invitation to reassess the relationship between the girl and the wolf in the less well-known folkloric version of the story, "The Story of Grandmother." In this essay I look closely at the film to examine the ways in which its so-called perversity works to challenge

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heteronormative hegemonic discourses about “Little Red Riding Hood” and the binary structures that support them.³

Charles Perrault penned “Le Petit Chaperon Rouge,” the first literary version of the tale, in 1697 and is responsible for giving the girl her distinctive headwear and for not providing her with an escape from the wolf’s attack. Perrault also includes a moral that specifically links the wolf to male sexual predators and warns young women that it is “no surprise” that they should be attacked if they are imprudent enough to be fooled by these men. By the time the Grimms finished tinkering with their version of the tale in 1857, Little Red Cap had grown younger, her mother’s instructions had expanded to include lessons in etiquette, a fortuitous hunter with excellent hearing appeared to free the girl and her granny from the snoring wolf’s belly, and the girl and Granny were given another chance to demonstrate the lessons they had learned in a coda in which they beat the wolf all by themselves. Contemporary popular versions for children, such as David McPhail’s “Little Red Riding Hood” (1995), tend to follow the Grimms’ version more closely than Perrault’s, but they remove all the sexuality, violence, death, and even poor Granny’s wine from the narrative. In McPhail’s tale Granny hides in the wardrobe, Red hides under the bed, and the last they see of the wolf, “He was running down the path, followed closely by a hostile crowd” (46). This bloodless, sexless, boozeless version is the one that my millennial students grew up with, and it is the version that has stuck with many of them as the “authentic” version of the tale as the ultimate warning of stranger danger.

David Kaplan’s film *Little Red Riding Hood* is an adaptation, not of Perrault or the Grimms but of “The Story of Grandmother,” an early French oral version collected by Achille Millien in the Nièvre region of France in the late nineteenth century and published in English in 1956 by Paul Delarue in *The Borzoi Book of French Folk Tales*. Kaplan cites Jack Zipes’s *Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (1993) and Robert Darnton’s *Great Cat Massacre* (1984) as the primary textual sources for his adaptation of “The Story of Grandmother” (D. Kaplan). Once a little known variant to English-language audiences, the English translation is now regularly included in university courses and units on fairy tales and circulates on the Internet.⁴ Anecdotal evidence also suggests that Kaplan’s film is often taught in conjunction with the textual English translation. However, in 1997, when the film played the film festival circuit, including the Sundance Film Festival, this version of the tale was not generally known outside folkloristic circles. Nevertheless, although “The Story of Grandmother” is now more widely available, Perrault’s and the Grimms’ versions and their attendant interpretations of the tale as first and foremost victim-blaming rape narrative⁵ or generalized stranger danger cautionary tale arguably remain the pre-texts for most contemporary creators and audiences today.

Kaplan's adaptation of "The Story of Grandmother" plays on temporal confusion, providing a "once upon a time" setting with references to classical music and contemporary pop culture. In an online interview from 2009, Kaplan admits, "One of the fun things about adapting these stories is that an audience approaches them with so many preconceptions. It appeals to my mischievous side to subvert those expectations" (Kohn, "Exclusive Interview"). The film plays audience knowledge of what "Little Red Riding Hood" is supposed to be against a less well-known version of the text and temporally layered intertextual and extratextual references. The voice-over narration of the tale recalls the oral folk tradition from which it derives and is laid over the black and white performance of nonspeaking actors, which itself recalls early silent film. The instrumental soundtrack, Claude Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894), cites the musical and balletic high art of modernism; and the celebrity of its voice-over narrator, Quentin Crisp, evokes the early days of dominant straight culture's interest in gay culture. Narratively the film troubles expectations raised by the title by offering a girl (Christina Ricci) who has sexual agency and seeks out her wolf (Timour Bourtasenkov) rather than being his victim. Its visual hybridity is also surprising, incorporating dance and puppetry as well as a *mise-en-scène* that shifts between natural forested locations and artificial interior set design inspired by German Expressionism.

Perhaps the most outstanding surprises to audiences familiar with canonical versions of the tale are the visual and verbal differences from Perrault and the Grimms. In Kaplan's film the girl comes across the wolf in a glade and watches him covertly well before he ever sees her. When she arrives at Granny's house after him, she is instructed by the disguised wolf to partake of some meat and wine that are actually the flesh and blood of her grandmother, and when she is accused by a cat of being a slut for doing so, she does it anyway. Once she has eaten, the wolf, wearing Granny's nightcap and hiding his face behind the bedsheets, tells her to undress and get into bed. The girl asks what to do with each article of clothing and performs a slow and flirtatious striptease as she is told to throw each item (apron, dress, long stockings, petticoat, bloomers) into the fire because she "won't need them any more." When the presumably naked girl eventually crawls into bed, the narrator goes through the traditional litany of "What big . . . you have" as the girl leans toward and strokes each part of the wolf and he pulls back, shielding himself behind the bedsheet. As they reach the final "What a big mouth you have.—The better to eat you with, my child!" the wolf leans in for a kiss. But now the girl pulls away and tells him she must "go make caca" outside. The wolf makes a disgusted face and permits her to go. The narrator says that she unties the woolen rope he has tied to her leg and escapes. But she does not simply leave: the girl hides behind a tree eating a plum as she watches the wolf's melodramatic lament at

her loss. She tosses the plum at him and ensures he can see her before running off through the woods. In the words of the voice-over narrator: "He ran after her but arrived at her house just at the moment she closed the door." Significantly, Kaplan does not provide a shot of the closing door, instead there is a slow fade from the eroticized and exuberant chase scene to an extreme close-up of the wolf's claw gently caressing down the girl's nose to her lip.

Although the film is taught in university classrooms, little scholarship has engaged with it, other than brief mentions in relation to other recent fairy-tale films.⁶ In his recent, wide-ranging gloss of fairy-tale films, *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films* (2011), Jack Zipes provides a clear and unequivocal interpretation of the film. He argues that "there is nothing ambiguous about the emphasis of the film: it focuses on female desire and a female gaze that rejoice in a young woman's artful and playful way in which she seduces an androgynous wolf" (151). This interpretation is supported by Kaplan himself, who, in his commentary on the DVD, says that it is "about a young woman who is really putting a toe in the water and exploring and celebrating her sexuality without sordidness. And she remains in control. She doesn't have to be rescued by a huntsman, nor is she punished for this exploration, which is in direct contrast to the better known versions of 'Little Red Riding Hood' by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm" (D. Kaplan).

Reviewers of the DVD, with varying degrees of knowledge of the long and rich history of "Little Red Riding Hood," also tend to lug the baggage she has carried with her since Perrault and the Grimms. Their responses indicate discomfort with the altered and unexpected relationship between the girl and the wolf. The words *twisted* and *creepy* appear again and again in reviews. The film is "a twistedly beautiful nightmare" (Bloody Disgusting Staff), a "provocative infusion of sexual deviance" (Kohn, review), and a "perverse retelling of the classic fairy tale" (Striegel). For one reviewer the film has "disturbing implications"; it "provides an uneasy mix of female empowerment and disturbing pedophilia"; the girl "knows what The Wolf wants and chooses to play along with his game"; and the wolf is an "unsavory marauder looking to have his way with her" (McKiernan). For others the wolf is read as "depraved" (Kohn, review) or "lecherous" (Musetto).

Whereas for Zipes and Kaplan the film's focus is on the girl's sexual agency, for these reviewers the focus is on the dangerous and even creepy sexual relationship between the girl and the wolf. They tend to concentrate on the wolf's predatory nature as much as or more than on the girl's agency, which tends to be discounted or overshadowed by his presumed desire for her. I contend that the reviewers' responses are informed more by their expectations about what the tale of "Little Red Riding Hood" should look like, the ones Kaplan likes to mischievously subvert, than on what is actually depicted in the film. Further,

the “sexual deviance,” perversity, “disturbing implications,” and “mix of female empowerment and disturbing pedophilia” they identify mark this film as representing nonnormative gender and sexual positions and thus also as potentially queer.

Catherine Orenstein’s argument about the importance of the history of “Little Red Riding Hood” suggests that overarching, monolithic interpretations are problematic and do not take into account variance between tales or ideological changes over time (75). At the same time, the stress placed on gender and power in fairy-tale studies also carries over, in one way or another, into new versions.⁷ Thus, although they may be reversed, the binary oppositions—girl/wolf, female/male, child/adult, prey/predator, animal/human, nature/culture, powerless/powerful—are reinforced in most versions and interpretations of the tale.

Many adaptations of the tale, especially contemporary ones, reverse the players associated with the binaries. For example, the girl becomes predator in simple reversal tales, or in more postmodern examples Granny, girl, wolf, and woodsman shift positions. Yet although the players may move freely around the board, the binaries themselves are often left intact. For example, one may have trouble figuring out who is predator and who is prey in the “Little Red Riding Hood” adaptation *Hard Candy* (2005), and Red, Granny, and the Wolf may ultimately be working on the same side in *Hoodwinked!* (2004); but even when it is difficult to see who is “good” and who is “bad,” the seemingly natural order of the good/bad binary is always there, structuring the relationships.

Following Judith Butler’s revelation that “*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*”; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself” (“Imitation” 1520; emphasis in original), queer theory works to both expose and destabilize other center-margin structures. That is, queer theory does not simply seek to reverse the relations between center and margin in binary structures; it demonstrates that in order for the privileged term to be privileged, it has to be dependent on the secondary term for its definition. Like queer theory itself, the concept of queer reading is adaptable and will not necessarily work in the same ways for all texts. Nevertheless, although queer is a term that resists fixed definition, queer reading will, pretty consistently, focus on sex, gender, and desire. In her early *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1996), Annamarie Jagose argues: “Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability—which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect—queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire” (3). My queer reading is based on recognition of nonnormative

gendering of the figure of the wolf and the mismatches between his presumed heterosexual aggression and his representation in Kaplan's film. In many ways the girl, as incarnated by Ricci, is typical of post-second-wave feminist fairy-tale heroines. She is clever, active, and in control of her own actions and surroundings. The wolf, however, is less typical of fairy-tale villains; in fact, I argue that he is not really a villain at all. Rather, his androgyny and shifting sexual desires mark him as a queer subject. In addition, this reading points to the ways that dominant interpretations of "Little Red Riding Hood" tend to depend on and lock in binary oppositions of wolf/girl, adulthood/childhood, male/female, and villain/victim.

Queer insists that the power of the myth of the normal, dominant, and natural is very much indebted to its opposing myth of the abnormal, minor, and perverse. Judith Halberstam's discussions in *The Queer Art of Failure*, for example, open the way for perverse readings of popular culture that offer possibilities for resistance to hegemonic notions of "success." The reviews of Kaplan's *Little Red Riding Hood*, though, seem to indicate an investment in a stable and uncomplicated understanding of what is normal and what is perverse, particularly in relation to heterosexual seduction and desire.

The flirtation and striptease, not to mention the final erotic scene, leave no question that this is a tale of heterosexual desire. And yet the privileging of the girl's gaze, the representation of the wolf as a tightly costumed, mildly androgynous Goth-boy *danseur*, and his sexual innocence and curiosity create space for a queer reading that recognizes this version of the tale as disruptive of heteronormative assumptions about male-female sexual relations and desire. In conjunction with the representation of the wolf, the film further complicates the heteronormative nature of the tale by aligning him with gay male culture through the celebrity intertext of the *danseur* Vaslav Nijinsky. The narration of the tale by Quentin Crisp also adds another layer to the film's potential queerness. Elsewhere I have argued that queer reading is produced by attention to the desires represented in both the text and the text's structure (Orme, "Mouth to Mouth," "Happily Ever After"). As I detail later in this essay, *Little Red Riding Hood* adds another, extratextual dimension to the queer invitation through celebrity intertexts. As Anne Duggan shows in her discussion of gay celebrity intertexts in *Queer Enchantments*, "for the informed adult viewer" the presence of a well-known gay celebrity in a heterosexual role "creates an aesthetic and even ironic distance between actor and role" (50). This distance is perhaps even greater in *Little Red Riding Hood* because neither Nijinsky nor Crisp appears as an actor on the screen. Rather than primarily creating ironic commentary on heterosexual relationships depicted in the film, for the informed viewer these celebrity intertexts bring gay culture to multiple levels of the film's discourse.

The film reconfigures the hierarchical relationship between visual and aural channels. It highlights the distinction between visual images, oral voice-over narration, and aural soundtrack, each offering something to the queer invitation. Rather than the seamless integration of the multichannel form of classical film narrative, *Little Red Riding Hood* draws attention to each of the component parts that create the whole. Cinematically the film explicitly exploits its multitrack medium: the visual images are in black and white and, as in silent film, there is no dialogue between the actors. Rather, "The Story of Grandmother" is narrated, offscreen, by Quentin Crisp. The extradiegetic soundtrack, Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, creates a dreamy atmosphere that emphasizes the at times sexually suggestive, suspenseful, and/or comical action of the film. As Zipes notes, "Kaplan's images and the actions of the characters often contradict the words spoken by the narrator. Nobody speaks in this film except the narrator, and his words are countered by the movements of the characters beyond his control" (*Enchanted Screen* 151). The distinct separation between the visual, verbal, and musical channels highlights the multiple levels on which film narrative is produced and also provides space for dissonance between visual and auditory narration. I contend that, in conjunction with the representation of the wolf and the celebrity intertexts of Nijinsky and Crisp, these spaces also provide room for queer possibility or the queer invitation.

In 1988 Donna Haraway argued that the unmarked and disembodied gaze of dominant heterosexual white masculinity that "claim[s] the power to see and not be seen, [and] represent[s] while escaping representation" absents itself from specificity by playing the "god trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (581). To curtail the power of the god trick, says Haraway, feminist thought needs to imagine objectivity informed by situated knowledges. She asserts that "only partial perspective promises objective vision" and therefore that "feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see" (583). These insights are relevant to my arguments about queer invitation and queer possibility in my reading of Kaplan's film.

Although Haraway's "Situated Knowledges" was published in the 1980s, before the emergence of queer theory, and although Haraway does not explicitly address nonnormative sexualities or even heteronormativity as a contrivance of the god trick, her arguments are easily adaptable to queer theorizing. If queer remains partial, indeterminate, fragmentary, and resistant to stability and yet hopes to support its claims with some kind of verifiable objectivity, then partial, embodied, and self-responsible situated knowledge would seem to be the logical way to go. Alexander Doty's notion of how things "might be understood" as

queer acknowledges this partiality of perspective through its emphasis on epistemological constructs rather than the ontological status of a text as queer or straight. For this reason, here and elsewhere (Orme, “Mouth to Mouth,” “Happily Ever After”) I have attempted to look at the ways in which some fairy-tale texts issue queer invitations. Recognizing that queer reading is not a way of “doing something” to texts that are, by the magic of the god trick, inherently straight, suggests that queer reading is a form of situated knowledge. “While it is frequently politically strategic to assume an essentialist position and critically examine how ‘most people’/dominant culture might understand things, it is also politically important, if queer readings are to stand up as legitimate readings in their own right, to articulate how other people might understand things *without reference to* these dominant cultural readings” (Doty 6; emphasis in original). Similarly, Cristina Bacchilega, in her recent work on the politics of wonder and the fairy-tale web, also insists that “a lot will depend not only on where cultural production is located but also on where and from which knowledge systems, cultural *habitus*, and critical agendas the reader or interpreter accesses the fairy-tale web” (*Fairy Tales Transformed* 27).

If we accept knowledge systems that are situated and interpreted without reference to dominant cultural readings, we will find, as Haraway suggests, that we “are bound to seek perspective from those points of view, which can never be known in advance, that promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination” (585). I suggest that queer is one of these perspectives. When we suspend the expectations of the relationship between the girl and the wolf that assume one of them must be a predator and the other prey, we can see that the relationship in Kaplan’s film is not about domination. It is flirtatious, playful, and consensual. If anything, the wolf/boy is by turns confused, bemused, shy, intimidated, intimidating, coy, joyful, childlike, and curious. The girl, a little more goal oriented, seems to have fewer emotional shifts. She is the instigator in this sexual relationship and is represented as such at every point in the film, from her first voyeuristic glimpse of his dance to her instigation of the final chase scene and slow dissolve to the extreme close-up of her expression during the last erotic moment of the film. She sees the wolf. She wants the wolf. She flirts with the wolf. She gets the wolf. But there is no indication that she dominates the wolf—or that he dominates her. The desire between the two is mutual; the wolf may not be as accomplished at seduction, but he does not lose a battle of wits or wills. If sex is the prize, the end of the film suggests that they both win.

The film directs attention to the girl as protagonist and the figure with whom we identify from the first shots. The girl sits on a riverbank with a baby goat; she turns and stares down into the water at her own reflection. The camera shows her contemplating her own face until she waves her hand through the water,

disturbing the reflection. When the water is almost settled, the girl is staring both at her reflection and directly into the camera. This shot, of a watery, wavy young woman's face looking directly into her own eyes, and into ours, works the cinematic magic of aligning the viewing audience with the girl's gaze. The next shot is of the girl wandering through a forest and the narration begins: "Once there was a girl." She comes to pause behind a tree, looking through its branches as the narrator says, "In the woods she met a wolf." The girl gazes through the trees at a wolf/man who rises, stretches, and writhes sensually on the forest floor as he wakes from sleep. Intercut with shots of the girl watching him, the wolf dances in the glen, clearly reveling in his own body, grace, and strength. Finally, he leaps into the air and when he lands, crouched, he seems to sense that he is being watched (fig. 1). An eye-line match and shot/reverse-shot to the girl establishes eye contact between the two. The girl turns away and the wolf rises to follow. Once again his body is the focus in a fixed close-up shot. He slowly ascends through the frame, head and torso rising out of the shot which then lingers for a moment on his genitalless groin and powerful thighs as he steps toward the camera and then leaps to meet the girl.

Following Laura Mulvey's foundational explanation of the gaze in cinema, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), the woman in classical Hollywood cinema denotes "to-be-looked-at-ness" (11). She is the desired erotic



Fig. 1. The wolf, as depicted in David Kaplan's *Little Red Riding Hood* (1997).

object of the male character, the masculine camera, and (presumed) male spectator, argues Mulvey. Woman's presence as the object of the desiring gaze pauses the narrative action of the film (11). Certainly Christina Ricci is beautiful and desirable; however, just as often, the shots of Bourtasenkov, particularly when he dances, stop the narrative and demand appreciation of his body as object of desire. When the wolf dances, the narration is literally paused; the voice-over narrator is silent and we hear only the *Prélude* as we gaze at his lithe form for about fifty seconds (quite a long time in a twelve-minute film) as he moves in sensual self-pleasure. When the girl performs her striptease, on the other hand, the voice-over narration continues. Her actions also move the plot along, getting her from dressed to undressed and, because her actions are aimed at the wolf, furthering the narrative of seduction. The function of the wolf's dance is pure visual pleasure, which we enjoy primarily through the girl's gaze.

The concept of the cinematic gaze is not as straightforward a form of male domination of the passive female object as Mulvey's early discussion would suggest. In questioning and expanding upon Mulvey's arguments, E. Ann Kaplan observed that, "when the man steps out of his traditional role as the one who controls the whole action, and when he is set up as a sex object, the woman then takes on the masculine role as bearer of the gaze and initiator of the action" (129). Certainly, this could be argued to be the case here: the girl stares at the wolf and the narrative stops as she, and we, gaze at the sexualized male figure. Kaplan goes on to observe that as bearer of the gaze the woman "nearly always loses her traditionally feminine characteristics" and becomes "cold, driving, ambitious, manipulating" (129). The woman is permitted by the gendered structures of classical film narrative to "assume (step into) the position defined as masculine, as long as the man then steps into *her* position, so as to keep the whole structure intact" (129). In *Little Red Riding Hood*, although the girl is the bearer of the look, both she and the wolf are objects of the camera gaze in similar ways and both indicate and stimulate sexual desire. The camera lingers as lovingly on the girl as it does on the wolf. Her desire and active role do not rob her of her warmth and charm, nor is the wolf's androgyny equivalent to effeminacy. Both characters exude to-be-looked-at-ness and both take active roles in the seduction. The binary opposition that insists that one figure must dominate and the other submit—to the look and to the seduction—does not hold. Much of the sexual play in this relationship derives from the two partners switching roles and positions in their flirtatious dance.

E. Ann Kaplan concludes her argument by noting that "our culture is deeply committed to clearly demarcated sex differences, called masculine and feminine, that revolve on, first a complex gaze-apparatus; and, second, dominance-submission patterns" (129). She contends that, to escape these systems of oppression, we need to "find strategies for changing discourse, since

these changes would, in turn, affect the structuring of the social formation" (131). For Haraway one of these strategies is situated knowledge. I believe that this reading of *Little Red Riding Hood* recognizes a different kind of cinematic discourse that not only posits a non-dominance-dependent heterosexual relationship and gender positioning but also destabilizes binary structures through queer positioning. One of the ways the film diverts from binary structures of gender and sexual relations is by diversifying the power of the gaze. Another way is by producing a wolf who not only is androgynous but also has desire that is not always consistent or even aimed in only one direction.

Both the girl and the wolf are pretty sexy; the only other live character in the film is Granny (Evelyn Solann), who is a tragicomic figure. Granny is not hot. In her white cap, knitting and quaking in her bed as the wolf enters her cottage and moves toward her bed, Granny is as lacking in sensuality as the wolf is practically dripping with it. The audience may be positioned to desire the girl or the wolf or both, but nobody is meant to find Granny sexy. Indeed, for Zipes the scene between Granny and the wolf "is a tragic-comic incident. What counts most is the manner in which a young girl proceeds to plot and fulfill her own sexual drives" (*Enchanted Screen* 151–52). Zipes is clearly not interested in the Granny, who, to be fair, does not get much screen time. However, in imagining nonnormative desire, the scene between the wolf and grandmother becomes important to the destabilization of heteronormativity.

When he arrives at the cottage, the wolf slinks around checking out the house. The design for the set is off-kilter and extremely artificial. The move from the natural locations of the forest and glen give way, in Granny's cottage, to German Expressionist artificiality. The entrance to Granny's cottage also signals a generic shift, from pastoral romance to camp horror. As he approaches Granny, we see his silhouette through the gauzy bed curtains, arms upraised, looming toward her. His shadowy form menaces Granny like the somnambulist in *The Cabinet of Dr. Cagliari* or a monster movie fiend. As he slowly pushes his face into the netting around her bed, Granny cowers, shaking on her pillows. When he pulls the curtains aside, however, although Granny is still fearful, his expression is more playful and curious. He pulls Granny's knitting out of her hands and reaches for her breast, which he caresses before suddenly covering her mouth with his large hand, sliding up her body and giving her face a long lick (fig. 2). When he pulls back to gaze at her, his expression is curious, head tilting to the side as she continues to struggle under his hand. In the next shot he is back to exaggerated B-movie monster posture as his looming silhouette now carries her filleted flesh to a bowl on the kitchen table.

The wolf remains sensuous throughout this scene. Even his monstrousness is seductive; his caress of Granny's breast and licking of her face after pushing her back into the pillow show a nonnormative, possibly even sadistic, though



Fig. 2. Licking Granny's face. David Kaplan's *Little Red Riding Hood* (1997).

heterosexual, desire. The wolf's seeming attraction to Granny and an implication of BDSM play (at least on his part) is certainly odd, if not positively perverse, to an audience who expects and desires to see sexy young people desiring other sexy young people. If it is queer to be attracted to another species, how very queer it must be to desire an old lady! In this scene the wolf is less cautious than when he is in bed with the girl. He is less nervous and shy; his exaggerated movements are both sinister and playful and played for comedic as well as horrific effects.

In his early defense of camp, Jack Babuscio identifies particular forms of the incongruous contrasts of irony as basic to camp: "The most common of incongruous contrasts is that of masculine feminine" particularly in relation to screen personalities' "androgynous qualities" (119). As the object of the girl's desiring gaze, the wolf has already been made androgynous to an extent, as does his full-body costume, which highlights his athletic dancer's physique but also, in the close-up of him rising to meet the girl, his lack of genitals. His costume both emphasizes and hides his masculinity; he is both wolf and man and neither.

The wolf's attraction to the grandmother in this scene might also be read as a camp moment. Another irony Babuscio notes "is that of youth/(old) age, particularly young man/old(er) woman" (119). Whereas the wolf's attraction to the girl is more tentative, unsure, and even confused at times, his attraction to Granny is immediate and visceral. Even though he initiates no physical

contact with the girl, merely responding to her advances, his desire for Granny is one-sided and intense. Babuscio stresses that camp aesthetics are very much about style: "When the stress on style is 'outrageous' or 'too much,' it results in incongruities: the emphasis shifts from what a thing or a person is to what it *looks like*; from what is being done to *how* it is being done" (122; emphasis in original). Similarly, Babuscio argues that "camp as a response to performance springs from the gay sensibility's preference for the *intensities* of character, as opposed to its content: what the character conveys tends to be less important than *how* or *why* it is conveyed" (125; emphasis in original). Thus from this perspective the wolf's sexual advances toward Granny are more about his perverse desire for an older woman than sexual violence and murder. This focus on the *how* rather than the *what* of bumping Granny off is also supported in the following scene, when the girl happily, and seductively, eats Granny's flesh, even after the cat tells her she is a slut for doing so.

When we carry assumptions about the tale as rape narrative or even the idea of simple stranger danger to this film, or if we focus on the *what* of the scene with Granny rather than the *how*, we cannot help but see the wolf as he has been described by a number of reviewers: "depraved," "lecherous," or as an "unsavoury marauder looking to have his way with [the girl]." But if we reject or suspend his historical reputation, disconnect interpretation from the heteropatriarchal authority of Perrault and the Grimms, and concentrate on "The Story of Grandmother" and the visual narrative *as it is presented*, this wolf appears to be comparatively innocent, curious—not "safe" perhaps and certainly not asexual—but not particularly rapacious either. Unlike the girl, who clearly knows her desires and acts on them, the wolf is at times unsure of her advances; at other times, such as in bed, he seems positively nervous.

Although he clearly enjoys the tête-à-tête with the girl in bed, he pulls back from her as she reaches toward him and coyly hides his face with the bedsheet and his hands/paws, but he never looks away from her. Notwithstanding the assumptions about the wolf's rapaciousness, the visual narrative here clearly indicates curiosity, nervousness, and even confusion on the wolf's part. He doesn't really know what to do with the girl and allows her to lead the way. He is a sensual creature but not an obviously lustful one. Rather, in the scenes with the girl he is a cute Edward Scissorhands-style Goth-boy, complete with floppy black bangs, sexy skintight costume, eyeliner, and emo expressions of yearning for Little Hot Riding Hood.

A camp sensibility infuses this scene too. The girl plays with the wolf in her seduction as he did with Granny previously. Just as he is leaning in to kiss her, she turns the seduction on its head by claiming she needs to make "caca." Seduction gives way to absurdity. The wolf, wearing Granny's floppy sleeping cap, tells the girl to "make caca here"; but the girl insists, she must go outside.

He wrinkles his nose and sticks out his tongue behind her back, signaling the unpleasant turn the conversation has taken (fig. 3). As he waits for the girl impatiently, the narrator tells us he calls out: “Are you pinching off a big loaf out there? Are you dropping a big load?” The sudden turn from intimate seduction to scatological humor creates a camp moment of absurdity by juxtaposing heterosexual desire and base bodily functions.

The visual representation of the wolf figure—his androgynous to-be-looked-at-ness, lack of rapaciousness, sexual curiosity tinged with polymorphous desire, and his campy monstrosity—all work to issue the queer invitation to viewers who are prepared to suspend what they already “know” about the tale of the girl and the wolf. But this visual presentation is only one facet of the queer invitation. The aural aspects of the film—the voice-over narration and the extradiegetic soundtrack—work with the visual to invite a queer reading. The presence of two celebrity intertexts is extrinsic to the film but adds to the film’s queer potential. First, the extradiegetic soundtrack, Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, implicitly references the fin de siècle choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky; and second, the offscreen voice-over narration is carried out by Quentin Crisp, an important early gay celebrity. In order for this aspect of queer possibility to be activated, the viewer needs specific



Fig. 3. Icky face. David Kaplan’s *Little Red Riding Hood* (1997).

knowledge of these gay cultural icons who challenged heteronormativity in the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth century.⁸

The character of the wolf is linked through erotic androgyny, his physicality, his balletic performance, his half-man/half-animal costume, and, most directly, through the extradiegetic soundtrack, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, to Vaslav Nijinsky, an early-twentieth-century figure whose sexuality is inextricably linked to his public identity (fig. 4). Nijinsky, born of Polish parents in Russia, was a dance prodigy. He joined Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in 1909 and quickly became his generation's *dieu de la danse*. The two men were lovers until Nijinsky unexpectedly married in 1913; their relationship was broken off, and Diaghilev fired him from Ballets Russes. Experimental, erotic, and athletic, Nijinsky's choreography and legacy as a dancer are closely tied to his unapologetic sexuality. His choreography and performances shocked and delighted audiences, in particular, *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1912), a balletic interpretation of Claude Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894), itself a musical interpretation of Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1876). Dreamy eroticism suffuses each of these iterations of the faun's afternoon in different media as it does Kaplan's film. Now recognized as a pivotal point of modernist dance, the first performance of *L'Après-midi d'un faune* caused an uproar.

In *The Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, Modris Eksteins discusses the scandal that the erotic choreography and costuming caused the first time Nijinsky performed the ballet in Paris with the Ballets Russes in May 1912: "Nijinsky, dressed in leotards at a time when skin-tight costumes were still thought to be improper, provoked in the audience a collective salivation and swallowing as he descended, hips undulating, over the nymph's scarf, and quivered in simulated orgasm (fig. 5). That was simply the culmination of a ballet that broke all the rules of traditional taste" (27–28). Eksteins goes on to recount a review by *Le Figaro* editor Gaston Calmette "in which he denounced *Faune* as 'neither a pretty pastoral nor a work of profound meaning. We are shown a lecherous faun, whose movements are filthy and bestial in their eroticism, and whose gestures are as crude as they are indecent'" (28).

Penny Farfan writes, "*Afternoon of a Faun* constituted a transformational moment in the representation of male sexuality" (76). Farfan sees Nijinsky's faun as "at once non-masculine yet non-effeminate" (77). "This queerly ambiguous figure," she says, "constituted a modernist challenge to hegemonic ideologies of sex and gender and thus contributed to the early-twentieth-century formation of alternative sexual identities, but the challenge that the ballet originally posed has since been obscured, as Nijinsky and the Faun have become pathologically fused in popular cultural and critical discourse" (77). Like Nijinsky's Faun, Kaplan's wolf becomes a "queerly ambiguous figure" who poses a "challenge to hegemonic

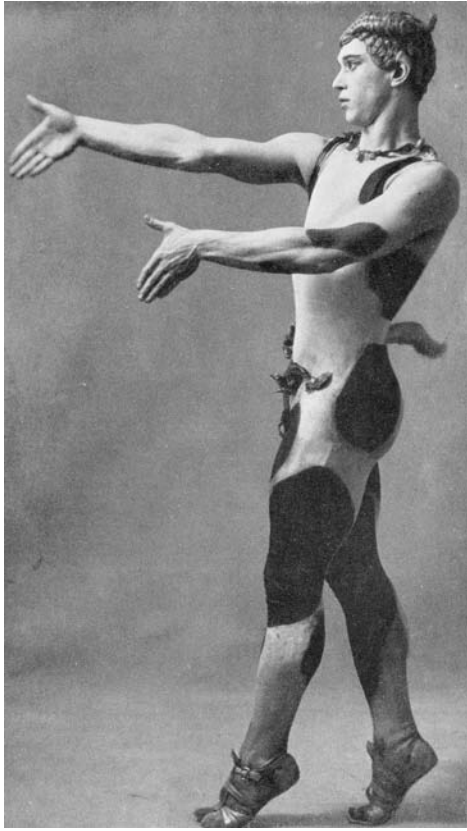


Fig. 4. Vaslav Nijinsky as the faun at the premiere of the Ballets Russes production of *L'après-midi d'un faune* at the Theatre du Châtelet in Paris in May 1912. Photograph by Adolph de Meyer.



Fig. 5. Nijinsky as the faun in an erotic moment with a nymph's scarf. Photograph by Adolph de Meyer, May 1912.

ideologies of sex and gender" (Farfan 77). The inability or refusal of the film's reviewers to recognize the wolf as anything but lustful, even pedophilic, demonstrates an equal resistance to his ambiguous sexuality and gender performance not unlike Calmette's review of the ballet. To the knowledgeable audience, then, the aural reference to *L'Après-midi d'un faune* fuses the wolf figure to the cultural image of Vaslav Nijinsky and the faun in the ballet as challengers of heteronormativity. The responses of both the early-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century reviewers to the spectacle of male animal eroticism indicate a continued discomfort with and an aversion to queer challenges to heteronormativity offered by male sexuality that does not adhere to normative gender constructions.

The specter of Nijinsky that clings to the wolf adds further substance to the wolf's queerness, but it is not only at the level of representation that the film uses intertextual queer celebrity. Kaplan makes the distinction between the visual, verbal, and musical channels clear. This is most apparent in the lack of dialogue and synchronization. The actors do not mime speaking. When the narrator reports a conversation between them, the actor's lips do not move, they act through gesture and facial expression alone. Similarly, in the long pauses between narrated sections the music comes to the fore as the actors continue their visual interpretation of the tale. Although this narrative choice is not particularly queer, the prominence of the separation between visual, verbal, and musical channels further disrupts expectations of film narrative traditions. However, as I have argued, queerness does adhere to each of these channels in different ways. The representation of the wolf's gender identity and sexuality plays out on the visual channel; the reference to Nijinsky is made possible by the wolf's costuming and dance and by the *Prélude* on the musical channel; finally, the "real-life" persona of the voice-over narrator in the form of Quentin Crisp subverts the authority of the voice-over narrator on the verbal channel.

Literary narration in Perrault and the Grimms is authoritative and, as has been noted by Cristina Bacchilega (*Postmodern Fairy Tales*) and Elizabeth Wanning Harries (*Twice Upon a Time*), arguably patriarchal in nature. Similarly, the bodiless "voice from on high" of the offscreen voice-over narrator in cinema, like the claims to objectivity that Haraway critiques, is a god trick. Indeed, the bodiless voice-over has been the subject of controversy in terms of objectivity and its authority because of its "voice of god" incorporeality, omniscience, and omnipotence (Kozloff 81). Yet ironically the "voice of god" in *Little Red Riding Hood* comes from a famously gay man.

Quentin Crisp rose to fame in the late 1960s after the publication of his memoir, *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968), in which he depicted his life as an openly femme gay man in England in the early- to mid-twentieth century. He became a media darling just at the moment that gay culture was beginning to gain the attention of straight culture. His public persona was one of safe British

eccentricity. His open homosexuality and gender nonconformity—makeup, mauve or lavender hair, manicured fingernails, and dandyish style—were contained and nonthreatening because he was already in his 60s when he came to public notice, because he claimed to be celibate, and because of his self-deprecating (and gay-deprecating) humor (fig. 6).

What does Crisp's public persona do to the authoritarian heterodiegetic narrator? For many reviewers, clearly, not much. In the reviews of the DVD release Quentin Crisp as voice-over narrator is either not mentioned at all or mentioned only in relation to his performance: "Quentin Crisp narrates with the eerie rasp of Vincent Price" (Kohn, review); or "Adding immeasurable playfulness is the hilarious narration by Quentin Crisp" (Tully); or the narration is "spoken in the sophisticated dialect of narrator Quentin Crisp" (McKiernan). These descriptions seem a little contradictory; Crisp's narration is either an eerie rasp, playful and hilarious, or sophisticated. Although clearly aware of Crisp's public persona as "one of the stately homos of England," some reviewers only refer to it obliquely: "Quentin Crisp narrates lines like 'A slut is she who eats the flesh of her granny' with queenly relish" (Striegel). Another



Fig. 6. Quentin Crisp at his favorite diner on the Lower East Side in New York City. Photograph © Piers Allardyce/Alpha 065000 09/04/99.

reviewer hints that the narration “giv[es] viewers familiar with Crisp’s legacy a clear idea of what the Director had in mind with this short” (Bloody Disgusting Staff). Sadly, however, the reviewer never says what this clear idea is.

Because he does not appear on screen and the most notable aspects of his voice are its age, gender, and (to a North American audience) accent, Crisp’s sexual and gender identity is not apparent until one discovers at the end in the closing credits that he is the narrator. The subversion of patriarchal narratorial authority is not accomplished simply by presenting his name in the credits because, as with Nijinsky, many audience members will be unaware of Crisp as a public figure. In order for the queer invitation to be delivered, one must be aware of Crisp as a famous gay man. Without knowing who Crisp is, then, the voice-over narrator retains a particularly authoritative voice, one that the visuals complicate. However, those who are aware of Crisp as a famous homosexual who wrote candidly about his life as a gay man in *The Naked Civil Servant*, which was also made into a TV movie, are particularly attuned to hear “queently relish” in his performance. Yet it would appear that those who are not aware of Crisp or his reputation read his performance as relatively straightforward. This discrepancy suggests that it is his persona rather than his performance per se that lends queerness to the text.

This knowledge adds another layer to the ways in which the film diverts from heteronormative fairy-tale discourse. It is precisely Crisp’s persona that adds to the ironic, parodic, and even camp aspects of the film because he emphatically does not possess the same kind of cultural gravitas attributed to such figures as Perrault and the Grimms, whose heteropatriarchal voices cling to our conceptions of what the tale of “Little Red Riding Hood” is supposed to be about. Crisp’s legacy moves the tale further away from the victim-blaming rape narrative and stranger danger morality tale of Perrault and the Grimms toward a camp sensibility of playful, queer eroticism.

As Bacchilega argues, fairy tales are multifarious texts that need not refer back to one center (*Fairy Tales Transformed* 27). And although the “Perrault-Grimms-Disney triad” is still influential, it is “no longer *the* central pretext for [fairy tale] adaptations in literature, film, or other media” (27). By using an unauthored pretext rather than the “classic” Perrault or Grimm versions, *Little Red Riding Hood* can reorganize the gendered power structures of the tale and contribute to a politics of wonder that engages queerly situated knowledge.

I have focused on Kaplan’s wolf as bearer of the queer invitation in this film, but it is clearly not he alone who creates space for queer readings. My initial reading of the wolf demonstrates the ways in which his performance and appearance place the wolf as lustful, rapacious predator into question. One need not be situated within gay culture to have access to this reading because it is borne out by the text, but in order to see it, one must be able to let go of hegemonic

understandings of the tale as primarily a tale of stranger danger and/or male sexual violence against women. Viewer situatedness becomes more relevant with the extratextual references to Nijinsky and Crisp. These specialized knowledges, though not exclusive to gay culture, can be activated only by those in the know. So even though the individual aspects of the film I examine can be dismissed as mere idiosyncratic interpretations or wishful queer thinking, combined they evince a queerness that is less easily denied or ignored.

In their different ways and on different levels, the androgynous and sexually curious wolf, who recalls Nijinsky's erotic reputation with his own balletic *L'Après-midi d'un Loup*, and the famously homosexual Quentin Crisp as traditional, authoritative fairy-tale narrator, destabilize heteronormative notions about the roles of gender and sexual identity in the tale. Thus this cinematic adaptation of "Little Red Riding Hood" is more transgressive than a mere recuperation of the girl as sexually empowered feminist. Furthermore, a queer reading is made possible in the dissonant relations between and among distinct features of the film. But because it is entirely possible to ignore them in preference for more familiar interpretations based on previous expectations and what we all already know about "Little Red Riding Hood," in order for this reading to work, one must be willing to accept the film's queer invitation.

Notes

1. Queer theory is relatively new to fairy-tale studies, as demonstrated by Lewis Seifert's introduction to this special issue; Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill's *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* (2012), the first book-length engagement with queer theory in fairy-tale studies; and Anne Duggan's *Queer Enchantments* (2013).
2. For a brief discussions of the theoretical approaches taken by scholars to "Little Red Riding Hood," see, for example, Zipes (*Trials and Tribulations*) and Greenhill and Kohn.
3. Sandra Beckett's three volumes, *Revisioning Red Riding Hood Around the World* (2014), *Red Riding Hood for All Ages* (2008), and *Recycling Red Riding Hood* (2002), clearly attest to the popularity, continuing relevance, and global appeal of the tale and the many ways authors and artists engage with, refine, resist, or outright reject Perrault and the Grimms. But even these tales are rarely read from a queer perspective.
4. Textbooks such as Maria Tatar's *Classic Fairy Tales*, Martin Hallett and Barbara Karasek's *Folk and Fairy Tales*, and Andrew Teverson's *Fairy Tale* all reproduce English translations or discuss "The Story of Grandmother."
5. See Johnson and Zipes (*Trials and Tribulations*) for arguments on "Little Red Riding Hood" as rape narrative.
6. For example, Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix mention the film in a footnote in *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity* (18n4); Kay Turner and Pauline

Greenhill refer to it in a note regarding the changes to “Little Red Riding Hood” over time in *Transgressive Tales* (23n2); and Cristina Bacchilega mentions the film briefly in her discussion of Kaplan’s Cinderella film *Year of the Fish* in *Fairy Tales Transformed* (131).

7. See Vanessa Joosen’s *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales* for an excellent study of the ways that critical and creative texts influence each other.
8. It should also be noted that this special knowledge is also more accessible to those of particular class, race, and age. That is, as a ballet dancer, Nijinsky is linked to modernist high art, arguably the playground of primarily educated, economically privileged, white people. Crisp, who in a way is famous for being famous and who came from a middle-class English background, was later associated with the art scene in New York City of the 1980s and appeared in such films as *Orlando* (1992); but he is not as tightly bound to high art but is certainly more likely to be recognized by gay white men of a certain age (let’s say 50 and up). Yet neither Nijinsky nor Crisp is entirely marginal: both are icons of gay culture. For example, both have biographies on glbtq.com (“the world’s largest encyclopedia of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer culture”) and other LGBT websites.

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