

**THRICE UPON A TIME:
HOW CINEMA IS SUBVERTING LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD**

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Abstract: In recent years, numerous fairy-tales have been adapted into movies. Tommy Wirkola's *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* (2013), Julia Leigh's *Sleeping Beauty* (2011), Daniel Barnz's *Beastly* (2011), Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) are among the most notorious examples. In this paper, I will concentrate solely on three particular adaptations, reinventions or subversions of one of the most celebrated stories in the European folklore: Little Red Riding Hood. I will examine Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves* (1984), Catherine Hardwicke's *Red Riding Hood* (2011), and David Slade's *Hard Candy* (2005). My main objective is to explore the psychoanalytical, artistic and social reasons underneath this phenomenon. In order to do so, I resort to the opinion of several specialists in psychoanalysis and cinematic adaptation.

Keywords: Cinematic adaptation, subversion, fairy tales, Psychoanalysis

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1. In bed with a daring wolf

“Little Red Riding Hood” is one of the most popular narratives of all time, a tale of innocence and loss, seduction and punishment, dream and terror, that still intrigues listeners or readers. Its origin is mysterious, but it had already been disseminated in the 10th century, in France, and four hundred years later, in Italy (Berlioz 2007, 63). Charles Perrault, commonly described as the father of children's literature, titled it as “Petit Chaperon Rouge”, and compiled it in *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé*, in 1697 (Opie 1980, 93). However, this first version was not particularly appreciated, perhaps because the story ends with the Bad Wolf devouring Little Red, without suffering any penalty.

The touch of poetic justice would be given by German writers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, who collected it under the title “Rottkäppchen”, in the volume *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, in 1812 (Velten 2001, 967). The famous brothers reinvented the epilogue: the grandmother and the girl are now

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rescued by a courageous woodcutter, who cuts open the wolf's belly and fills it with stones. This happy ending decisively contributed to popularize the tale, which, today, is part of our collective imagination and of Western Culture (Zipes 1993, 33).

However, the story of the pubescent girl and the daring wolf transcends the mere moral teaching, which discourages children from talking to strangers. In depth, it presents strong sexual connotations, related to incest and the Oedipus complex. Due to its polysemic meanings, it is not surprising that this tale became a source of inspiration for writers, artists, musicians, movie directors or videogame producers.

In this paper, I will concentrate solely on three cinematic reinventions of this narrative: *The Company of Wolves* (1984), by Neil Jordan, *Red Riding Hood* (2011), by Catherine Hardwicke, and *Hard Candy* (2005), by David Slade. My main objective is to explore the psychoanalytical, artistic and social reasons that lie behind this phenomenon, and to determine the creative changes that were made to the traditional tale.

2. Meanings hidden under the covers

In 1872, "Little Red Riding Hood" was published in *Fairy Tales Told Again*, an anthology with engravings by Gustave Doré, an artist who had already illustrated literary works by Samuel Coleridge, Miguel Cervantes or Edgar Allan Poe. One image, in particular, disturbed the most perspicacious readers. The drawing represents the girl in bed with the wolf, dressed in the grandmother's cap. On one side, Little Red appears to be afraid of her grandmother, and she pulls the blanket over her, as if trying to protect herself from the strange creature. On the other side, her expression suggests childish curiosity. The animal, with a tender and seducing look, leans his head towards the girl, while contemplating the shape of her legs, concealed by the linen (Doré 1872, 42).

If in numerous narratives for children, characters represent collective types or stereotypes, who are the individuals embodied by the girl and the wolf? According to psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, in his classic study *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1975), "Little

Red Riding Hood” constitutes an allegory for puberty. This process of physical and mental changes is represented by the forest, a place of charms and dangers, in stark contrast with the security of the paternal home (Bettelheim 2010, 170).

In this context, the protagonist symbolizes all pubescent individuals, who simultaneously fear sexuality, but crave to unveil the secrets of adults. The girl transgresses her mother’s instructions: “Set out before it gets hot, and when you are going, walk nicely and quietly and do not run off the path” (Grimm 2013, 98). When she finds herself in bed with the wolf, the girl poses the famous questions about the ears, the eyes, the hands and the mouth, which represent hearing, sight, touch and taste, senses associated with the sexual act (Bettelheim 2010, 172).

Traditionally, the animal, described as an old sinner, symbolizes an attractive man, a potential rapist, who intends to seduce innocent children or adolescents. However, to Bettelheim, the wolf also represents a father figure, who has sex with his own daughter (Bettelheim 2010, 175). According to the Oedipus complex theory, during childhood, all girls experience the unconscious and repressed wish of possessing their fathers, while boys are mainly attracted to their mothers, and see their fathers as rivals. According to Freud, in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*:

In these fantasies the infantile tendencies invariably emerge once more, but this time with intensified pressure from somatic sources. Among these tendencies the first place is taken with uniform frequency by the child’s sexual impulses towards his parents, which are as a rule already differentiated owing to the attraction of the opposite sex — the son being drawn towards his mother and the daughter towards her father. (Freud 2000, 92-93)

After the seduction game in bed, the animal eats Little Red, a symbol of the sexual act, and falls asleep, satisfied. However, he snores so loud that he draws the attention of a huntsman who was passing by, peeps his head through

the window and sees the predator. He takes a pair of scissors, and cuts open the stomach of the sleeping wolf, so that the grandmother and the girl can emerge. According to Bettelheim, with the Oedipus complex solved, the girl is no longer in love with her father, and experiences a rebirth as a young virgin (Bettelheim 2010, 182).

3. *The Company of Wolves* (1984), by Neil Jordan

Bettelheim's psychoanalytic interpretation profoundly influenced the short story "The Company of Wolves", included in the anthology *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), by English writer Angela Carter. The book consists of ten narratives, based upon folkloric tales, but with a unique characteristic: they challenge the role of women in family and society, according to a feminist perspective. The movie *The Company of Wolves*, by Neil Jordan, constitutes a cinematic adaptation not of the homonymous story, but of the radio version that Carter had written in 1980.

The story begins with a disturbing piece of advice given by the grandmother to Rosaleen, who plays the role of Little Red: "Beware of a man whose eyebrows meet" (Jordan 1984, 1). What could the old woman possibly mean by this strange observation? One of the most threatening versions of the traditional tale presents a werewolf instead of the ferocious animal. In this context, granny's guidance may be a veiled allusion to that creature, which populates many medieval narratives. Besides, a hairy man also conveys an image of virility. The story cautions girls against strangers, particularly when they enter puberty, a time when their bodies become attractive, and draw the attention of individuals of the opposite sex.

Initially, the movie parallels the plot of the traditional tale, since Rosaleen carries a basket with food and drink to her grandmother's house, across the forest. The setting is charged with fertility symbols, underlining the girl's sexual awakening: the red color is omnipresent, evoking the blood; mushrooms recall phalluses; bird nests remind us of her procreative capacity. On her way, Rosaleen meets not a wolf, but an attractive huntsman, whose eyebrows meet, corresponding to the grandmother's description of the

dangerous male. He arrives to destination before the girl and, not surprisingly, devours the old woman. Rosaleen realizes what happened and takes revenge by shooting the huntsman. Contrarily to the traditional tale, where the wolf pretended to be a person, the man becomes a werewolf.

In the name of love, the girl makes an irrevocable decision: she leaves with the animal and the wolf pack to the depths of the forest. In my opinion, this choice represents the power of free will, in the context of female sexuality. In this line of thinking, the grandmother stands for the perpetuation of patriarchal society, which forces adolescents to conform to mainstream morality (Crofts 2003, 55).

In short, *The Company of Wolves* cautions the audience against older mentors, not against wolves; challenges patriarchal preconceptions; invites the audience to reinterpret the traditional tale in a new fashion.

4. *Red Riding Hood* (2011), by Catherine Hardwicke

A werewolf, a huntsman specialized in supernatural phenomena, an unfaithful wife and a pregnant adolescent certainly constitute an unusual combination of characters. Yet, all are present and interact in Catherine Hardwicke's eclectic *Red Riding Hood*. What lies behind this adaptation: an artistic wish of subverting the story?; or simply a commercial strategy to please young audiences, craving for sex and violence, in the age of hormones?

As in the Grimm's version of the story, this movie's plot unfolds in a typical village, surrounded by a dense forest, and inhabited mainly by peasants and lumberjacks. This settlement, Daggerhorn, vividly recalls the scenery of Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves*, with a gothic atmosphere, revealing all the experience of Hardwicke as an inventive designer.

The protagonist, Valerie, is closer to the model of an independent and courageous girl than to the traditional image of the unprotected damsel. Such strategy propitiates empathy between the public and the main character, generating a new heroine in gothic movies.

As in the tale, a ferocious animal prowls the village in search of preys; however, it is not a simple wolf, but a werewolf who can easily transmit its

curse by biting humans. This reinvention of the malefic character takes advantage of the current popularity of vampire books and movies. It is relevant to remind that Hardwicke directed several movies of the *Twilight* saga, based upon Stephenie Meyer's famous novels. Similarly, *Red Riding Hood* explores juvenile passions, identity search and nonconformism, themes that appeal to young audiences.

Screenwriter David Leslie Johnson introduces another popular character: the werewolf hunter, embodied by priest Solomon. This sinister man resorts to ingenious weapons, in steam-punk style, recalling Van Helsing in Stephen Sommer's homonymous movie or Hansel and Gretel, in Tommy Wirkola's adventure.

One of the few surprises of the movie occurs when Valerie finds out that the dreadful werewolf is nothing less than her own father, Cesaire, who had caught his grandfather's curse. Cesaire fights against Peter, Valerie's boyfriend, but loses and is killed. In my opinion, this murder can be rooted in Bettelheim's interpretation and symbolizes the *ending* of the Oedipal love and the *beginning* of a more mature sexuality. In a similar reading, Astrid Ernst declares this is a symbolic killing of patriarchal law, a flight from socially imposed restrictions (Ernst 2012, 68-69).

Peter was bitten during the fight and, therefore, he transforms himself into a werewolf during full moon. Several months later, Valerie listens to a long howl in the woods and waits for her companion, cuddling her baby. This ending echoes the epilogue of *Twilight* (2008), by the same director, in which Bella Swan, the protagonist, chooses the wild side of human nature.

5. *Hard Candy* (2005), by David Slade

Of the three movies I selected, *Hard Candy*, by independent director David Slade, is the most provocative. The tag lines immediately reveal the subversion of the traditional tale. In the United States, the sentence "Strangers shouldn't talk to girls" inverts the roles of the characters; and, in Japan, the slogan "Red Hood traps the wolf in his own game" emphasizes the premise of this movie.

In the Middle Ages, a dense forest constituted the ideal territory for wolves and perverse men; nowadays, the most propitious place for pedophiles is no longer physical, but virtual: the internet. With the proliferation of social networks, the cases of cybercrime, voyeurism, cyber stalking and pedophilia tend to increase. It is rather easy for a criminal to hide his true identity, create an imaginary profile or an avatar to seduce children and young people, as numerous situations of abuse reveal (Jewkes and Andrews 2013, 75).

The movie begins precisely with a cyber-chat between Hayley Stark, a 14-year-old adolescent, and Jeff Kohlver, a 32-year-old photographer. The messages they exchange reveal a strong sexual innuendo:

Thonggrrrl14: Whatcha doing now?

Lensman319: Besides fantasizing over you?

Thonggrrrl14: You oughta film me with that videocam. Then, you wouldn't have to fantasize.

Lensman319: This is very doable. (Slade 2005, 1)

In my opinion, the first hint that Hayley is not the typical prey pedophiles crave for resides in the nickname she uses in the chat room, Thonggrrrl14, not because of the provocative reference to “thong”, but to “grrrl”. This onomatopoeia, which imitates the sound of an animal growling, is used by third wave feminists to designate girls who react against discrimination or abuse in patriarchal society (Krolokke and Sorensen 2006, 15).

The adolescent and the photographer meet at the Nighthawks Café, a meaningful name, and discuss books, pop music and art. In a clear inversion of the traditional tale, Hayley persuades Jeff to take her to his home in order to listen to a bootleg recording of Goldfrapp, supposedly her favorite band.

At this place, the hypothetical prey becomes the predator, leading to one of the most perverse vengeance in the history of horror movies. The adolescent offers the photographer a drink she mixed with drugs to sedate him; ties him to a chair; questions him about his preference for nymphets; simulates a surgical operation to castrate him; searches his house and finds out pictures

of minors, including one of a missing girl, Donna Mauer; forces him to confess his participation in the crime; and threatens him with revealing everything, unless Jeff commits suicide. In the end, the pedophile hangs himself from the roof, while Hayley, dressed with a sweatshirt with a red hood, like the girl in the tale, and quietly returns to town.

Who is this contemporary Little Red? When during his interrogatory, Jeff poses this question, Hayley explains: “I am every little girl you ever watched, touched, hurt, screwed, killed” (Slade 2005, 24). The adolescent sees herself as a representative of all the victims of stalking and abuse, therefore attributing a symbolic and political meaning to this motion picture.

Interestingly, several movies of the past few decades presented several girls who, in spite of their innocent appearance, reveal an obscure nature. These teenagers seduce, manipulate and get revenge on any man who falls on their web. Adrienne Forrester in *The Crush* (1993), by Alan Shapiro; Suzie Toller in *Wild Things* (1998), by John McNaughton; Vanessa Lutz in *Freeway* (1996), by Matthew Bright; or Hayley in *Hard Candy* (2005), by David Slade, constitute good examples of perversity. Does this tendency suggest that men fear adolescent girls and their recently acquired feminist awareness? Are they *filles fatales*, demonized by a society at terms with their new power? (Williams 2011, 163-169).

6. One girl, three red hoods

Among the movies I analyzed, I detected several common elements or motifs, but also daring reinventions of the original tale. In a study suggestively titled *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale*, Catherine Orenstein explains:

Folklorists trace tales just like scientists trace the evolution of species, by collecting, dating and comparing samples, and by looking for traits that suggest a common ancestry. (...) For folklorists, motifs — the tiny, immutable elements of a plot that persist in telling after telling — are the details that suggest a tale’s lineage. A motif can be an object, a person or

a particular plot development: a magic key, a wicked stepmother, or the rubbing of a lamp that recurs in tale after tale, from one place to another and from generation to generation. (Orenstein 2002, 72)

In common, the three movies present the same protagonist (the girl) and the antagonist (the wolf). However, in *The Company of Wolves*, by Neil Jordan, and in *Red Riding Hood*, by Catherine Hardwicke, the main characters are no longer innocent children, but teenagers. Far from the passiveness of the heroine in the traditional tale, they both make a radical choice, against the moral principles of their times, by deciding to be the companions of the wolves they love. This position not only values free will, but also redeems the wolf, which the folkloric narrative had demonized and equaled to perversion.

In intertextual terms, *Hard Candy* is the most subversive of the three movies, because it presents an inversion of the roles of the main characters: Little Red is now a feminist adolescent who chases and leads to suicide the wolf, embodied by a pedophile. Could this revenge be a warning to contemporary criminals, or does it simply demonize the *fille fatale*, revealing that society is afraid of independent teenagers? In any case, the revenge is rather shocking, since spectators didn't view Donna Mauer's murder, and because Hayley, who acts as a judge and executioner, is only fourteen.

Whatever the answer is, "Little Red Riding Hood" remains a narrative as disturbing and allegorical today as it was eleven centuries ago. After all, there are secrets that only a wolf can whisper to a girl, under the covers; but also numerous dangers to be faced in our contemporary forest.

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