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Petra Sterry's "Tale of Princess Dunkelschön" as a linguistic-conceptual strategy

A fairy tale written in three text blocks on a curtain: that could be interpreted as a pleonasm. The curtain and the fairy tale share a common morphological structure. Both the curtain and the fairy tale conceal and cover something. Petra Sterry explores the "morphology of the fairy tale" (Vladimir Propp).[1] She recognizes that fairy tales are narratives which are continually being woven anew out of the same or similar elements. Fairy tales are living things, they tell of life, they are a postmodern literature *avant la lettre* that lives from an aura of ambivalence. They only show what they say, and yet in the narrative itself more is concealed than is said: they keep their secrets. Fairy tales are the mirror of society, a dark mirror that is clouded at some points – thus the fascination of the fairy tale, but also the fear of it. In the fairy tale the child becomes acquainted with concealed social mechanisms and reads of social hierarchies and social classes, of poor and rich, of beautiful and ugly, of good and evil, of names and the nameless, of prohibitions and laws. The true meaning of the fairy tale glimmers through the interpretable and the uninterpretable, the surreal and the irreal; it is, namely, to point toward that which is concealed behind the curtain. Petra Sterry seems to be telling a new fairy tale, but its elements are familiar: the lake, the forest, the mirror, the queen, the princess, the dwarf by the name of Rumpelstilzchen. She opens a new chapter in the unending history of the fairy tale. Similarly to Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley in their interpretation of "Heidi", Sterry's interpretation also reveals the dark side of the fairy tale. Not a happy end, but disaster waits at the end of the "Tale of Princess Dunkelschön",[2] who hangs herself in the forest, abruptly and brutally eliminating the hopeful line about "living happily ever after" found at the conclusion of every fairy tale

In exploring and deconstructing fairy tales, Sterry is really exploring social mechanisms, whose clockwork of rules is veiled and conveyed by the fairy tale's narrative. The subjects are eroticism and death, power and morality, esteem and honor, possessions and social rank. Myths and fairy tales deal with the fields that psychoanalysis pulled forth from the darkness of the soul, from incest to Oedipus. In visual depictions, the art of antiquity explored myths and fairy tales allegorically. Petra Sterry, in contrast, dissects the fairy tale in its logical structure: she shows the fairy tale as a communicative text in which language games reveal the game of social class (as a sociological "puzzle"). Since she has printed her fairy tale on a curtain, it could be referred to as a "text picture". Sterry has created a number of text pictures, which are characterized by their deformed language, a language that a dreamer might murmur in sleep. The language of the dream is the language of

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[1] Vladimir Propp, *Morphologie des Märchens* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), orig. 1928.
[2] Translator's note: Although its resonances conjure rich imagery, the invented name "Dunkelschön" simply combines the German words for *dark* and *beautiful*.

the fairy tale transformed. Through their "faulty" orthography, Sterry's text pictures amplify the ambiguity of the fairy tale's language. They make it clear that the rules of language are not only governed by compulsion – the compulsion of grammar, the compulsion of communication, which for her reflect the compulsions of life – but that liberties can also be taken, liberties with meaning. The fairy tale's ambiguity and the pluralism of meaning found in Sterry's picture texts show that she is concerned with a fundamental element of social life: the freedom of the individual. She expresses this freedom in her individualized text pictures, practicing social resistance by rewriting orthography and rewriting the fairy tale. She preserves the child's unreserved experience of society, which emanates from an attitude of questioning and amazement. Thus a language game becomes a social game. Such linguistic-conceptual strategies were formulated after 1945 by the Wiener Gruppe and later popularized by Peter Handke.[3] In her work Sterry brings together the language games of the Wiener Gruppe and the world of Viennese Actionism, as becomes apparent when one compares her drawings with the sketches of Rudolf Schwarzkogler.

Art that invokes the fairy tale gives way to its mechanisms. The 1999 drawing "Princess Dunkelschön" shows a phallus that as a snake pushes like a backbone into the head of the princess. The snake's forked tongue parallels the trident in her crown. In the text Sterry adheres to the rules of the fairy tale, tabooing sexuality: Rumpelstilzchen strokes the princess' face. In the drawing, however, she negates the fairy tale's rules, showing sex and death in all their cruelty. In many other similar drawings from 1999, Sterry sketches out the dark primordial ground of existence, death. The drawings emanate from a defensive zone, from an escape, from an attempt to ward off something whose name is clear, but which may not be spoken out. Thus Sterry's art remains rooted in the grammatical and the narrative structure of the fair tale. Her art is the art of the fairy tale, only it is crueler. Aesthetic experiences like those of Artaud's Theater of Cruelty, of Art Brut and beyond have for decades spread out a map of human suffering, where no home is to be found, rather a continual state of instability and uprootedness, a state of floating. These aesthetic experiences also represent the horizon of the aesthetic obsessions of Petra Sterry.

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[3] Peter Handke, *Kaspar* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970); *Das Spiel vom Fragen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989).