# The Obscure Becomes Vivid: perspectives on the (re)mediation of fairy lore by folklorists, performers and audiences

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## Introduction

Tales about fairies are often thought of as the province of children, popularised by moralising fairy tales and Disney films, yet the success of works such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones* and *World of Warcraft* demonstrate that other tropes that tap into the mythical past hold the power to enthral adult audiences. This article reports on the Modern Fairies project (http://www.modernfairies.co.uk), which explored how obscure fairy mythology can appeal to contemporary audiences through vivid new artworks. We frame the artists' interpretations of fairy lore as acts of (re)mediation.

The Modern Fairies research project was devised to give 13 artists free rein in making new work from archival fairy lore. These artists, referred to and quoted throughout the article, are listed in the Appendix. The artists all had previous experience of working with archival sources, but their understanding of fairy lore varied – from firm belief in the existence of fairies to scepticism and a knowledge of fairies only from Disney and Brothers Grimm manifestations. Their work was supported and documented by three academics from various fields: Carolyne Larrington (folklore), Fay Hield (practice research) and Steven Hadley (audience research).

At the start of the project, Larrington prepared folders of archival material, containing stories relating to five themes: (1) Fairies and Fairyland; (2) Fairies, Wives and Lovers; (3) Helpful Fairies; (4) Fairies and Children; and finally (5) Loathly Ladies. (http://modernfairies.co.uk /blog/fairy-sources) These provided a starting point for immersion in the fairy world. The poets, musicians, illustrators and filmmakers were asked to explore the folders and combine their skills to generate new works that would resonate with contemporary audiences. Their brief was open, calling for active engagement rather than setting specific remits: no output was specified beyond participation in the various project events.

Several activities were held to support the journey. Four two-day workshops in Oxford (July 2018), Sheffield (November 2018) and Gateshead (January and April 2019) enabled the artists to meet and develop ideas collaboratively. A work-in-progress performance was held after the Sheffield workshop in order to gather audience response at an early stage, and there was a 'gathering' after the final workshop at Sage Gateshead, where more developed work-in-progress was shared. A film of this can be seen on the Modern Fairies website (http://modernfairies.co.uk/blog/modern-fairies-gatherings-at-the-sage-gateshead). Finally, a weekend of public workshops was held in Sheffield (May 2019), in which the artists presented their process of production and engaged audiences in creating new work.

Throughout the project, the artists were engaged in group discussions and interviews, and produced blog posts about their process. Their creative works were collated via Google Drive and the creative processes documented through participant observation by Hield, holding the dual role of artist and academic. Audience data was collected from the Sheffield work-in-progress sharing via a questionnaire at the event and from Facebook comments during a subsequent screening of the event. Focus groups, drawing on different audience segments, were held following the two Gateshead workshops. The audience findings were 'fed back' to the artists and the impact of this on their developing work was monitored. This open and multi-stranded methodology afforded the artists control over how they developed new work, self-selecting the themes that attracted them and the formats they chose to re-present them.

First recorded in English in the fourteenth century, 'obscure' originally simply meant 'dark', gradually accruing other meanings such as 'unclear', 'hidden' and 'little known' (*OED online, sv.* 'vague.'). While Disney fairies appear twee, saccharine and highly-gendered, traditional stories about fairies encompass dark, disturbing themes. Belief in fairies has almost vanished in the UK, and in communities where such belief does survive, it is generally hidden from outsiders. Some traditional tales about fairies – the radiant fairy queen and her predilection for a handsome human lover; the predatory elf-knight; the beautiful people dancing in the forest or tempting the greedy with their treasure – have remained relatively well-known; others are largely forgotten. The Modern Fairies project aimed to bring these tales out of obscurity and back into the light, by giving the tales a new kind of life. The etymology of 'vivid' associates it with the Latin verb *vivere* 'to live', and has acquired meanings of 'vigorous', 'fresh', 'bright' and 'lively' (*OED online, sv.* 'vivid'). Not only were the stories made to live once more, but they were made to live in the now;

(re)mediated into the modern world, the fairies took on new and relevant meanings for their audiences.

This article is written by the three academics involved in the project along with Sarah Price, an audience researcher who was involved in writing the initial project bid. The three areas are addressed separately, through the folklorist's perspective (Larrington), the artists' perspective (Hield) and the audience's perspective (Hadley and Price). While this might suggest that creative processes run in a linear fashion – archival source to artistic mediation to audience reception – in practice, working with folkloric materials creates a symbiotic relationship between artists, cultural workers and audiences throughout the acts of production and dissemination. Our article cuts across these separate themes to show how interactions between the different agents are necessary in the process of (re)mediating folkloric materials, drawing them from obscurity to make them vivid and accessible for contemporary audiences.

**Approaches to (re)mediation**

In order to share archival folklore with contemporary audiences, materials are recontextualised, taken from manuscript form and put into new media such as film, song or paint. Artworks do not reach audiences in isolation and metadata is generated and shared through 'the media' (newspapers, event brochures, online marketing materials). There are two levels of mediation in play here: firstly, one of creation – the artist acting as mediator between the archive and the new work; and secondly, one of communication – working between the artist (and their work) and their audience.

A useful model to examine the first (creative) mediation, comes from Foster's (2016) typology: version or adaptation, precise allusion and fuzzy allusion. Versions or adaptations demonstrate consistency with earlier renderings of folk narratives within a different medium. Precise allusion borrows motifs from tradition, but uses them differently from the tales they explicitly reference. Fuzzy allusion, or the 'folkloresque', entails wholly new creations unconnected with a specific tradition but alluding imprecisely to folkloric elements; in Foster's words, 'it smells of folklore, but we can't locate the particular sources of the odour' (2016: 46). Creative work embodies different relationships between the original and its new manifestation, which cannot necessarily be seen. It is in understanding the meaning of the quotation that distinguishes precise from fuzzy

allusion. Authenticity, therefore, lies in the eye of the beholder; new mediations may be seen as folkloresque by knowledgeable audiences, or received as folkloric versions by others (Grazian 2005).

This second mode of mediation, communicating between work and audience, takes different names in different disciplines: the culture broker in folklore (Bendix and Wetz 1999), and the cultural intermediary in music management (Smith, Maguire and Matthews 2014). Their role is to operate between two fields, involving an element of translation between the two. How cultural material should be framed is not always in alignment between artists and arts managers or promoters (Grazian 2005) and carries the potential for conflict in public folklore (Baron 2010). Such relationships are unavoidable in the contemporary arts world, and it is important to understand the impact of cultural mediation on (a) the creation of works and (b) audiences' interpretation of these works.

Less colloquially used, the term 'remediation' has specific, though contested, meanings in cultural theory. Bolter and Grusin (2000: 273) describe it as the process 'by which new media fashion prior media forms' – put simply, the transfer of a folkloric idea into a new medium. However, as Korsgaard (2017) notes, this provides an unclear distinction between mediating and remediating. Others, such as Novak (2010), see remediation as specifically drawing attention to the (re)presentation of the original media (rather than just the concept) within the new work. This could be understood in terms of digitising a picture: in mediation, a digital scan may be taken of the image; in remediation, the old frame is also referenced within the new frame, acknowledging its previous form, and both old and new media are involved in meaning-making. No form of media is a transparent vehicle through which ideas are transmitted; each form of media will affect the interpretation of content (Omanga 2016), 'reveal[ing] and constitut[ing] contemporary cosmopolitanism … stress[ing] the contradictions of nostalgic desires to return to original sites of cultural production' (Novak 2010: 63). Folkloric material holds strong associations with history and the past. However, there is no inherent need to involve this level of association in new mediations, and artists engage with these different concepts in various ways through their work.

Cultivated and commercialised folk musics have tended to be excluded in academia as 'simply folklorism', their cultural relevance relatively underexplored (Lenk 1999; Hield 2015); however, there is value in exploring the processes at play for artists, audiences and the cultural industries.

The Modern Fairies project constructed a web of media objects including folkloric concepts, mediated and remediated works, and (re)presentation of these works both by the artists in performance and by the cultural industry in promotion. Our investigation sheds light on the nature of meaning-making through this multifaceted experience of artistic production.

**The Folklorist Perspective**

At the Sage Gateshead gatherings, audiences were summoned by Hield's 'The Calling On', an invitation intentionally challenging the belief that the fairies are long gone, the concept of disenchantment long proposed as modernity's defining feature. Yet, Hield's song originated in a (tongue-in-cheek) lament for the vanishing fairies in the introduction to Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath's Tale', written around 1390. Already in the fourteenth century, it was feared that the fairies had fled.

One of the show's principal themes was that the fairies had not left, but had simply withdrawn, now only ever glimpsed from the corner of the eye. Along city railway lines, in Sarah Hesketh's poem 'Glitches', attentive commuters might spot 'faces forcing / their way out of the stone, quick bodies etched in stone / and jigging'. Ewan MacPherson's song 'Sleeper' describes a moment when his companion's shadow seems to part company with her body, leaving the train and heading up on to the moors to dance with other kinds of beings. Patience Agbabi's poem 'We Dance to an Other Tempo' riffs on the motif of the fairy dance; the mortal is caught up in a dance that seems to last a single night, but once it is over, he discovers that centuries have passed. While Agbabi's speaker ventures deep beneath the trees into a subterranean club with strangely intoxicating drinks and hip otherworld creatures, time goes on a different track. Come morning, the trees are gone, and tower blocks, named Alder House and Elder House, stand in their place.

If the project artist's vision of our environment is not disenchanted, it is certainly seen as degraded. Many artists conceptualised fairies as protectors and guardians of the wild: in an urbanised world, the fairies are fighting back. MacPherson's 'Sleeper' observes that 'While you sleep, we go to dance on the back of the wild', and his film *Of Land and Story (The process of forgetting and remembering)*, argues that the supernatural is always close by, if humans open themselves up to its existence. Inge Thomson's song 'Wood and Blood' invokes a more threatening presence: 'winged warriors' lurk below the marsh, 'lick their wounds and cast spells to replenish'. The artists

speak of revivification, rescue and re-greening as potentialities, but also as processes demanding human and supernatural labour and sacrifice.

Themes of the obscure made vivid were most visible in Jim Lockey's black-and-white film *Parallel Worlds*, with a remarkable, atmospheric score by Barney Morse-Brown. A boy sits on a chair at the end of a long gallery; at the other end, a canvas depicting a tangle of lines pulses and rotates. Irresistibly drawn to the dark knot, the boy walks up to it, and is somehow transported into a woodland flooded with low, refracted summer light. There, he encounters a boy who looks much like him, and the two boys walk away through the trees in friendly intimacy, arms slung casually around one another's shoulders. The frame is flooded with a misty light; yet, back in the pin-sharp clarity of the gallery, the canvas' tangle vanishes, the portal closes. The other world allows humans access only on its own terms; return is not guaranteed. Lockey's film suggests then that children are particularly open and vulnerable to the supernatural. All these works make use of 'fuzzy allusion' (Foster 2000) to radically reimagine human contact with fairies in a modern, urbanised world.

Precise allusion featured in many pieces: artists quoted stories in new settings, finding ways to connect fairy lore to universal human experiences. The idea of the changeling, the wizened, languageless creature, substituted for a loved, healthy human baby, underpins Agbabi's poem 'Double'. Agbabi was intrigued by the idea of the changeling as alluding to a mother witnessing the manifestation of autism in her child. This specular poem traces a mother's belief that 'something has happened to my child' – despite his mother's loving care, he may not now be the same baby she bore and nourished. The tale of the 'Green Children' reverses the motif; here, two otherworldly children blunder into the human world, drawn by the sound of bells. The boy cannot adapt, and dies; the girl assimilates and thrives, but she loses her green strangeness. Marry Waterson adapted and set to music Jane Yolen's poem 'The Green Children', creating a new version from Yolen's precise allusion, in Foster's terms. She also developed the idea herself through precise allusion in composing a new song, 'Green in my Growing Pains', featuring the children as child migrants, refugees who long to return to their home. Precise allusion afforded Waterson the opportunity to re-present aspects of the Green Children story juxtaposed with another theme to generate new meaning.

Writer Terri Windling took up the idea of assimilation to create an introductory setting for these two Green Children songs. Her speaker is a man who recalls what his grandmother – the Green Girl – had told him about her origins. The interview begins as a scratchy recording on an old wax cylinder, played live on stage. Eerie and decidedly unmodern, this was a clear act of remediation among the contemporary performed pieces, consciously drawing attention to the materiality of the chosen medium. By bringing this old technology into the performance, audience attention was brought to the processes by which these stories have reached us. Despite the 'interview' being newly written and recorded, it evoked the sensation of authenticity. Although it is clearly a work of fiction in itself, it brings into question the nature of truth in fairy lore, playing with audiences' sense of disbelief. Remediation deliberately played on audience emotion, although through a faked artefact.

Precise connections between folklore and contemporary emotions or situations were foregrounded in the transformation tales that were a key theme of the project. Selkies, the seal-people of the Scottish islands, who can shed their skins and dance on sunlit beaches, were harnessed to explore ideas of identity, change and loss. The selkie-bride, compelled to leave the sea when her would-be husband steals her skin, longs to return to her native element, but the price is losing her children. No compromise seems possible – skins once slipped are snatched and hidden; when recovered, the chance of freedom must be seized. Lucy Farrell's podcast encapsulates the implications of and survival of these traditions in precise allusion; project members tell tales of singing to the selkies on northern beaches. Farrell's poignant round overlaps the calls of the selkie mother and her bereft husband, while Natalie Rae Reid's animation shows a woman transforming into a seal and back to a woman, an endless loop under the sea. The selkie is a figure of ambiguity and conflict; she longs for self-determination but agonises over separation from her children. Hovering between her land and sea forms, epitomised by Reid's animation, her image reiterates dilemmas that face contemporary women: maintaining their individuality whilst inhabiting new roles as wife and mother.

Freedom and release also infuse the Hare-Songs, inspired by the claim by Scotland's most famous early modern witch, Isobel Gowdie, that with the Devil's help, she could change herself into a hare. Hield composed two songs about the hare, one of which used Isobel's own spell to generate the melody, transforming her words into a powerful incantation. The second song is 'When She Comes', using words by Hesketh, that explore the sensation for the hare herself, possessed by an

alien presence, yet one that makes her feel whole. These songs highlight the experience of succumbing to an overwhelming force, at once unnerving and pleasurable. These versions and precise allusions retell the selkie and hare stories, though they are reframed by the artists, drawing on the elements that 'spoke' to them though their investigations into the stories. The resulting works do not just contain the narratives, but show how these narratives are shaped by the artists.

Other works imagined a different relationship between traditional and modern. An original version drawing on recognisable stories is found in Ben Nicholls' play *The Fairy Investigation Society*, which juxtaposes the story of Air Chief Marshall Sir Hugh Dowding, architect of the Battle of Britain, with the Somerset tale of 'the War between the Piskies and the Fairies', and the emergence of the gremlins. These supernatural figures were glimpsed at altitude by fighter pilots, grimacing through the windshields as they sabotaged vital plane systems, ripping out fuel lines and snapping steering mechanisms; again, the fairies fought back against human encroachment, the razing of their haunts for hangars and runways. Hesketh's 'Alyson Loathly' Instagram poet persona, in dialogue with Jackie Morris' comments, tapped into on-trend possibilities of fairies as a social media presence – the intangible and perhaps illusory made modern. Video, audio technology and animation were all harnessed to realise the artists' vision, alongside more traditional media: shadow puppets, drama, song and performance poetry. The fairies did not lose their darkness or menace as they were drawn by the power of art and imagination from the peripheries out under the lights of the theatrical space.

**The Artist Perspective**

To produce material for contemporary audiences, the artists first set out to forge their own connection to stories that, to many, were unfamiliar and associated with the sentimentalised 'winged being blowing dust' (Lockey) in media for children. This happened on a variety of levels, from personal to global connections, satisfying personal aesthetics or meeting audience expectations.

The artists connected with specific stories that resonated with their personal situations or political leanings. For example, Farrell gave birth during the project and chose to explore that experience via the fairy. Similarly, Agbabi drew on her experience of autism:

> I found an article suggesting children thought to be changelings in the past were probably disabled in some way, quite likely autistic. It set me thinking how we make things up to make things palatable.

While these connect with artists' personal experiences, they also hold significance for wider society. The artists were particularly intrigued when they found parallels between universal experiences described in the stories and contemporary situations:

> Waterson: There is a sense of loss and disconnection in ['The Green Children'] ... As climate change becomes an ever so imminent crisis in the twenty-first century, perhaps fairy stories can help us to reflect upon and question our own relationship with nature.

> Hesketh: The image I'm really drawn to … is that of the 'loathly ladies' and their dual identities as both monsters and beautiful women. The issues of power and control, and how we look at the female body, seem so pressing today.

The artists wanted to bring something new: simply repeating what had come before was not enough. Indeed, every artist interpreted the material through their own lens; the act of mediation added something to the new work. Waterson felt this was how the tales remain relevant:

> Ever since time began, stories have been retold and retold and retold. And every time they are told … they're going to become more relevant by the nature of the people telling the tales.

While the content of new versions could remain close to the original, there was a shift in contextual meaning to fit the contemporary climate. The extent to which fairies should be made 'modern' was debated amongst the artists. While for some the tales' universality meant that 'keeping those stories alive' was 'enough' (Morse-Brown) to make them modern, Agbabi felt a more interventionist approach was necessary:

> I don't want just some modern folk songs in fairy castles and settings – that's completely escapist. I want to make them relevant and I really like the idea of urbanising it and trying to do that in a meaningful and successful way.

Lockey was also averse to retaining established formats, agreeing with Agbabi that 'it would just be dangerous if we were to create a lot of lovely work that didn't seem to be aware that we're living in 2018'. However, there were fears about appearing inauthentic. Waterson, for example, defended her use of archaic language as a technique to create a sense of 'otherworldliness'. The 'Green Girl's descendant's interview' further explored this idea. Recording an imagined interview on to a wax cylinder integrated it into an earlier medium, highlighting the ambiguity of fairy lore's

continuing validity. Morse-Brown explicitly addressed the concept of remediation, emphasising that 'there [was] no point in recreating what's already come before'; yet he had to 'respect the ghosts standing behind you and behind them and behind them'. The artists considered the stories' journeys through different forms, deliberately engaging with, or rejecting, them in their new creations.

Making art relevant and modern was found both in the ideas it espoused and the aesthetic format through which the ideas were delivered. The Sage Gateshead gatherings' innovative multi-artform format added context to the individual pieces, even if their modernity had not been obvious in the process of adapting the materials.

> Hesketh: Up until [the final performance], a lot of the music to my ear had sounded like quite traditional folk and actually how the whole thing has been put together feels … very contemporary or quite avant-garde … and so it's the form that's modern.
>
> Agbabi: Earlier in the project, I was concerned with the aesthetic, that it would appeal to folk fans but not branch beyond that to reach a wider audience… Yet, in that space, with use of film, digital loops, lighting, high-quality recording, etc., it felt embedded in the twenty-first century.

The mode of presentation – the performance – came into focus. Andy Bell, the creative producer, created a highly stylised, atmospheric environment to frame the new works. 'In-the-round' seating within a 'black box' theatre generated an avant-garde atmosphere, distinct to folk club informalities. Manipulated sound effects and lighting including projections, further removing the works from stereotypes of acoustic aesthetics. Even pieces at the more traditional end of the spectrum became remediated though their performance context; the juxtaposition of an a cappella 'The Calling On' song and the stage setting created a contemporary context for individual works. The stories, as the artists realised, were not the only possible focus for the project; the effect of the material, rather than the materials themselves, could be explored:

> MacPherson: Instead of interpreting the stories … we could just interpret the sensation of the moment of people reading it, that end experience … it's not necessarily re-framing anything – just giving an experience, a moment.

As the works were not created for an integrated piece, there was much discussion about how to frame them for the gatherings. It felt important to provide the audience with some support to understand the materials, to enhance their experience, as 'sometimes a bit of explanation and

context is just as interesting as the material itself' (Waterson). Many of the musicians and poets were used to providing a spoken introduction for context; here, they felt this could jar, disrupting the magical experience they were attempting to create. Thus, information was provided in a programme outlining the themes and in an exhibition in the foyer exploring the artists' responses. Windling composed several aesthetically compatible transitions to give context to the following work, to 'lead the audience into, through and out of' the new piece, rather than introducing it from the stage.

Indeed, while the audience was at the forefront of artists' minds in preparing for the gatherings, they were a more elusive concept for the artists earlier in the project. While the artists were asked to keep them in mind, the idea of creating work to please a mass audience was not warmly received:

> Thomson: That spark's gone if we have to do work for mass consumption, and I don't think any artist wants to do that.
>
> Waterson: Trying to predict what somebody would like, that's kind of a fool's errand, really – and you won't write in your own true voice if you try to predict what will be popular.

Rather than trying to please audiences at the outset, artists focused on their own journeys into the material to seek out their creative spark. In some cases, these were solo voyages, without thought for the potential audience: 'I write for myself' (Waterson). Others found that the audience 'gets to be more and more of an influence' (Nicholls) as the artistic process progressed. Audiences were at times described as a necessary evil for these professional artists, and at other times as collaborators, people they wanted to connect with; they noted a difference between consciously commercialised artistic work and more altruistic material for connecting with an audience. Unwilling to let the audience affect their creative process, nevertheless the artists cared deeply about how the performance was received, keenly aware of audience reception and anxious that the work be presented professionally. As they focused primarily on the activities within the performance frame, artists gave little thought to selling the event to an audience; indeed, it seemed an inconvenience to engage with promoters. This was seen as an inhibition to creative practice, with the demand of marketable information ('what it's gonna look like') needed 'before you've even made the work' (Hesketh).

In summary, regardless of the artists' initial feelings about fairy lore, they cared deeply about creating work that was meaningful for themselves and for audiences. They were aware of the audience's need to find the material accessible, but had varying conceptions of their responsibility to enable that process. Some expected their work to stand in its own right while others accommodated audiences' previous experience, trying to scaffold the new ideas. Notions of commercialism cast a negative shadow on creative processes, yet connecting ideologically with audiences remained a central ambition. There were strong desires to avoid twee fairy rhetoric, and conscious attempts were made to modernise the material, both in terms of content and media.

The artists explored the reasons for the stories' longevity, examining how they could be a metaphor for contemporary experiences. The emotional experience of, for example, discovering that a child has autism or having post-traumatic stress disorder can be read out of these traditional narratives. Meanwhile, the dilemmas faced by selkies or the misogynist portrayal of loathly ladies speak directly to women's experiences in the modern world. By finding connections with their lived experience, the artists were able to engage with the ancient fairy lore, creating new versions or adaptations of the tales. Another approach that made the narratives vivid was translation into contemporary, urbanised settings. Parallels were drawn between the perennial fear that fairies were disappearing and the loss of rural life and green spaces. Strikingly, no artists used Foster's version or adaptation for this aspect; they were averse to retelling a recognisable story within a contemporary setting. Rather, fuzzy allusion was more congenial, indirect gesturing towards fairy legend.

Feeling strong connections to the sources, the artists were nevertheless uncomfortable about distancing motifs entirely from their origins. While these were questioned and reframed for the artists' own purposes, the sources were respected as new meanings were generated from them. Previous meanings were quoted or referenced; the juxtaposition of the contemporary interpretation created another layer in which the works could be 'read'. This process echoes ideas of remediation through the content itself.

**The Audience Perspective**

Moving beyond the production of new works, a major aim of the project was to understand how the work was meaningful to audiences. The project was a work of both audience development

(attempting to reach new audiences) and audience research (investigating the experience of audiences). Following the gatherings at Sage Gateshead, group conversations were carried out with members of the audience to explore their reactions to mediated works and the ways in which contextual information, workshops and social media content might be effective in enhancing engagement with the works from new and current audiences.

The desire to find new audiences for folk-stories is part of a wider mission for cultural organisations – to reach out into wider communities and involve a range of audiences in their programmes of activity. Issues around the social stratification of cultural consumption are well known (Taylor 2016), and arts events are frequently attended by a largely middle-class and well-educated audience. A concomitant, implicitly democratic moral imperative requires interventions in order to move citizens beyond these recognised patterns of consumption (Hadley 2017). The well-documented relationship between arts engagement and social inequality (Bourdieu 1984) shows that the skills needed to interpret artworks are often taught via early family socialisation and higher education. This project developed as a 'target-led' type of audience development, in which different artistic works were created based on the aims of developing and engaging with audiences (including current, lapsed and potential audiences). We wanted to meet audiences 'where they are' in terms of cultural knowledge and explore their ability to interpret artworks.

The following commentary draws on two series of focus groups, which ran in January and April 2019, both in advance of and immediately following the gatherings. Specific audience segments were targeted for the focus groups: previous attenders at folk performances at Sage Gateshead (April Focus Groups 1 and 2); participants in the regional Creative People and Places (CPP) project, run by Cultural Spring (April Focus Group 3); students from the city's two universities (also April Focus Group 3); and young people aged 16–25 living in the North East, recruited via targeted Facebook advertising and incentivised through £20 gift vouchers (April Focus Group 4). These audience segments represented groups covering a range of arts engagement and demographics, likely to approach the concept of fairies with differing levels of knowledge and preconceptions.

Audiences' existing knowledge of fairy material significantly shaped their understanding of the stories. Understanding the audience's prior history with, and experience and expectations of, folklore, and their embodied, affective response to the material became of vital importance to

meeting audiences 'where they were'. Several artists recognised that their existing audiences would be predisposed to engaging with the project and raised questions about how to make material accessible to an audience with preconceived ideas about fairies being 'just for small children' (Windling). This concern was well-founded: folk audiences in the April focus groups spoke of their 'scepticism' (April FG1/5) about the performance, believing fairy themes to be 'dated and old-fashioned' and without adult appeal.

The concern as to whether audiences would be able, or willing, to engage with the folklore-derived stories raises a question as to what kind of audience development was intended. Kawashima's (2006) typology of audience development is useful here, plotting specific types of audience development activity in evolving the range of target markets, product types and rationales for the activity:

- Extended Marketing, aiming to reach potential audiences with the same existing product
- Taste Cultivation, aiming to introduce existing audiences to new art forms and genres
- Audience Education, providing opportunities for learning and deepening engagement with the works
- Outreach, aiming to attract those unlikely to attend (e.g. in deprived communities), often taking arts projects outside the existing venues.

Within this schematic, the Modern Fairies project engaged in activity covering Taste Cultivation, Audience Education and Outreach. The project: introduced existing folk music audiences to different art forms and genres (in this case, spoken word, film, animation and 'contemporary folk') via Taste Cultivation; offered online source materials, a programme booklet and an exhibition for Audience Education; and engaged with participants from the CPP project and non-attenders in the 16–25 age range for Outreach. The attempt to cover a range of activity was not without its own tensions, as identified by the focus group participants: 'Do you want people who are interested in, like, fantasy and stuff like that, or do you just want ... everybody? How are you going to get a general audience in as opposed to quite niche?' (April FG1/4).

Each audience group arrived with different levels of knowledge about fairies and folklore, different levels of cultural confidence with various art forms, different experience of the gatherings format and different levels of interest in engaging with explanations and contextualisation: 'where your audience are very familiar with the material, less needs to be said' (Audience feedback via

questionnaire after work-in-progress showcase at the Festival of the Mind, Sheffield, November 2018) and 'even if you want people to read up before they show up, people aren't necessarily gonna do that. People take as much interest in things as they want to' (April FG1/4).

It rapidly became apparent that a significant proportion of the audience were, as Windling noted, encountering the project with both a foreknowledge of the archival material and an emotional attachment 'from their childhoods' to these stories (January FG3/1). The acknowledgement that many of the participants brought a degree of cultural capital with them, though not framed in sociological terms, raises interesting questions regarding potential future modes of marketing presentation and the orientation of such projects if art with folkloric content is to target new markets. Most of us have some degree of understanding of and connection to folklore, since its tropes imbue popular culture with narrative, metaphor and archetype. No clear correlation emerged among the focus-group cohorts between the affective cultural capital of an early-life-stage familiarisation with fairy tales and class or social position, although it is worth noting that the CPP participants were highly unlikely to go to any event at Sage Gateshead had they not been invited.

In similar contexts, audience development activity would need to align with, rather than seek to enhance/extend, the audiences' affective capacity; the pre-existing cultural capital in our collective memory of folklore would no doubt deepen audience engagement, in terms of what Foley (1991) calls 'traditional referentiality'. This entails 'the invoking of a context that is enormously larger and more echoic than the text or work itself' (Foley 1991: 7). The different audience experience described here shows that reliance on such cultural allusions is variable and can greatly affect the experience of different kinds of audiences receiving the work.

Post-performance focus groups illuminated how audiences interpreted the sources and intention behind Modern Fairies' songs, poems and films. Some felt that the 'experimental nature' of the performance style made it feel 'avant-garde' (April FG3/9). Others, expecting 'fairies' to mean highly gendered, tiny sprites, were surprised to find the depictions so nuanced and the stories so dark and 'appl[icable] to the modern world as well' (April FG1/5). Yet, for some, the pre-modern subject matter and the soundworld of traditional folk music meant that the performance 'couldn't be further removed from modern' (April FG4/7).

Beyond the feel or soundworld, participants also debated whether the old stories had been mediated for the modern world. While some were seen as explicitly modern (such as MacPherson's

'Sleeper'), many more were made contemporary through the artists' framing, on stage or in the exhibition beforehand. The connection between 'The Green Children' and attitudes towards incomers and refugees, or between Selkies and the experience of motherhood, gave participants a way to translate the emotional experience of these stories into contemporary situations: 'I feel all of it was relevant because of the way that the traditional tales have been reshaped ... like failing to recognise your own child in a cradle if you've been up all night for a week' (April FG2/8).

Many participants wanted to hear more about these connections; when the possible connection between the changeling tale and the manifestation of autism in children was explained, participants were fascinated by this extra layer of meaning and wished they had known 'a dash more of what it's actually about' during the performance (April FG4/9). However, these connections did not always have to be explained to the audience as participants were able to interpret the stories on their own, at times suggesting other ways in which the stories might be meaningful (such as drawing connections between the in-between land and the experience of dementia, April FG1/5). As in previous research (Hield and Price 2018), participants took delight in making those connections between seemingly alien stories and their everyday lives.

One piece in particular struck participants as significantly different in style from the rest of the works: Nicholls' 'The Fairy Investigation Society'. The industrial, modern setting contrasted with the rural backdrop to most of the other tales, and the origins of the piece were seen as peculiar to the rest of the performance: 'Why I thought that didn't make sense is because I didn't believe in the fairy problem, that they would attack the planes in that way. … all the other things, seemed to have a human quality to what fairies get up to and how we're linked to them' (April FG2/7). Reactions to this piece show how each audience member's experience was mediated by their interpretation of fact versus fiction. Participants happily played with the idea of fairies being a metaphor for 'explaining the unexplainable' (April FG1/3); from a contemporary vantage point, it is easy to understand fairy stories as a means of explaining autism, mental health issues, trance-like states and the perceived difference of foreign migrants. Fairy lore could enable people to interpret and understand the emotional experience of these challenges. However, there was little sense amongst the participants of any belief in the existence of fairies. Consequently, when stories of fairies entered the twentieth century in the WWII material, participants were less comfortable: should they explain it away as post-traumatic stress disorder or accept that people in living memory believed in otherworldly creatures? The interest in dissecting what might be historical fact or

fiction confirms the demand for contextual material explaining the (re)mediation and modernisation processes, both before and after the event.

In terms of introducing new audiences to fairy lore the project succeeded through inviting outreach groups to participate. While we have gained valuable insight into their responses to the works, it is unlikely that the outreach groups would attend a similar performance again, or that other people from similar outreach demographics could be attracted without the research project incentives. There were elements that interested them, but the mode and site of presentation were too far removed from their existing cultural practice. The project also brought existing (new music, folk music, literary) audiences together to experience new mediums. This opened up their ability to interpret the works in new ways and showed potential for further development of cross-art-form audiences for fairy lore.

**Conclusion**

The Modern Fairies project has shown that artworks do not stand alone. Emerging from a wealth of folkloric archival material, they tap into a system of traditional referentiality understood by those 'in the know'. Artists and audiences alike arrive with existing cultural understanding of fairies, which affects their expectations and experiences.

Artists incorporated elements of previous versions within new works, repurposing both narrative content and form. This occurred through all three of Foster's types (version, precise allusion and fuzzy allusion) and included elements of remediation in which historical sources were directly referenced. Melding individual pieces with contextualising transitions created an event that could be viewed as a remediation in its entirety. Juxtaposing traditional song styles with wax cylinder players, contemporary film and theatrical performance helped to create a kaleidoscope of perspectives through which audiences navigated their own response. This project casts new light on the negative connotation of Foster's 'fuzzy allusion', which is often associated with superficial treatment of folkloric ideas by mass media. Instead, the artists played with the effects of deep emotions associated with the folkloresque to create new experiences through artistically aware work.

The new 'version' and 'precise allusion' works intrinsically included the artist's voice. Either through drawing out the important element in a version, or juxtaposing with another theme in

precise allusions, the artists constructed new meaning, enabling them to produce new work. These meanings, however, were not always immediately apparent to audiences. Although audiences enjoyed finding their own meaning in the work (sometimes in alignment with the artists, other times different) they may find those meanings more easily, and experience them more deeply, when they have more of an understanding of each artist's thinking around the work itself. Whether previous mediations of fairies are referenced or not, audiences bring pre-existing understanding to their interpretation. This proposes that some of the work of remediation happens within the audience's frame of interpretation as well as through the artists' process of producing work.

The site of reception provides an important factor for accessing artworks, and the promotional strategies employed to attract audiences has an impact on who attends, and who experiences the work. The artists had complicated relationships with this concept. They wanted their work to stand alone and speak for itself. Attention was paid to framing individual items within the event, when they were in contact with audiences. However, they were generally suspicious and talked in negative terms about marketing practices and how their work was 'sold' to audiences away from their works. Linked to this, they did not want to feel that their work was being shaped, during the development stages, by commercial concerns. This demonstrates an internal conflict that ran throughout the project, a disjuncture between the artists wanting to speak to people, to attract new audiences to folklore, but not seeing how this was intrinsically connected with the work of the venues: their activity was seen as being focused on commercialisation.

The project investigated processes of mediating folkloric material to make it speak to contemporary concerns and anxieties. The narratives that the artists selected foreground vital themes relevant to contemporary society of individual identity, environmental and social crises and self-determination; the vivid dramatisation of these enduring truths about human existence communicate powerfully with contemporary audiences, which bring existing experience of fairy lore that shapes their reception and constructs new meanings following exposure to new artworks and concepts. With attention to the staging of concepts and mediatised (re)presentation, this project has shown that the ancient, academic and obscure has the potential to become immediate, relevant and vivid.

**Notes**

i April focus group 1, participant number 5.

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**Appendix: List of artists in the Modern Fairies project**

Patience Agbabi

Lucy Farrell

Sarah Hesketh

Fay Hield

Jim Lockey

Ewan MacPherson

Jackie Morris

Barney Morse-Brown

Ben Nicholls

Natalie Rae Reid

Inge Thomson

Marry Waterson

Terri Windling

Produced by Andy Bell