

Running Head: *LA FÉE VERTE*

La Fée Verte: James M. Storm *un*Conventionally Transforms Reality into Fantasy

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Abstract

This paper explores the latest film from J. S. Company Productions, *La Fée Verte* (2007); it begins with background, followed by inductive analysis and impacts. This film provides a cyclical, *unconventional* twist on a well-known myth. The impacts drawn from this analysis are theoretical, rhetorical, and pragmatic. Theoretically, this film provides a unique narrative structure for a traditional, linear myth, and the possibility of revitalizing or rethinking other traditional myths. Rhetorically, the film both entrenches and rejects patriarchy. Pragmatically, the film is beautiful, entertaining, and inspiring. Overall, the film provides a generative rhetorical and performative space for scholars to comment.

Key words: *La Fée Verte*, Absinthe, J.S. Company Productions, James M. Storm, film

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It is eerily quiet. A bottle filled with steaming, glowing green liquid sits, unassumingly on a tiny table in front of an audience of beautiful, rendered green fairies. An ordinary looking man gazes wistfully out of a window in the midst of a consuming rain. He pauses, turns, and sits upon an ornate cushion in front of the table. There, he methodically and through seemingly rote bodily practice, mixes water, the mysterious green liquid (labeled absinthe), and a flaming sugar cube. As he sips his drink, his eyes caress the two-dimensional images of fairies on the wall. The frame encapsulates one fairy in particular, clad in what appears to be a punk-rock inspired bikini and leg warmers. She embodies an equal vamp sexuality and innocence. The drinker swallows another sip, breaking his gaze for a mere second; followed by a stark realization the fairy has left the poster on his wall (Swift 2008a; Swift, 2008b; Swift, 2008c). So begins the latest cinematic tour de force from James M. Storm, *La Fée Verte*¹. The DVD cover describes the film as follows:

When a lonely dreamer drinks from a bottle of magical absinthe, his inner most fantasies come to life. The magical Fée Verte will draw her indulger into her world of dreams. A land so beautiful, it reminds us that miracles may still come true. From the creative mind of James M. Storm, comes this sweet tale of romance and fantasy and will invite you, the viewer, to have your own private glimpse into the world of dreams. (Synopsis, *La Fée Verte*, Storm, 2007).

Though the myth of the green fairy is not a new one, this particular telling is unique. The rich history of the myths surrounding absinthe and its past legal ban, coupled with its subsequent re-legalization the very year this particular film was made warrants further investigation. Through this 12 minute experimental film, Storm (2007) achieves the telling of his own festering fantasy,

shrouded in creative license. In his film, Storm utilizes the familiar myth of the green fairy to transform fantasy into reality, and then back into fantasy, weaving a cyclical narrative in a film without the spoken word, in the midst of a sound-bite culture. The film is unexpected, predictable, shocking, strange, and somehow simultaneously familiar. In response to the film, this paper begins with a foundation into the history of absinthe and the myth of the green fairy before an inductive analysis of the themes performed in the film followed by impacts from said analysis.

Background

JS Company Productions

The film comes from a San Diego based, independent film studio, which I have written press releases for, and according to the company website:

J.S. Co. PRODUCTIONS is a fully functioning, independent multi media and film production studio. Created by James M. Storm and managed by a tight collaborative crew of artists and creators, the company has produced over 40 student films and countless commercial services. Whether it is a full-length feature film production or a humble wedding project J.S. Co. PRODUCTIONS is dedicated to the highest quality of professional work with a fresh artistic edge that can only be found with our production staff (<http://www.jscompanyproductions.com>).

Though the films produced by the company have always been innovative, *La Fée Verte* is the newest and best executed of Storm's films to date. From the camera angles to the filtered lenses, black lights, costumes, original artwork, and beautiful score by Larry Coppetelli, *La Fée Verte* invites the audience into a mystical dance with the Green Fairy, well portrayed by Stephanie Swinscoe. Devin Umscheid, on the other hand, provides an almost forgettable performance.

Not because he is bad, but because he allows the possibility for his character the (unnamed) absinthe drinker, to be anyone at all with dreams, truly allowing the viewer to substitute him or herself into the part during the film. Interestingly, Dyer (1983) points out a possible reason that the male hero may remain clothed, regardless of how scantily clad his female counterpart may be: “a limp penis can never match up to the mystique that has kept it hidden from view for the last couple of centuries” (p. 116). This sentiment is mirrored by the wardrobe and actions of the Absinthe drinker in this film.

Absinthe and the Green Fairy

There is no singular history of absinthe or the Green Fairy. Mystery, intrigue, and curiosity surround the green alcoholic beverage known as Absinthe. According to greendevil.com, a website devoted to the spirit; there are a number of myths surrounding the drink, which conflict with and confirm each other, working with and against each other to sustain the drink’s rich history and mystery:

Absinthe was initially called ‘La Fée Verte’ (The Green Fairy) and this name stuck throughout Absinthe's heyday . . . Absinthe was romantically known as the Green Fairy since the late 18th century but, although its origin is untraceable before that date, some legends talk about its origin coming as far back as ancient Greece.

(http://www.greendevil.com/absinthe_legands.html).

Perhaps it is the unresolved conflicting accounts which aid in sustaining absinthe’s intrigue to drinkers and story tellers alike. McGee (2007) reported that Hemmingway’s 1935 Death in the Afternoon, while posing as a story about bullfighting was actually an account of an absinthe hallucination.

While conflicting and controversial myths exist, Crowley's (1918) essay, *The Green Goddess*, seems to offer the most detail. Crowley explained that in life, a man is trapped in the mundane struggle and darkness, which is absent of spirit. In the Old Absinthe House in New Orleans, he found a wet (with both rain and the alcoholic beverage) environment full of wonder, hope, spirit, God, and the possibility of salvation or at least renewal. He articulated that there is a fine line between fantasy and reality, but absinthe is the bridge. Absinthe is a means for transcending or subsuming the real to the plane of salvation; absinthe provides the rhetorical and performative means for traversing from the lustful fantasy to creation and consumption of perfection like Aphrodite. Further, Crowley argued that those who reject absinthe are flawed. Consumption of and intoxication from absinthe, according to Crowley, provides the catalyst for realizing the purpose of life, which is embedded within love, art, and religion. Absinthe is not without its downfalls, however. With genius comes vice, which calls into praxis Derrida's (2001) aporetic ethics—in order to be ethical to one, we are unethical to another. Divine consciousness of the artist brings with it all of the illusions of the artist, toying back and forth with reality. Crowley continued by arguing that the absinthe drinker's home is not one of a physical place, but a metaphysical space of meeting. This space is encapsulated by the cleansing rains and absinthe, an intersection of philosophies. The Green Fairy/La Fée Verte is the stereotype of man's perfect woman; she is the impossibility of desire and torture. This impossibility is performed by the word absinthe itself, which comes from the Greek *apsinthion*, which means undrinkable or undelightful. Possibly at least partially due to these embedded paradoxes, man continually fights to achieve the reward of La Fée Verte.

Absinthe legalized in the US 2007

In addition to the conflicting myths surrounding the effects of absinthe, even its legal status is a bit unclear. The drink has been banned for nearly a century, but imposters or similar drinks without certain ingredients have been bought and sold in European countries as well as the United States. As explained by Baggott (2007):

In the United States of America, absinthe was originally banned by Food Inspection Decision 147 in 1912. Now, thujone is banned as a food additive according to Section 801A of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act of August, 1972. Wormwood was included on a list of unsafe herbs which the FDA released in 1975 (Absinth: Frequently Asked Questions and Some Answers).

While that report makes absinthe seem rather banned, Rothstein (2007) explained his experience with the drink as he sat down with friends to enjoy the drink, claiming, “this column was conceived under the influence of a green-colored, high-proof herbal liquor that was illegal in the United States for more than 95 years” (<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/12/arts/12conn.html>). Hence, though there is disagreement over the authenticity of the absinthe now available, there is currently some form of the substance currently legally available in the United States.

Theory behind the Film

Obviously, the entirety of film theory is beyond the range of this paper. While motion pictures are not the everyday, mundane, lived experience, “culture is the constant process of producing meanings of and from our social experience, and such meanings necessarily produce a social identity for the people involved,” and the realistic felt experience of film is one of the most powerful forms of cultural meaning-making and deciphering (Fiske, 1989, p.1). Within film, the prescribed or agreed upon social identities for characters “emerge within the play of specific

modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity” (Hall 1994, p.4). Of particular power in the cinematic world is the construction of gender norms on the screen. The performativity of the same archetypal characters creates a need and satisfaction for what defines a man and a woman, which ultimately bleeds into the audience’s expectations for gender off of the screen as well (Butler 1990, Butler 1993). Hence, the process of culture creation involves the circulation of discourse and text which result in defining and redefining social identity (Fiske 1989). Regarding film theory overall, Razutis (1984) argued that a successful film analysis requires clearly defined and limited terms. Hence, the theoretical discussion in the present paper is designed to specify and limit the theoretical and analytical scope of the present discussion. The theory pertinent to the current project, however, includes discussion of un/conventional narrative structure in film, the performance of female sexuality in film, and the blending of fantasy and the real.

Un/conventional narrative structure. The expected narrative structure within a Western film is one of a clear beginning, middle, and end. However, there are those films, like the one in question which may start mid-action or end before the audience feels there is a resolution. More specifically, this film, though featuring real people, closely resembles a Disney short animation film. Diffrient (2006) explains that *Fantasia*, a feature-length animated film, sans words, set to music, is essentially a “collection of ‘paintings’” (p. 509). Instead of a set narrative structure, there are a series of frames which are aesthetically pleasing and provocative. Of course, *La Fée Verte* is not an outright rejection of convention; it contains elements of the predictable elements of narrative while simultaneously performing challenges to those norms. This is made possible

because of the way Storm both planned and manipulated the system of his text. According to Metz (1974):

The system of the text is the process which displaces codes, deforming each of them by the presence of the others, contaminating some by means of others, meanwhile replacing one by another, and finally—as a temporarily “arrested” result of this general displacement—placing each code in a particular position in regard to the overall structure, a displacement which thus finishes by a positioning which is itself destined to be displaced by another text. (p. 103)

Metz was concerned with text in the sense of the language of film. He was not limiting his analysis to linguistic constructs, however. His theory applies to film as text. In *La Fée Verte*, there is a presence of absent words, creating space for the viewer to substitute his or her own for the perceived empty space.

Performed female sexuality. There have been innumerable theories written regarding the performance of gender, perpetuation of normative female sexuality, and women in film. These theories tend to critique upholding of expected female roles within mass-mediated venues because of the negative implications these expected performances can have on the immediate audience as well as the public at large. Of course, most of these theories are far more nuanced. Perhaps the leading theorist in this area regarding film specifically is Mulvey. Her approach is particularly nuanced and helpful for the project at hand. Mulvey (1975) set forth an important aporia within narrative cinema concerned with pleasure. She argued that the male character captured within both phallogentrism and a film narrative is simultaneously always already in pleasure and pain. He both desires and fears the female object of desire. Additionally, the conventional structure of the Hollywood narrative forces the female into the role of the looked at

and the male as the *looker*. The idea that the male and female characters' sexuality are simultaneously threatened and appeased opens the possibility of an un/conventional sexuality to be preformed on film. The sexualities may or may not meet pre-determined norms, but more importantly, the sexualities are not fixed. Instead, the roles the characters take on within a given film create and challenge a dynamic, unending sexuality. Those who protest Mulvey (1975) point out primarily that her theory is white heteronormative; it focuses solely on the white, heterosexual male gaze. Of course, there exists the possible lesbian gaze (e. g. White, 1995) and heterosexual female subject (e. g. Neale, 1986; Rodowick, 1982). Finally, there is the argument that Mulvey's theory does not even attempt to broach the area of racial diversity (e. g. Gaines, 2000). However, in this particular paper, we are addressing a film with two characters who, by all indications are white and heterosexual, or at least portraying that they are.

Fantasy, reality, fanlity, reatasy. What constitutes a "reality" is constantly in question, and the present film further complexifies the issue. The fictive nature of this particular film necessitates exploration of the concept of fantasy, yet the in-film action creates a reality within the confines of the story itself, based on the absinthe drinker's presumed fantasy. For decades, the goal of filmmakers has been to create a fantasy escape so "real" for their viewers that the audience can escape a less preferable reality. Likewise, scholars have dissected and generated many theories regarding fantasy and the possibility of the real. For instance, regarding realism in film, Williams (2003) wrote, "the camera is a single eye, there is no possibility of an alternative viewpoint, the viewer has to go along or detach him or herself, he or she has no complex seeing within the action" (p. 80). While an understandable conclusion based on the physical nature of film and audience, not all would agree that the audience's role is quite so predetermined or stagnant. On this point of contention, Stular (1994) argued the omnipotent nature granted to the

audience involved in Hollywood fantasy allows audience members to be both rebellious and submissive. Suffice it to say, the audience members get to determine their own role to an extent. Audiences are, of course, aimed at their intended role by the director of the film as well as the actors within. However, because of the physical displacement of audience members and the routine nature of film observance in American culture, those who are not in the film operate under a presumption of (perhaps illusive) power.

Analysis

Un/conventional Narrative Structure in the Film.

This 12 minute film is told through the performing corporeal bodies of two actors set to music. The narrative, rather than completely linear, is cyclical. The story begins in the midst of action. The viewer is left to assume, based on various cinematic cues that the absinthe drinker, who remains nameless, is going about this day as any other. He is in the midst of the embodied mundane. Alone, he directs his male gaze at the poster of his fantasy fairy, and drinks his fantasy beverage. Without explanation, the fantasy springs from the two dimensional, fantasy world into his lap (figuratively and literally). His fantasy becomes reality through a series of painting-like frames, similar to those described by Diffrient (2006) which are nearly disjointed visually, but sewn together fluidly by the musical score. When the absinthe drinker's fairy comes off of his wall, their roles are reversed. While the drinker picked her rendered body and placed it where he wanted it on his wall, she commands his movement the moment that his drinking sets her free. With a come-hither stare and a crooked finger, she demands that he follow, and without objection; he does. While on the original poster, the fairy is captured to "freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11). She is reduced to the sexual spectacle of the absinth drinker, and simultaneously, her forced passivity

highlights the importance of the absinth drinker's actions. "She is isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualised" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 12). Through drinking the forbidden substance of absinthe, the drinker sets his fantasy free and simultaneously becomes a slave in a newly embodied reality. The fantasy or myth of the green fairy of absinthe comes true and subsequently, the fairy of the drinker's fantasies commands the drinker's actions. Though it seems his wishes have come true, through committing the forbidden act of drinking the absinthe, the drinker further entrenches himself into the forbidden. Contradictory narratives/texts work upon and against each other throughout the film. Similarly to what Metz (1974) described, the expected codes within this particular film are displaced with other codes, leaving the audience in the midst of a conversation which is simultaneously predictable and refreshing. The fairy comes to life, as expected, but the drinker follows at her will until he, too, is transformed back into fantasy. Hence, the audience is left to wonder if anything was "real" to begin with. The fairy moves about and asks the drinker to come closer, but each touch is initiated by her and he is no more than an intoxicated/enchanted follower. As the synopsis explicitly attests, "The magical Fée Verte will draw her indulger into her world of dreams." Because he indulged, the drinker is now encapsulated into a world where his actions are no longer solely his own.

The Bodies Performing Sexuality

This film provides the audience with a multitude of layers to the performed sexualities on screen. Interestingly, there is another level to this reality transforming into fantasy. In this film, the body of the green fairy is perfect. She is svelte, scantily clad, confident, and perfectly made up. This is, in fact, the way that Stephanie Swinscoe looks today. However, her body has not always been perfect. Swinscoe as sex symbol would have seemed far fetched a few years ago when she had the *imperfect* body. Due to scoliosis, Swinscoe once had a pronounced

imperfection to her back. Post corrective surgery, however, no one would know. Hence, the fantasy of Swinscoe as the perfect body has become reality, and this particular film has become her forum to showcase this new perfection. As Mulvey (1975) described, the sexuality of the bodies in this film are fluid and paradoxical. The perfection of the fairy's body next to the unknown attractiveness of the male body becomes a catalyst for the fear a female can arouse in a male on film. Additionally, when the reality of Swinscoe's bodily history is layered atop her perceived perfect body, a further catalyst for desire coupled with fear is articulated. Because the body of the male in the film is clad in so many layers, his shape is virtually non-descript and ordinary. Hence, the absinthe drinker becomes an easily substituted character for any audience member. Any (wo)man can imagine stepping into the screen and drinking the absinthe him or herself, which supports the possible multi-directionality of audience members' roles set forth by Stular (1994). The most present body in the film, however, is arguably the absent body of its creator/director, James M. Storm.

Fantasy, Reality, Fanlity, Reatasy in the Commentary

Like the film itself, the commentary by Storm and his lead actress, Swinscoe (2007) attested that the on-screen performance mirrors the actual process of making the film. Storm explained that each of his films is both a dream and a memory. His fantasies come true when making his films. However, like the fairy coming to life and controlling the drinker, Storm admitted that the product of his dreams—his films—also consume him. Storm ruminated on the idea of this particular film for years, as the absinthe drinker fantasized about his fairy. The fairy also illustrates Riviere's point that a woman may utilize "gestures of feminine flirtation" in order "both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it" (in Doane, 1991, p. 25). The description of the making of this film explicated by

Storm in the commentary provides a performative affirmation of Williams's (2003) charge that the camera provides only a single-eye. Storm's eye is translated into the camera's eye, and if viewed as intended, substitutes for the eyes of the audience. When Storm finally initiated production of this film, he swallowed the steaming green liquid, freeing the idea from his mind, the fairy from the wall, and suddenly was simultaneously consuming/consumed by the fantasy/fairy. The cast and crew were caught in a fast moment of production, as the absinthe drinker was caught imbibing. Storm and Swinscoe explained that production of this film, due to various pressures, was compressed into two laborious, strenuous nights and conditions were less than favorable. Swinscoe described the weather as nearly unbearably cold, which was made even less favorable by her tiny fairy costume, designed by Storm. Storm's design of the costume performs the male gaze further. As the absinthe drinker selected and placed the poster of his chosen fairy, the director of the film selected and dressed his lead actress. Then, the absinthe drinker drank his fairy into being as Storm wrote, directed, and filmed Swinscoe's fairy into being. As the absinthe drinker drinks and Storm directs, the audience of the film consumes the body of Swinscoe/*La Fée Verte*. She becomes and performs the fantasy of the drinker and the director, and makes these fantasies the fantasies of the audience. The film presents captured images of perfection—unreal, corporeal bodies—without showing the hidden imperfections of preparation and happy accidents.

Impacts

From the dance between the drinker and the fairy, the director and the actress, and the music and the bodies, we can draw impacts on theoretical, rhetorical, and pragmatic levels. Theoretically, this film sets out a new narrative structure and precedent for understanding the fantasy/reality dichotomy/negotiation. This film allows the viewer to choose his or her

interpretation. The viewer could see this film as entirely fantasy, entirely reality, or some negotiation or fusion of the two. As described by Razutis (1984), the future of film theory is uncertain and always already in flux:

We run the risk of falsifying the conditions under which “new narrative” and the “future of film theory” could be properly assessed. The “reality of film practice” is rarely acknowledged . . . Rather, primacy is given over to speculations on viable and non-viable models for an equally hypothetical enterprise that doubles as 'praxis'. The dilemma of film theory lies not only in its internal contradictions and lack of relevance to much of film practice, but also in its status within dominant and established orders (like the university), a status that potentially undermines and neutralizes the possibility for film to subvert dominant orders. (http://xalrazutis.org/alchemy/visual_alchemy/opsis/Menage-complete.html)

Through ongoing analysis of films like *La Fée Verte*, which deny stock-analysis, film theory can continually improve in detail and scope.

Rhetorically, *La Fée Verte* both reinforces and inverts the patriarchal male gaze, perhaps promoting a fresh understanding or interpretation of it. Marcantonio (2007) argued that a mute female body within a film perpetuates the traditional and expected gender performativity of women. When the woman is mute and awakened, especially for or by a man, patriarchy is re-entrenched. While this Storm film performs this critique to a degree, it goes beyond this normative gender performance. The green fairy in this film is indeed mute for the duration of the film. She is even unconscious until awakened from her place within the poster on the wall by her (male) absinthe drinker. Subsequent to the predictable male awakening of the female, the male also remains silent, follows the lead of the female, and is ultimately returned to her place on

the wall with her, making them equals in the end. The fairy is especially empowered because, though her male counterpart empowered her to “come to life,” he succumbs to her power by following her.

Additionally in terms of rhetoric, there are a number of implications which can be drawn from the commentary. For example, Storm serves as author and director of the film, the action in the film as well as commentary, and Swinscoe. The control that Storm has over Swinscoe is revealed in the commentary as well as through his direction of Swinscoe and Umbscheid. Further, Swinscoe is the imperfect yet “perfected” body, through surgery, through Storm’s direction, wardrobe design, and make up application. It is Storm who has the power to perfect Swinscoe, both in the directing and performing of the film as well as in the conversation in the film’s commentary. Finally in terms of rhetoric, there is fabricated control for Swinscoe/Fairy. Even though the fairy takes the drinker back to her poster, it is the drinker/Storm who gets what he wants.

Pragmatically, the film provides the audience with beauty, entertainment, and worlds of possibilities. The fantasy within the film is that absinthe makes dreams come true at least partially because it is forbidden. However, in reality, the drink became legal to consume in the US in 2007, the very year this film was released. Perhaps the release of Storm’s fantasy blossomed into reality. Essentially, the film enables Storm, Umscheid, Swinscoe, and the audience to perform the green dream because consuming the absinthe enables the audience to consume Swinscoe/*La Fée Verte*. The commentary further supports the pursuit of fantasy in reality because Storm explained that each of his films is a fantasy realized. Through the continued production of his own films, Storm provides a practical precedent for others to follow his lead and pursue dreams/fantasies of their own.

Conclusion

Through an examination of foundations behind, analysis of and impacts from *La Fée Verte*, it is clear that Storm has made an impressive and meaningful contribution to the study of film, myth, and rhetoric. In reference to his analysis of *Charlie's Angels* and *Alias* promotional materials, Coon (2005) concluded: "Although the film and series do take steps to challenge these conventions, the promotional tools may indicate a nervousness on the part of the producers, a fear that too direct a challenge up front will scare away potential viewers" (p. 11). Similarly, *La Fée Verte* has simultaneously furthered liberation and oppression of the sexualized female body in independent film. This film provides an exquisitely executed narrative and rhetorical space for simultaneous rejection and entrenchment/enrichment of tradition. Hopefully, there will be a plethora of films to come from J. S. Company Productions for audiences to enjoy and scholars to analyze. Storm and company provide theoretical, rhetorical, and pragmatic possibilities for further academic pursuit of film theory through this particular film and others like it. Storm's *unconventional* direction allows for the possibility of multiple avenues of scholarship. In the end, the film and the commentary alike perform a narrative structure which enables the audience to hold onto the hope to consume and be consumed by their own *La Fée Verte*.

Endnotes

1. *La Fée Verte* can be purchased from J. S. Company Productions. The studio is a fully functioning multi media service, fully capable in videography, advertisement and commercials, student film, DVD and VHS duplication, 8mm transfer, and legal video. JS Company Productions is primarily comprised of: James M. Storm (founder, director, producer), Sean Sprigle (production manager), Larry Coppotelli (original music scores), Lara Harlow (Script Supervisor), Kris Asghazadeh (production assistance), Sebastian David (Cinematography), Wes Donnalson (production crew), John Hagan (production crew), Rolando Issa (Cinematography), Shane Pulido (production crew), and William Trafton III (assistant director). To order *La Fée Verte*, any other JS Company Productions film or services, contact the studio at: www.jscompanyproductions.com, 858-513-4116, PO Box 502923, San Diego, CA 92150-2923, jsco@san.rr.com.

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