THE FANTASY FILM

Katherine A. Fowkes

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This edition first published 2010

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial Offices
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this title

ISBN: 9781405168786 (hbk)/9781405168793 (pbk)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 11/13pt Bembo by Thomson Digital

Printed in Singapore

001 2010

In loving memory of my father, Conard Fowkes (1933–2009): Actor, film lover, and tireless champion of the performing arts.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank a number of people, including series editor Barry Keith Grant, who has been a pleasure to work with and whose close reading of the proposal and penultimate draft have been invaluable. Thanks to the incomparable Nell Minow for also reading the penultimate draft, and to Jayne Fargnoli and Margot Morse at Wiley-Blackwell for their enthusiasm, and for being so wonderful to work with! And special thanks to my fabulous project manager and crack-commando copy-editor, Justin Dyer.

Thanks to Dennis Carroll, Carole Stoneking, Wilfred Tremblay, and Nido Qubein for all their support. Thanks also to my students Andrew Tzvaras and Matt Wells. And on a personal note, thanks to my sister Cly Fowkes, Dr Holly Lee, Dr Lewis Lipsey, Kirby and Carmen, and Michelle Bishop.

Finally, my deepest thanks goes to the love of my life and best friend, Pranab Das, for sticking with me, for tech support, for help with editing, and for all the many ways in which he brings me joy.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT'S IN A NAME

Defining the Elusive Fantasy Genre

Names and labels have a sneaky way of influencing our physical reality. Words form the prism through which we understand the world, and genre identifications help to shape expectations for what we find at the local cinema (or in our DVD players or computers). In the real world, we say that sticks and stones may break our bones, but words will never hurt us. But denizens of fantasy worlds might beg to differ. In *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–3), *The Chronicles of Narnia* (2005, 2008), and many other fantasy stories, great importance is given to words. In the *Harry Potter* films (2001–9) it is anathema to say the name "Voldemort" out loud. And making magic often depends upon correctly using names and language. The ridiculous and sometimes catastrophic results of poor diction in the *Potter* films illustrate the importance of precise language in casting magic "spells." In fantasy, to know a thing's true name is to have power over it.

If words become spells that harm or charm, then the word "fantasy" has itself cast a negative spell on a number of movies in the real world. The label "fantasy" has often been pejorative, applied to films seen to be trivial or childish, or said to seduce us with unrealistic wish-fulfillment. Until recently the film industry has considered fantasy "box-office poison" (Thompson 2007, 55). The tide seems to have turned, and yet "fantasy" is

still a genre struggling to be taken seriously. Although it has been notoriously difficult to pin down the genre, one central aspect of fantasy stories is that they each feature a fundamental break with our sense of reality. This break, an ''ontological rupture,'' is one of the hallmarks of the genre, but one whose subtleties bear exploring with regard to neighboring genres.

It is generally agreed that fantasies tell stories that would be impossible in the real world. They frequently concern mythical creatures or involve events that circumvent physical laws. But looking more closely, we see that fantasy's generic boundaries are rarely hard and fast. *Splash* (1984) is both a fantasy *and* a romantic comedy, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) is *also* a musical, and *Shrek* (2001) is an animated, comic, fairy tale. This tendency toward hybrids may at first seem to militate against designating fantasy as a discrete genre, particularly in light of the wide difference in tone among fantasy movies (ranging from films like *Pan's Labyrinth*, 2006, to *Beetlejuice*, 1988, for example). The problem intensifies when we consider fantasy's relation to science fiction and horror, two types of film intimately related to fantasy. *The Terminator* (1984) is usually considered to be sci-fi, and *Dracula* (1931) horror, but isn't each also a kind of fantasy? If ''fantasy'' is to be an overarching term that includes sci-fi and horror, then we must ask why we don't also have a unique designation for films that don't qualify as *either* sci-fi or horror (*The Santa Clause*, 1994, for example, certainly doesn't belong to either of those categories).

This has left us with a kind of negative definition – fantasy films that are neither horror nor sci-fi get lumped into one big pool merely by virtue of *not* fitting one of those two categories. ''Fantastic'' might be more useful as an umbrella category to describe this overall ''mode'' of fiction, thus reserving the term ''fantasy'' as a designation related to, but distinct from, science fiction and horror. (This is essentially Brian Attebery's approach [11]. Note, however, Tzvetan Todorov's very different use of the term ''fantastic,'' described in Ch. 3.) Although the three strands of ''fantastic'' cinema are related, each has come to be associated with specific types of stories. Classic or Gothic horror is distinguished from sci-fi and fantasy by its attempt to scare us, but may also announce itself through certain themes and iconography – dark and stormy nights, monsters, vampires, etc. (Modern horror may not feature supernatural elements at all, and thus represents a subset less relevant to this discussion.) Science fiction usually refers to stories that extrapolate from rational and scientific principles, and here again we expect a certain iconography – spaceships, robots, advanced technology, etc. But there is a great deal of overlap between all three of these categories. In combining a horrific and deadly monster with

PLATE 1 *E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial* (1982 Universal): Science fiction or fantasy? (Courtesy of Photofest.)

a futuristic outer-space setting, *Alien* (1979) is arguably both horror and sci-fi. And with its space alien, *E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial* (1982) is certainly science fiction, but shades into fantasy in its homage to other classics in the genre such as *The Wizard of Oz* (see Ch. 4) and *Peter Pan* – a story explicitly referenced in the film and also echoed through a delight in spontaneous flight (the famous bicycle scene) and through an emphasis on *belief* when encountering fantastic phenomena (Plate 1).

So, is there really such a thing as the fantasy genre, or is it a figment of this author's imagination – a fantasy itself, if you will? If conceptualizing fantasy as a genre proves elusive and messy at times, it may say as much about the concept of genre as it does about fantasy. As it turns out, many scholars agree that generic mixing is neither a new nor an isolated phenomenon. "The closer we look at individual genres and their histories, the less straightforward they become. . . . Genre labels are flags of convenience more than markers of entirely distinct territories" (King, 141–2). And precisely *because* so many critics and scholars *already* conceive of science fiction and horror as distinct from other fantasy films, it is convenient here to devise a study which examines some of the films left out of those discussions, even though their range is unusually eclectic.

Despite their differences, movies as varied as the comedic *Liar, Liar* (1997) and the epic *Beowulf* (2007) may be categorized as fantasy, thereby

distinguishing them from horror and science fiction, but also reflecting a duality that seems to separate all fantastic or ''fantasy'' from other fictional films. ''Dogmas of realism'' have shaped our conception of cinema, creating a binary that privileges codes of realism and mimesis (the representation of reality) over more fantastic stories (Singer, 43). This duality has haunted art in general but also informs our understanding of the nature of cinema, influencing our evaluation of individual films. While it would be rare to hear that a movie was flawed because it was ''too realistic,'' many are criticized for the opposite reason: ''It was so unrealistic.'' ''That could never happen.'' ''It was implausible.'' Yet this long-standing tradition favoring mimesis and realism has, ironically, helped to obscure the relative ''fantasy'' nature of all fiction. Fantasy and mimesis are not actually opposites. ''Mimesis without fantasy would be nothing but reporting one's perceptions of actual events. Fantasy without mimesis would be a purely artificial invention, without recognizable objects or actions'' (Attebery, 3).

Assessments of the realism of a film often have little to do with actual reality but more to do with the specific conventions of realism and storytelling as we have come to know them through an accretion of Hollywood movies. The conventions for depicting time, space, and causality in Hollywood films help them tell coherent stories that seem internally consistent, regardless of whether they are realistic *per se*. Our sense of realism in a given film depends upon a number of factors, including sequences of cause and effect and our expectations for the conventions of genre (Bordwell et al., 12–20). When Gene Kelly sings and dances in the rain, we don't complain that it's unrealistic – it's realistic in a musical, in much the same way that aliens might seem ''realistic'' in a science-fiction movie. So if fantasy films don't resonate with viewers it's not necessarily because they feature unrealistic scenarios. Rather, a film is more likely to be criticized for failing to be internally consistent, hence thwarting coherence and meaning. In fantasy, the use of magic may subvert the normal circuits of cause and effect, but this in no way implies a lack of logic or coherence in the rest of the story. Instead, as a trope of fantasy, magic *stands in* for causality – its rejection of realistic causality is precisely its point.

If we are going to criticize fantasy films for offering up ''unrealistic,'' wish-fulfillment scenarios, then shouldn't we at least acknowledge that films like *Rocky* (1976) are also fantasies of a sort? Yes! But of course that is clearly *not* what most people mean when they speak of fantasy film. Instead, they most likely mean a type of movie that departs *so* significantly from our understanding of reality that we feel comfortable bracketing it

off from other fictional films. At the other extreme, films that are so experimental as to elude any possibility of a mimetic or realist interpretation have usually not been called fantasy. Instead, the terms ''surrealism,'' ''magical realism,'' ''impressionism,'' ''avant-garde,'' etc., are often applied. For my purposes then, the term ''fantasy film'' is most usefully restricted to mainstream cinema. The further we move away from classical Hollywood storytelling conventions and techniques, the more likely we are to abandon the term ''fantasy'' for one that evokes art with a capital ''A'' or denotes more subversive, experimental modes of cinema.

Using the term ''fantasy'' to describe a film does not *necessarily* force us to fall back on the same old binary of fantasy versus reality. Rather, within the context of mainstream cinema, the term could be understood to refer to ''fantastic'' story elements that are integral to the film's story-world. Brian Attebery's approach to fantasy literature (although not fantasy *film*) relies on the notion of fuzzy sets in which not all members of the set will feature all of the elements that define it. More likely, a core of fantasy themes and ideas exists at some metaphorical center, and movies may share many or few of these commonalities such as magic, physical transformations, or the ability to fly. A host of iconography helps to distinguish fantasy from other genres, particularly science fiction and horror, so that when we encounter wizards, crystal balls, flying brooms, fairies, magic talismans, or talking animals, we tend to assume fantasy unless otherwise informed. But a movie doesn't necessarily need to feature any or all of these to be considered fantasy.

My own definition is that that the audience must at the very least perceive an ''ontological rupture'' – a break between what the audience agrees is ''reality'' and the fantastic phenomena that define the narrative world. The word ''rupture'' distinguishes the fantastic elements in fantasy from those in science fiction, where fantastic phenomena are ostensibly *extrapolations* or extensions of rational, scientific principles. Thus in science fiction, the ability to instantly transport oneself to a distant location will be justified by extrapolating from scientific or quasi-scientific principles (''beam me up, Scotty''), while in fantasy it may be attributed to magic, as in the *Harry Potter* movies, where characters skilled in magic can use an old boot to ''disapparate'' from one place to another. The term ''ontological'' denotes the fact that fantastic phenomena are understood to really exist *within* the story-world – an existence as real as the reference world from which they break. This contrasts with movies that feature hoaxes, or hinge on characters' hallucinations or delusions. Although the premise of some fantasies concerns this very distinction, fantasy tends to discourage a solely psychological interpretation of events, or at least minimize its impact

on the viewer's experience (*The Wizard of Oz*, for example). Supernatural horror may share in fantasy's rupture, but is distinguished from fantasy by its express purpose to frighten viewers with its alternate realities or impossible phenomena.

Fantasy's ontological rupture must be inherent in the premise of the movie or be otherwise integral to the story. Movies that feature only brief moments of weirdness or a single miraculous coincidence may not qualify. Occasional over-the-top violence in a slapstick comedy or a series of outrageous physical stunts in an action film may well be impossible in the real world, yet these are mostly not ontological breaks, but *exaggerations* of the possible in service of the genre in which they appear – humor in the case of a comedy, thrills in the case of an action film. Scary moments may be featured in fantasy, but they are necessarily part of a larger narrative and not the main point of the movie, as in horror. As a rule, fantasy tends to favor happy endings, and eschews not only tragedy, but cynicism, providing solace and redemption in a world of evil and violence.

J.R.R. Tolkien characterized fantasy as a literature of *hope*, a sentiment echoed by numerous fantasy scholars, and widely celebrated by fans of the genre. This emphasis on hope, happy endings, and a rejection of cynicism has only encouraged scholars and critics to ignore or vilify fantasy. But this impulse is contradictory. While fantasy is often accused of being ''mere'' escapism and therefore trivial, this very escapism is often the source of its alleged harm – supposedly encouraging audiences to abandon real-world problems and solutions for (usually) nostalgic and conservative illusions. Ideologically loaded terms associated with fantasy such as ''naïve'' and ''childish'' are usually assumed to be pejorative. Yet it behooves us to consider not only *why* these terms seem so negative but also whether they might also be considered in a positive light. In fact when we identify some of the recurring critiques of fantasy film, we find that many of these concepts actually form the basis of fantasy film content.

One important notion of film genre relies on the type of pleasure offered the viewer, almost always opposed in some way to social norms. Genres (by definition) ''sequentially promote two different value systems, each providing pleasure by virtue of its difference from the other'' (Altman, 156). The rhetoric surrounding fantasy film illuminates a host of contradictions and contrasting attitudes regarding work vs play and leisure, rationality vs imagination, adults vs children, nostalgia vs progress, etc., and these are some of the themes to which fantasy repeatedly returns. The negative reading of escapism is both pejorative and defining: calling attention to what it is *not* (like the fantasy genre

itself) – not productive, not serious. The conventional wisdom is that escapist literature ''aims at no higher purpose than amusement'' (Rabkin, 44). Fantasy films lie at the extreme of such critiques because with fantasy we do, in effect, vicariously escape to a completely different world. But is this a bad thing? Eric S. Rabkin disputes what he sees as a false dichotomy between escapist and so-called ''serious'' literature, noting two misconceptions: ''first that 'seriousness' is better than 'escape'; second, that escape is an indiscriminate rejection of order'' (44). If, as Altman says, genres concern themselves with cultural interdictions, then one of fantasy's key interdictions is also integral to the pleasure we take from watching movies in the first place. No matter what the genre, we put aside other activities when we go to the movies and escape into another world for a few hours.

Viewers may not be consciously aware that they have escaped into an ''alternate universe'' when watching an action movie (for example), but that's exactly what they are doing. Fantasy just exaggerates aspects of this pleasure and makes it explicit in its *content*. Hence, in *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy escapes boredom, neglect, and persecution, as does Harry Potter, who escapes the oppressive and unimaginative Muggle world. The children in *The Chronicles of Narnia* escape boredom and loneliness in the first film, and school and bullies in the second. Again, is this a bad thing? Many proponents of fantasy would say ''no.'' In part, this is because we are not just escaping *from* something, we are also escaping *into* something, and therefore the quality of the escape rests on the quality of the fantasy.

As is true of all movie genres, poor-quality fantasy films can easily be found, yet this doesn't necessarily explain why escape itself is so vilified. As noted, some genre scholars, including John G. Cawelti, W.R. Irwin, and others, see our engagement with genres as a kind of game between readers (or viewers) and texts. ''Each genre game begins by positing a cultural norm, in order to permit the construction of generic pleasure as in some way contradicting that norm'' (Altman, 157). As we shall see, a number of fantasy films explicitly or implicitly position themselves as imaginative and playful in contrast to a world of rationality, work, and conformity. The binaries reveal a conflicted attitude but one which, upon examination, reveals a need to justify our desire to fantasize, to play, to escape, or to engage in imaginative pursuits. It's not uncommon to question the value of escape or leisure, but it is far less common to question the value of work. Many films critique its *abuse* – work in excess, for example, or work for ''the wrong reasons'' (for greed or glory) – but the work ethic itself is not usually suspect. Play and other sorts of leisure,

however, often seem worthless when characterized as the antitheses of productive society, often seen as ''childish'' distractions from important adult duties. Dreams, daydreams, and fantasizing also tend to be suspect unless a useful purpose can be ascribed to them. But as Roger Caillois argues, isn't ''play'' defined precisely as non-utilitarian and ''unproductive?'' (10). And if we concede that movies can be considered a type of play, as both Brian Sutton-Smith (145) and Caillois would (41), then it's interesting that critics would alternately celebrate movies for being entertaining, but at the same time insist upon movies being ''useful.'' An argument can certainly be made that the ''trivialness'' of any given movie should be of less concern than the sheer amount of time spent engaging in the many ''trivial pursuits'' that distract us from more important things. On the other hand, if any sort of play or imaginative activity (escape, entertainment) is conceived of primarily in this light, it then seems off-limits to adults except as a guilty pleasure, a distraction from the ''work of adulthood.''

Sutton-Smith rejects the notion that any sort of play is frivolous (208), and certainly the movie industry would have to agree, but perhaps for different reasons. A consumer society predicated on leisure spending (an ''indulgence'' often conceived of as relief from work) can't afford for hard-working adults to stop spending big bucks on leisure pursuits, whether they be vicarious spectator events like movies or more active, but expensive, pursuits like skiing. That would be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. But as Josef Pieper argues, playful pursuits and leisure need not be seen as idleness, but can be viewed as essential aspects of humanity and culture. ''Leisure lives on affirmation.'' It is not the same as the absence of activity (33). Rather than see work and leisure as antagonistic (the ''Thank God it's Friday'' syndrome), a vibrant culture would seek a more holistic approach. In Pieper's view, the proper attitude toward leisure is one of joy, best expressed by the concept of ''festival,'' where humanity actively affirms and celebrates life and community. Such a perspective is dramatized and then threatened in *Rings* through the Hobbit's lifestyle in the Shire, where joyful work goes hand in hand with a love of gathering with others for music, food, and merriment. In fantasies such as *Harvey* (1950), *Big* (1998), and *Groundhog Day* (1993), the tension between work and leisure finds no such happy integration, but instead forms the basis of conflict underlying the fantasy narratives themselves.

The need to justify leisure, play, and flights of imagination helps to explain why so many fantasies are either aimed at children, or feature child characters. Childhood becomes the ''place'' where play is permitted