

Introduction

FANTASY EXISTS, REGARDLESS as to whether or not we choose to believe in it. Fantasy is all around us, permeating our existence, influencing our thoughts, and informing our worldview. It is part of our culture, deep-seated and ubiquitous, constructing our society, and distributing our wealth. Every day, every hour, we imagine. We imagine a world that exists and a world that does not. We imagine things for ourselves and we imagine things for other people. To exist outside of fantasy is to exist outside of reality, and to live in the real world is to live in a world full of dreams.

This is a book about fantasy. More specifically, it is a book about two different kinds of fantasy. It is a book about *fantasy cinema*, a genre that is responsible for some of the most enduring images throughout film history from Dorothy's (Judy Garland) arrival into Munchkinland in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) to the entrance into the Great Hall of Hogwarts in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001). Fantasy films have informed our collective memories and expectations surrounding the cinematic experience and have provided a global film industry historically based within the hills of Los Angeles with some of its biggest commercial successes. But this is also a book about *phantasy*. It is a book about how we use our capacity to imagine to experience the world around us without credence to ideas of rationality and logic, and how our ability to phantasize allows us to forge relationships with stories we know are not real and cannot be true. *Encountering the Impossible: The Fantastic in Hollywood Fantasy Cinema* explores a particular kind of cinematic experience that liberates us from our everyday responsibility to find meaning in things based on our capacity toward empiric knowledge and objective understanding, and the freedom that comes from engaging with scenarios that we know are neither accurate, nor realistic, nor natural. This book is about the

experience we associate with the Hollywood fantasy film, and why that experience matters.

What Is a Fantasy Film? Film Genre and the Problem of Classification

In the words of David Orr writing in the *New York Times*, we are currently living in a “high time for high fantasy.”¹ The commercial success of franchises such as *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003), *Harry Potter* (2001–2011), *The Chronicles of Narnia* (2005–2010), *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2006–2017), and the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (2008–) has not only seen the fantasy genre dominate Hollywood’s production cycles over the past few decades but also has resulted in the word *fantasy* becoming a seemingly ubiquitous category of narrative filmmaking used within all manner of popular cinematic discourse. *Fantasy* is a term used by newspaper and magazine journalists to categorize new releases. It is utilized by theatrical chains like AMC Theaters to provide their customers with a more efficient means of searching for the types of films they want to see. Online forums like IMDb dedicate numerous pages to the discussion and celebration of fantasy cinema, apps such as Rotten Tomatoes and Letterboxd allow their users to find out what film journalists/critics have already said about different examples of fantasy cinema, and streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+ allow users to easily access the latest or best examples of fantasy filmmaking through a designed filtering device embedded within their website coding. The notion that there is a stable and recognizable genre of filmmaking known as fantasy cinema is a prerequisite assumption for many to participate in large sections of the landscape of popular film culture, operating as a useful and effective means of film classification across the globe.

So what exactly is a fantasy film? Given the popularity the genre enjoys, it seems almost bizarre that such a question needs asking and, even more bizarre, that it is very difficult to answer. Audiences and producers should surely have a very clear idea of what a fantasy film is if they are to use the term in the promotion and discussion of cinema. Indeed, it is not difficult to think of an example of fantasy filmmaking from the menagerie of dragons, dwarfs, ghosts, goblins, munchkins, mome raths, ogres, orcs, pirates, pixies, trolls, titans, witches, wizards, and warlocks that have emerged from Hollywood over the past century. Yet, finding

an essential ingredient that unites all these disparate quests, spells, and creatures together is an altogether more difficult matter, a problem not helped by what Frances Pheasant-Kelly refers to as the “scant scholarly attention” the genre received within film and media scholarship prior to the turn of the twenty-first century.² Some fantasy theorists have tried to classify the genre according a certain narrative criteria, suggesting that all fantasy stories are required to contain an element of “magic” (Alec Worley) or else a kind of “ontological rupture” (Katherine A. Fowkes) that sets them apart from other stories that seek to represent or mirror reality within their fictions.³ Yet, although these definitions offer some clarification, they are muddled by the inherent subjectivity of the terms they evoke. For some audience members, a film like *King of Kings* (1927 and 1961) may offer a complete and self-conscious departure from their sense of reality in that it depicts the death and rebirth of Jesus Christ. For others, though, *King of Kings* represents a vivid confirmation of a preexisting worldview in that it tells a story that is the basis for the Christian faith. A definition of fantasy as a story that breaks from reality, then, relies first and foremost on a shared definition of what a story based on reality might look like, an issue that gets us into often contentious territory. Using these definitions alone, it becomes very difficult to state with any certainty what is one person’s fantasy and another’s philosophy or theology, where one person’s fabrication ends and another person’s realism begins.

It is for these reasons, alongside a lack of standardized terminology across different languages (*fantastique* in French, *fantastika* in Russian, *fantezi* in Turkish, *fantaji* in Japanese, each with their own subtle distinctions about the relationship between fantasy and reality), that what is referred to in Anglophonic circles as fantasy cinema has proven to be one of the most difficult categories of cinema to pinpoint and define among both critics and academics alike. Scholars like David Butler and James Walters have gone so far as to suggest that fantasy is not a genre but a wider storytelling mode or impulse, with the latter arguing that fantasy is as likely to occur in a “story about an escaped convict as it is in a story about a mythical kingdom.”⁴ But these attempts to broaden out the parameters by which we might analyze the form and function of fantasy onscreen are fraught with their own problems. From elaborate pratfalls to choreographed song-and-dance numbers to last-minute dashes through airports, popular cinema is littered with situations that are unlikely to occur in real life, moments that we might say showcase a wider impulse toward fantasy onscreen. This does not mean, however, that is either

necessary or even useful to consider films like *The General* (1926), *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), or *Love Actually* (2003) as works of fantasy, even if they do contain moments that seem to push the boundaries of credulity onscreen. Moreover, if we try to make sure we include everything that might be a fantasy in a definition of what fantasy is, then we have to acknowledge the fact that, when we sit down to watch a group of highly paid and extremely famous actors pretend to be journalists, accountants, or downtrodden janitors for our viewing pleasure, we are often very aware that we are delighting in things we know are not real. So, it might indeed be argued that *all* films are fantasy films, which is akin to saying none of them are when it comes to assessing the viability of a recognizable and well-used category of genre filmmaking.

Perhaps the difficulty in assigning an adequate definition for what constitutes a fantasy film comes not from the fact that fantasy is unable to be defined but that we are asking the wrong kinds of questions in pursuit of that definition. As Raphaëlle Moine argues, the dominant “classificatory or analytical logics” of contemporary film genre scholarship are useful in that they identify recurring thematic and stylistic traits that help to shape a formal understanding of what constitutes a film genre.⁵ Yet, as Moine also states, a focus on these formal characteristics alone is in danger of bypassing the “functional dimension of genre” as a process that gives shape and meaning to the film experience itself.⁶ Fantasy cinema functions as an effective means of classifying particular film releases for many individuals across the globe, even if it does so while operating in imperfect or flawed terms. This is not necessarily proof of the invalidity of fantasy as a film genre label but a symptom of its status within popular culture. Cultural theorist John Fiske once famously argued that one of the determining characteristics of popular culture is that it is full of contradictions and imperfections.⁷ It almost has to be that way if anything is to achieve the level of popularity it needs to resonate within the age of mass media. Popular films rarely dictate a singular meaning to a mass audience but provide platforms for a variety of often contrasting and contradictory meanings to be formulated. Their formal and stylistic specifics are permitted to be stretched and bent by the demands of different national and regional cultures across the globe, and this allows them to function as examples of popular cinema. As such, popular culture does not have to be defined or articulated; it does not have to make sense or be consistent. It simply has to work in practice.

To quote Stanley Fish's reflections on the wider performative function of academic writing, genre theory is sometimes guilty of not

just providing information to its readers but asserting “the power of an interpretative community to constitute the objects upon which its members . . . can then agree.”⁸ By writing books attempting to define different genres, scholars implicitly tell the individuals they address what films they should or should not classify according to different labels. In this way, we indirectly scold audience members for getting genres “wrong,” for describing films like *Star Wars* (1977) and *Back to the Future: Part III* (1990) as science fiction films when we know they bear a more striking resemblance with the semantic/syntactic structure of the western, or else chastise them for daring to think that animation is even a genre at all, when really it is a cinematic technique. Through this model, genre labels are in danger of operating as top-down, authoritative devices analogous to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of a cultural nobility on taste.⁹ They try to dictate the terms by which examples of cinema can operate and exclude audiences themselves from any part in the decision making in an act of cultural imposition. This act of imposition can happen as a result of efforts made by Hollywood due to the forces of pure capital (industry, commerce) or else as a result of the imposition of either academic (duration of schooling) or cultural capital (knowledge of art’s history, theory, codes, and conventions). Yet, it remains an act of imposition that tells audiences what a particular genre is, regardless of what they might think in response. I could tell you that a film needs five hobbits, six trolls, a magical talisman, and a talking animal in order to be considered part of the fantasy genre. But, whether you agree with this definition or not, this makes very little difference to the seemingly more pertinent factor of why you might choose to watch a film in the first place because you know it is a fantasy.

I therefore propose an alternative. Instead of telling audiences what fantasy films *are*, why not ask what fantasy films *do*? Why not try to define the experience that lies at the heart of the various plot tropes, character archetypes, and thematic paradigms that are so often articulated within genre theory and consider how films often labeled under certain popular categories produce similar reactions and responses that help to assert their identity as film genres? If genre theory can articulate what a genre *does* rather than what a genre *is*, then it ceases to be an exercise that dictates the meaning of film labels to a filmgoing public. Instead, it becomes a way of adding value and meaning to those existing categories, allowing audience members to decide for themselves whether a particular film generates the kind of experience that is attached to certain genre labels, and to use that rationale as the basis for classifying films into categories.

Indeed, historically, genre analysis has often strayed into such territory to answer basic questions about other popular categories of filmmaking. Studies of film comedies have helped us understand some of the reasons why films make us laugh. Studying horror has helped us understand what it is about films that scare us. Yet, despite all that has been written about such so-called “Body Genres,”¹⁰ despite all that has been thought about why action excites or thrillers thrill, we are still bereft of a comprehensive theory of the experience fantasy cinema offers. Without such a theory, we are left only with an understanding of fantasy as a form of classification, rather than as a cinematic experience.

What Do Fantasy Films Do? The Fantastic and Spectatorship Theory

At its most basic and most self-evident level, the term *fantasy cinema* seems to exist because certain films allow spectators to engage in an imaginative experience of phantasy. Defined by Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis as “a purely illusory production which cannot be sustained when it is confronted with a correct apprehension of reality,” phantasy (often spelled with a *ph*) is a term evoked by psychoanalytically informed thinkers to describe a set of psychic activities that include dreams, daydreaming, and the wider ability human beings have to imagine situations beyond the physical constraints of the world surrounding them.¹¹ Fantasy cinema takes its name partially from this namesake activity and, as such, has been and continues to be associated with the act of phantasizing as a key component of its generic identity. And, yet, as much as it might seem rather obvious to some that the unique appeal of fantasy films resides in their ability to offer spectators opportunities to experience film fiction in a more imaginative or more obviously “phantastical” manner than either everyday life or other film genres that seem to be aiming for a naturalistic or realistic register, explaining why that is becomes so complicated that it will take up the entirety of what follows. This book tries to explain how and why fantasy and phantasy are related.

We spend so much of our lives trying to make sense of the world that surrounds us, and making sense of the world seems to provide us with both some of our greatest pleasures and our greatest anxieties. When we discover new things about reality, we are often shocked, amazed, affirmed, and gratified; while, when we feel like our grasp of reality is slipping away, we find ourselves at our most anxious, scared, confused, or

irritated by the world's failure to match up to our expectations about it. Vast amounts of research within the area of clinical psychology support this idea that humans are designed to make sense of a world we believe to be real, and that the appeal of fictional narratives more broadly is found in their ability to operate as essentially intensified versions of the way we unpick, unlock, and understand everyday life.¹² Yet, at least within the realm of literary theory, it has become an almost commonsense notion to suggest that the pleasure of reading fantasy fiction comes from its appeal to the imagination, the genre's pleasure arising from what Gary K. Wolfe terms the "desire and longing arising out of the promise of other worlds or states of being."¹³ This idea might seem perfectly natural given what many might already associate with the fantasy's genre uniquely imaginative register. Yet, it should also strike some as rather unnatural given what we claim to know about the way both our minds and our emotions operate in relation either to the world, or within the context of cinema.

Given all we invest in making sure we get reality "right," given all the emotional and intellectual attachments we make with a world we have come to know, understand, and believe in gradually as we grow from infancy to adulthood, it seems instinctively strange to think that we would devote equal amounts of attention to the pursuit of deliberately getting reality wrong, actively trying to comprehend ideas and information that we know to be false. Yet, when we talk about a pleasure associated with using our imaginations, that is in essence what we are assuming. We take for granted that the act of willfully and deliberately avoiding the hard-earned truths we have gleaned from reality provides some innate sense of respite, relaxation, and fun without often thinking about why that might be. This poses a particular problem when trying to understand the place of phantasy in fantasy fiction. Perhaps we need to reconcile these two strands of thinking between the rational pleasures of narrative and the irrationality of imagining by arguing that, despite any superficial difference, the role phantasy plays in our understanding of fantasy fiction is no different from other narrative forms. If such a reconciliation feels unsatisfactory, it is because it suggests that fantasy fiction operates like other genres whose pleasures reside in their appeal to our rational, cognitive selves, albeit in a more intensified manner. Or, we have to find a way of speaking to the unique role the imagination plays in our experience of the fantasy genre that operates outside some of the assumptions we make about how both phantasy and reality operate in our everyday life. Either fantasy is just like all other forms of storytelling, or nothing like them whatsoever.

If the problem of how we square the circle to understand why we enjoy stories that demand a phantastical triumph of the emotional over the logical were not difficult enough, an additional problem in understanding fantasy filmmaking comes in articulating the uniqueness of such a reaction in the context of cinema. It is not too difficult to see a place for the imagination when we sit down to read the outlandish and otherworldly scenes described by writers like Lewis Carroll, J. M. Barrie, or Ursula Le Guin. As readers, we are required to take their words and imagine something altogether abstract and unbelievable in our minds, giving fantasy literature a quality of what I. R. Irwin calls “mental play.”¹⁴ Yet, when we watch a fantasy film, the experience seems to be far more reactive than proactive. Rather than letting us imagine fantasy scenarios into being, we are required to experience them onscreen in a way more akin to the way we might see things in everyday life, making the place of the imagination far more difficult to pinpoint and describe. Within the realm of film studies, the study of the imagination has not often been a subject of interest in and of itself but has instead fallen under the wider rubric of spectatorship theory, a branch of film analysis that E. Deidre Pribram defines as a consideration of “the relationships between individuals and filmic processes.”¹⁵ Noted spectatorship theorists throughout film history from Hugo Münsterberg (1916) to Laura Mulvey (1975) to Todd McGowan (2007) have all described the appeal of watching films by evoking the medium’s appeal to our imagination, arguing, in their own respective ways, that films allow spectators to construct an elaborate world of illusion through their ability to forge intense relationships with the images onscreen as if they were every bit as real as everyday life despite the fact they are not.¹⁶ This sense that film’s imaginary power lies in its ability to feel real is so pervasive that it feels almost an insult to describe a film as implausible, unbelievable, or unrealistic. Yet, that is exactly what fantasy films are, or at least what they pertain to be.

What we need, then, is not just a theory of fantasy cinema but a theory of the role phantasy plays within the act of watching cinema that acknowledges the rather obvious but no less provocative idea that, despite the fact that films look and feel a lot closer to everyday life than books, some films are still not designed to be believed by their spectators. Pre-occupied with the arresting perceptual realism that cinema can achieve, we do not let ourselves think about a form of imaginative experience that is brazen and unapologetic, self-conscious and fully aware of the fact it is making things up, that is nevertheless perfectly possible within the expe-

rience of narrative cinema. Instead, we prefer to think that the experience of being a film spectator is essentially an extension, embellishment, or intensified version of what it means to witness everyday life. We have therefore constructed detailed theories as to how films invite us to use our imaginations in order to make them seem real, but we know very little about what happens when we phantasize in relation to films that declare themselves to be unreal. And, so, the space of both the fantasy genre and phantasy as a spectatorial act within both Hollywood's history and its theory remains partially unarticulated.

By offering just such a theory of the experience of Hollywood fantasy cinema, this book hopes to not only avoid some of the problems surrounding the classification of fantasy cinema given the "fuzzy set" of formal criteria that emerges when one tries to define the genre according to any strict definition of typical narrative or iconography,¹⁷ but to address the reluctance we have in discussing the role of the imagination in experiencing films that offer themselves as alternatives to reality. This experience, which I label as *the fantastic*, is not only fundamental to our understanding of a particularly popular film genre like fantasy but offers a fundamentally new way of understanding the role the imagination plays in the act of watching films more generally. While other Hollywood genres typically strive for a quasi-naturalistic mode of address, fantasy films require a rejection of naturalism as a fundamental part of the way they communicate as works of fiction. Instead of trying to make cinema conform to the standards and expectations of reality, fantasy cinema encourages us to forge new relationships and new experiences, to find value in what we are watching precisely because it does not match up with the reality that we know or believe in. It is precisely this lack of belief that characterizes the experience of the genre, and yet also makes the experience so difficult to articulate or explain. Why do we like encountering the impossible? What is pleasurable about experiencing situations that we know cannot be real? How can disbelief be exciting, and why can incongruity feel good? This is the story of the fantastic in Hollywood fantasy cinema.