# LITERATURE AND FILM: FANTASY ACROSS MEDIA

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this work is to show how interrelated film and literature are and to explore the benefits of each to viewers and readers alike. Filmic fantasy and literary fantasy both have the power to communicate the four main benefits of fantasy stories: recovery, escape, consolation, and eucatastrophe. Literary fantasy and filmic fantasy will be examined, and the different ways they signify things in fantasy story will be observed. By examining literary fantasy, it will be shown how the audience is enabled to cooperate in the imagination of fantasy's secondary world, and thus experience its benefits. By examining filmic fantasy, it will be shown how film works as a medium to convey fantasy story visually and to enrich viewers' capacity for imagining and experiencing fantasy's secondary world.

KEY WORDS: fantasy, literature, film, Tolkien, imagination

## Introduction

Literary scholar Tom A. Shippey has said, "The dominant literary mode of the twentieth century has been the fantastic" (quoted in Dickerson & O'Hara, 2006: 21). Readers seem to support this claim, since, according to several polls taken in the last twenty years, *The Lord of the Rings* has consistently ranked number one among novels considered to be the greatest of the century (Shippey, 2001: xx–xxiii). One could likewise say the same is true for film; at the top of the list in all time box office hits one can find *Harry Potter*, Marvel's *Avengers*, *Dark Knight*, Disney's *Frozen*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and *The Lord of the Rings* (*All Time Box Office World Wide Grosses*, 2015). The popularity of fantasy literature and film should cause us to examine the power and draw of this genre. What is it about fantasy that creates such attraction in readers and in viewers alike? What affect does fantasy evoke from the person who reads or watches it? How does fantasy differ in its effects when conveyed through the written word versus filmed images? Is fantasy, after all, nothing more than a mode of escape from what is relevant and significant in reality? Or, does fantasy lead us to the good, the true, and the beautiful? These questions will guide our exploration of fantasy as we examine it in the context of the fantasy story cast in two different mediums.

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**Background**

In 1938 Tolkien wrote an essay entitled "On Fairy Stories" (see Tolkien, 2001). His goal was to define fantasy and show how its three "faces" (*i.e.* the Mystical toward the Supernatural; the Magical toward Nature; and the Mirror of scorn and pity toward Man) reveal a secondary world that appears wholly separate from reality, yet is profoundly connected to it. The ideas set forth in "On Fairy Stories" have proven true to many of Tolkien's readers, who having entered the secondary world of fantasy have found that it clarifies and transforms their understanding of the primary world of reality.

From this essay and many of Tolkien's subsequent writings, an entire field of literary scholarship was fueled for decades to come. A close friend of Tolkien's and a fantasy writer himself, C. S. Lewis wrote in "On Stories" that stories provide momentary flashes of insight and beauty that parallel reality (Lewis, 1982). These recurrent themes of insight and beauty are essences we lose or never have time enough to perceive in our primary world. The secondary world of stories, especially of fantasy, is often able to catch the timeless essences that elude us in the continual series of actions and events of life. Lewis says, "In life and art both... we are always trying to catch in our net of successive moments something that is not successive" (Lewis, 1982: 19). In 1983 Verlyn Flieger's work, *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World*, persuasively demonstrated that Tolkien's fantasy world provides readers insight into the rich themes of light, darkness, hope, despair, and language (Flieger, 2002). Ten years after Flieger's work, Belden Lane argued that fantasy enables us to imagine new places or worlds in which we may dismantle our conceptions of reality and form new ones that offer us "mythic possibilities for change" (Lane, 1993: 401). According to Lane, such an engagement of the imagination in places of fantasy can be an expression of "one's yearning for the Kingdom of God" (Lane, 1993: 404). Fantasy may be able to lead us not only to a transformed view of reality, but also to one that is higher and spiritual.

In recent years, there has been a heightened interest in fantasy, perhaps initiated by such novels and film adaptations as J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, Phillip Pullman's *Dark Materials*, and Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Two of the most prolific Tolkien scholars, Tom Shippey and Ralph Wood, have responded to both this renewed interest and also to Tolkien's revival in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. Besides making frequent contributions to the growing number of works on Tolkien and fantasy, they have specifically addressed and critiqued Jackson's film adaptation.

Tom Shippey (2003) finds Jackson's film version significantly altering the narrative structures of Tolkien's work. While Tolkien kept the outcome of events always hidden from readers, Jackson makes the plot straightforward and fairly predictable. Shippey attributes this difference in structure

to a difference in worldviews. Whereas Tolkien held that victory is not inevitable or easily discerned from afar, Jackson offers a very hopeful tale with assurance of victory. Tolkien's priority was realism, but Jackson's was triumph. According to Shippey, this aspect of Tolkien's worldview does not appeal to popular audiences, but Jackson's worldview of triumph does. While this conclusion may point to the commercialism and superficiality of modern Hollywood and its audiences, it does not follow from Shippey's analysis (nor does he suggest) that film as a medium necessarily offers a less meaningful experience than literature.

Ralph Wood, on the other hand, does seem to discredit film as a medium of depth or meaning. Wood seems to argue that the written word requires listening, and listening is necessary for receiving truth. Truth is not received through seeing, however, because physical sight "cannot penetrate depths" (Wood, 2003: 17). It would seem then that because film is primarily a medium of sight, while narrative is primarily a medium of listening, narrative can convey truth better than film. Lloyd Billingsley (1989) agrees, as is evident in the title of his book, *The Seductive Image: Cinema and the Christian Faith*. In chapter five, Billingsley argues that cinema is inept at capturing spiritual experience, artistic experience, thought or the life of the mind, and goodness. Chapter six conversely claims what film does well: presenting a sense of place, action, cutting between scenes, a person speaking, people's fears, trivial subjects, amusement, crime, war, evil, and sex. Some of these 'strengths' are obviously worse than others, and only a few seem positive (*e.g.* sense of place, person speaking). He predictably concludes that film is best suited for presenting content that is mostly negative and spiritually malnourished.

Film, it would seem, is not able to convey the same richness and depth of fantasy that literature can. Tolkien himself argues that fantasy is an art "best left to words, to true literature" (Tolkien, 2001: 49). Words are able to describe the places, people, and events of fantasy in a credible way, inviting suspended disbelief, or, as Tolkien preferred, "secondary belief". The imagination can take such descriptions to a level of vividness and credulity that descriptions of other arts would only mock and depreciate. Tolkien argues to this effect about drama when he says:

> But drama is naturally hostile to fantasy. Fantasy, even of the simplest kind, hardly ever succeeds in Drama, when that is presented as it should be, visibly and audibly acted. Fantastic forms are not to be counterfeited. Men dressed up as talking animals may achieve buffoonery or mimicry, but they do not achieve Fantasy (Tolkien, 2001: 37-8).

The claim made here is that fantasy requires a level of descriptive detail that only words can convey. Fantasy's secondary worlds are delicate. If handled

with anything but the greatest artistic care, they may turn from wonder to whimsy. Tolkien, at least at the time he delivered "On Fairy-Stories" in 1938, did not think drama could achieve fantasy. His chief reason for saying so had to do with technology. Drama, a visible art form, did not have the technological capabilities for producing believable fantasy worlds. The technology (*e.g.* men dressed as talking animals) was not advanced enough to convincingly portray visible fantasy stories. Drama's heightened sensation of spectacle allows for the depreciation of fantasy if the stagecraft, costumes, and special effects are inadequate. In drama, the worlds of fantasy require advanced means of depiction, because drama is a visual medium.

As a combination of drama and photography, film is also a visual medium. It would seem that because spectacle is a necessary (and often market-driven) component of film, this medium is as prone to failure as drama in capturing the depth and richness of fantasy. In fact, this is part of C. S. Lewis' argument against film adaptations in "On Stories". In this essay Lewis describes the pleasures gotten from mood, descriptive detail, and the essences or themes of written stories. For readers like him, the best pleasure is not gained from the surprises of an unfolding plot, but from the sense that the story's world is a real place with real pirates, Indians, or hobbits. Such perceptions of beauty and sublimity, Lewis says, are not available in the cinema. Movies cannot picture the worlds of story like the human imagination can. And so, because film is a visual medium, it fails to adequately convey story, especially fantasy.

Judging from the claims and arguments presented above, it would be logical to surmise that while fantasy's power to transform our understanding of reality would be well suited in literary form, it would be extinguished or at least seriously diminished if placed in the medium of film. On the contrary, in *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* Robert Johnston (2006: 24) claims that the medium of film has a unique artistic power that can change lives and communicate truth, even to the point of "experiencing God." Likewise, Gerard Loughlin (2007) argues that film is able to draw viewers into its images and lead them to truth within those images in the same way a religious icon leads its devotees. Even a cursory reading of these works results in at least one defense for film: it is a form of art. As an art form, film has the inherent ability to accomplish what Aristotle (1996) called *mimesis*, or the process of reflecting true things about reality, whether they are truths about man, the world, or God.

Our goal is to examine the ways things are signified in fantasy literature and fantasy film. This will help us determine the similarities and differences between the effects of literary fantasy upon readers and the effects of filmic fantasy upon viewers. Watching fantasy film is an experience that can draw viewers away from the primary world they see into a secondary world they

do not know, by means of filmic images. The reading of fantasy literature is an experience that likewise draws the reader to a secondary world, but by means of words. The means of conveying the world of fantasy by these two mediums is profoundly different. While one prioritizes the human senses, the other prioritizes the human imagination. By demonstrating the differences between literary fantasy and filmic fantasy, I will seek to prove that filmic fantasy has the power to arrest our emotions and draw us to the deeper meaning of what we see, while literary fantasy has the power to ignite our imaginations and draw us to a greater and clearer vision of what we read. Remarkably, the differences in their workings result in drawing readers and viewers to the same goal—fantasy story's four main functions—but from different vantage points.

**Literature's Main Signifier: Word**

The secondary world of fantasy literature is a magical place that entrances the reader, but it is difficult to make. Fantasy stories must be written with significant creative insight and descriptive skill, or they will not captivate the attention or enjoyment of their readers. That is why Tolkien (2001: 48) once made the following comment about writing fantasy: "Fantasy has also an essential drawback: it is difficult to achieve. Fantasy may be, as I think, not less but more sub-creative." Artists who make fantasy worlds are attempting to sub-create, a task resembling God's power. The difficulty inherent in producing fantasy worlds stems from the fact that in fantasy's secondary worlds things are most unlike things in the primary world. For example, primary reality has no categories for a "green sun", and so for a reader to suspend his disbelief about the sun's color requires great writing. Tolkien (2001: 49) says: "To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labor and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft." Fantasy writing is successful insofar as it entrances readers with a world that is so like primary reality that it comes short of absurdity, yet so unlike primary reality that it goes beyond scientific, materialist categories into a realm of beauty and sublimity, of meaning, and of transcendence.

Tolkien believed that the best medium for creating fantasy stories and the worlds in which they occur was literature. Contrasting literature with visual arts such as painting, drama, and film, Tolkien considered literature as the best form for fantasy stories. He said, "In human art Fantasy is a thing best left to words, to true literature" (Tolkien, 2001: 49). Words convey fantasy best, according to Tolkien, because it begins with thought and proceeds to images.

"Literature", as Tolkien (2001: 78) explains, "works from mind to mind and is thus more progenitive." The signifiers in written stories signify thoughts, ideas, and forms that correspond to words and relationships between words, or syntax. The words are concrete, being typed on a page. Yet what the author intends the reader to see and understand is not contained in typed letters. The author uses words to bring up thoughts and conjure images, which are immaterial and must be made with the mind. A reader cooperates with the author by constructing or imagining the scene or image that is signified by words; both author and reader are making images. In film and other visual arts, however, only the artist makes the images. Viewers do not construct images, rather they simply view the ones set before them. In such a visual art as film, the working is not from mind to mind, but from mind to eye. In other words, the visual artist conjures the image and the viewer sees it, whereas the literary author conjures the images and the reader does also.

**Word's Images: Universal and Particular**

The result of these two different workings is that literature is more "progenitive", as Tolkien says. Literature offers myriad kinds of images, but a visual art like film "imposes one visible form". As an example, consider the difference between drawing a tree and writing about a tree. The drawing will present only one possible image of that tree, while a written description leaves room for the reader to imagine his own unique version of that tree. A visual representation is limited to one form, but a literary representation will be imagined differently by everyone who reads it. Tolkien's reasoning, therefore, would mean that literary fantasy has a plurality of forms for readers, while filmic fantasy is limited to one form for viewers. Tolkien posits that the great benefit of literary fantasy, which signifies by word, is that "it is at once more universal and more poignantly particular" (Tolkien, 2001: 78). It is helpful to hear a fuller portion of his reasoning at this point:

> If [literature] speaks of *bread* or *wine* or *stone* or *tree*, it appeals to the whole of these things, to their ideas; yet each hearer will give to them a peculiar personal embodiment in his imagination... If a story says "he climbed a hill and saw a river in the valley below", the illustrator may catch, or nearly catch, his own vision of such a scene; but every hearer of the words will have his own picture, and it will be made out of all the hills and rivers and dales he has ever seen, but specially out of The Hill, The River, The Valley which were for him the first embodiment of the word (Tolkien, 2001: 78).

The words "hill", "river", and "valley" are universal because each of them signifies a plurality of forms, not a single form as in a film or painting; everyone who reads those words, and not just the author who wrote them, can

participate in the creative process of imagining the images being signified. And while these words are universal, they are also "poignantly particular", because the readers are allowed to construct their own image of these words in their mind. Readers can imagine the word "river" in a form most power-ful to them, because whatever is most remarkable about the idea "river" will be what they imagine. An artist's version of "river" will present what the artist finds most powerful about it, but not necessarily what the viewer finds most powerful. The freedom to imagine given by words, however, can con-jure what no visual artist can: an individual's particular embodiment—with all the most potent details—of the thing that the word(s) signify.

### Conveying Fantasy: Cooperation, not Coercion

Assuming that Tolkien's argument about signification in literature is sound, one should be able to say how literature's main signifier, word, is conducive to fantasy. Fantasy is an art form with its own unique functions, which Tol-kien (2001) identifies as fantastic sub-creation, recovery, escape, and conso-lation. How does literary fantasy accomplish these functions? The answer is that literature allows for reader cooperation, and reader cooperation is the reason fantasy's functions work. In order for a work of fantasy to have its full effect on its audience, it must invite the audience to cooperate and share in the imagining process; whereas fantasy succeeds through mutual cooper-ation between artist and audience, it fails whenever the artist tries to coerce or impose upon the audience. Since signification by word is, by nature, a "progenitive" art form that invites readers to cooperate in the imaginative process, literature has a high potential for conveying fantasy well.

Let us now examine how cooperation, and not coercion, empowers readers of fantasy to enter into each of fantasy's functions. Starting with sub-creation, Tolkien describes it as a function given to all human beings and not just fantasy writers: the capacity to make things for the pure delight of making. Successful fantasy allows readers to join the author in the process of sub-creation through co-creating an imaginary world. Tolkien did not intend for the world of Middle-earth to be his creation alone, but to be a process in which they participated with him in imagining the people, places, and events of his story. This shared act of sub-creation could not happen if only the author's imagination was at work. Because signification by words allows readers to imagine with the author, instead of foisting images upon them, fantastic sub-creation can be accomplished.

This author/reader cooperation also allows for the other functions of fantasy: recovery, escape, and consolation. Recovery is the regaining of a clear vision of things. Fantasy recovers things in the real world that have become drab and trite through familiarity. Recovery occurs when familiar things that have lost their intrigue and beauty are seen in a world that is

highly *unfamiliar*. Tolkien says, "fairy-stories deal largely...with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting" (Tolkien, 2001: 59-60). In a setting where things are less bound to natural laws, or in which things are enchanted, familiar things become suddenly new and wonderful. And so Tolkien also says:

> For the story-maker who allows himself to be "free with" Nature can be her lover not her slave. It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine (Tolkien, 2001: 59-60).

Fantasy recovers because it places worn out things of the primary real world into an enchanted secondary world. But in order for the enchantment to work, the secondary world must have the consistency of reality and the willing cooperation of the audience. Without a sense that the fantastic world is fundamentally very much like the real world, it will seem a farce, that is, it will lack the qualities that pertain to human life, and thus fail to garner the audience's trust in where the author is leading them. Without the audience's willing cooperation with the author, they will not have a stake in creating the secondary world nor in the process of recovery.

Escape, the next function of fantasy, is a flight from imprisonment in the primary world, where fear, doubt, and the troubles of life weigh on men's hearts. According to Tolkien, fantasy offers escape from the ugliness of the industrialized age, worldly evils and sorrows, limitations due to sin and weakness, and death. Closely related to escape is consolation. Consolation refers to the comforts to which fantasy readers are trying to escape. For example, people trying to escape from ugliness grasp for the consolation of beauty; those escaping from evil and sorrow reach for the consolation of goodness and joy; those escaping from death fly to the consolation of eternal life; finally, those escaping from despair seek the consolation of a happy ending, which is the highest consolation of fantasy, "eucatastrophe". The eucatastrophe of a fantasy story is the happy ending that amazingly fulfills ones deepest hopes in spite of seemingly insurmountable opposition. Fantasy stories acknowledge that evil and sorrow exist and are very powerful, but contrary to the tragic and meaningless state to which many people consign the real world, fantasy stories confess a piercingly different end to what would otherwise seem an unavoidably disastrous trajectory. Speaking of this eucatastrophic end, Tolkien says, "In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure... it denies... universal final defeat" (Tolkien, 2001: 69). In this quote one will notice that it is the world of the fairy-tale that allows for final victory. Fantasy's

secondary world is one that is by nature open to the miraculous. The world allows for this function of fantasy to work because it is miraculous. And so, for fantasy to convince a reader that miraculously happy endings are possible—for one to believe the eucatastrophic resolution to be more than an authorial coercion—fantasy's secondary world must be believably miraculous. How can such a world be convincing to a reader? There must be the kind of author/reader cooperation that results in a poignantly believable imagined world—the kind of cooperation that is most likely to occur when word, or literature, is the medium of fantasy story.

The fact that literature's signification by word equips fantasy stories to perform their functions is proved through common experience. From the beginning of recorded history people have delighted in fantasy stories signified by word: from the poetic verses of Homer, to the songs of Norse bards, to novels of modern times, audiences have allowed the worlds of fantasy stories spoken or written to enchant them as literary "lies breathed through silver" (see Carpenter, 1977: 151). These "lies" have been received as entertainment, escape, and even enlightenment. Due to their enchanting nature, fantasy stories have led audiences to suspend their doubt and disbelief about fabulous tales and to accept them for their worth. In fact, not only have they enchanted readers to suspend their disbelief, but some fantasy stories have warranted the encomium that is usually applied only to revelatory truth:

> Fantasy literature is like a periscope. Periscopes bend our vision to allow us to see above and out of our world to help us understand our world better. Except fantasy literature does not bend our vision; at its best, it straightens our vision by showing us what is really there though often unseen (Dickerson and O'Hara, 2006: 53).

For many people, fantasy stories have revealed truths about reality that they otherwise would not have seen, and they have often done so through the literary medium.

Many fantasy stories have been considered to not only reveal truth, but to be real, factually consistent records of true persons and events. On this phenomena Tolkien remarks, "The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories... But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation" (Tolkien, 2001: 72). For many Christians, stories of the Old and New Testaments that contain elements of fantasy, like the occurrence of miracles, are the most reliable and life-changing truths revealed to humanity. One who was persuaded by the Gospel said the following about its medium: "So faith arises from hearing, and hearing arises by the *word of Christ*" (Romans 10:17; au-

thor's translation and italics). The "word of Christ" refers to the written and spoken proclamation that invokes Christ's followers, both in ancient times and the present, to listen and believe. Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles, considered the message of the Gospel to have come within a medium divinely chosen and empowered to do an extraordinary work: to take an audience from no knowledge or interest in a story about a crucified Jewish man to wholehearted belief and life-transforming response. Paul's opinion is not an anomaly, since from the birth of Christianity the life and teaching of Jesus and his followers has been primarily conveyed through written and spoken word (*i.e.* the Bible and prophetic teaching or preaching).

The fact that verbal discourse, both oral and aural, have been Christianity's primary medium for evangelism and catechism could have many explanations. One reason relates back to the cooperative process of imagination inherent in signification by word. Work does not restrict a hearer or reader to one set form or image. Rather, word is malleable, allowing the audience to envision things that are substantive, yet free to change and grow in complexity. With word-signification the audience can amend, add to, and perfect its conceptions of things with increasingly informed imaginations. A reader's mental image of 'the river in the valley beyond the hill' will probably change with subsequent readings, because readers tend to get better at imagining the more they do it. The way readers conceive the worlds of fantasy (or any other kind of story) will mature with re-reading. For this reason, it is not surprising that the primary medium for Christians, who believe in a God who can never be fully circumscribed, is word. The God of Judaism and Christianity is communicated not by a static image, but by the Word, the depth and breadth of which assures humanity's image of God will always need to be broken and recast again and again. Because of this reality about God's nature, C. S. Lewis has called him the great iconoclast (Lewis, 2001). God is always smashing our images of him, Lewis says, since they are always in need of improvement. What better way to do so than with a medium that signifies by word?

From these thoughts, we may conclude that literary fantasy has the potential to succeed in fulfilling fantasy's functions, because it encourages the audience to cooperate in imagining a fantasy story's world. On the other hand, we would be hasty to suppose that because of its strengths, literary fantasy relegates filmic fantasy to a poorer, weaker, or less believable class of mediums, or that because film works differently from literature, it must be incapable of conveying fantasy. On the contrary, it will be argued that film's expression of fantasy can supplement and improve one's understanding and enjoyment of literature. As will be shown, film can do so because, as an art form similar to literature, it can share the same essence (or spirit) of the literary original; also, as a visual medium, it has a power that can provide

viewers with escape, consolation, recovery, and participation in sub-creation.

### The Spirit that Bridges Literature and Film is Story

Although literature and film are often pitted against each other, at their core they share the same essence, or spirit. That spirit is story, or narrative. Robert Johnston says, "The heart of film is story", and the same could be said of fiction literature (Johnston, 2000: 144). Story transcends media: it can be told through drama, literature, painting, sculpture, film, and many other art forms. Differences in technique do not hinder story from indwelling various media, as Claude Bremond explains:

> [Story] is independent of the techniques that bear it along. It may be transposed from one to another medium without losing its essential properties: the subject of a story may serve as argument for a ballet, that of a novel can be transposed to stage or screen, one can recount in words a film to someone who has not seen it. These are words we read, images we see, gestures we decipher, but through them, it is a story that we follow; and it could be the same story (quoted in Ryan, 2004: 1).

The techniques, or signifiers, used by different media will certainly make a difference in how a story is told, but if the essential elements are present, the story will remain intact. Literature's signification by word is vastly different from film's complex combination of word, music, drama, and especially image. Despite film's multiple signifiers, however, story is the driving force: "But in the American cinema especially, the story reigns supreme. All the other language systems are subordinated to the plot, the structural spine of virtually all American fiction films, and most foreign movies as well" (Giannetti, 2009: 324).

If story is the heart of literature and film, how can its presence be discerned? What comprises story in these mediums? If this question is not answered, then there is no way of judging whether a fantasy story is as sufficiently conveyed through film as it is through literature. It is necessary, therefore, to observe the essential elements of story and then to decide whether they are shared by both fantasy literature and fantasy film. If these mediums share the essential elements of a story, then it can be said that they tell the same story.

### Essential Elements of Story

What are the essential elements of story? Although authorities differ, there are at least three essential elements: plot, character, and setting.

"Plot", according to Michael Meyer (2002: 31), "is the organizing principle that controls the order of events." Every story has a plot that involves a

problem or situation that must be resolved through a sequence of connected events. The outcome or resolution of the plot in a fantasy novel is the eucatastrophe. In Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*, after about 200 pages he reveals the basic plot or "the driving narrative requirement: take the Ring to Orodruin and destroy it" (T. A. Shippey, 2001: 81). Viewers of Peter Jackson's adaptation, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, have given almost exactly the same plot summary. For example, one viewer who summarized the film's plot said it was about Frodo's quest "to journey across Middle-Earth, deep into the shadow of the Dark Lord and destroy the Ring by casting it into the Cracks of Doom" ("Plot Summary for The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring", n.d.). While some of the events and particular sequencing from the novel are omitted in the film (*e.g.* the Hobbit party's stay at Crickhollow), the basic plotline is maintained in both the novel and film adaptation.

The characters of a story are the people involved in the events of the plot. Meyer claims that characters are inextricably tied to the plot, because, "If stories were depopulated, the plots would disappear because the two are interrelated… Characters are influenced by events just as events are shaped by characters" (Meyer, 1987: 53). A story's plot will change if its characters are changed, and consequently, the story itself will be different. Jackson's film adaptation leaves out several characters (*e.g.* Fatty Bolger, Tom Bombadil, Bill Ferny, Glorfindel), but it includes those without which the plot could not exist: Frodo, Sam, Gandalf, Aragorn, and Sauron, to name a few. What is more, the characters in the film share many traits as those in the novel (*e.g.* Frodo is a wise hobbit, burdened but willing to bear great cares and responsibility).

Lastly, as Meyer says, "Setting is the context in which the action of a story occurs. The major elements of setting are the time, place, and social environment that frame the characters" (Meyer, 1987: 88). If Jackson's adaptation had set the plot and characters in modern day England surrounded by current technologies and modes of civilization, it would not be the same story. As it is, however, Jackson has followed Tolkien's setting with fidelity. In commenting on the film story's setting, Bradley Birzer (2002) lauds the filmmaker's version of Middle-earth as a faithful representation, and even praises it for some of its additions. It is in this element that filmic fantasy, as in Jackson's adaptation, can not only adequately reflect literary fantasy, but help improve our understanding and appreciation of it. The reason that film excels in conveying setting is that it is a visual medium. It does not just describe the world of fantasy, it *shows* it, because its main signifier is image.

### Film's Main Signifier: Image

The primacy of image signification in film results in an easy suspension of disbelief. Whereas in literature, word signification allows for readers to co-operate with their imaginations and thus more easily enter fantasy's world, in film, image signification can also convince viewers that they have temporarily been given a window into another world. Tolkien felt leery about fantasy stories expressed through drama and other visual arts, because they tended to do a poor job of showing fantasy's world. But Tolkien was not altogether averse to visual art, as is demonstrated by the many drawing and paintings he produced (see Hammond and Scull, 1995). According to Tolkien's requirements, for a film to adequately portray a fantasy story it must present a believable visual presentation. He knew what Robert Johnston knows about audiences:

> Audiences watch some movies…asking with their mind if what they observe is plausible. Movies take us to places, show us situations, put before us dilemmas, move us forward or backward in time, allow us to see people in ways we have yet to experience. And we must be able to put ourselves in these places, times, and situations if the movie is to have its intended effect on the viewer (Johnson, 2000: 153).

Perhaps in Tolkien's time, it did not seem likely that film technology would ever advance to this point. And yet, today some of the most successful movies of all time are set in fantasy worlds. Filmmaking has caught up to at least one part of Tolkien's standard for conveying fantasy story: a convincing image of fantasy's secondary world. Signification by image can result in the suspension of a viewer's disbelief.

### The Accessibility of Image Signification

The main benefit of signification by image is its accessibility. The believability of filmic fantasy's worlds helps understanding and enjoying them easier for viewers than literary fantasy worlds do for readers. To read that "Bilbo the hobbit went out the door with Gandalf the wizard and a band of dwarves" may make perfect sense to one familiar with fantasy terms, but to others who do not know the definition for "hobbit", "wizard", and "dwarves", it is unintelligible. Of course, all one has to do in most fantasy novels is to keep reading, and they will eventually piece together what these things mean. For example, they will learn that a hobbit is (by most accounts) a short, good-natured creature with hairy feet that enjoys eating good food, living in homely comfort, and staying well away from dangerous adventures. Fantasy literature, however, cannot offer the immediate accessibility that fantasy film can. One does not need to read a few hundred pages to understand what kinds of lands lie in Middle-earth; they need only watch

the first ten minutes of Jackson's *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Even if a viewer comes to this film with no concept for elves, orcs, or dwarves, he will get an immediate visualization of these things in the world in which they exist. Such a visualization of fantasy brings understanding, because it sets the unknown entities (*e.g.* hobbits, the Shire, ring-wraiths) into a world that, while foreign, is in many ways like our primary one with many of its resembling characteristics (*e.g.* forests, homes, weather). Things that readers may find unintelligible—and thus unbelievable—in a novel may become clear in a film that visualizes them. When fantasy worlds are understandable, viewers are enabled to more easily enter and believe in them.

Beyond film's accessibility is a power that results in even greater responses than suspension of disbelief. The response it provokes in viewers leads them beyond belief, stirring their emotions and motivating their actions. This power also comes from film's nature as visual image, and is the power of presence.

### Film's Power of Presence

In *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, David Freedberg (1989) claims that people respond to images as if they were or were very close to what they represented. Freedberg says that there is a fusion of image and what is represented by it, of sign and signifier. An image of a person, for example, can evoke a viewer to imagine the living and real person being represented. An image of Christ on the cross can lead viewers to an animated vision of that event in their mind. Since such a vision would be similar to the real event; it would evoke a response similar to that of one who stood in the presence of the actual crucifixion. The response might entail sorrow, weeping, empathy, hope, or joy, all of which testify to the image's power. Taking another example, a portrait of Venus in the nude might lead to much different responses. Both images are able to evoke response because of their "verisimilitude" with reality, as Freedberg says (1989: 201). They are so close to the reality they represent, that they evoke the same kinds of responses.

Because of this aspect of images, people have attributed particular works with great power. These images have a quality that suggests presence and sometimes even divinity. For this reason such images are consecrated, or set apart, and they are used according to the kind of power they possess. Images of the crucifixion, for example, were used by medieval monks to comfort the condemned as they were being executed (Freedberg, 1989: 5-8). Images of beautiful men and women were placed in sight of lovers during intercourse in order to imprint beauty on the child being conceived (Freedberg, 1989: 2-3). Still images have a history of provoking people's emotions

and will by their sense of presence, and, as a result, these images attain the status of powerful, consecrated objects.

Like the still images of paintings and portraiture, filmic images have the same kind of power, because they also are imbued with presence and consecrated by viewers. Film is by its very nature a medium of images. As such, film can cause powerful responses in viewers, including the sense that there is a presence behind the images to which film draws. Film is also frequently consecrated, or set apart for purposes corresponding to the responses it evokes. Film is powerful. Johnston gives numerous examples of films that radically affected movie-goers, such as the story of a man who "after watching Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky*, was inspired to begin seriously working out" (Johnston, 2000: 31). In another example, Johnston tells about a friend and filmmaker, Paul Woolf, whose experience of the presence of God while watching *Spartacus* inspired him to make movies. This power to change people's lives shows up in other films including *Schindler's List*, *Becket*, and even *Beauty and the Beast* (Johnston, 2000: 34-39).

Film is also often consecrated. Some films become so marked by their power and the responses they evoke that they are set apart by viewers and critics as particularly imbued with a sense of presence. In their book *Finding God in the Dark: Taking the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius to the Movies*, John Pungente and Monty Williams (2004) use several films to lead readers in their devotional life towards God. Viewing film, they say, can be an act of contemplation leading to an encounter with God and self-transformation. Their views sound strikingly similar to those of Freedberg, who, commenting on the contemplation of images, says, "By concentrating on physical images, the natural inclination of the mind to wander is kept in check, and we ascend with increasing intensity to the spiritual and emotional essence of that which is represented in material form…" (Freedberg, 1989: 162). Perhaps most people do not attend movies with the specific aim of devotional contemplation, but many people find in movies an implicit source of meaning, truth, and substantive "presence" (Marsh, 2007: 146). The cinema can offer a good meditative device for people in a depersonalized, multi-tasking society.

Here an objection must be considered. Is it not true that film lacks the same presence as still images because filmic images move? Freedberg says, "Film… forgoes the aura of living presence; but that results less from replication than from the fact that the film moves on. We cannot hold to the image in a film in the way we do with still images" (1989: 234). To answer this objection, it must be conceded that film does differ from still images in respect to what Freedberg specifically means by "the aura of living presence". A still image has this aura, because viewers sense a tension between their knowledge of the images' artifice (*i.e.* they know it is a representation and

not the real thing) and the images' unabated reconstitution (*i.e.* the imaginative process of animating the still image in one's mind). Filmic images are usually not presented on screen long enough for this aura to be sensed. In making this concession, however, there is no lost ground to the power or sense of presence in film. Filmic images do not merely intimate the sense of lively presence, they produce it outright! Film goes a step further than still images by bringing its images to life. Yet, as in still images, viewers can also sense the tension between film's artifice and its verisimilitude to reality. In fact, the tension is increased because film is so much more similar to reality. Rather than movement attenuating film's powerful sense of presence, or verisimilitude, it actually enhances it. As historians of early film know, audiences, who were so convinced of the images' lifelike presence, were sometimes frightened out of their seats thinking that the images might come out of the screen. The power of film and the power of still images both result in a sense of presence felt by viewers.

If still images and filmic images share this power of presence (with film enhancing it), then it is reasonable to assume that they also evoke the same kind of response. People respond emotionally and volitionally to the presence they sense in images, both still and filmic. Emotional responses like fear, adoration, lust, empathy, and happiness are evoked. On the heels of such emotions, volitional responses follow. In some cultures, people have so adored certain cultic images that they sought to beautify them with adornments. Images of Christ have aroused such empathy in viewers that they have encouraged imitation of Christ's life and suffering (Freedberg, 1989: 164). In Western cultures, images of all kinds evoke response from viewers, whether they reside in the art museums, pornographic magazines, or film. As has been argued, images affect viewers because of the power of verisimilitude and presence they possess. Intriguingly, most Westerners tend to dismiss or deny this power and the responses that images elicit, both still images and filmic.

According to Freedberg, Westerners ignore the basic responses to images they experience, which in primitive cultures would be considered animistic, conflating a presence with an image. Yet Freedberg exposes the fact that "we too have the kinds of beliefs about images that people who have not been educated to repress those beliefs and responses have; and we respond in the same ways" (Freedberg, 1989: 42). The difference between the West and more "primitive" cultures, according to Freedberg, is that Westerners tend to dismiss the power they sense in images and their emotional responses to them. Although they ignore it, Westerners are as much affected by and drawn to the power of images as every other culture.

Movie-goers tend to ignore the deeper reasons they see movies. The reasons most people give for going to movies revolves around "escapism";

movies are a way to avoid reality. As Marsh posits, however, "Whatever people say they go to the cinema for, they often get more than they expect" (2007: 147). In data collected from respondents asked about attending the cinema, although most said cinema was an escapist activity, they also tended to admit many ways film affected them, influenced them, and provided meaning for them (Marsh, 2007: 148-50). Although simple entertainment, fun, and escape from life's monotony primarily comprise move-goers' conscious motivations, a subconscious draw to film as a source of meaning is exposed when people stop to reflect on and admit what they actually took away from the cinema experience. Based on such admissions, Marsh makes the following claim: "Entertainment is taking the place of religion as a cultural site where the task of meaning making is undertaken" (Marsh, 2007: 150). Film has become a venue for more than escape and entertainment. It is a source of meaning for people who seek escape or deliverance from a reality that offers a paucity of significance and meaning.

Notice how the last point reiterates the strong connection between literary fantasy and filmic fantasy. Film has proven its ability to fulfill one of fantasy literature's main functions: escape. And if viewers can escape from what they dislike about the primary world, they must expect to find the opposite in film's secondary world, namely, consolation, which is another function of fantasy.

The power of film affects people emotionally and volitionally. It causes them to question where meaning can be found. Film's power uses visual image to captivate viewers and draw them into the deeper meaning and themes of what they see. Theme is an element of story that has to do with meaning. It is, as Meyers says, "the central idea or meaning of a story. It provides a unifying point around which the plot, characters, setting, point-of-view, symbols, and other elements of a story are organized" (Meyers, 2002: 185). But theme is hard to discern; it takes repeated readings of a book to understand all the symbols and other elements that reveal the theme. What makes a story's themes harder to discern in a film is film's nature as a medium. Filmic images—even though they are supplemented by music, dialogue, and editing—cannot convey ideas and concepts with the same perspicuity as words. What filmic images can do, however, is move viewers to seek out the meaning-laden traces of theme they sense by going back to a more verbal and more perspicuous source, literature.

**Film's Lure to Literature**
Film incites viewers to explore the world it displays. Viewers feel the presence and power film possesses because they look into a secondary world—one that seems very real to them, yet is also elusive and mystical. They come away affected by this world apart from reality, and sometimes they recog-

nize how powerful and meaning-laden watching film can be. Whether they recognize it or not, however, viewers will ineluctably desire to explore film's power, meaning, and possible themes at a deeper level of clarity. Film draws viewers to clarify the feeling and sense that as dull or insignificant as life may seem, there are secondary worlds in film where life is given meaning after all.

Film grants feelings that lure us to explore more of the world displayed, but it cannot give us this world definitively. It cannot because film is based on images, and images do not communicate meaning as clearly as words. Film does not define like language does. Geoffrey Wagner points out that while a film provides a visual picture of a character, a novel fills that character with meaning: "Some of Dostoyevski's characters are extremely hard to 'see', but they are great and real characters nonetheless. They are so because language is a completion, an entelechy, and film is not" (Wagner, 1975: 12). Language is a "completion" because it actualizes the essence of its content (*e.g.* characters, setting, and themes) to the extent that it shows not only what happens, but what is. Novels and other literature can clearly convey both what happens in a materialistic sense and also what exists in an ontological sense. While film can also convey both things, it does not clearly convey what exists on an ontological level. Ontology has to do with essence, which is invisible. Rather than defining and explaining invisible ontological essences, film accentuates visible things, characters, and events. While film can convey visible things easily, its nature as photographic image necessarily hinders it from a focus on invisible things, such as thought. Wagner says, "Film is a diffusion. The activity of extracting thought from a concretion... has to be so. Borderlines become unclear. This is not to denigrate cinema in any way, though it certainly is an admission of a difficulty in reaching norms about such a plural form" (1975: 12). Film's concrete images can convey myriad meanings, and in so doing, film can leave the exact meaning behind events, persons, and other visible things ambiguous. This ambiguity, or lack of definition, can be a weakness or strength. When film is posed antithetically to literature, its ambiguity is a sure weakness. If film and literature are understood as complimentary mediums, however, film's lack of ontological definition acts as a signpost pointing to the literary form. In this way, film points viewers to a fuller, more complete world, as can be conveyed through the originating novel behind a film adaptation.

Of course, film's ambiguity in meaning can lead to other places besides their literary origin. Film's ambiguity has also led to film criticism. Film critics exist in part to explain and judge the meanings intended in film worlds. Their attempts to interpret these worlds and all their aspects, however, are often not sufficient. The reason film criticism cannot clarify the meaning and significance offered in many films is in large part due to the fact that

viewers are not looking merely for a propositional explanation. Critics interpret and explain film's meaning with propositional language, and while this is one source for viewers wanting to explore the meaning behind film, another way is to enter the secondary world seen in film through a different medium, namely, the novel. The novel can convey material realities and ontological realities in a more balanced way than critical exposition. Critics are understandably concerned with analyzing films in terms of mechanics, techniques, themes, and other aspects relating to how the work was made and what its content means. They are not concerned with describing all the details and meanings of a work, since its office is more judicial and expositional and less filial and compatible. Critics judge and explain films, but they cannot perform the same artistic feat as the filmmakers. Only a retelling or (in the case of literary originals) pre-telling of a film's story can be called filial, compatible, and concerned with performing the same function: telling a story about a world in which certain characters are involved in a certain plot. And so, if viewers are lured by a film to engage and understand its world in a greater and deeper way, they find the best way is by entering it again through a different medium or form: the original novel.

**Conclusions. Literature's Need for Filmic Images**
Turning to literature, one finds that the secondary world of fantasy is necessarily richer and deeper because it allows for a greater use of one's imagination. Because readers have to imagine the things being conveyed by word, they are forced to understand and inhabit fantasy's secondary world to a much greater degree. David Jasper (1998) argues that although film is more accessible to audiences, literature's demand for deeper intellectual engagement results in a broader and deeper understanding of the story and message of the work.

A reader's imagination, however, has limitations. Not everyone has an imagination as sophisticated as Tolkien's when he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. Readers' imaginations must be educated. Tolkien grew in his powers to sub-create by looking at and studying the world around him. His mental faculties were instructed in empirical, visible ways. Fantastic sub-creation, he said, must be established upon rational grounds (Tolkien, 2001: 55). The imagination required to vividly see fantasy's secondary world is one that must be educated with not only reason, but visual images. Roger Bacon said that "nothing is completely intelligible to us unless it is displayed in figures before our eyes" (quoted in Tachau, 2006: 355). In the Old Testament book of Job, it is only after Job has seen God that he finally comes to understand his situation: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job

42:5-6, ESV). And for reasons that Thomas Aquinas explains, God took on visible form in the incarnation of Christ:

> But the very nature of God is the essence of goodness... it belongs to the nature of the highest good to communicate itself in the highest manner to the creature, and this is brought about chiefly by "His so joining created nature to Himself that one Person is made up of these three—the Word, a soul and flesh", as Augustine says (Aquinas, 1952: 702).

The world of fantasy can provide sub-creation, recovery, escape, and consolation. The functions and benefits of fantasy stories are best experienced when fantasy is allowed to cross media. For when literary fantasy and filmic fantasy cooperate with each other, the imagination will mature by both words and images.

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