

CHAPTER 1

Figure and Ground

According to influential auteur critic Andrew Sarris, the films of directors who attain the rank of auteur reveal an “interior meaning” that exists in “the tension between a director’s personality and his material” (Sarris 1996: 43). This “tension” may be understood as the way directors mobilize or inflect the conventions and iconography of the genres within which they are working. Ultimately, the “personal contribution” of a director “can only be seen fully after typical iconographical elements have been identified” (Alloway 1971: 41). Thus, this first chapter begins by providing the context of New Zealand film history. Hollywood movies were enthusiastically embraced by New Zealanders, and its own cinema, accordingly, emphasized genre filmmaking, especially horror and parody. Sir Peter Jackson follows in this tradition in his early films. However, at the same time that Jackson works within popular genres, his films display a distinctive style and set of thematic concerns.

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WHAT THEY DO IN THE SHADOWS: NEW ZEALAND CINEMA

The term “national cinema” refers, at the simplest level, to films produced within a particular country, although the idea of one monolithic, encompassing definition for any nation has been complicated by the increasing flow of people, financing, and media across national geographic boundaries. Contemporary theorizing on the subject, largely influenced by political scientist Benedict Anderson, has explained nations as “imagined communities” in which a large number of individuals are bound together by common ideas of what defines their country as distinct and sovereign (Anderson 2006: 6). Concepts of nationhood are formed and reinforced by political discourse and cultural mythology and given concrete form by iconography and the stories that contain it. Film, of course, is a significant cultural force for visualizing national values and concepts—for “imagining” the national community.

Some national cinemas developed genres specific to them, like the German mountain film and *heimatfilme*, or homeland film, in the 1920s and 1930s, or the British heritage film, nostalgic depictions of the nation set before World War I, in the 1980s, but historically, American popular films have dominated the international market. Media historian Toby Miller writes that “Hollywood is global in that it sells its wares in every nation, through a global system of copyright, promotion, and distribution.” Hollywood “owns between 40 percent and 90 percent of the movies shown in most parts of the world” (Miller et al. 2001: 216). At the level of government policy, for example, many countries at one time or another have created quota regulations largely to combat the dominance of foreign—essentially, American—films on domestic screens. But the American influence on other national cinemas exceeds mere numbers, for Hollywood has not only dominated foreign film markets on every continent, but also, as German filmmaker Wim Wenders would put it, colonized imaginations through the conventions of popular genres.

If audiences worldwide have been trained by the protocols of Hollywood and classic narrative cinema generally, it is clear why so many filmmakers outside of the United States have made genre films. The frame of genre allows filmmakers the benefit of working in forms familiar to audiences both at home and abroad, and thus, it offers more lucrative potential for foreign distribution. Distribution in other countries is particularly important in nations like New Zealand, where the population is insufficient to sustain a vibrant homegrown film industry, for it provides a possibility for films to return a profit. At the same time, however, accepting generic forms from

Hollywood also allows for the potential loss of any distinctive national features that might be expressed in cinema. This dilemma has informed the discourse regarding national cinema in many countries, especially Australia, English Canada, and Great Britain, as well as New Zealand. All of these countries share the English language with the United States, so that Hollywood movies do not require dubbing or subtitling, making their potential influence even greater.

Inevitably, then, national cinemas must find space, both at the local and international level, to compete with Hollywood. Because of Hollywood's global dominance, its generic forms have become familiar to audiences internationally. Filmmakers from around the world have responded to the domination of American film by adapting Hollywood genres and reworking them according to their own cultural sensibilities. Because Hollywood cinema is overwhelmingly a cinema of genre films, this means, in effect, working within the genre system, with its inherent constraints and possibilities. In his book on Australian national cinema, film scholar Tom O'Regan refers to this process as "indigenizing" American genres (O'Regan 1996: 5). The concept of "indigenizing" cultural texts such as movies might seem politically problematic in countries like New Zealand, with its Māori population, although O'Regan uses the term to mean movies that absorb elements of popular genres while adapting the context to local culture (O'Regan 1996: 5).

The question of national cinema is theoretically fraught, like the concept of the nation itself. Much theoretical work has been done to question hegemonic concepts of the nation, indeed to challenge the very concept of a unified nation (see Anderson 2006). Aotearoa New Zealand specifically wrestles with the diverse identities of the islands' first settlers, the Māori, and the *Pākehā* (European) population, as shown in films such as *Ngāti* (1987) and *Once Were Warriors*, as well as with the arrival of distinct immigrant groups like the Chinese, depicted in *Illustrious Energy* (1988), and Croats in *Broken English* (1996). As one scholar explained, "the meaning of New Zealand has always been open to re-negotiation. But the cultural questions now being asked reflect an uncertainty thrown into sharper focus by a transnational age" (Brown 1997: 1). The international success of Jackson's films has only amplified these questions, requiring one "to think less prescriptively about cultural expressions of national identity in the international cinema forum" (Robinson 1999: 3).

American cinema provides the benefits of entertainment and a frame of reference for kiwi filmmakers. Many important New Zealand films incorporate elements of American genre films. *Sleeping Dogs* (1977), for example, enters into dialogue with Hollywood political conspiracy films such as

The Parallax View (1974), *All the President's Men* (1976), and *Winter Kills* (1979) that were popular at the time. *Goodbye Pork Pie* (1981) is a road movie involving an extended police chase in a country comprised of two islands! *Utū*, with its story of a Māori militia scout who rebels against Pākehā authority during the New Zealand Wars in the 1870s, engages with the American Western. A Māori village is burned in a scene reminiscent of the depiction of the infamous Battle of Washita in *Little Big Man* (1970), in which the U.S. cavalry brutally massacred Cheyenne women and children, itself influenced by the My Lai massacre in Vietnam in 1968. Featuring considerable violence, the film was described by American film critic David Chute at the time of its release as “the Māori *Wild Bunch*” (qtd. in Reid 1986: 133).

Gaylene Preston's *Mr. Wrong* (1985), the first New Zealand film to be produced and directed by women, involves a young woman who buys a used car and finds herself terrorized by the ghost of the previous occupant, a woman who had been murdered. The movie is a variation of haunted vehicle horror movies like *The Car* (1977) and especially John Carpenter's *Christine* (1983), but here the vehicle functions as a feminist attack on the dread of difference that characterizes the masculinist mentality of many American horror films and suggests the frequent ironic distance of some New Zealand movies from American generic paradigms.

Perhaps the best examples of this approach to genre is Murphy's *The Quiet Earth* (1985). In this movie, iconic New Zealand actor Bruno Lawrence plays research scientist Zac Hobson, whose research project sets off a warping of the space–time continuum (“the Effect”) that makes almost everyone else disappear. Hobson searches a deserted North Island looking for other people until he meets one surviving woman, Joanne (Alison Routledge), and a Māori, Api (Peter Smith). Realizing that the Effect might occur again, the three agree to return to the research lab in Auckland and destroy it. But the trio is riven by cultural tensions, and before they can destroy the lab, the Effect reoccurs. The film evokes the cycle of apocalyptic science fiction movies focusing on a handful of survivors, such as Roger Corman's *Day the World Ended* (1956) and, most importantly, *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* (1959), with its trio of dramatis personae—a black man, a white man, and a white woman. But unlike the American film, *The Quiet Earth* does not offer the upbeat closure typical of classical Hollywood genre films. While *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* ends with its three characters reconciling and presumably eliminating racism in the post-apocalyptic future, in the final image of *The Quiet Earth*, Hobson is the ultimate man alone—a mythic concept in New Zealand culture—standing by himself on a beach, facing an alien horizon of seemingly realigned planets. *The Quiet Earth*, coming one

year after New Zealand's 1984 breaking of the ANZUS Treaty, a political and military alliance between Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, when it became a nuclear-free zone, expresses anti-American sentiment and nuclear anxiety, particularly with Hobson's revelation that the Effect is the result of his American collaborators having concealed important information regarding their experiment.

New Zealand is a country where the invasive presence of American popular culture, especially film, has been described by kiwi cultural critic Geoff Lealand as an ambiguous "foreign egg in our nest" (Lealand 1988). Lealand is referring to the eggs of the cuckoo, which are placed in the nests of other birds where, once hatched, the chicks are inadvertently raised by them as one of their own, siphoning off nutrition from the other, smaller native chicks and eventually pushing them out of the nest. In *Shaker Run* (1986), a road movie reminiscent of *Smokey and the Bandit* (1976), someone asks the film's protagonist, an ace American racing-car driver played by Cliff Robertson, "If he's the best, what's he doing here?"—a question that addresses not only the diegetic character, but also the frequent presence of American actors in New Zealand movies in the first place. Genre filmmaking threatens to erase local difference. The production of the post-apocalyptic science fiction movie *Battletruck* (1982), set "after the oil wars," was obviously indebted to *Mad Max* (1979), an Australian film that similarly mobilizes genre conventions, and raised concerns that New Zealand was in danger of becoming "a Hollywood satellite" (Martin and Edwards 1997: 82).

In addition, there has been a steady talent drain, with many filmmakers, as in other countries, lured by Hollywood. For the most part, the subsequent careers of these filmmakers in the United States are more indicative of tradition—the "genius of the system" (Bazin 2008: 27)—than of individual talent. That is to say, most of them have been absorbed within the Hollywood institution, producing capable but unremarkable genre movies usually indistinguishable from those made by American directors.

Roger Donaldson, director of *Sleeping Dogs*, the film that marked the beginning of contemporary New Zealand feature filmmaking, and the subsequent hit *Smash Palace*, has had a steady if undistinguished output in the United States beginning with *No Way Out* (1987), a political thriller based on the classic film noir *The Big Clock* (1948); a 1994 remake of Sam Peckinpah's *The Getaway* (1994); and several big-budget action movies including the disaster film *Dante's Peak* (1997). Lee Tamahori, who came to international attention with *Once Were Warriors*, an important film about contemporary Māori life in the slums of Auckland, went on to direct in

Hollywood the neo-noir *Mulholland Falls* (1996), the thrillers *The Edge* (1997) and *Along Came a Spider* (2001), the James Bond entry *Die Another Day* (2002), and the action movie *XXX: State of the Union* (2005), although his career sputtered subsequently. Other New Zealand filmmakers have not fared as well in Hollywood. Geoff Murphy, director of the important New Zealand films *Goodbye Pork Pie*, *Utu* (1983), and *The Quiet Earth*, subsequently directed such staple if undistinguished Hollywood fare as *Young Guns II* (1990), a bratpack Western; the action sequel *Under Siege 2: Dark Territory* (1995); and the forgettable science fiction thrillers *Freejack* (1992) and *Fortress 2* (1999). Sam Pillsbury, who worked on *Goodbye Pork Pie*, *The Quiet Earth*, and *The Scarecrow* (1982), was responsible for *Free Willy 3: The Rescue* (1997). Vincent Ward, director of the arthouse hits *Vigil* (1984) and *The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey* (1988), tested the constraints of the classic narrative style with *What Dreams May Come* (1998), starring Robin Williams, before returning to New Zealand to make *River Queen* (2005), about the New Zealand Wars.

English-speaking New Zealand enthusiastically embraced Hollywood films early on. According to Lealand, American movies have counted for more than 50 percent of films screened in New Zealand every year since 1929 (Lealand 1988: 83–85). Gordon Mirams, soon to become the country's fourth chief film censor, famously described New Zealand in 1945 as “a nation of film fans,” explaining that “we adopted the motion picture earlier and more enthusiastically than most other nations, and today we spend as much time and money at the pictures, per head of population as any other people in the world, except the Americans—and even they are not far ahead of us.” But he also warned that “If there is any such thing as a ‘New Zealand culture,’ it is to a large extent the creation of Hollywood” (Mirams 1945: 5). In his documentary, *Cinema of Unease*, a personal interpretation of New Zealand cinema, actor Sam Neill, with some irony, calls the vision of American movies so alluring that it has become “the real thing” for New Zealanders.

Of the 142 fiction feature films made in New Zealand until 1996, as listed in the book *New Zealand Film, 1912–1996*, more than half are described by the authors in terms of familiar Hollywood genres such as melodrama, action-adventure, thriller, horror, road movie, and teen film. While there are filmmakers such as Merata Mita, Barry Barclay, and Alister Barry, who have worked outside the commercial mainstream, from *Sleeping Dogs* to the *Lord of the Rings* and beyond, New Zealand films overwhelmingly have been genre movies. Just as Australian national cinema engages in a “conversation” with Hollywood (O’Regan 1996: 1), so does New Zealand cinema. This conversation is both dialogue and dialectic, and in New Zealand cinema, as in the popular

cinema of other English-speaking nations, one finds both generic imitation and inflection.

Kiwi scholars have identified specific generic trends in New Zealand film, such as the teen film (Watson 1990). Alistair Fox argues that a surprising number of New Zealand films are coming-of-age films, which he differentiates from the teen film in that the experience of maturation is not dependent upon literal age. In this group, he includes *Braindead* and *Heavenly Creatures* (Fox 2017). The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy might also be read as a coming-of-age film, in which Frodo is seen as the hero who evolves from untested youth to accepting great responsibility as an active agent in world events. Certainly, the books have been read this way, as chronicling Frodo's maturation. Fox sees the coming-of-age film as a hybrid genre, employing elements of several other genres including the family melodrama (Fox 2017: 6), and he explains the prominence of coming-of-age movies in New Zealand cinema as deriving from the nation's status as a post-colonial culture: "In a post-colonial society like that of New Zealand, for example, which was only systematically colonized after 1840 and did not truly begin to separate from the mother country until Britain joined the European Union in 1973, the process of becoming an individual that informs the coming-of-age film provided a parallel to the process of becoming as a nation that was necessary after Britain unilaterally loosened the bonds that had provided the colony with its economic and cultural security" (Fox 2017: 13).

In the late 1980s, British horror writer Kim Newman saw *The Quiet Earth*, an apocalyptic science fiction film, along with Jackson's *Bad Taste* and Ward's *The Navigator*, as establishing a distinct tradition of kiwi cinéfantastique (Newman 1989). New Zealand film critic Nicholas Reid had already identified a distinct kiwi gothic mode in his discussion of *The Scarecrow*—also a coming-of-age film—in 1986, a year before the release of *Bad Taste* (Reid 1986: 68–77). Many other New Zealand films do fall within the category of the gothic, including *Death Warmed Up* (1984), *Bridge to Nowhere* (1986), *The Price of Milk* (2000), *The Irrefutable Truth about Demons* (2000), *Kung Fu Vampire Killers* (2001), *Black Sheep* (2006), and *What We Do in the Shadows* (2014), as well as TV series such as *Wellington Paranormal* (2018–2022), a spinoff of the latter film (Figure 1.1). In their emphasis on the Gothic and the fantastic, many New Zealand filmmakers have followed the well-trodden path of others before them who began their careers and gained invaluable experience making low-budget science fiction and horror movies. But scholars have traced the pronounced tradition of the Kiwi Gothic in New Zealand film within a cultural tradition that has its roots both in the sublimity and remoteness of the New Zealand landscape as well as the practical realities of international



FIGURE 1.1 *The Quiet Earth* directed by Geoff Murphy. © Gibson Group and Five Mile Films 1985.

film distribution (Conrich 2005). “The Kiwi Gothic constructs New Zealand not as a place of some pastoral idyll but rather as an environment where danger and horror lurk everywhere. The Antipodean gothic is generally considered to be an expression of the settler anxiety that derived from the confrontation with a hostile and alien environment, such as the native New Zealand bush” (Leotta 2016: 296). Many New Zealand genre films have exploited the country’s scenic and diverse landscape before *The Lord of the Rings*, from the use of the Central Otago Plains as a post-apocalyptic landscape in *Battletruck* to Alison Maclean’s depiction of the boiling hot springs of Rotorua in *Crush* (1992), which literalizes Thomas Elsaesser’s description of melodrama as revealing in its *mise-en-scène* “hysteria bubbling all the time just below the surface” (Elsaesser 2012: 444).

Interestingly, both *Braindead* and *Bad Taste* begin with images of the Queen before proceeding to their graphic horror shows. (Additionally, a visual gag in *Braindead* shows one of the Boys preparing for an assault on the alien stronghold by synchronizing his commemorative watch with wedding portraits of Charles and Diana on its face.) This suggests that domestic audiences were drawn to Jackson’s early films at least partly as an expression of post-colonial backlash. Interestingly, Jackson describes the experience of watching his films as one in which spectators have no “control”: “I’m in control, I’m pulling the strings and calling the shots” (Espiner 1997: 10). If Jackson conceives of the director functioning like a puppet master, it is no coincidence that early on he would make a movie entirely with puppets.

The poster advertising *Bad Taste*, in which an alien flips the finger toward the viewer (it was banned in the London underground), makes this aspect of the film's appeal explicit (Figure 1.2). One might say that Jackson's approach to popular genres allows him to colonize the former colonizers by appropriating their popular discursive forms. His work has made New Zealanders cognizant of their own cinema and culture by having them look through "the crazy mirrors" of fantasy and comedy (Durgnat 1970). This may also explain the pronounced tendency toward parody and satire in New Zealand film and culture.

According to Jackson, New Zealand cinema has no particular generic tradition, just a loose bunch of filmmakers who, merely making what is of interest to them, "end up muddying the genres" (Quoted in Barr and Barr 1996: 156). But to what extent this is muddying or "indigenizing" is a

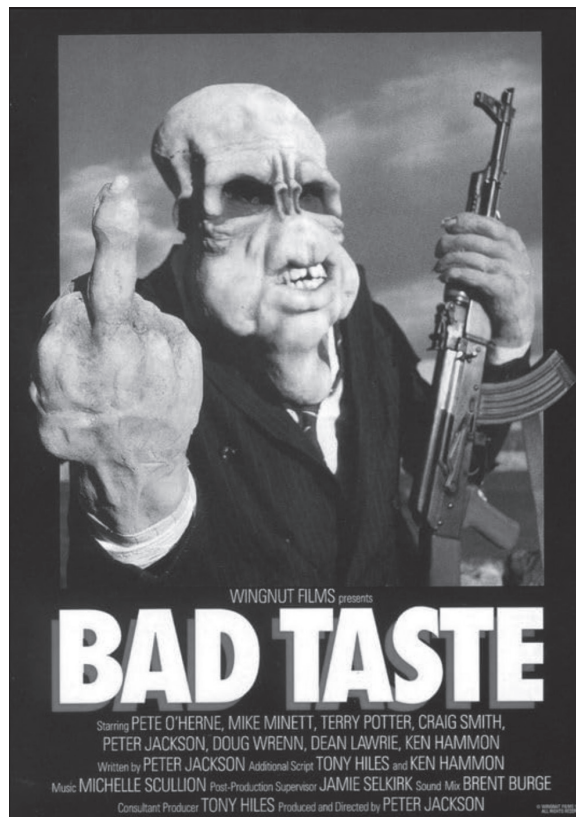


FIGURE 1.2 *Bad Taste* directed by Peter Jackson. © WingNut Films 1987.

matter of debate. Lealand argues that “the mythologies of Hollywood became ‘naturalized’ in the absence of any more powerful propositions, integral to the ways of ‘reading’ the world for New Zealanders” (Lealand 1988: 90). New Zealand’s genre films, like those of other nations, constitute an embattled site wherein national cultural identity is enacted and negotiated. As genre theorist Rick Altman points out, “Because a genre is not one thing serving one purpose, but multiple things serving multiple purposes for multiple groups, it remains a permanently contested site” (Altman 1999: 195). If genres, as literary theorists René Wellek and Austin Warren argue, are like institutions, Jackson’s films show that “One can work through, express oneself through” them, even “reshape” them (Wellek and Warren 1956: 226).

ACTION JACKSON: PETER JACKSON AND AUTHORSHIP

Bad Taste, Jackson’s first feature, may be a “quintessentially New Zealand film” (Barratt 2008: 4), but Lealand writes in an overview of New Zealand cinema in 2010 that “in no way can his later efforts be described as ‘New Zealand films.’” He concludes that “Jackson can be best described as a New Zealand-born and New Zealand based global film-maker” (Lealand 2010: 258). He quotes a contemporary review of *King Kong* that describes it as “possibly the least New Zealand film ever made,” although he does concede that, in the end, Jackson “has also made it difficult to think of New Zealand film in a clear and uncomplicated fashion” (Lealand 2010: 258–259). But, if national cinemas are, as O’Regan writes, “simultaneously an aesthetic and production movement, a critical technology, a civic project of state, an industrial strategy and an international project formed in response to the dominant international cinemas (particularly but not exclusively Hollywood cinema)” (O’Regan 1996: 45), then Jackson is, I would argue, unquestionably New Zealand’s most important filmmaker.

Lawrence McDonald notes that Jackson is the most successful New Zealand filmmaker to explore—one might say “indigenize”—a single genre with any consistency, although at that point in Jackson’s career, he contextualizes his work generically within comedy (McDonald 1993). Most of Jackson’s films do have comic elements, although *Bad Taste*, *Braindead*, *The Frighteners*, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *King Kong*, and even the more highbrow art films *Heavenly Creatures* and *The Lovely Bones*, indicate that his sensibility is equally rooted within the fantastic genres of science fiction, horror, and fantasy—the latter of which he claims as his preference. The fantastic elements in his films often feature an alternate or fantasy

world—the afterlife in *The Frighteners*, Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, the “In-between” in *The Lovely Bones*, Skull Island in *Brain-dead* and *King Kong*, Borovnia and the Fourth World in *Heavenly Creatures*. When, for the first time, Ann Darrow steps aboard the *Venture*, the ship that will take her to Skull Island in *King Kong*, she is stepping into another world, venturing forth for an adventure, and Jackson marks the significance of the moment with a close-up of her feet stepping onto the ship’s gangplank followed by another of her hand gripping the railing. In his introduction to the director’s cut Blu-Ray (2006), released 10 years after the film and containing 14 additional minutes of footage, Jackson himself says that the film was important to him on one level as a logical next step given all the computer equipment he had amassed for the effects in *Heavenly Creatures*, so that the film became a link between the two “very different worlds” of independent and big-budget studio filmmaking.

Film scholar James Walters has proposed three types of alternative worlds in popular cinema: “(i) Imagined Worlds, where a character dreams or hallucinates a world away from the world they inhabit, (ii) Potential Worlds, where a character visits an alternative version—or alternative versions—of the world they inhabit, and (iii) Other Worlds, where a character travels to a different world entirely from the world they inhabit” (Walters 2008: 10–11). Jackson’s alternate worlds fit into all three categories: for example, The Fourth World is an Imagined World, Skull Island a Potential World, and Middle-earth an Other World. The Other World of Middle-earth even has a Potential World within it—the unseen Undying Lands, where Bilbo, Frodo, Gandalf, and the race of elves go at the end of the Third Age in *Return of the King* (Figure 1.3). The world of the theater serves as an Imagined World, distinct from the sordid business of the puppets’ “real world,” in *Meet the Feebles*. But despite these conceptual differences, these two movie worlds—one mundane, one fantastic—are perhaps parallel to the two actual worlds—the quotidian real world and the alluring fantasies of Hollywood movies—that Jackson negotiates. For New Zealanders, after all, “Feature films were lavish daydreams from a magical nowhere called Hollywood” (Horrocks 1985: 150).

In these pages, I refer to the three speculative genres of science fiction, horror, and fantasy, usually regarded as separate although overlapping, together as “the fantastic.” For my analysis, it is sufficient to note that while “realistic fiction seeks to describe present reality in terms of a counterfeit of that reality,” emphasizing a mimetic impulse, speculative genres present reality in terms of a “hypothetical invention... extrapolated from that reality” (Franklin 1966: 3). Whether it’s the “novum” of science fiction (Suvin 1979), the “ontological rupture” of fantasy (Fowkes 2010: 4), or the uncanny



FIGURE 1.3 *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* directed by Peter Jackson.
© New Line Productions, Inc. 2003.

hesitation of horror, the otherwise different diegetic worlds created by these three genres disrupt “our understanding of mimesis and what is possible in our known world” (Butler 2009: 13). All three work in some fashion to defamiliarize the familiar.

The fantastic genres all rely on special effects to do so, and special effects are of particular importance to Jackson, who relies on the full palette of special effects to create his alternate worlds. Thompson compares the significance of Jackson’s technological advances in moviemaking to those of Spielberg, Cameron, and George Lucas (Thompson 2007: 281). He filmed *They Shall Not Grow Old* in 3D after having first used the technology for *King Kong 360 3D* in 2010, an attraction that was part of Universal Studios’ Hollywood tour. The attraction featured a ride through Skull Island, home of Kong, that combined “3D imagery with physical motion, wind, water, and scent” (Leotta 2016: 107–108) as a step toward achieving a Bazinian “total cinema.” He filmed *The Hobbit* at the faster frame rate of 48 fps rather than the standard 24 fps. He was involved in developing the Massive (Multiple Agent Simulation System in Virtual Environment) program for showing large crowd and battle scenes in which all the digital agents move individually, and for pioneering motion capture technology with the character of Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*. Jackson’s team also developed the MAL (Machine-Assisted Learning) audio restoration program that allowed for the separation, enhancement, and remixing of old and new material to create the music video of the Beatles’ “Now and Then” (see Conclusion).

In his amateur films, Jackson created his own models of airplanes, spaceships, monsters, and weaponry, and worked out the special effects

himself. He has often claimed that initially he wanted to become a special effects expert. In *Good Taste Made Bad Taste*, the narrator informs us that “special effects and action are at the heart of his filmmaking,” and Jackson’s mother Joan explains that in his youth, he had “oodles of patience” when working on his models in the kitchen of the family home. Ultimately, though, Jackson realized that the director has the ability to be the special effects person in a wider sense, since he or she determines the look of the entire film, and so he eventually left much of that work to others while supervising them.

Years before the introduction of computer-generated imagery (CGI), on which Jackson’s films rely—indeed, in some ways pioneered—film scholar Albert J. LaValley noted that “it is difficult to know where to draw the line as to what constitutes a special effect.” This difficulty has only deepened since CGI, but I follow LaValley’s point that “there must be a significant and important gap between the illusion of what we see on screen and what was used to produce it” (LaValley 1985: 143). In other words, the profilmic reality in front of the camera (if, indeed, there even is one) must be manipulated visually and/or aurally in some substantial way. Special effects, according to science fiction scholar Carl Freedman, are therefore “filmic moments of a radically filmic character,” for they seek to achieve unreality as realistically as possible through the means available to the medium (Freedman 1998: 305).

Thus, in the experience of viewing special effects, we simultaneously marvel at them for their fantastic content and appreciate the ingenuity of their realization. Consider, for example, the case of Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. One scholar of special effects explains that appreciation of the character “depends upon the spectator’s knowledge that Gollum is a digital effect,” thus creating “a dynamic between transparent illusion and the technical apparatus behind it—we need to be persuaded that Gollum is alive in order to believe in him as a diegetic presence, but we also need to be aware of the performative aspects of the illusion,” that is, the motion capture process that created Gollum in the first place (North 2008: 125) (Figure 1.4).

One might regard Jackson’s emphasis on special effects as “reminiscent of a child with a huge toy box performing conjuring tricks” (Babington 2007: 264). At its least effective, as when he concentrates on visualizing the In-between in *The Lovely Bones*, this criticism may be justified. Jackson has said that he was able to make *The Lord of the Rings* because the technology had caught up with Tolkien’s vision, which suggests the extent to which he relies on special effects. But it is important to note that special effects inevitably announce the power of cinema, a medium that is itself based upon trickery in its reliance on the phenomenon of persistence of vision



FIGURE 1.4 *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* directed by Peter Jackson.
© New Line Productions, Inc. 2002.

characteristic of the human eye. Think, for example, of the shot in *The Two Towers*, beginning with the camera sweeping past the mighty forges in the bowels of Isengard, then finding and following a moth that flutters in a spiraling fashion toward and up the tower of Orthanc, and then into a room where Gandalf is imprisoned, and ending when Gandalf reaches out his hand to hold the moth and give it a message to deliver before letting it go. It's a bravura moment that impresses us with its technological ability as much if not more than it provides a sense of real space. Recalling LaValley's definition of special effects, Jackson says he is interested in "pure" cinema, which he defines as envisioning things "that have no actual existence outside cinema" (Leotta 2016: 21). With the exception of *Heavenly Creatures*, he is not very interested in exploring questions of sexuality, desire, and other dark aspects of human nature. Jackson's reliance on special effects inevitably makes viewers aware and appreciative of the ability of cinema to provide visual pleasure. His films are about the possibilities of the "alternate world" of cinema and come as close as any filmmaker's to demonstrating theorist Christian Metz's dictum that "all of cinema is, in some sense, a special effect."

It is not surprising that Jackson is especially fond of stop-motion animation as was practiced by Willis O'Brien, animator of the original *King Kong*, and his protégé, Ray Harryhausen. Harryhausen's work was characterized by a combination of anatomical authenticity and creative fantasy, whether he was animating imaginary beasts (the Venusian Ymir of *20 Million Miles to Earth*, 1957) or actual animals (the dinosaurs of *One Million Years B.C.*, 1966). As a young man, Harryhausen was interested in sculpture and paleontology, both of which would give his later animated

work its distinctive verisimilitude (within the technical limitations of the time, of course). He showed his work, which he had produced in the family garage, to O'Brien, who hired Harryhausen as his assistant to animate the big gorilla in *Mighty Joe Young* (1949). Harryhausen immediately established his careful working methods by sending a cameraman to a zoo to photograph one of the gorillas, using the footage to help give the film's animated ape an impressive array of individualized gestures. Jackson, who would later use the newer technology of motion capture for Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* and his giant gorilla in *King Kong* for essentially the same reason, was entranced by O'Brien's stop-motion animation for *Kong*, which he would later remake, and it prompted his experiments with a variety of animation techniques himself.

In 1953, Harryhausen provided the special effects for one of the best dinosaur movies, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, the first feature for which he was in charge of visual effects. While working on *Beast*, he began exploring more resourceful ways of combining animated models with live backgrounds, and eventually developed the process he called "Dynamation," which incorporates matte photography, sets built to scale, and the synchronization of animated and live-action photography. The results include the justly famous sword fight in *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) between Jason's men and seven warrior skeletons, a sequence that alone took four and a half months to produce. Jackson pays homage to the scene in *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies* when the White Council fights the Nazgûl at Dol Guldur.

Stop-motion animation, like pixilation (a similar process employing living persons), is a special effect achieved by filming objects one or a few frames at a time, stopping the camera, changing the object's position slightly, filming a few more frames, and so on. The technique, employed almost since the beginning of cinema, appears to endow inanimate objects with life by showing them move. Because movement is the essence of cinema, Jackson is drawn to stop-motion animation. He inserts brief stop-motion animation in the quick view of the Sumatran rat monkey's pummeling, dismembering, and eating of another monkey in *Braindead* and when Nicholas is cut in two by a descending castle gate in *Heavenly Creatures* (Figure 1.5). Stop-motion animation is also used in *Valley of the Stereos* (1992), a comic short produced by Jackson and directed by George Port (a special effects expert who worked on several of Jackson's films and was also the walrus Bletch in *Meet the Feebles*), to show the hippie's house transforming into a giant robot, and in the reconstruction of the lost spider pit sequence from the original *King Kong* (see Chapter 5). These scenes, with effects that could have been achieved by other means, are at once metacinematic tributes to the distinctive look of



FIGURE 1.5 *Braindead (Dead Alive)* directed by Peter Jackson. © WingNut Films 1992.

O'Brien and Harryhausen's animation and an expression of cinema's illusionist capabilities.

Jackson's later turn toward documentary with *Thou Shall Not Grow Old* and *The Beatles: Get Back*, already apparent with the mockumentary *Forgotten Silver* and the production documentaries about his films, may seem like a surprising move away from the fantastic, but, in fact, it is consistent with his vision of the film medium. In *King Kong*, when the explorers come upon a field of grazing brontosauri, the filmmaker Carl Denham immediately begins filming and instructs his actor, Bruce Baxter, to walk toward the animals and enter the shot so that the audience won't think the image has been faked. Ironically, the shot is, of course, faked. As viewers, we know the shot is faked because dinosaurs are extinct and have been visualized here by digital technology. But now, we appreciate it even more because our attention has been drawn to it. The moment testifies to the film image's fantastic potential.

To quote Metz once more: "Fantastic art is fantastic only as it convinces (otherwise it is merely ridiculous), and the power of unreality in film derives from the fact that the unreal seems to have been realized, unfolding before our eyes as if it were the flow of common occurrence.... The *subjects* of films can be divided into the 'realistic' and the 'nonrealistic,' if one wishes, but the filmic vehicle's power to make real, to *realize*, is common to both genres" (Metz 1974: 5, emphasis in the original). Jackson's drive to "realize" through cinema is especially manifest in the enhanced images of *Thou Shall Not Grow Old*, the Beatles' "Now and Then" music video, and, again, the

reconstruction of the lost spider pit sequence of *King Kong*. Already in *Heavenly Creatures*, when the two youthful protagonists imagine their fantasy world, that world seems a perfect illustration of Metz's point, for the "Fourth World" unfolds before the viewer's eyes, just as it does for the two girls, who in the same shot step from the real world into the spatial depth of the magical space even as it is forming. The transition to the Fourth World could have been achieved much more easily with a simple cut as they step out of one frame and into the next, but the seamlessness of its realization is crucial to understanding the girls' fantasies as coterminous with the real world as well as Jackson's approach to cinema (Figure 1.6).

On the one hand, Jackson is fond of the moving camera, especially with extreme long shots. His camera frequently swoops and soars, tracks and cranes around an environment, often to express his characters' swirling emotions or to enhance the viewer's affective response. Even the DIY production of his first film, *Bad Taste*, features tracking shots with tracks built by Jackson himself. Guillermo del Toro, who collaborated with Jackson on the screenplays for *The Hobbit* movies before eventually backing out, says that Jackson makes Sam Raimi's peripatetic camerawork look like that of Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu (del Toro 2005: 57)! These mobile long shots, on the other hand, are often counterbalanced by big close-ups, primarily of actors' faces. Usually, these shots are of full faces, but sometimes they are of profiles or of individual facial features—the psychiatrist's mouth in *Heavenly Creatures*, Gollum eating a raw fish. Overall, though, the long shots show the geographical landscape while the close-ups document the landscape of actors' faces, both types of shots relying simultaneously on cinema's indexical relation to the real world and its expressive capabilities.



FIGURE 1.6 *Heavenly Creatures* directed by Peter Jackson. © WingNut Films 1994.

The work of a film director has been compared to that of an orchestra conductor or sports team coach. “The director is usually involved—or at least has a say—in all the major creative decisions from development through post-production, notably script approval, casting, production and costume design, the details of performance, and editing. That puts him or her in a position to unify the project and coach the team” (Kawin 1992: 292). Such an approach to authorship serves to explain how a unified vision may emerge from a collaborative endeavor like cinema, with successful collaboration as a shared vision among those involved. But this does not negate the possibility of an authorial presence. The director, concludes Bruce Kawin, is “in a position to have a finger in every pie... It is the position, not really the person, that is at so crucial a place in the filmmaking system. The director has the opportunity to live up to that position” (Kawin 1992: 300). The auteurist assumption is that performing multiple functions gives a filmmaker more artistic control. Of the pantheon auteurs in Andrew Sarris’ influential book *The American Cinema*, perhaps it is Charlie Chaplin that Peter Jackson most resembles. On his later features, Chaplin was a writer, director, producer, star, and composer. Jackson, similarly, has been consistently involved in multiple levels of production, serving at different times in all the same roles as Chaplin except that of composer. The IMDB website lists credits for Jackson in the following categories: producer, director, writer, actor, additional crew, special effects, cinematographer, editor, makeup department, second unit or assistant director, visual effects, art director, costume designer, camera and electrical department, animation department, and music department.

Jackson has tended to work with the same crew members from one film to the next. Among others, special effects expert Richard Taylor, production designer Grant Major, editors Jamie Selkirk and Jabez Olssen, digital effects expert Joe Letteri, cinematographer Andrew Lesnie, filmmaker Costa Botes, and writers Fran Walsh (also Jackson’s life partner) and Philippa Boyens all have worked on multiple films directed by Jackson. Kristin Thompson recounts that on the *Lord of the Rings* films there were up to six different units shooting simultaneously, some supervised by second unit directors, with satellite feeds allowing Jackson to follow all of them in real time on rows of TV monitors. She avers that “the unity of style came from Jackson, who approved virtually every detail” (Thompson 2007: 38, 89). Many members of Jackson’s crews have worked together on his films before, so it is possible for a cohesive sense of collaborative authorship to form. Jackson’s collaboration with Walsh and Boyens especially is crucial to understanding “Peter Jackson,” which is an amalgam of the sensibility of the three of them. This explains how Jackson can seem to jump from boys’ own adventures like

Bad Taste to a masterpiece like *Heavenly Creatures*, which is infused with a feminine sensitivity nowhere to be found in the movies before.

In Jackson's case, this "unity of style" would seem to be amply demonstrated by the 2018 film *Mortal Engines*, which Jackson did not direct, but which is revealing in the context of considering Jackson from an auteurist perspective. Adapted from the YA (Young Adult) science fiction series written by Philip Reeve, the film was directed by Christian Rivers, a "school kid" who had written Jackson a fan letter and who eventually became a storyboard artist for him beginning with *Braindead* (Sibley 2006: 201). The film contains many of the elements one finds in Jackson's own films. Given its premise of mobile cities roaming the devastated European landscape in search of resources ("municipal Darwinism"), the film relies heavily on special effects. It also features many shots in which a fluid camera sweeps around the enormous, fantastic devices it clearly revels in showing, as Jackson does frequently, for example, with the landscape in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Some of the actors in *Mortal Engines* have also appeared in Jackson's films. Hugo Weaving, who plays Elrond in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* films, is here the villain, Thaddeus Valentine; and Sarah Peirse, who plays Honora Reiper in *Heavenly Creatures* and appears as a citizen of Lake-town in the second and third *Hobbit* films, plays Valentine's evil assistant, Dr. Twix. Also, the climactic battle in *Mortal Engines* features the breaching of a mammoth wall, which recalls the similar edifices on Skull Island in *King Kong* and the fortress of Hornburg at Helm's Deep in *The Two Towers*. *Mortal Engines* even shares similar themes with Jackson's films. One of the young female protagonists seeks to find out the ugly truth about her father and is told that "You have to let him go," as Lionel must do with his mother in *Braindead*, Susie Salmon must with her grieving family in *The Lovely Bones*, and Éowyn with her uncle, King Théoden of Rohan, when he is mortally wounded in battle in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*.

Jackson himself appears in *Mortal Engines* in a cameo, as he does in the films he has directed, in this case as a guard. (Is Jackson, as producer, guarding the production?) In his own films, Jackson's cameos act as visual signatures, like Hitchcock's. Sometimes, these cameos are humorous, as with the punk with multiple face-piercings whom Frank Bannister bumps into on the street in *The Frighteners*, which might be compared to the spirit in which Hitchcock appears in an advertisement for weight loss in a newspaper in *Lifeboat* (1944). But Jackson's appearances onscreen sometimes do have thematic significance, like Hitchcock's appearance with a double bass in *Strangers on a Train* (1951) or coming out of the pet shop with his own two terriers in *The Birds* (1963). Jackson's brief appearance as a biplane pilot at



FIGURE 1.7 *Braindead (Dead Alive)* directed by Peter Jackson. © WingNut Films 1992.

the end of *King Kong*, as discussed in Chapter 5, resonates with thematic and contextual significance, although even his comic appearances, such as the mortician's lab assistant in *Braindead*, say something about the campy, comic approach of that film as a whole (Figure 1.7).

Mortal Engines might be compared to *The Thing from Another World* (1951) in the context of Howard Hawks's work. The credited director of *The Thing* is Christian Nyby, although to what extent Hawks actually directed some parts of it has been a matter of debate. Nyby was primarily an editor, with Hawks's *To Have and Have Not* (1944), *The Big Sleep* (1946), and *Red River* (1948), for which he received an Academy Award nomination, among his credits. *The Thing* displays elements of Hawks's signature style, including his distinctive use of overlapping dialogue, and his common theme of an isolated group of men trying to accomplish a life-threatening task, along with the gender byplay that frequently accompanies it. For these reasons, the film is typically regarded as a Hawks' film. *The Thing* was Nyby's first film as director, just as *Mortal Engines* was for Rivers. Hawks produced *The Thing*, as Jackson did with *Mortal Engines*. Nyby, like Rivers, worked across multiple films with his producer as director and emulated his mentor's successful style and approach when given the opportunity to direct. Both films reveal the collaborative nature of a filmmaker's authorship and the distinctive stamp of a mentor's personality and influence.

Genre theorist Steve Neale points out that within popular culture, genres are always much more than simply a group of primary texts. Neale emphasizes the importance of advertisements, trailers, publicity photos, lobby cards, studio stills, reviews, and so on in keying and shaping the expectations of viewers even before they see a film by promoting what he calls its “generic image” (Neale 2012: 182). Hitchcock was a pioneer in promoting his authorship in media other than film, lending his name as editor of successful book anthologies; hosting a popular and well-regarded television series (*Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, 1955–1965), making him a household celebrity; and, in one form or another, as the name fronting the long-running bi-monthly crime fiction publication, *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine* (founded in 1956). This aspect of authorship is even more important in the era of the internet and streaming, and in this sense, Jackson is the digital world’s version of Hitchcock.

Jackson, too, is a master at exploiting paratexts. He has been actively involved in the production of “making of” documentaries and video diaries about his films, working with internet fan sites, and providing DVD features, all of which stimulate and maintain fan interest in his films and contribute to shaping his own persona as an enthusiastic and knowledgeable movie geek. During the production of *King Kong*, for example, Jackson produced a series of short videos about the making of the film on one of the fan sites (some of these were bundled together and released as *King Kong—Peter Jackson’s Production Diaries* [2005]), including a fictional scene in which the crew chases a spy off the set. Thompson assesses that “Jackson himself has understood the potential of fan sites better than perhaps any other director” as she details his elaborate embrace of the internet in promoting *The Lord of the Rings* (Thompson 2007: 163). Film scholar Cecilia Sayad writes that when directors insert themselves into their films, “their bodies contribute to our sense that the amalgam of sounds and images we see on the screen can be traced back to a locatable human source” (Sayad 2013: xv). Jackson is clearly aware of his cherubic persona in his paratextual appearances, and their importance for establishing him as an auteur, as is demonstrated by his clever use of his own image when he plays the unassuming discoverer of supposedly long-lost films in the mockumentary *Forgotten Silver* (see Chapter 6). In short, then, there can be no doubt that Jackson is an auteur in the context of contemporary film production and marketing practices.