CHAPTER 1

# WHAT'S IN A NAME

## Defining the Elusive Fantasy Genre

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and even encouraged. And we may be more likely to accept escapist stories when not constantly reminded that the ''serious'' world is being left behind by adult characters. In any case, both the content of fantasy film and the reactions that characterize such films as childlike or escapist point to a culture that is intensely conflicted about its relationship with work and utility in the face of guilty desire for the participation in and consumption of leisure experiences.

On the other hand, escape and play is often seen as the very work of childhood itself, conceived of as useful when seen as part of a child's normal maturation process. In fact, many fantasies dramatize this process through coming-of-age stories, featuring journeys or quests that result in the protagonist's personal and spiritual growth. Orphans abound in fantasy, untethered from parental authority and free to adventure. Coming-of-age stories are not unique to fantasy, of course, but they dovetail nicely with one of fantasy's central elements in their emphasis on the significant ''transformation'' of a character. Jack Zipes finds transformation to be a key element of the traditional fairy tale, whether characterized as the actual transformation of physical matter, the transgression of class boundaries, as in *Cinderella*, or coming-of-age transformations where a kid may become a king or a hero (2006, 49). Fairy-tale influences on fantasy movies are obvious through their reliance on stock characters, magical themes, and iconography common to such tales (wizard, wands, etc.), but we also find explicitly *physical* transformations in a variety of films, such as *Ladyhawke* (1985), *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971), *The Mask* (1994), and comic-book superhero movies.

Despite the many fantasies aimed at or featuring children, proponents of fantasy argue that fantasy is neither childish nor a denial of reality, but an escape into a spiritual or inner journey. Fantasy's appeal may lie in its insistence on engaging us in imaginative experiences that invite us to temporarily transcend our sense of what is possible. If, as Rosemary Jackson writes, ''the basic trope of fantasy is the *oxymoron*,'' (21) (a self-contradiction characteristic of the ontological rupture), then what unites so many fantastic stories (from fairy tales to Gothic horror) is their ability to express and dramatize contradiction so potently. By engaging the reader/viewer on both a psychological and a symbolic level, fantasy provides the opportunity to experience ideas outside of the framework of reason and the boundaries of everyday reality. Like the rabbit/duck illusion (Plate 2), fantasy excels at encouraging multiple and even contradictory readings.

Fantasy's insistence on ''imaginative re-visioning'' may be one of the things that binds the genre together, on both a thematic and a viewing

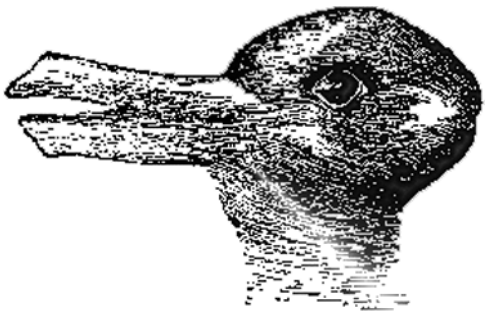

**PLATE 2** Optical illusion: Rabbit or duck?

level. When viewers adopt a kind of shared vision, they create a virtual group identity, becoming, in Altman's words, a ''constellated community.'' Accepting the

> premises of a genre is to agree to play within a special set of rules, and thus to participate in a community precisely *not* coterminous with society at large. . . . genres do not exist until they become necessary to a lateral communication process, that is until they serve a constellated community. Only when the knowledge that others are viewing similar films similarly becomes a fundamental part of the film-viewing experience does lateral communication exist. (157–62)

Even though Tolkien was wary of adapting *The Lord of the Rings* for film, fans long ago adopted his view of fantasy (''Faerie'') in celebration of other fantasy films such as *The Dark Crystal* (1982) and *Labyrinth* (1986). Internet fan sites for such films show evidence that fans embrace them for their examination of the ''big questions'' and for suggesting a different way of perceiving the world. ''There is a whole experience here, a way of sharing and apprehending the world through a newly defined concept of faery'' (J. Wood, 292). Longstanding fans of Tolkien's books create a preconstituted site of reception for the film adaptations, often extending their love of the films to social occasions. Likewise, fans of *Harry Potter* may see themselves as part of a community that forms its identity in opposition to real-world Muggles – those who don't care for the series, and/or anyone who seems to lack imagination.

In their wide-reaching study of movie audiences for *Rings*, Barker and Mathijs have demonstrated the complicated interaction between viewers and the film trilogy. In the general population, variations on the idea of ''traditional'' fan groups arose worldwide through excitement generated by the films' sophisticated advance publicity (including strategic

''blackouts'' of information, which stoked suspense), by teasers and trailers, by ancillary materials (which extended to the DVD releases), and by the general excitement and hype surrounding the trilogy. *Rings* became a social phenomenon for enthusiastic newcomers to Tolkien, who, like traditional fans, enjoyed discussing aspects of the films with friends and families. While fans of the books tend to focus on the films as ''fantasy'' (Mikos et al., 126), many others share the fantasy vision of Tolkien and the films' director, Peter Jackson, through a non-fantasy lens, celebrating the theme of friendship (Biltereyst et al., 57), or variously characterizing the story as epic, as a spiritual journey, adventure, etc. (Barker; Kuipers and De Kloet).

Both casual enthusiasts and traditional fans of fantasy (and other genres) increasingly converse at length in virtual chat rooms, while serious fans may also gather for screenings and conferences, enjoying ''the social and communal aspects of fandom'' (Klinger, 74). Nevertheless, the constellated communities generated by generic affinities do not depend upon direct communication between individuals. Traditionally, constellated communities have tended to be absent, invisible, or virtual. It is the ''fantasized'' community, this ''invisible bond'' between viewers, that becomes important for fans of *any* genre (Altman, 165). For fantasy enthusiasts, it may simply include an attitude open to the possibility of transcending day-to-day material existence, one that encourages us to imaginatively reconsider our sense of reality. For example, the shared ''vision'' for lovers of *Harvey* (see Ch. 5) might include the winking acceptance of an invisible rabbit. Hence, when strangers encountered Jimmy Stewart in person, it was said that many of them would inquire about how Harvey was doing.

The notion of constellated community also relates to an important aspect of many fantasy films: the theme of home. A variety of myths underlie much of American cinema, including the obvious ones such as happy endings and the idea that love will conquer all. But,''none of these myths is stronger or more persistent than the myth of home as the best possible place in the world'' (Selcer). While Elisabeth Bronfen explores the construction of home in a variety of movies, Altman also notes how genres may encourage constellated communities that function as virtual homes, as viewers locate personal memories in the context of favored viewing experiences (187). Selcer points out, however, the inherent ambiguity in the concept of home and how difficult it is to define. ''The fact that home cannot be readily defined is probably why it has been the subject of so many movies; it must be depicted rather than defined.'' If films must construct their own notion of home and their attitude toward

it, fantasy may be in a privileged position because home is already an elusive, fantasy-like idea. It is both a physical and a mental/emotional construct, invested with both positive and negative connotations that change over time. Although Selcer argues that home is a distinctly American idea, there is no doubt that the concept also finds resonance with ancient myths and traditional folk and fairy tales through its opposition to adventure and journey. Whereas the house becomes the locus of haunting and repressed evil in Gothic horror, in fantasy it more likely serves as the repository of childhood memories and as a site of safety and nostalgia. But even here, this positive (some would say regressive) idea of home is never stable. It must be constantly re-constructed, re-invented, and re-valued through each narrative, each of which may highlight a variety of related concepts such as the nuclear family, gender roles, capitalism, or patriotism.

While fantasy answers horror in its celebration rather than dread of the supernatural, it answers science fiction by providing an alternative response to our anxiety in the face of technology, rationalism, and alienation. Both science fiction and horror can be seen as concerned with matters of control (McClintock, e.g. 34), and indeed the use or misuse of power is a central theme in a number of fantasy films. As with coming-of-age stories and the preoccupation with home, power struggles are not unique to fantasy or science fiction, but each genre inflects the issues through its own generic lens. So in science fiction, control can be wielded through technology (or via a monster created through technology), but in fantasy, magic often becomes the locus and focus of power. As ever, these tropes may easily be combined, as occurs in *Star Wars* (1977), where science-fiction technology combines with the very fantasy-inflected spiritual dimension of ''the Force.''

Genres are never stable, and fantasy's themes and motifs, as well as viewers' interpretations, are subject to change over time. Furthermore, we must expect that our notion of what qualifies as science fiction, horror, or fantasy will also change over time. What seems like pure science fiction in one era may actually reflect reality in a later era, and much of what we take for granted in everyday life would seem like magic to earlier generations. Moreover, although many have traced the roots of fantasy and the fantastic back to antiquity, we should be wary of applying modern genre labels to older, and in some cases ancient, texts. As Mark Rose argues:

> Like science fiction, fantasy is a modern, post-enlightenment genre. A spell cast by a sorcerer in a romantic epic of the 1590s simply does not

> mean the same thing as one cast by a sorcerer in a fantasy novel of the 1980s. In the sixteenth century the world of objective fact, the empirical world from which fantasy deviates and which it requires as a precondition, had not yet fully emerged. (52)

Rose and others thus see fantasy and science fiction as distinctly modern genres related to, but not synonymous with, earlier fantasy texts.

Just as transformation is a common theme of fantasy, we might also say that "magical" transformation is a hallmark of *all* genres, since they continually mix, merge, evolve, and mutate (Altman, 14). In another vein, we might say that genre itself is a fantasy, one that provides the illusion of stasis in the face of chaos and change. It provides a template for creating but also interpreting texts at a given moment, despite the fact that these *con*texts may change as much as the genre itself, both transmogrifying over time. Furthermore, studios, fans, and critics each use genre labels for their own purposes, and may even do so at cross-purposes. Even as critics and scholars attempt to classify films generically, big studios actually prefer *mixed* genres in order to garner wide audiences, and may shun generic labels altogether in order to establish and protect their own "brands" and franchises (Altman, 99). In that high-stakes Darwinian struggle, the long-denigrated fantasy genre has much to gain, but will continue to be a subject of much debate.

## *Coming Attractions*

The following chapters continue with an exploration of the genre in a short historical overview and a brief review of the critical literature on fantasy. In keeping with the other books in the *New Approaches to Film Genre* series, the focus is on US films (although some examples of non-US cinema can be found in the Historical Overview). Chapters 4 through 13 feature discussions of individual films. With a few exceptions, selection is weighted toward more recent popular films, in part because of the large number of fantasies released in the last few decades, but also because these recent movies are more likely to be familiar to readers. The films are therefore not meant to represent every historical era. Rather these "features" were selected because they have been successful or influential, or because they represent one or more significant thematic trends. In addition, the selections should help reveal commonalities between diverse types of fantasy film, and may help to suggest the variety of stories, themes, and approaches that might be legitimately considered

fantasy. For example, *Shrek* is included in part because it exemplifies a type of animated fantasy currently in vogue (computer-generated and appealing to adults as well as children), but also because, in commenting on fairy tales, the film helps to illuminate this strand of the fantasy tradition. *Spider-Man* was chosen to represent the comic-book/superhero fantasy in part because of its enormous popularity, but also because it helps demonstrate the similarities between this subset of fantasy and other, non-comic-book-based fantasies. Finally, the films highlighted here don't significantly overlap with science fiction or horror, well-documented genres which are covered by other books in this series.

Please note that space considerations have required some difficult choices to be made and a number of splendid films have been neglected here. My apologies if your favorite movie doesn't get the attention it deserves.