

The Magic Screen: Fantasy in TV and Film

The movies have been telling stories of fantasy for decades. Television has followed this trend also. Many fantasy TV series and mini-series are available on VHS and DVD. On-screen fantasy stories are explored here in several major categories.

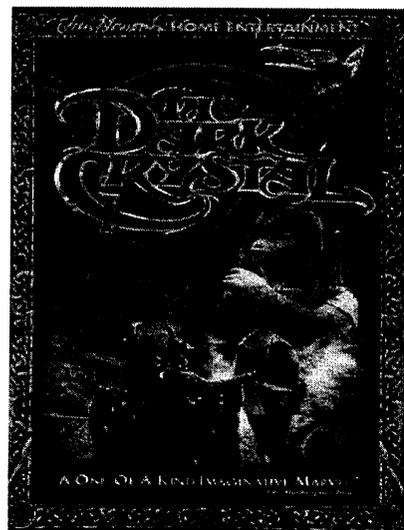
Animation and Puppetry

Since the early days of animation, fantasy stories were common. The old Disney classics like *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Sword in the Stone*, and *Alice in Wonderland* all followed fairy tale motifs. More recently, *Shrek* and its sequel re-defined the fairy tale genre by poking fun at it. *Monsters, Inc.* is also a computer-animated comedy that explores the complex lives of those monsters that come out of children's closets.

One of the contemporary masters of animation is writer/director Hayao Miyazaki. Many of his films are fantasies containing complex stories that both teens and adults will enjoy. *Princess Mononoke* was released in an American dubbed version with voices by Claire Daines and Billy Bob Thorton. This epic adventure follows a young man's journey to a sacred forest where he finds himself caught in a war between mining colonists and the creatures of the woods. The Oscar-winning *Spirited Away* is the story of a girl named Chihiro who finds that she has crossed over into a supernatural land. Her parents are turned into pigs and to save them she must go to work in a vast bathhouse that serves the spirits of Japan.

While Peter Jackson's recent film versions of the Tolkien's writings are very well known, they were not the first motion picture treatment of these books. Ralph Bakshi directed an animated version of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1978. Its style was dark and ominous, and the animation technique called rotoscoping gave the characters very natural looking movements.

Jim Henson, the 20th century's best-known puppeteer has produced two excellent fantasy films. In *Labyrinth*, a teenage girl enters a mysterious maze-world to save her kidnapped baby brother from the goblin king. Human actors share the screen with elaborate puppet characters. In *The Dark Crystal*, no human beings are present at all. Every character is a puppet creation. A young Gelfing who is one of the last of his race must undertake a journey to heal a fractured crystal that an evil race of beings has used to enslave the world. *The Storyteller* was a television series Henson produced that is available on DVD. John Hurt plays the grizzled old storyteller who narrates centuries old folk tales while a combined cast of human and puppet characters act out the scenes.



Based on the Book

Popular writings have inspired a large number of films. Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey* was made into a television mini-series produced by Francis Ford Coppola and starring Armande Assante and Isabella Rossellini. Jonathan Swift's beloved comic novel *Gulliver's Travels* has been made into a feature film six times. The earliest of these was a French silent movie created in 1902. A TV mini-series was made in 1996, and a recent released IMAX film also follows Gulliver's adventures.

Robert E. Howard's pulp fantasy writing of the 1930s was adapted into the film *Conan the Barbarian* starring the sword swinging Arnold Schwarzenegger. Two of Howard's lesser-known characters, *Red Sonja* and *Kull the Conquerer*, also appeared in a couple of less popular movies. All of these characters inhabit a mythic time before the dawn of recorded history.

William Goldman is the author of both the novel and screenplay for *The Princess Bride*, a comedic adventure that sends stable-boy Wesley on a harrowing quest to save his beloved from an evil prince. Facing the Cliffs of Insanity, Rodents of Unusual Sizes, and the Pit of Despair, he ventures forth with his companions, a giant and a great swordsman, to save the day.

Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy, written in the 1940s and 50s, inspired a BBC mini-series that is available on DVD. It tells the story of a young prince in an enormous old castle where an upstart servant plots to violently overthrow the entire social order. This bizarre tale features a quirky assortment of characters, including Dr. Prunesquallor, Swelter the cook, and Nannie Slag.



The magical martial arts film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was based on a book by Wang Du Lu. It was the fourth volume in a sequence of five novels that are collectively called the Crane-Iron Pentalogy, written from 1938 to 1942. When a powerful ancient sword is stolen, Master Li must find the thief and seek revenge for his friend's murder. Accompanying him is the widow of his friend, a woman he secretly loves. Mighty warriors float through the air and battle in the trees in this spectacular adventure.

Neverwhere is both a book and a mini-series written by fantasy author Neil Gaiman. An ordinary Londoner named Richard meets a strange girl named Door and is soon drawn into the mysterious world of London Below, a realm that exists within the hidden places of the city: the underground tunnels, alleys, and rooftops. Teaming up with Hunter and the Marquis de Carabas, they go in search of an angel and confront a terrible beast.

Two of the most popular fantasy series of modern times have been made into very successful movies. The *Harry Potter* books by J.K. Rowling have produced three movies so far. The students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry experience many exciting adventures as they learn magic, play Quiddich matches, and meet strange creatures and characters. The right mix of humour and horror keeps these movies entertaining. With more books in the works, further movies are sure to follow. The only question is, can the filmmakers discover some sort of magic that will keep the actors from aging too much? *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien is surely one the grandest efforts ever the field of fantasy writing. It is appropriate that such a book inspired one the largest and more elaborate filmmaking ventures ever. It was the first time a whole movie trilogy had been filmed all at once. The entire project cost 500 million dollars and included a crew of more than 3,000 people. The great epic of hobbits, dwarves, and elves became a visual feast of amazing settings and sprawling battles. Extended versions of the DVD add several more hours to the grand story.



Legends and Fairy Tales

Some fantasy stories have been around for centuries, and these tales make great material for movies. The Greek myths have inspired many films. One of the best loved is *Jason and the Argonauts*, the 1963 adventure film that featured the animated special effects of Ray Harryhausen. The son of deposed king goes on a great quest to the edge of the world to find the legendary golden fleece. He is accompanied by a band of brave heroes, including Hercules. The same story was made into a mini-series in 2000. More of Harryhausen's animated monsters appeared in the 1981 movie *Clash of the Titans*. It tells the story of Perseus, a son of Zeus who must save the princess Andromeda by defeating Medusa and the Kraken. Fantastic creatures also appear in the 1958 feature *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*. A prince of Baghdad sets out for the island of Colossa to find the egg of a fierce giant bird. A race of Cyclops and a fire-breathing dragon are just two of the challenges he must face.

The Arthurian legends have been adapted to the screen several times. The 1981 film *Excalibur*

follows the life of the great king who drew the sword from the stone and gathered together the Knights of the Round Table. The story of Arthur, Guenivere, and Lancelot is also told in the 1995 movie *First Knight*. More recently, a less mythological treatment of the characters was attempted with the 2004 movie *King Arthur*. This film shows the historical context of the Arthurian legends. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, barbarian invaders threaten the people of Britain. Arthur arose as a champion of civilization, an archetypal character who fought for justice in the dark ages.

The classic fairy tales have been adapted to numerous modern movies. *Ever After*, a Drew Barrymore movie from 1998, retells the Cinderella story in 16th century France. A girl forced to live with her cruel stepsisters falls in love with handsome Prince Harry. To win his heart, she needs assistance from the eccentric genius Leonardo da Vinci. Another adaptation of the Cinderella story is the 2004 movie *Ella Enchanted*. In this version, young Ella is under a spell that forces her to be obedient to everyone. To break this spell, she goes in search of her fairy godmother, meeting the handsome Prince Charmont as well as ogres, elves, and other magical beings.



Sword & Sorcery

These are movies where brawny warriors with flashing blades go to war with magical villains. There are the usual heroic rescues and many battles with monsters. The 1983 movie *Krull* is an adventure story from another world. A prince must save his world and his new bride by finding the Black Fortress, lair of the Beast. He seeks out a legendary weapon called the Glaive and is joined by a Cyclops, a magician, and a band of thieves. Fighting their way past Slayers and a giant spider, they struggle to defeat the great evil that threatens their land.

Willow is a fantasy film from 1988 written by George Lucas and directed by Ron Howard. An unlikely hero from a race of little people finds a human baby that an evil queen wants to sacrifice. To save the baby, he journeys far from his homeland accompanied by an impulsive swordsman and a pair of tiny Brownies. He gradually learns to perform magic while battling against trolls, evil henchmen, and a two-headed fire-breathing beast.

The 1996 film *Dragonheart* featured a huge CGI animated dragon voiced by Sean Connery. The last of his kind, he fights and then befriends a powerful warrior named Bowen. The two of them try to stop the corruption of a young king who was once Bowen's pupil. The trouble is that the king and the dragon share the same heart and if one dies the other must also perish.

Television Series

Several recent television series have elements of fantasy. The series *Witchblade*, produced by the TNT network tells the story of a New York police detective who finds a magic metal gauntlet, worn by powerful women throughout history, including Joan of Arc. Using its power, she can deflect bullets, see visions, and produce melee weapons. The fight against city gangsters becomes a mystical epic conflict.

In the CBS series *Charmed* a family of three young spell-casting women try to live regular lives while struggling against demons, sorcerers, and evil beings. After discovering the Book of Shadows in their attic, they acquire the magic abilities that their ancestors have had for generations. Each of the women has her own special powers, and when they combine their efforts their power is far greater.

One the most popular TV shows to include magic and fantasy is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Inspired by a 1992 movie, the series shows us the life of a high school student who is the “chosen one” destined to fight vampires, demons, and other dark forces. Starting at a new high school, she meets a librarian who knows about her destiny and is eager to give her the help she needs in her battles with evil. Buffy has companions in this struggle; a group of unusual teens called the “Scooby Gang.” Facing the trials of high school and the dark powers of hell, they all learn to come of age. The TV show *Angel* is a spin-off series. It follows the undead life of Angel, the vampire

with a human soul who feels remorse for all of the violent acts he has committed in the past. Moving to Los Angeles, he sets up an investigation service and with a team of offbeat companions, fights against the evil forces that lurk throughout the city.

The Internet Movie Database (<http://www.imdb.com>) was of invaluable assistance in this endeavour.

