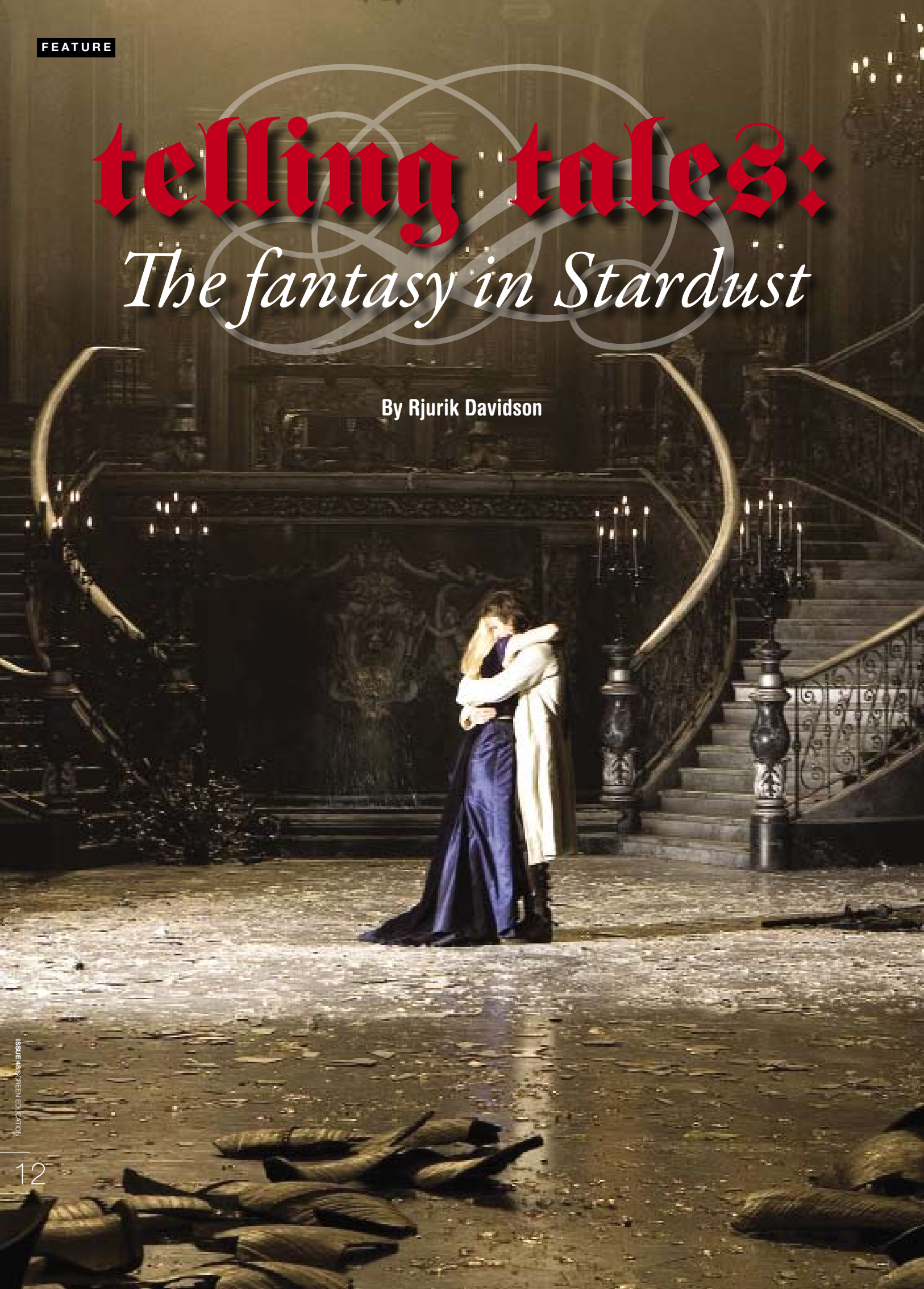


# telling tales:

## *The fantasy in Stardust*

By Rjurik Davidson





**I**n a gesture towards a traditional fairy tale, *Stardust* (Matthew Vaughn, 2007) begins in a town called Wall, named after the wall which marks the boundary between the land of fairy – the kingdom of magic – and the mundane world in which we live. To cross the wall is to enter a world of danger. For this reason, and to ensure that all things remain in their place, the wall is guarded. So when a young man, Tristan (Charlie Cox), crosses the wall to bring back a falling star for his love, we know that things are about to get interesting.

One of the traditional rules of the fairy world is that you should not step out of your assigned place. Don't have the hubris to assume that you will trick or outflank the fairy world. Tales of children being carried away by leprechauns were born from fear and the urge to protect. 'Be careful who you deal with, be careful not to strike deals which seem too good to be true,' they warned. But by the birth of modern fantasy, tales of the fairy kingdoms were quite often adventure stories. And in recent times there have been a number of postmodern rewritings of fairy tales: self-conscious or self-referential reworkings that play with the genre and genre expectations. Foremost amongst the film adaptations of these (for they are mostly adaptations of literary works) is *The Princess Bride* (Rob Reiner, 1987), based on William Goldman's novel of the same name.

*Stardust* follows in this postmodern tradition; it is a rollicking romp through the fantasy world of fairy, featuring witches and unicorns, chains that cannot be broken, candles that allow the user to

teleport, and a fallen star in the form of the radiant Claire Danes. The film is based on the novel by Neil Gaiman, one of the most popular of modern fantasy writers, whose work since his early graphic novels has often relied heavily on myth, legend, and traditional fairy tale tropes. Gaiman's success as a writer and the recent success of contemporary fantasy films beg the question: what is it about this form which attracts viewers?

### Symbolism in fantasy

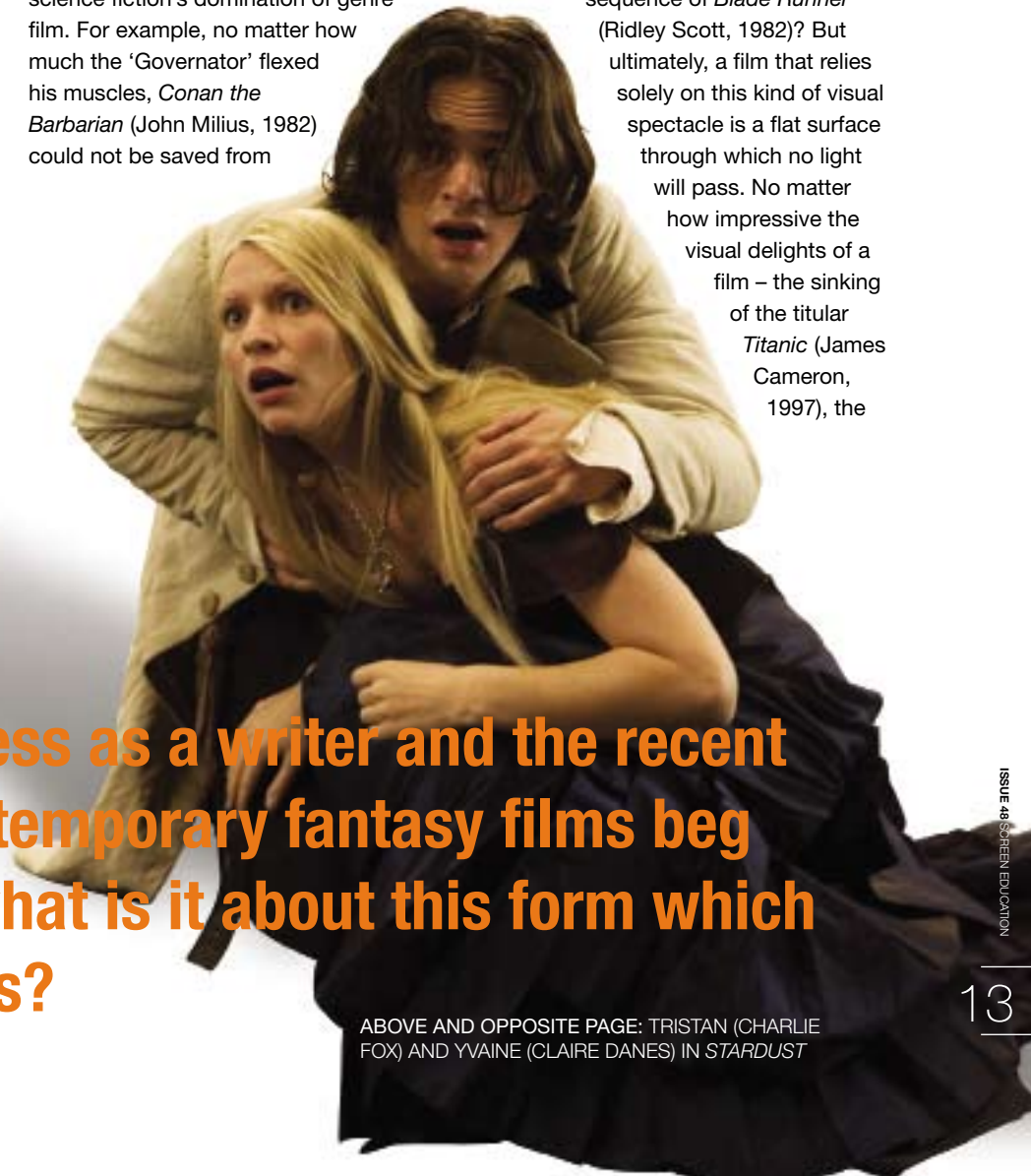
It has become a truism that many of the most successful films at the box office are either science fiction or fantasy. The most obvious reason for this is the massive advances in special effects that have occurred over the last thirty years. Without a doubt, most influential in this revolution was the Star Wars trilogy, which George Lucas recently returned to and defiled in an act of almost unforgivable self-mutilation. Fantasy, it must be said, took some time to catch up with science fiction's domination of genre film. For example, no matter how much the 'Governator' flexed his muscles, *Conan the Barbarian* (John Milius, 1982) could not be saved from

its pretentious and portentous fascism. It could be watched ironically, though, in which case Conan's dictum for the good life – 'Crush your enemies, see them driven before you, and hear the lamentation of their women' – might just be a prefiguration for the contemporary Republican foreign policy. In fact, with the exception of *The Princess Bride*, fantasy film was surprisingly bereft of quality until Peter Jackson took the minotaur by the horns and put together a wonderful version of J.R.R. Tolkien's own rather deeply conservative The Lord of the Rings trilogy.

There is little doubt that the first reason for the dominance of science fiction or fantasy film is its ability to visually represent estrangement – that is, to show us other, wonderful, horrific or thought-provoking worlds. Indeed, the 'sense of wonder' is often considered to be the defining characteristic of the genre. Who is not impressed by the magnificent night-time cityscape in the opening

sequence of *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982)? But ultimately, a film that relies solely on this kind of visual spectacle is a flat surface through which no light will pass. No matter how impressive the visual delights of a film – the sinking of the titular *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), the

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ABOVE AND OPPOSITE PAGE: TRISTAN (CHARLIE COX) AND YVAINE (CLAIRE DANES) IN *STARDUST*





ABOVE: LAMIA (MICHELLE PFEIFFER) AND DITCHWATER SAL (MELANIE HILL)  
 BELOW: TRISTAN APPROACHES THE WALL.

battle scenes in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (Peter Jackson, 2003), the raging seas in *A Perfect Storm* (Wolfgang Peterson, 2000), or the tornados in *Twister* (Jan de Bont, 1996) – ultimately, we are left cold if there is no compelling story with which these visual feats are given emotional significance. It is a phenomenon all too common in the film industry, and recalls Guy Debord's

argument in *The Society of the Spectacle*: 'In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.'<sup>1</sup> For Debord these spectacles are not real, they are lifeless:

*The images detached from every aspect*

*of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudoworld that can only be looked at. The specialization of images of the world evolves into a world of autonomized images where even the deceivers are deceived. The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving.<sup>2</sup>*

Too often, genre films rely on disembodied imagery. For a fantasy or science fiction film to really work, for it to really qualify as science fiction or fantasy, for it to have life rather than simply be a sequence of empty images, it must make *narrative* use of its defining characteristic of estrangement. It should not be analogy or allegory – that is, it should not simply be a story that could be told without the fantastical elements, it should be a story where those elements are essential and crucial to the plot. This division is what makes, for example, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* – both book and film – generally poor fantasy. The same story





could no doubt have been told *without* the fantastical elements: it's basically just a British public school story, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* with magic. What then is the specific characteristic of fantasy?

Fantasy, like its child, science fiction (science fiction is essentially a mode of the fantastic), is essentially a symbolist mode. It seeks to 'represent rather than reproduce'.<sup>3</sup> The secret meaning to the spaceship may well be the post-Second World War automobile and its sense of freedom, independence and affluence; the android may be, as in Philip K. Dick's work, a symbol for the *reified* or alienated individual. This symbolic aspect then connects science fiction or fantasy back to us and our lives. Symbolism allows a richness and depth not available to an allegorical work, as critic Adam Roberts has explained, because:

[It] opens up to a richness of possible interpretation, where allegory maps significance from one thing onto one other thing. More than this, any symbolist movement in literature, such as the late nineteenth-century movement of symbolist poetry, will tend to reuse a set corpus of symbols.<sup>4</sup>

The best of the fantasy novels, such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* series, are able to perform exactly this symbolic function. In *A Wizard of Earthsea*, for example, the young magician Ged, in a duel with a competitor, releases a 'shadow' from the underworld, which he must chase and vanquish. The shadow, we come to realize, is in fact Ged's own dark side, and once he can name it, he can vanquish it. This externalization of an inner soul is something that fantasy and science fiction does well – the werewolf, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. The point here is that Ged's story could not be written in any other genre. It's a story that can only be told in the fantasy or science fiction mode. His shadow is not just a stand-in for something else (the way Quidditch is for soccer in *Harry Potter*), in just the same way as Frodo having to drop a magic ring into a volcanic pit resists any kind of reductive reading in *The Lord of the Rings* series. How successful, then, is *Stardust* as a fantasy film and what are its symbolic strategies?

### Symbolism and conservatism in *Stardust*

The wall in *Stardust* immediately indicates to us that we are about to enter the symbolic realm. The central symbol

of the film is the Star: a symbol for true love, which must be, by its nature, eternal. Tristan crosses the wall and, with the help of a magic candle, teleports to the site of the fallen star. He finds it in an embodied form – white and virginal and radiant. Though he is not aware of it, the Star, whose name is Yvaine (Claire Danes), cannot live on the mundane side of the wall. (She would turn to stardust.) This makes sense given the logic of fantasy, for she is a symbolic figure – to leave the symbolic realm would destroy her. She is also, in general, a passive figure: she is captured, held captive, made to trek with Tristan back to the wall, and is the prize for two other forces.

Searching for Yvaine are the heirs to the throne of the magical realm, a group of self-serving princes who rather comically kill each other along the way. The princes are not fantasy figures but, rather, feudal ones. Instead, it is a group of three witches, led by Michelle Pfeiffer's Lamia, who are in symbolic opposition to the Star. Yvaine's heart, when eaten, has the ability to rejuvenate them. The witches are, thus, symbols of the search for eternal youth. Youth is itself also equated with power. Lamia's use of magic ages her, and so we see through the course of the film Michelle Pfeiffer aging, losing

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ABOVE: LAMIA THREATENS TRISTAN. BELOW RIGHT: TRISTAN AND CAPTAIN SHAKESPEARE (ROBERT DE NIRO) CROSS SWORDS.

hair, growing old. Together, then, we have two images of the woman, fairly familiar ones: the virginal young woman and the evil old witch. We are offered a third figure of a woman, Tristan's mother, who is held captive by a witch, but who fulfils the role of the mother with sufficient stereotypicality, characterized as she is by maternal love and self-sacrifice.

Together these three figures – the Star, the witch and the mother – provide the contours of a patriarchal vision of womanhood. The virgin is the possessor of all the qualities of romantic love, she is good and giving. The mother is nurturing, prepared to sacrifice for her son. But most virulent is the figure of the witch. This figure has a long history within art, reflecting and contributing the real histories of those unfortunate women in Middle Ages Europe or famously in Salem, where witches were unable to fulfil the role of what it was to be a 'good woman' and so provoked the wrath of an ignorant and fearful community.

**A**s a whole, this symbolic set-up – love as eternal and embodied in a virginal young woman, youth as power, a semi-feudal landscape, the opposition of witch/virgin and witch/mother – is hardly original. Indeed, for all the film's vitality and humour, for all of its deft touches

and structural successes (for our young man ends up being the heir to the throne because his captive mother is the sister of the princes), it remains a fairly predictable story. This kind of fantasy, descending from Tolkien, is very popular. Fantasy literature is filled with neo-feudal realms, where kitchenhands turn out to be heirs to the throne, destined to rise and rule benevolently. The landscapes are commonly patriarchal and conservative. A war against a 'dark lord' or evil king is standard. All in all it's a pretty underwhelming subgenre.

I might note, however, that in the last ten years things have significantly shifted among fantasy writers, with the emergence in the late 1990s of the 'New Weird' pioneered by such writers as China Miéville:

*I made a checklist of the kind of things Tolkien does and set out to invert them: so where his is a feudal world, mine is capitalist; his is rural, mine is urban; his is*

*very Manichean in its morality, mine is all about shades of grey – and not even shades of grey, really, but genuinely insoluble moral and political conundrums, where there is no right answer.<sup>5</sup>*

This was a shift of critical significance because immediately it opened up a whole new realm of content for fantasy. The city, as it occurs in Miéville and others of the new generation of fantasy writers, such as Ian R. McLeod or Jeff VanderMeer, is an imaginary late-nineteenth-century space of flux. One only needs to think of the rapid shifts in urban culture during that period to get a sense of its potential: grubby urban ghettos, new counter-cultures, emerging and half-formed sciences. But others such as Le Guin also attempted to return to the genre to reconstruct it in a more progressive direction. Discussing her first three Earthsea novels, she has said:





I think it's not unfair for the first three [to describe them as conservative], in the sense that you could say *The Lord of the Rings* is conservative. We're restoring the king, we're keeping the balance, something's gone out of whack and we're bringing it back to level. Yeah. The first three books of *Earthsea* were written thoroughly within the Tolkienian fantasy tradition, in the tradition that he was writing within: they're totally male, and they are in a way deeply conservative. That's why I had to write the fourth book [Tehanu], having come on out of that tradition via feminism, without betraying the tradition, I hope, without turning my back on it, denying it. It seemed to me that the fantasy tradition could go on out of that kind of conservatism towards an open imagination.<sup>6</sup>

## Playing with genre

This kind of reassessment does not arise in *Stardust*: the witches are still ultimately evil, Yvaine a passive figure to be sought after and consumed, the young man the hero, and so on. *Stardust* is thus, in many ways, from an earlier trend of fantasy, but very much one that remains dominant. Within this general nature, however, its playfulness does allow for a postmodern ironic overturning of certain features of the traditional fantasy outlook. An obvious example would be the character of the lightning-catcher pirate, Captain Shakespeare, played by Robert De Niro. When Tristan and Yvaine are captured by Shakespeare he presents himself as a bloodthirsty brute, an image which is quickly reversed as, out of sight of the rest of his crew, he reveals himself to be a kind and sensitive soul and later again we discover that he is a cross-dresser. He maintains the facade of the cruel brute to trick his crew, and in a second ironic twist the crew later reveal that they had known this all along.

This kind of postmodern reversal – in which what would once have scared or thrilled us is now played for laughs – is a good example of *Stardust* playing with genre.

Where once the genre itself seemed enough, now the story-savvy writers and viewers are no longer moved by the traditional tropes. This shift in mode – a similar shift can be seen in horror movies, such as from George A.

Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) to its remake (Zack Snyder, 2004), or from the horror movies of the 1970s and 1980s to *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) – is deconstructive in Derrida's sense, in which the preconditions of the mode itself are examined by this ironic play. Thus, the bloodthirsty masculinity of 'the pirate' is

implicitly unveiled and critiqued in the figure of Shakespeare. This kind of deconstruction – the examining of the conditions of existence of a certain mode, figure, question, narrative via its oppositions – occurs unevenly throughout *Stardust*. It is where the comedy comes in *Stardust*: the moment where the narrative becomes self-conscious, where it steps back and asks us to examine it, where, as in the opening, it says, 'the story begins, as these stories often do.'

But the postmodern reversals are too few and far between to rearrange the dominant traditional symbolism of *Stardust*. It remains at its heart a fairy tale of traditional outlook. If Yvaine had become the hero, the witch something other than a sinister harridan, or Tristan's story something other than a coming to manhood, the film might have been able to break these bounds, go beyond being an enjoyable fantasy romp and create something new. Perhaps the next task for fantasy film is to find such innovative material in the 'New Weird' or some other recent wave of fantasies, which will bring us across the wall of traditionalism and into the present.

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967, Black & Red, Detroit, 1970, section 1.
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid*, section 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Samuel R. Delany, *Silent Interviews: On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction and Some Comics*, Wesleyan University Press, London & Hanover, 1994, p.123.
- <sup>4</sup> Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction*, Routledge, London & New York, 2000, p.16.
- <sup>5</sup> Mark Bould 'Appropriate Means: An Interview with China Miéville', *New Politics*, vol. 9, no. 3 (new series), whole no. 35, Summer 2003, <<http://www.wpunj.edu/newpol/issue35/bould35.htm>>, accessed 17 July 2007.
- <sup>6</sup> Personal interview with Ursula Le Guin, November 2000.