

The World As Film

Modern Mythology, Evolving the Hero's Journey & Why Fantasy Cinema Matters

by Jessica Mae Stover

People say that what we're seeking is the meaning of life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.

Joseph Campbell *

Fantasy. In 2001 the success of *The Lord of the Rings* invited Hollywood to reevaluate the potential of genre cinema. Every studio has since tried their hand at fantasy. Regardless of box office receipts, all have remained unsuccessful in creating a compelling film that will stand the proverbial test of time. Just as modern fantasy novelists live in Tolkien's shadow, modern fantasy filmmakers live in the shadow of Peter Jackson's masterful adaptation; the adaptation that has spurred a hundred knock offs. Executives shake their heads and comment, "it's like catching lightning in a bottle." It's not, however: There is a science to fantasy. Beyond template or formula, there is a craft to the success of cinematic story and a skill in timing. What proves to be a lucrative genre with a loyal fan base that is steadfast and transcends generations (as demonstrated by the original *Star Wars* trilogy), is abused by those who neither understand the genre nor exactly why it often appeals to multiple "quadrants" of the film-going audience. The suits know sci-fi/fantasy movies make money; they know fans love the style, but why?

A whole tradition of Occidental mythological information was lost. When the story is in your mind, then you see its relevance to something happening in your life. It gives you perspective on what's happening to you. With the loss of that, we've really lost something because we don't have a comparable literature to take its place.

Mythology. Fantasy is mythology and mythology serves a purpose. The point of mythology (and religion), after all, is to help people make sense of the world around them and to instruct individuals on how to function in society. On a simpler level, fairytales taught children important lessons, i.e. not to wander off in the woods where they may get lost, injured... or eaten by a witch (*Hansel & Gretel*). Originality in storytelling is a myth itself: There are only a handful of basic stories to be told. The "originality" lies in the telling. In fantasy this authenticity, this joy found in the genre,

* Italicized quotes are by celebrated comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, as told to acclaimed journalist Bill Moyers at George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch, 1988.

is forged in the metaphorical world created to mirror the truth. Keeping in mind that mythology is a religion that has lost its following or never had one (Greek mythology, for illustration, or Egyptian; both were dominant religions in their times), the truth lies here: So passionately do people believe in mythology that it has been the driving force behind human sacrifice, religious wars and nerds lining up for six weeks outside of Mann's Chinese Theater in hopes of being the first to see a prequel.

It follows that mythology, or fantasy, matters to humanity.

Myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths. If your private myth, your dream, happens to coincide with that of society, you are in good accord with your group. If it doesn't, you've got an adventure in the dark forest ahead of you.

Metaphor. Genre-wise, fantasy has a certain power that rivals and oft outstrips documentary. Myth is a metaphor: Less abrasive than the non-fiction truth, yet the same truth in the universal bones nonetheless.

Fantasy is our world via another world. Often comparison and symbolism are required to help us see different perspectives and explore ethical shades of grey, especially where controversial topics are concerned in our ethnocentric society. Through metaphor, fantasy goes where documentary cannot go, where biopic cannot go, where historical epic cannot go... Fantasy opens minds and hearts that otherwise remain closed.

As a base paradigm, let's look at where the novel *The Da Vinci Code* was able to go and where its "non-fiction" predecessor *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* was not. Few good Christians have read the latter even out of academic interest, for the latter was recognized as conspiracy theory (mythology) but presented as a non-fiction truth. To read such a book could be feared to be blasphemy. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands read the former, wherein the exact same mythologies were embedded in a vanilla thriller of a novel. The Pope banned *Da Vinci Code* along with *Holy Blood*, but the former was presented as imaginary: Less abrasive to the close-minded. At its best, mythologizing inspires humanity to be better, to rally to worthwhile causes or live their lives in a healthier way. At its worst, it plays into the fields of propaganda and cults. This is the power of story, mythology, metaphor... Fantasy.

So what does this mean in terms of film?

Well, you see, [a] movie communicates, it is in a language that talks to young people, and that's what counts.

Film. From morality tales to history to religion, the purpose of story in society transcends cultures, age, genre and medium. Motion picture is currently the most-distributed form of story mythology, and large-budget genre films are the most-viewed films. It's fun to see rollercoaster flicks like *Pirates of the Caribbean*. ...Yet should we be concerned that every movie with a budget to speak of, every major story that reflects our modern society, is equally as shallow and flash-in-the-pan? Americans watch more films in a year than they read books or attend church. Mythology matters to humanity, film matters to humanity, so it goes that sci-fi/fantasy films (modern, motion picture myths) matter to humanity.

The courage to face the trials and to bring a whole new body of possibilities into the field of interpreted experience for other people to experience—that is the hero's deed.

Ethos. Cinema blends music and picture, light and shadow, movement... It has a potential influence and magick that should not always be taken so lightly. *Spider-man's* tagline is, "With great power comes great responsibility." One need only engage in a quick bit of Googling to discover how many fans wanted to staple that tagline to the foreheads of the producers who handled the underwhelming franchise, much less those working on the studio's other films. The pretense bleeds through every product distributed. Do fans matter or do they not? Does film matter or does it not? Is the medium influential or is it not? The messages conflict.

We've demonstrated that film is powerful; that's why people continue to see movies. The disregard for the craft grows, the bar lowers, but we love movies. We love them so much, and we keep going and we keep getting cheated out of our catharsis and still we go back after two prequels hoping that the third is finally great, only to find that it is not. Yet we go back again. It won't last forever, however; this hope. Producers may be shooting themselves in the foot where one of the most meaningful and therefore lucrative genres are concerned.

There's no reason why something entertaining shouldn't also be significant. It's good for everyone, including the business side of show business, when a film story means something, when it matters and aspires to prestige.

Our goal in making films is to do our jobs, to be great storytellers. Bold. Wise. Responsible.

Independent.

In the doing, achieving our goals will revitalize the fantasy genre, raise the bar and disrupt the way genre feature films are approached, produced and marketed.

We make meaningful films. We neither contrive to appeal to the religious or conservative (*The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *The Passion of The Christ*), nor engineer heavy-handed liberalism (*V for Vendetta*). There is no pandering to PG ratings (*The Phantom Menace*, *Harry Potter I*) or betting on the broad and useless (*The Fantastic Four*). We make films that tell stories that matter in metaphors that resonate and examine our roles, our society and our philosophical debates. The same production mentality and genuine intentions that brought us *Hotel Rwanda*, *Syriana*, *Good Night, Good Luck*, and *Crash* or the dramatic chops that brought us *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Forrest Gump*, *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Million Dollar Baby* can bring us a fantasy story of equal caliber. The story is set in a fantasy world, the fantasy world itself (lately the spectacle) is not the story; it cannot make up for a lack of story.

True, fantasy can apply to a variety of styles: There exists high fantasy such as *The Lord of the Rings* (creatures, magic and a clear good vs. evil) and low fantasy such as HBO's newly acquired *A Song of Ice and Fire* (think *ROME* meets *The Mists of Avalon* in all its politics and lite magic). Fantasy can be Gothic like Ann Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, comedic like *Bruce Almighty* or can skew more magical reality, such as *Finding Neverland* or *Amélie*. Or it can be like one of our favorites: *Sense & Sensibility* + martial arts = *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

The Beatles brought forth an art form for which there was a readiness. Somehow, they were in perfect tune with their time. Had they turned up thirty years before, their music would have fizzled out. The public hero is sensitive to the needs of his time.

Timeliness. There is indeed a science to storytelling. A craft. What makes a fantasy work is that it is timeless in its archetypal themes while also being timely to the current temperature of society. Timely: *Spider-man* after 9/11. New Yorkers pulling together to help Spidey, his red-and-blue patriotic uniform, the pose at the conclusion with the American flag... We needed that. You must renew the old story,

and make it matter. Try watching the film now, however: It doesn't stand up. It was heavy-handed and coincidentally-timed, manipulative and made for the moment. Unfortunately it did half its job. That's where the larger picture, timeliness, comes in. With all great stories we can come back to the work and it's still relevant. *A New Hope*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The NeverEnding Story*, or something the likes of the first *Matrix* film (timely in it's take on technology, timeless in terms of the hero's journey). *The Matrix* is a terrific example of what it means to evolve archaic myth so that it becomes original and relevant as opposed to feebly recycling an existing story (Jerry Bruckheimer's *King Arthur*).

The purpose of modern mythology is to renew old stories and themes, to make them believable to our world and to make them resonate once again. This is what we do: We bridge old and new.

A fairy tale is a child's myth. There are proper myths for proper times of life. As you grow older, you need sturdier mythology.

Character. We dwell in the grey, and nothing is absolute or easy. No one dies without meaning, such as in action movies (*The Terminator*) and there are no expendable red shirts (*Star Trek*). Death matters, it is personal, close, and wounds do not heal movie-fast. Survival cripples, logistics are not overlooked, journeys remain unshortened and the deus ex machina never comes. The rules are concrete and every scrape burns.

The best stories are those that do the right thing at the right time and speak timeless truths. *A New Hope* accomplished that balance, as do all of the strongest stories. It is in this harmony of universal archetype and timeless metaphor that we come to recognize the characters' faces and plights as our own.

At the root of these celebrated stories is a legend that exists throughout time: The hero monomyth. Whether it be King Arthur, Shakespeare's Henry V, Luke Skywalker, William Wallace, Jesus, Buddha or Neo, the hero's story resonates with humanity. In the monomyth we see ourselves as we could be, and dream of the opportunity to be a part of something larger than ourselves.

Which is what filmmaking is about in the first place.

There is a kind of secondary hero to revitalize the tradition. This hero interprets the tradition and makes it valid as a living experience today instead of a lot of outdated clichés. This has to be done with all traditions.

Heroes. The author F. Scott Fitzgerald observed in one of his notebooks, “Show me a hero and I’ll write you a tragedy.” Mythology has taught us that the reluctant hero who first shuns his path and the power it will afford is the one who will come to deserve that power and wield it as required, quite often to a clean cut, good-triumphs-over-evil happy ending. Reality is not so convenient, nor should story always be.

No, mythology is not a lie, mythology is poetry, it is metaphorical. It has been well said the mythology is the penultimate truth—penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words.

Realism. Fantasy that is real; reality at its most fantastic; our world at its best and its worst... Sci-fi/fantasy grounded in geo and social science. Poetry mixed with physics. Heightened. Focused. Dramatized. Leveraging technology to *limit* the CGI...

Our world teems with life and color to the point that it sometimes looks fake: The surreal greens of a May bloom, the streaked skies after a thunderstorm, the drama of a mountain’s shadow... the death that can come so swift when things turn dangerous on the path to survival, the comfort of a true friend—someone who understands—and what it feels like to climb your steps after the longest journey. Fantasy can be found in our lives if we only look, and natural exteriors provide a fantastic theater dramatized by character and story.

We all need to tell our story and to understand our story. We all need to understand death to cope with death. We need for life to signify, to touch the eternal, to understand the mysterious, to find out who we are. What human beings have in common is revealed in myth. When we tell stories we attempt to come to terms with our own lives, to harmonize our lives with reality.

Theme. We are storytellers; we use our talents to raise questions, celebrate commonalities, comment and drive change via filmmaking. *An Inconvenient Truth* was a hit in the documentary genre. So was *Fahrenheit 9/11*, but can either of those

do for conservation and US foreign policy what *The Lord of the Rings* did for New Zealand tourism? We hope so. Regardless, should the goal be to tie an audience to a cause, the filmmaker must make the film meaningful by relating it to our lives. Show us what we value and what we know to be true by speaking in the universal language of mythology, show us our potential, inspire us to step out into our own big backyard...

But the world's full of people who have stopped listening to themselves. This is the threat to our lives. We all face it. We all operate in our society in relation to a system.

Our limits are the result of a cultural arrangement that's marred by monopolies of knowledge, inconsistent moralities and bottom-line thinking. Throughout history constraints like these have driven people to gather and explore change. And now? The Internet evolves, communities rally and new doors open. We suddenly find ourselves on the first threshold of a real-life journey.

The big question is whether you are going to be able to say a hearty yes to your adventure... the adventure of the hero—the adventure of being alive.

The hero is the opposite of the status quo: A sign of things becoming. We now have an opportunity to discover the potential of modern mythology as social art. Whether we've sought the moment or stumbled upon it accidentally; adventure is at hand. This is your life as film. And it's here, where myth and reality unite, that your experience will be compelled only by your ability to imagine.

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