

ENIGMATIC ENTERTAINMENT

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THE EMOTION OF FANTASY

“Fantasy: ph.n. Faculty of imagination, esp. when extravagant; mental images fanciful design, speculation, fantasia, fantastic: musical or other composition in which form is subservient to fancy. Fantast: visionary dreamer. Fantastic: extravagantly fanciful, eccentric, grotesque, quaint.”

Within the bounds of artistic fantasy many diverse and often doubtful tangents are created in what seems to be an all-embracing desire to call everything marginally surrealistic, fantasy; this desire if all-suffocating.

Human taste, coupled so necessarily with individualistic preference, is a precious thing, and who is to say that what one person considers to be fantasy should be strictly ruled not so because another finds its inclusion to be unjustifiable. When one is dealing with facts it is far easier to reach a definite conclusion than when the subject for discussion is art, or concerns the artistic in any sense. Fantasy in art appears in as many guises as there are people interested enough in the subject to hold forth with their views. Similarly the particular art form can be divided into separate realms within the same subject. This is particularly true of literature and cinema the two fields where the fantastic is at its most recognisable. To complete the quartet of art forms would be to add painting, coupled with sculpture, and music; these four being the most readily receptive media for the fantastic. Perhaps a fifth may be added, not forgetting the effect the 1927 Broadway production of Dracula starring Bela Lugosi had on Tod Browning’s excellent 1931 film version, and that is the live theatre, although the live play does not lend itself so readily to the dictionary definition. Whilst not intending to decry live theatre, it is difficult to create the correct atmosphere of fantasy from a stage play, and to an audience, coughing and sweet unwrapping at every turn. Although it is certainly true that many excellent examples of good theatre are still being produced – Ghost Stories for one – not to mention the readings and performances of ghost stories, such as those by M R James.

Fantasy in Art, meaning here the facility of painting, sculpture, and companion “high brow” forms, is a little appreciated, or publicised translator of the fantastic. Possibly because art is less widely available on such a mass scale as books and films, and because it does not hold such a universal appeal, it is often excluded from discussion on the subject of fantasy. Books and films can appeal on more than one level, whilst paintings are often a blank canvass to many viewers. Clark Ashton Smith was a fine sculptor, yet he is known for his poems and stories. Artists such as Coye and Bok are known for their illustrations for books but seldom hailed in their own right. At certain times books are available on the subject, such as *The Artists of Fantasy* in the 1970’s; and magazines used to feature advertisements for colour prints depicting scenes for Robert Howard’s Conan adventures, alongside prints from scenes from Rod Serling’s *Night Gallery* TV series. Further examples from this era were the album sleeve designs of Roger Dean, although the intention behind these works seemed not to stem from the basic emotion of fantasy. The most widely seen and accessible form of fantastic art is on the covers of books, especially paperbacks. This

works well for the form as it complements the fiction within, as well as standing in its own right. Fantasy that is essentially static, as paintings and most sculpture must inevitably be, is always going to be less satisfying, for the elements of fantasy, than the other mediums into which so much more can be woven. While the painting can be discussed on a technical level, and whilst the emotion evoked from it is personal to each mind viewing it, the painting remains for all that merely an object to be viewed, for some an adornment for the wall upon which it is hung, which can at different times provoke different moods. Obviously a painter would think differently, and possibly consider painting the most important medium for fantastic emotion. The subject cannot be set aside without a mention of the wonderful artists that are currently at work within the fantasy genre, both mainstream, but especially in the small press where some marvellous work is being done.

With the inclusion of music in any discussion of fantasy brings in the fundamental question of what we mean by fantasy. Music it would seem is on the fringe of the colloquial term fantasy, and yet the dictionary dictates otherwise. The first factor would seem to be the intention behind the act, or art. If an artist, in the general sense, intends their work to be accepted as pure fantasy that is one matter. What too often happens is that the person receiving the work considers it to be fantasy when that is not the intention. The strict term of fantasy encompasses a far wider field than the raw emotion of fantasy. With the medium of music it is hard to believe that however imaginative a musician, rock band or orchestra may be, the intention behind their music is the fantastic emotion. When listening for example to groups such as Soft Machine, Tangerine Dream, Pink Floyd or Hawkwind, to name only one facet of music, it is easy to conjure in the mind images related to the emotion of fantasy. How often though was that the intention of the musicians? The images conjured are but a shallow reflection of the real emotions to be wrung from a truly weird work. Similar ephemeral emotions after all may be attained from the pleasures of sex, and stimulants such as drink, tobacco or drugs. Listen to any piece of valid music under such influences and note the different mental images thus conjured by the stimulated brain as opposed to those of a sober one. Did the musicians intend such stimulants to be included in the appreciation of their work? The intention behind the fantasy is an important factor in its relevance and effect. Musical scores play a large part in the creation of mood within a film, and here it seems is one true place where fantasy and musical art can meet, with the music being the instigator of emotion behind the visual image on screen. Music in its own right though can only add to, rather than create its own, emotion of fantasy.

The fantastic cinema demands a great deal from its audience. People come in from the street to sit in a darkened room where they watch moving images upon a white screen. The fact that they can see the images makes the fact that they are weird or unreal all the more difficult to believe. A horror is all the more frightening when we cannot see it, in the main, and for most people. It is the unseen horror that might happen that truly grips the imagination. The fantasy film therefore demands from the outset a belief from its audience, a belief in the unbelievable that, because they will see it, becomes believable. The modern, cynical, cinema audience is less willing to believe, or even to suspend disbelief, than their predecessors. It is often the fashion to sneer at fantasy films with the retort that it has all been seen before. Sadly too many films are guilty of repetition and even plagiarism, while the great majority are guilty

of merely being too obvious, and far too many show their horror, at the same time lessening the emotional effect.

Horror has always been a good gross earner, with even small budget films, accompanied by excellent hype, getting good ratings. And we are, it seems, ever more seeking a journey into the unknown. For emotions rather than thrill alone, the good fantasy films perhaps are in the past, with the modern special effects replacements a poor substitute. In a materialistic society, the fantasy form can be sadly neglected, which clearly is more than a pity, because as we learn so much, we realise how little we, as a species actually know. We also need fantasy as a release from the daily horrors of simply living. The film as an art form also tends to lessen the emotion of fantasy by the fact that the whole audience shares the images simultaneously. How more scaring it is to watch a late night horror film in your own home than in the communal setting of the cinema? When you switch off the television, computer, tablet, or DVD, to leave the room in total darkness, and the house is making those creaking noises they all do at night. Even the firmest cynic and disbeliever can become scared in a dark, not quite silent room. Silence or near silence is as important to the emotions as the darkness. Interesting though fantasy films undoubtedly are, they are not aided by their visual and communal form. Occasional additions of light or comic relief in a film also often, if not always, work against the creation of mood, and to the detriment of the film. Though light relief in the manner of the two old boozers in Stuart Walker's *Werewolf Of London* and the wit of James Whale, nowadays seems to have been replaced by erotic relief or gratuitous nudity. Blatant sex, like blatant humour, rarely mixes with fantasy emotions.

Fantastic fiction is primarily a private occupation for the reader in that they sit alone reading and it is their brain alone that absorbs the meanings behind the printed words. Therefore from the outset it performs one of the fundamental and necessary functions of fantasy and its emotions in that it creates its effects upon one individual who is made to feel that they alone are experiencing the horrors created by the power of the writing. A mood shared can be a mood lessened so far as fantasy is concerned. Books as marketed today are categorised by the publishers so that even without reading them the reader is told what to expect. This is basically a failing because in the broad field of fantasy in general there is a thin dividing line between the different forms of writing. Terms used include Science fiction, Fantasy, dark fantasy, horror, and yet the dividing line between them all is less than often imagined. One essential difference could be that some deal mainly with experiences of the mind while possibly encompassing the spirit, while others deal with the body, the natural emotions. All however stem from the same womb, in many respects. Some look forward while some look back; some are concerned with the advancement of mankind and some with its downfall. Some are considered a higher art form than others? Sometimes, though the SF writers and readers would not believe they were favoured above Fantasy, and they above horror. Few horror writers are held in high esteem in the public regard and possibly this is due to the rigidity of the human mind in not wishing to believe in things or events that are unwelcome; they used to shoot the messenger didn't they? Horror as an art form has been equated by analysts with the natural human desire to injure ones fellow. Note the crowds that gather around a car crash, not from sympathy, or even a desire to help. It is the rubberneck desire to watch, to see if anyone has been hurt, the staple element even in slapstick humour. A

release of this desire in fiction is welcome, and it could be a day in the not too distant future when books are made available on the NHS, on prescription, almost a Fahrenheit 451 in reverse.

With fiction, as with musical fantasy, the intention behind the writing is important, but to a lesser extent which creates a vital difference. Not only has the reader to interpret the writer's intentions, but also because the medium is again visual, though more restrained, the reader can to a certain extent and with greater validity put their own interpretation to the printed words. The ability to "read between the lines" enables greater depth to be applied to the story form; while only in the work of written fiction can true subtlety of the emotion of fantasy be achieved. Only with words can the meaning be so well hidden from view. The emotion is developed by subtle hints, which upon canvas or celluloid or on CD or Internet source, can only be caught in part. With words the writer can create pictures; to the receptive mind they can also produce sounds. The emotion of fantasy is captured upon the printed page, or on the e-zine electronic pages, in so many different ways that the very diversity alone allows the story form to ensnare a wider audience into its mood, while at the same time keeping it a private experience. One reader may like the plot, another the style, another the story, but the result is the same; the emotion of fantasy has been recreated.

The term fantasy is wide as the dictionary definition shows. The term fantasy to mean the weird in art is also widely interpreted but to such an extent that its natural impact is lessened. The unique quality of the true emotion of fantasy is lost when equated with so many diverse and doubtful elements. The final judge will be individual taste, yet the emotion of fantasy is a far more rare experience than is imagined. Everyone loves to be safely scared, fear is a primary emotion, but that does not mean that everyone has an appreciation of the emotion, and certainly not an appreciation of the genre. Similarly a mere love or even appreciation of the emotion is not by itself enough when possessed apart from the basic emotion itself. Individual taste of style or of a medium is not so important as this elusive quality, so that the true possessor of the emotion of fantasy may understand most forms of the artistic presentation.