

## Making Fantasy Matter: *The Lord of the Rings* and the Legitimation of Fantasy Cinema

In the past decade, the Hollywood fantasy film has established itself as arguably the twenty first century's most popular form of filmmaking, a feat made all the more remarkable given the genre's somewhat troubled critical and commercial history. Exemplified in a number of high-profile 'flops' scattered throughout Hollywood's history, examples of which include *Doctor Dolittle* (Fleischer, 1967), *Willow* (Howard, 1988) and *Hook* (Spielberg, 1991), the fantasy film has traditionally been met with a mixture of apathy from mainstream audiences and derision from traditional newspaper and magazine critics. This attitude showed no signs of changing at the dawn of a new millennium when *Dungeons and Dragons* (Solomon, 2000) was released internationally to both critical and commercial disappointment, described by A.O. Scott in *The New York Times* as a 'noisy, nerve-racking tedium of contemporary popular culture'. Yet, the release of New Line Cinema's adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* (Jackson, 2001-03) would witness a fundamental change in the attitudes of both audiences and critics towards an oft-dismissed genre of filmmaking. Breaking box-office records and opening to enthusiastic reviews worldwide, *The Lord of the Rings* not only ushered in a new era of the Hollywood fantasy franchise but was held up by journalists and critics such as Kenneth Turan as a model 'for how to bring substance, authenticity and insight to the biggest of adventure yarns'. Self-conscious in their desire to remove the films from the pejorative stigma long-associated with the fantasy genre, producers and screenwriters Boyes, Jackson and Walsh pioneered a number of formal and stylistic features that would not only prove hugely influential for future fantasy franchises, but would encourage audiences to look at the various trolls, wizards and hobbits presented in such stories in an entirely new way. The trilogy

managed to showcase the merits that came in taking fantasy seriously to a traditional intellectual establishment and, in taking fantasy seriously, so too did its popularity seem to come hand in hand with a new era of critical legitimacy.

Part of the reason the creative team behind *The Lord of The Rings* trilogy was able to legitimize the fantasy genre in this manner was due to the literary prestige of the source novel. Prior to the release of the trilogy, Hollywood had primarily adapted fantasy films from pulp fiction or comic book sources which, although popular amongst certain subsections of US culture, lacked the necessary prestige to register amongst mainstream audiences. Films such as *Conan the Barbarian* (Milius, 1982) had managed to achieve a modest degree of financial success, but were primarily designed to appeal to a specialist audience of self-conscious fantasy fans rather than the broader audiences courted by Hollywood studios. In contrast, *The Lord of The Rings* was a film franchise targeted at the same audiences who, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, had been raised on steady diet of action and science-fiction cinema. Producers hoped that the phenomenal cultural impact Tolkien's novel had made not only within the US but around the globe would allow it to transcend the specialist or niche appeal fantasy filmmaking had enjoyed up until this point, and allow the film trilogy to succeed where countless others had failed.

Occupying a prominent position within the canon of twentieth-century English literature and frequently discussed by literary scholars for its remarkable depth of vision in the creation of Middle-Earth, Tolkien's novel reflects the moral and ethical concerns of a practising Roman Catholic writing during a time of world war and the invention of the atomic bomb. In his own essay of literary criticism 'On Fairy Stories', Tolkien advocated that writers should utilise the supernatural not as an 'end to itself' but instead as device whose virtue lay 'in its operations' (11). Screenwriters

Boyes, Jackson and Walsh sought to follow this example in adapting Tolkien's narrative to the big screen by emphasising the angst-ridden plot embedded with the original story. The trilogy condenses Tolkien's epic tale down to focus primarily on Frodo and Sam's journey to Mount Doom and the threat posed by Sauron due to the survival of the one ring. Frodo is presented largely as a substance addict, and his fate is continually juxtaposed with the now-iconic character of Gollum whose status as a tragic antagonist is invested with a certain degree of psychological realism. Characters such as Boromir in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Jackson, 2001) and Faramir in *The Two Towers* (Jackson, 2002) spend the majority of their time on screen gripped in a self-destructive torment, whilst Aragorn's decision whether or not to accept the throne of Gondor is given greater emphasis from the minor subplot it serves in the original novel. Whimsical episodes such as the house of Tom Bombadil or the encounter with Old Man Willow are all but removed from the cinematic adaptation, and what is emphasised above all else is a feeling of dread and mortality. The narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* exemplifies a desire to be taken seriously, and to move the fantasy genre away from the pejorative connotations amassed by many of its previous forays on screen.

Beyond these decisions taken at the level of character and narrative, the way in which Jackson depicts Middle-Earth is also marked by a desire to dissociate *The Lord of the Rings* from a kind of visual spectacle offered in previous fantasy films. Whilst previous fantasy films had invited audiences to gaze at the otherworldliness of that which was on screen, Dorothy's famous entrance into Munchkin land in *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939) being a prime example of this kind of aesthetic (Figure 1), *The Lord of the Rings* is primarily invested in a very different kind of visual spectacle altogether. As David Butler argues in his book *Fantasy Cinema*, there is a 'marked

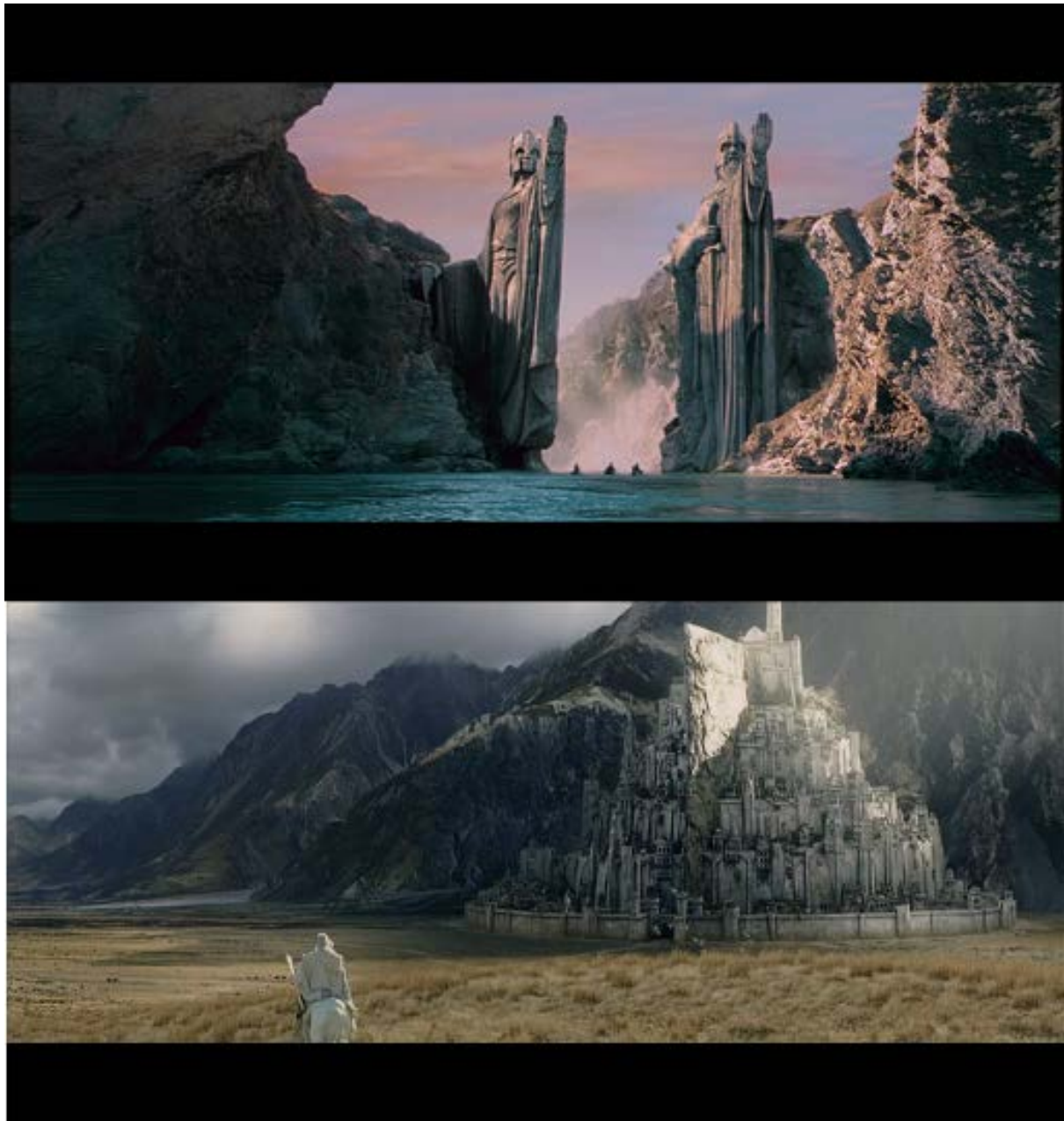
difference' between the way in which the world of Middle-Earth is brought to life on screen in comparison with previous fantasy worlds such as Oz, or indeed the alternative fantasy worlds of *The Dark Crystal* (Henson & Oz, 1982) or *Legend* (Scott, 1985). As Kristin Thompson argues in *The Frodo Franchise*, Jackson's trilogy is notable by the way in which it 'would follow Tolkien in treating the story as history rather than as fantasy' (90). Following on from Tolkien's preference to describe *The Lord of the Rings* as a work of faux history rather than as a work of fantasy, the desire to historicise fantasy manifests itself as a persistent formal and stylistic concern throughout Jackson's trilogy. This trait not only affects the way in which the story is told on screen, but the way in which audiences were invited to respond to it.



**Figure 1** A still from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), demonstrating the way in which the use of Technicolor, costume and set design are combined together in classical Hollywood fantasy films often invite visual spectacle through an exoticization of their magical imagery.

In sequences wherein new locations are introduced to the audience for the first time, a recurrent technique occurs in which Middle-Earth is made spectacular on screen not due to its exotic quality. Instead, individual characters are made to seem miniscule in comparison with the vastness of the circumstances they enter (Figure 2). It is a sense of scale, rather than a sense of magic, that is placed up on screen for our viewing pleasure; a scale that is then emphasised in the editing patterns as the scenes often cut between the subjective vantage-point of characters to impersonal panoramas designed to allow audiences to take in the authenticity of detail achieved on screen. This technique of the ‘spectacular vista’ is argued by Tom Brown to be a prominent feature of historical epics such as *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming, 1939), and is defined largely by the ability to such moments to utilise visual spectacle as a device that ‘vivifies or actualizes the sense of a character’s relationship to the world constructed around them’ (159-161). Whether it be the famous crane shot of the siege of Atlanta in *Gone with the Wind* or else the numerous shots of the Roman coliseum in a more recent historical epic such as *Gladiator* (Scott, 2000), the spectacular vista serves to employ visual spectacle to bring the past to life in a visceral way on screen. It is this actualisation that is also presented during such key moments throughout *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, represented perhaps most acutely in the various epic battles of Helm’s Deep in *The Two Towers* (2002) and Pelennor Fields in *The Return of the King* which relied on set-pieces far more in-keeping with historical sagas such as *Zulu* (Endfield, 1964) or *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995) than they did remind audiences of previous fantasy films. By consistently presenting fantasy in this manner, *The Lord of the Rings* subverts a kind of response to the supernatural on screen and presented Tolkien’s Middle-Earth as a largely historicized world with a visual pleasure is obtained through a series of formal and stylistic conventions associated with the

historical sagas and action set-pieces that proved popular with audiences throughout the 1990s.



**Figure 2** Examples of the prominent use of the ‘spectacular vista’ (Tom Brown) in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Images include the fellowship’s journey past The Gates of Argonath from *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) and Gandalf’s arrival at Minas Tirith in *Return of the King* (2003).





**Figure 3** ‘So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what do with the time that is given to us.’ Gandalf becomes the Greek chorus in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), inviting audiences to ponder on the allegorical ramifications of the fantasy narrative.

Having historicized Tolkien’s fantasy world, *The Lord of the Rings* manages to achieve a level of naturalism on screen which it then utilises at key moments to invite audience to ponder the allegorical and metaphorical ramifications to the narrative. An example of such a device can be found in a speech made by Gandalf within the Mines of Moria in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, wherein a close-up shot of Ian McKellen staring almost directly at the camera is utilised in a manner akin to the ancient Greek theatrical device of the chorus (Figure 3). An iconic moment from the first film, the speech is given a universal quality as Gandalf stares at Frodo but also seemingly beyond the screen and into the auditorium, as if to invite audience members to ponder over the wider thematic ramifications of what he is saying. Repeated at the film’s denouement, this moment serves to provide *The Fellowship of the Ring* with a thematic resolution beyond the literal circumstances taking place on screen. Similar moments appear throughout the trilogy. Toward the end of *The Two Towers*, Sam compares the journey he and Frodo find themselves on to ‘the great stories ... the ones that really mattered’, a speech that functions to unite the various

story-strands together as Sam's voice-over provides a conclusion to the second instalment of the franchise (Figure 4). At the end of *The Return of the King*, Frodo himself is seen writing a copy of *The Lord of The Rings*, and reflects on the nature of the telling of his own story in a manner that posits him simultaneously as protagonist and narrator. In each of these moments, the films self-consciously invites their audiences to find a figurative or metaphorical meaning for *The Lord of the Rings* beyond the specifics of Middle-Earth; to interpret the trilogy as something more than a 'mere' adventure story about hobbits and orcs.

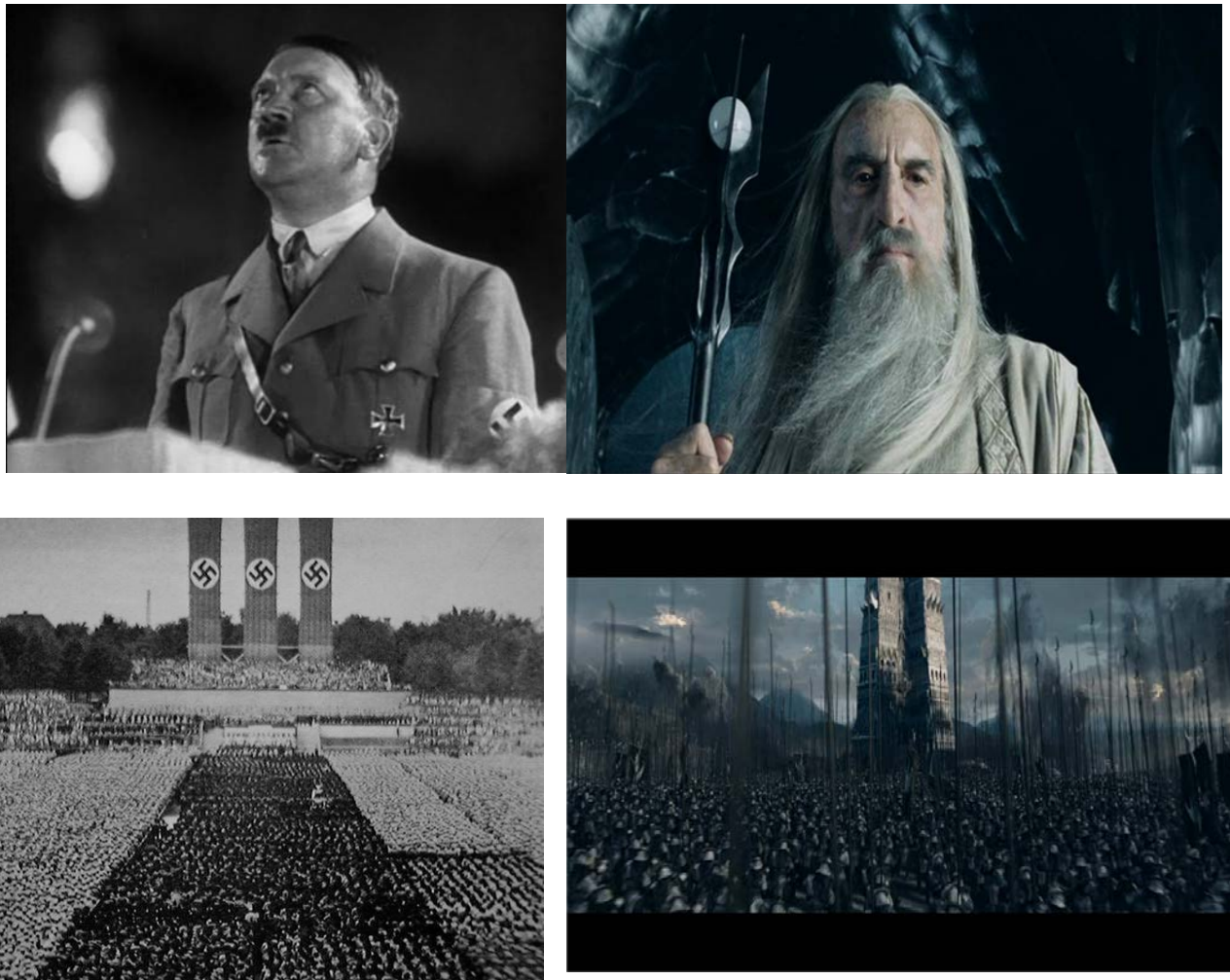


**Figure 4** 'It's like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo, the one's that really mattered'. Samwise numerates on the moral ramifications of his own story in *The Two Towers* (2002).

We can relate these devices to a key strategy found within fantasy literature discussed by Farah Mendlesohn. In *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Mendlesohn subdivides fantasy literature into four categories: 'the portal-quest fantasy', 'the immersive fantasy', 'the intrusion fantasy' and 'the liminal fantasy'. Mendlesohn's first three categories can broadly be defined through a series of rhetorical strategies designed to at least partially convince the reader that the supernatural components of the story are



real. However, what distinguishes Mendlesohn's category of the liminal fantasy narrative is that it 'estranges' the reader from the supernatural story in a manner that allows our experience of the narrative to reach a point wherein 'metaphor and magic become indistinguishable' (195). Such a liminal approach to fantasy fiction appears in Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*, albeit contained within certain key scenes rather than appearing as a coherent narrational strategy. One example of such a moment occurs halfway through *The Two Towers*, wherein the wizard Saruman delivers a speech to his army of uruk-hai soldiers. Not only is the speech itself reminiscent of numerous real-life speeches made by charismatic 20th century leaders such as Adolf Hitler, but the film invites such an interpretation through the way in which the scene juxtaposes close-up shots of the single figure of Saruman and the spectacular images of a uniformed army of soldiers (Figure 5). Reminiscent of some of the scenes from Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), such moments have seemingly encouraged critics such as Richard Corliss of Time magazine to interpret *The Lord of the Rings* as 'a metaphor for the Allies' battle against Hitler ... or, for that matter, the U.S. and the Northern Alliance against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban'. As Frances Pheasant-Kelly states in *Fantasy Film Post 9/11*, the trilogy invited spectators to engage with the narrative framed through a perspective of 'shared global histories' that ranged from the imagery of the Holocaust in the gaunt figure of Gollum to images of 9/11 evoked through the spectacle of warfare (25). By deliberately inviting such comparisons in the way in which certain scenes and characters are presented, *The Lord of the Rings* utilises the supernatural as a device that those willing can use as a springboard for their own interpretation, allowing them a whole new life beyond that which is on screen.



**Figure 5** Juxtaposing the single image of Saruman with the faceless army of orcs, *The Two Towers* (2002) is reminiscent in visual style of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and, as such, invites comparisons between the fantasy narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* and real-life twentieth-century events.

David Hartwell's essay 'Dollars and Dragons' pinpoints Tolkien's work as the epochal novel of modern fantasy literature, its success inspiring numerous imitators both conscious and unconscious of its influence in a manner that sculpted an understanding of the genre for decades to come. The same influential impact might also be attributed to its cinematic adaptations. The critical re-appraisal Jackson's trilogy would achieve for the fantasy genre would culminate inside Los Angeles's Kodak Theatre on February 29, 2004. Having already won ten academy awards that same evening for the film's achievements in screenwriting and visual effects, *The*

*Return of the King* crowned its success by becoming the first fantasy film to win the coveted statue of Best Picture. On this occasion, the trilogy's co-writer, co-producer and director Peter Jackson took to the stage to deliver his take on the shift occurring in fantasy's critical recognition. As Jackson stated:

I'm so honoured, touched and relieved that the academy, and the members of the academy, that have supported us have seen past the trolls and the wizards and the hobbits and are recognising fantasy this year. Fantasy is an F-word that, hopefully, the five second delay won't do anything with.

Greeted to warm laughter inside the theatre, Jackson's comments reveal not only an awareness on the part of the creative team behind *The Lord of the Rings* of the somewhat dismissive attitude their choice of genre had received in the years prior to their decision to adapt Tolkien's novel, but also indicate a key strategy by which the films themselves attempted to circumnavigate such opinions. *The Lord of the Rings* was to prove a pivotal film that fundamentally altered both the way in which fantasy would be presented on screen, and the kind of response it invited from such supernatural imagery. It invited us to 'see past' the hobbits through a series of formal and stylistic strategies that not only normalised the potentially hyperbolic or bathetic nature of fantasy on screen but also courted a series of metaphorical interpretations in that process. As we continue to 'see past' hobbits, so too fantasy ceases to be the F-word it once was amongst both film academia and popular culture.

## **Go Further**

### **Books:**

*Fantasy Cinema: Impossible Worlds on Screen*  
David Butler (London: Wallflower Press, 2009)

*Rhetorics of Fantasy*  
Farah Mendlesohn (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

*Fantasy Film Post 9/11*  
Frances Pheasant-Kelly (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

*The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood*  
Kristin Thompson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

### **Extracts/Essays/Articles:**

“Spectacle/Gender/History: The Case of *Gone with the Wind*” by Tom Brown  
In *Screen* (49.2), 2008, 157-178.

“Lord of the Films” by Richard Corliss  
In *Time* (December 17, 2001). Available at:  
<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,188807,00.html>.

“Dollars and Dragons: The Truth about Fantasy” by David G. Hartwell.  
In David G. Hartwell, *Age of Wonders: Exploring the World of Science-fiction* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, Inc. 1996).

“After D&D you may need R&R” by A.O. Scott,  
In *New York Times* (December 8, 2000). Available from:  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/12/08/arts/08DUNG.html>.

“On Fairy Stories” by J.R.R. Tolkien.  
In Christopher Tolkien (ed.), *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*,  
(London: George Allen & Unwin Publishers Ltd., 1983).

“Movie Review” by Kenneth Turan  
In *Los Angeles Times* (April 16, 2003). Available at:  
<http://articles.latimes.com/2003/dec/16/entertainment/et-turan16>.

### **Films:**

*Braveheart*, Mel Gibson, dir. (USA: Icon Productions, 1995)

*Conan the Barbarian*, John Milius, dir. (USA: Dino de Laurentiis Corporation, 1982)

*The Dark Crystal*, Jim Henson & Frank Oz, dir. (UK / USA: ITC Entertainment, 1982).

*Doctor Dolittle*, Richard Liescher, dir. (USA: Apjac Productions, 1967)

*Dungeons and Dragons*, Courtney Solomon, dir. (USA: New Line, 2000)

*Gladiator*, Ridley Scott, dir. (USA: Scott Free Productions, 2000)  
*Gone with the Wind*, Victor Fleming, dir. (USA: Selznick International Pictures, 1939)  
*Hook* Steven Spielberg, dir. (USA: Amblin Entertainment, 1991)  
*Legend*, Ridley Scott, dir. (USA: Universal, 1985).  
*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, Peter Jackson, dir. (USA: Wingnut / New Line, 2001)  
*The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, Peter Jackson, dir. (USA: Wingnut / New Line, 2002)  
*The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* , Peter Jackson, dir. (USA: Wingnut / New Line, 2003)  
*Triumph des Willens / Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl, dir. (Germany: Reichsparteitag-Film, 1935)  
*Willow*, Ron Howard, dir. (USA: Lucasfilm, 1988)  
*The Wizard of Oz*, Victor Fleming, dir. (USA: MGM, 1939)  
*Zulu*, Cy Endfield, dir. (UK: Diamond Films, 1964)