

# **A Very British Spectacle?**

## **Critical Reception of the Fantasy Genre within Contemporary British Cinema**

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## **Abstract**

In the period since 2001, cinema has witnessed what David Butler refers to as a ‘golden age’ of fantasy film production. The majority of fantasy films released during this time have originated from British literature, and have to some extent been produced and located within Britain, showcasing a wealth of national characters, acting talent, and landscapes on screen. Yet, despite vital revisionist work conducted on British horror, science fiction and melodrama, there remains a hesitancy to embrace fantasy as a genre intrinsically connected with national cinema and domestic film production values.

This thesis applies the contention that perceptions and understandings of British film and fantasy are influenced by the critical ‘writing machine’, which informs existing tensions between aesthetics, genre and film production, and also wider meanings attached to ideas around national identity and representation. However, this study argues that such discursive processes do not function as a homogenous entity and instead are prone to fluctuation across different critical sites and at different ‘moments’ in time. In order to determine how British cinema and fantasy genre are appropriated by the critical ‘writing machine’, this research adopts a historical reception studies approach to examine meanings and associations as generated by the contemporary British mainstream press in the subsequent decade since 2001 onwards.

Building on work conducted by Barbara Klinger and Kate Egan, amongst others, this thesis examines a broad range of critical materials, including press reviews and film-related articles, which circulated across a national, regional and local spectrum of mainstream distribution. This research contributes to existing scholarship by investigating how the critical ‘writing machine’ operates to inform and influence cultural appropriations of British cinema and fantasy genre, and considers how these meanings can shift over time.

## Contents

2	Abstract
5	Acknowledgements
6	<b>Introduction</b> Locating British Fantasy Film – Developing a Discursive Approach Towards British Cinema and Fantasy Genre
47	<b>Chapter One</b> The Rise and Rise of British Fantasy Adaptation
81	<b>Chapter Two</b> The British Appeal of the Children’s Fantasy Film
109	<b>Chapter Three</b> Locating the ‘Real’
134	<b>Chapter Four</b> ‘Categories’ of Fantasy and Realism in British Film
162	<b>Chapter Five</b> The Impact of British Fantasy
195	<b>Conclusion</b> A Past, Present and Future for British Fantasy Film?
211	Appendix A Cultural Test Guidance Notes
212	Appendix B UK Certified Films Categorised as Fantasy Genre by Year (including Director, Country of Origin and Production Details)
217	Appendix C UK Certified Films Listed by Genre on Wikipedia, IMDB and British Council (British Films Directory)
220	Filmography
223	Teleography
224	Bibliography

## List of Tables

31 Table 1 - Selected Newspaper Titles

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## Introduction

### Locating British Fantasy Film – Developing a Discursive Approach Towards British Cinema and Fantasy Genre

In existing scholarship concerning British cinema, marginal attention has been directed towards a thorough analysis of fantasy film. Despite vital revisionist work in other, previously maligned, genres such as horror, science fiction and melodrama, and numerous studies on the British production output of Powell and Pressburger, fantasy remains substantially neglected in comparison.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in the wake of the recent phenomenal success of the *Harry Potter* series (2001 - 2011), and a notable increase in British films that utilise fantastical elements through the depiction of personal illusions, alternate realities, parallel universes and secondary worlds, the question remains why fantasy should still be marginalised within critical assessments of British mainstream cinema.

The lack of established research in this particular area alerts attention towards a number of possible explanations and outcomes. Firstly, there appears to be some apprehension over whether certain fantasy films can actually be classified as British. The global status of fantasy films such as *Harry Potter* in terms of their international production values would appear at significant odds with historicised

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<sup>1</sup> Various literature includes Andrew Moor, *Powell & Pressburger: A Cinema of Magic Spaces*, (London: I.B Tauris & Co Ltd., 2005) and Ian Christie, *Arrows of Desire: the Films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger*, (London: Faber, 1994). For comprehensive studies on British horror and science fiction cinema, see Peter Hutchings, *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Steve Chibnall & Julian Petley, Eds. *British Horror Cinema*, (London: Routledge, 2002); I.Q Hunter, Ed. *British Science Fiction Cinema*, (London: Routledge, 1999), amongst others. Melodrama is often acknowledged for its anti-realist tendencies and a prominent study on British melodrama is Pam Cook's extensive *Gainsborough Pictures: 1924-1950*, (London: Cassell, 1997). Andrea Wright offers a critique of the Henson Company Productions *The Dark Crystal* (1982) and *Labyrinth* (1986), in "Selling the Fantastic: The Marketing and Merchandising of the British Fairy Tale Film in the 1980s", *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, Vol.2, Issue 2, 2005, p.256-274. See also a chapter by Josephine Botting in *Ealing Revisited*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) for a re-assessment of fantasy in output by Ealing Studios during the 1940s (p.175-184).

understandings of national cinema. In conjunction with this sentiment, there is an assumption, deeply embedded in critical approaches towards British cinema, that fantasy does not represent a genre typically associated with domestic film production. This argument is articulated effectively by Julian Petley, who contends that films of a fantastical, surrealist and poetic nature represent a 'lost continent' of British cinema.<sup>2</sup> Petley outlines the importance of the 'writing machine' in forming and maintaining dominant critical understandings of British cinema as 'realist' in aesthetic style and narrative content. Andrew Higson also highlights this tendency when he argues that the prevailing 'discourse of British film criticism "writes" British cinema into film cultural memory as a realist cinema, thus effectively blocking off other ways of conceptualising the institution'.<sup>3</sup>

The influence of the 'writing machine' in creating and re-affirming critical approaches to British cinema represents a concern often re-visited by film historians, and a survey of existing literature demonstrates how this topic has received frequent attention over time.<sup>4</sup> In an article for the prestigious film journal *Screen*, published in 1983, Higson offered the following advice: 'the terms of that discourse must be unravelled in order to understand why certain British films have been vaunted and valorised', and others contested, dismissed or ignored altogether in the canon of British cinema.<sup>5</sup> However, there remains a

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<sup>2</sup> Julian Petley, "The Lost Continent" in Charles Barr, Ed. *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, (London: BFI, 1986), p.98-119.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Higson, "Critical Theory and British Cinema", *Screen*, Vol.24, No.4-5, July-October 1983, p.91-93

<sup>4</sup> For examples of studies on British film criticism see James Chapman, "The True Business of the British Movie? *A Matter of Life and Death* and British Film Culture", *Screen*, Vol.46, No.1, 2005, p.33-50; John Ellis, "The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the Cinema 1942-1948" in Andrew Higson, Ed. *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, (London: Cassell, 1996), p.66-93; Charles Barr, "*Straw Dogs, A Clockwork Orange* and the Critics", *Screen*, Vol.13, No.2, 1972, p.17-32; Julian Petley, "A Crude Sort of Entertainment for a Crude Sort of Audience: the British Critics and Horror Cinema", in Chibnall and Petley, Eds. *British Horror Cinema*, p.23-41. Hutchings dedicates the first chapter of *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film* to analysis of press response to domestic horror films of the 1950s and 1960s. Daniel Martin also provides an assessment of the British critical positioning of 'serious horror', in "Japan's *Blair Witch*: Restraint, Maturity and Generic Canons in the British Critical Reception of *Ring*", *Cinema Journal* Vol.48, No.3, Spring 2009, p.35-51.

<sup>5</sup> Higson, "Critical Theory and British Cinema", p.91-93.

distinct absence of research into how such discursive processes operate and why they remain so influential. In addition, there is a tendency to regard film criticism as a homogenous entity; a ‘machine’ which offers collective and unanimous opinion. The problem associated with such an approach is that it dismisses the potential for dispersed critical output across different publications or changes in ‘dominant discourse’ over time.

This study argues that a more concerted analysis of the critical ‘writing machine’ can reveal a range of contributing factors that underpin the theoretical assertions put forward by Petley and Higson et al., most notably issues concerning British culture, society, politics and industrial economics. Consequently, this thesis adopts a reception studies approach to examine how such processes influence and contribute to prevailing discourse surrounding aesthetic and generic attributes predominantly associated with British cinema, with a particular focus on how the contemporary ‘writing machine’ constructs meaning in critical assessments of national cinema and fantasy genre. The main intention is to determine whether such discourse continues to write ‘British cinema into film cultural memory as a realist cinema’,<sup>6</sup> or whether ‘British fantasy film’ is provided parlance in modern critical practices. The lack of existing research in this area would suggest that critical reception analysis not only remains an under-developed methodological approach in British film studies but also highlights a particular resistance to examining fantasy within this field. However, to comprehend how the critical ‘writing machine’ operates, and to assess its effectiveness in the dissemination of meaning around such complex concepts, this thesis stresses the need to analyse the institutional mechanics involved in this dynamic process.

### **Issues of Definition**

This overview highlights an important issue which needs to be addressed, concerning the absence of canonical literature. As a result, what constitutes a ‘British fantasy film’ is both obscure and indiscernible at this

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<sup>6</sup> Higson, “Critical Theory and British Cinema”, p.91-93.



initial stage. This presents potential problems for the following study, as the range of films selected for analysis cannot be determined by pre-established definitions alone. The complexities surrounding national cinema and genre therefore need to be assessed before an initial survey of films can be identified. The following sections will introduce and outline existing scholarship in the fields of British cinema and fantasy genre which are relevant to the aims and objectives as discussed. In response to this collated evidence, the final section will emphasise the need to investigate British fantasy as a ‘cultural category’<sup>7</sup> and re-affirm why a reception-based approach provides a useful methodological tool to analyse the discursive properties of the critical ‘writing machine’.

### **British Cinema: Economic and Cultural Debates**

The issues with the *Harry Potter* film series as outlined in the introduction to this study presents the most compelling argument for conducting further research in this area. By analysing critical assessments of the popular fantasy film franchise in existing academic literature, we can begin to understand and unpack some of the major concepts and themes associated with British cinema and domestic film production. The *Harry Potter* films are adapted from a series of British novels by British author J.K Rowling and follow the adventures of a teenage schoolboy, located between the parallel worlds of contemporary Britain and a magical, secondary world only accessible via a secret platform located in seclusion at King’s Cross Station in London. At Rowling’s request, the film adaptations were produced and located entirely within the UK with an almost exclusively British cast.<sup>8</sup> The films were co-produced by Hollywood conglomerates Warner Bros., British-based Heyday Films and 1492 Pictures, an American production company founded by Chris Columbus, who also directed the first two instalments of the franchise: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (2001) and *Harry Potter and*

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<sup>7</sup> Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.18.

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of key UK locations used for filming of the *Harry Potter* series, see the Visit Britain website: <[www.visitbritain.com/en/Travel-tips/Britain-for-kids-and-families/Top-10-Harry-Potter-locations.htm](http://www.visitbritain.com/en/Travel-tips/Britain-for-kids-and-families/Top-10-Harry-Potter-locations.htm)> Accessed online 01/10/2014

*the Chamber of Secrets* (2002).<sup>9</sup> Despite the dominant presence of British involvement, particularly as the series progressed,<sup>10</sup> the *Harry Potter* series remains an example of contentious debate in current critical assessments of British cinema. A major concern involves the perceived intervention and potential domination by Hollywood studios in *Harry Potter's* production, exhibition and distribution. As Higson argues:

Inward investment films, where the bulk of the funding is coming from non-English sources, will therefore be controlled by non-English interests, and will often be medium-to-high-budgeted films that require blockbuster treatment at the point of distribution and exhibition, as with the *Harry Potter* franchise.<sup>11</sup>

In Higson's assessment, the dispersed, globalised funding of the *Harry Potter* series is considered in opposition to film production more typically associated with British cinema. The concern is that ultimate 'control' over the film's production is removed from national interests in pursuit of international investment and involvement. To understand how such factors impact on the perceived national ownership of *Harry Potter* as a cultural product, we need to understand the economic and industrial landscape of British cinema. According to Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street in *Cinema and State*, early British film policy was guided by a rhetoric which emphasised economic, as opposed to cultural, capital. Accrediting a film with British nationality was deemed important, however the 'criteria chosen for determining whether a film was "British" had relatively little to do with cultural characteristics' and instead was formulated against domestic labour representation.<sup>12</sup> Increased interest in the artistic, educational and cultural potential of cinema developed at pace after World War II. This was reflected in the foundation of organisations such as the Arts Council (1946) and the National Film Finance

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<sup>9</sup> The first *Harry Potter* film was released in the United States as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

<sup>10</sup> From the fourth instalment, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2005), onwards, British directors Mike Newell and later David Yates took over directing responsibilities.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Higson, *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s*, (London: I.B Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2011), p.27.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, *Cinema and State: Film Industry and Government 1927-1984*, (London: BFI, 1985), p.2.

Corporation (1948) which provided formal frameworks for state support of British cultural output.

The legislative ethos behind film production in the UK changed with growing concerns around the importance of national representation on screen. Government film policy has reflected this need to promote the social and cultural qualities of British film production. John Hill sums up this process in a recent article as follows:

the boundaries between the economic and cultural became increasingly blurred with the result that not only did ‘cultural’ policies increasingly come to rest upon economic justifications but also that ‘economic’ policies increasingly came to depend, both explicitly and implicitly, upon ‘cultural’ assumptions as well.<sup>13</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, UK film legislation certainly reflects the ‘blurring’ Hill describes, with policy documents stressing the importance of both cultural *and* economic impact. For example, the most recent Oxford Economics report on *The Economic Impact of the UK Film Industry*, published in September 2012, outlines the ‘many channels’ through which the industry makes a contribution to the UK economy. In addition to ‘direct impacts’ (employment within the sector), ‘indirect impacts’ (supported employment activity including the supply chain and other business expenditure) and ‘induced impacts’ (the spending activity of those employed by the film industry), the study also includes a ‘number of additional economic catalytic impacts’.<sup>14</sup> The economic effect of the UK film industry is therefore acknowledged across other areas such as tourism and cultural industries, with the added potential for further investment opportunities based on this close affiliation. The Oxford Economics report outlines how economic benefits experienced by the UK film industry are not limited to the employment of British nationals within the sector, but increasingly dispersed across a wider, socio-cultural

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<sup>13</sup> John Hill, ‘This is for the *Batmans* as well as the *Vera Drakes*: Economics, Culture and UK Government Film Production Policy in the 2000s’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, Vol. 9, Issue 3, 2012, p.337.

<sup>14</sup> Oxford Economics, *The Economic Impact of the UK Film Industry*, September 2012, p.17-18.

sphere.<sup>15</sup> In the period since the creation of the UK Film Council (UKFC),<sup>16</sup> films classified as either domestic features (DOM) or British co-productions (COP / ICP) need to adhere to definitions set out under Schedule 1 of the 1985 Films Act and later re-employed into guidelines established within the ‘Cultural Test’ (Appendix A). This system is designed to provide financial incentives such as public funding and tax relief to film-makers who produce a proportion of their films in the UK. However, the issues Higson outlines are clearly illustrated in the classifications and descriptors, where productions which qualify as ‘UK films’ under policy guidelines are often financed by international studios. In addition, the Cultural Test also allows some degree of flexibility for films not actually located in, or immediately connected to, the UK. As Hill contends:

this means that a policy in support of “the sustainable production of culturally British films” has entailed the provision of financially generous “state aid” to numerous big Hollywood productions such as the *Harry Potter* films, *Mr Bean’s Holiday*, *Prince of Persia*, *Hugo* and *Pirates of the Caribbean 4* (all of which passed the cultural test).<sup>17</sup>

This overview is significant because it highlights a distinct conflict of application. Despite Hill’s contention that *Harry Potter* is a ‘big Hollywood production’, and Higson’s argument concerning ‘controlled interests’, in terms of UK film policy and legislation the franchise is viewed as an unequivocal British cinematic success. In a recent report commissioned by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), *Harry Potter* was included as a major player in the ‘run of really good,

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<sup>15</sup> Examples of this trend and the associated economic benefits are discussed frequently in the mainstream press. According to an article by *The Independent* newspaper in 2007, Alnwick Castle in Northumberland ‘used as the location for the wizard school Hogwarts in the film adaptations of JK Rowling’s bestsellers, saw a 120% rise in visitor numbers following the release of the first film. The trend was also mirrored in other *Harry Potter* film locations including Gloucester Cathedral, where numbers rose by 50%’. Source: Arifa Akbar, “Film fans flock to UK locations”, *The Independent*, 27/08/2007 <Nexis UK, accessed 24/09/2014>

<sup>16</sup> The UK Film Council was a non-departmental body set up in 2000 by the Labour government to develop and promote the UK film industry. The organisation was abolished in March 2011 following decisions by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government, with many functions transferred to the BFI.

<sup>17</sup> Hill, ‘This is for the *Batmans* as well as the *Vera Drakes*: Economics, Culture and UK Government Film Production Policy in the 2000s’, p.350.

successful, British-made and British-based movies’, and notes its overall success at the box office, with the entire franchise earning ‘in excess of £440m at UK cinemas alone (4.7bn worldwide)’.<sup>18</sup>

The conflict of meaning surrounding ‘British cinema’ in terms of industrial or economic definition is compounded further when positioned within a cultural context. In Higson’s assessment of ‘inward investment’ practices, he argues that ‘the bigger the production [...] the more conventional and conservative the ideologies on display; smaller budgets tend to lend themselves much more readily to innovative representations of a more extensive range of social types’.<sup>19</sup> For Higson, *Harry Potter* provides a prominent case study because the popularity and success of the film series, both at home and more specifically abroad, is determined by the film’s commitment towards ‘an eminently bankable version of Englishness’.<sup>20</sup> This study does not intend to refute claims put forward in this assessment, particularly as the primary sources for this research also indicate a critical preference for emphasising the more conservative or nostalgic British appeal of the *Harry Potter* series. However, this contention would also suggest that *Harry Potter* is not reflective of Britain or the British people because it fails to engage with a diverse range of social representation. There are numerous complexities in this assertion, specifically around ideas concerning the perceived role of national cinema in conveying a specific evocation of national identity on screen.

Furthermore, this argument serves to problematise the types of films which are considered British; often to the point of exclusion. A recent example of this tendency can be found in James Leggott’s *Contemporary British Cinema: From Heritage to Horror*. This study provides an effective overview of current trends in British cinema with revisionist attention directed towards anti-realist films, such as *28 Days Later* (2002) and *Shaun of the Dead* (2005). However, Leggott claims that recent fantasy films including *Harry Potter*, *Nanny McPhee* (2005)

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<sup>18</sup> Department of Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS), *A Future for British Film: It Begins with the Audience*, January 2012, p.5.

<sup>19</sup> Higson, *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s*, p.29.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27.

and *The Golden Compass* (2007) have little ‘relevance to contemporary British society’ and should, instead, be assessed solely as ‘manifestations of global trends in the entertainment industry’.<sup>21</sup> Although Leggott does not outright dismiss fantasy films per se, the implicit suggestion is that films which share iconographical features associated with fantasy genre, have no tangible cultural, social or national ‘relevance’ to modern Britain. This argument therefore aligns concerns regarding international ‘control’, or ownership, of British film production with established ideas around aesthetics and national cinema. However, Leggott’s assertion in this respect is merely representative of the dominant critical discourse which continues to exclude certain genre films from assessments of British cinema. What this discourse also demonstrates is that to be considered ‘British’, a film is required to reflect or ‘mirror’ British society by providing a tangible commitment towards cinematic ‘realism’.

The historical tendency for British critics to place value on films which commit to ‘realism’ and authenticity is explored in John Ellis’ “The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the Cinema 1942-1948”. Ellis describes the 1940’s ‘quality film’ in terms of its close relationship with the British documentary tradition and also outlines the following characteristics: a strict adherence to coherent visuals, uninterrupted flow, restrained and sincere overtones and what he determines as maintaining the ‘truth of the real’.<sup>22</sup> Critics considered that ‘the moral imperative for the quality film is that of representing the world correctly and avoiding misrepresentation of place or character for the sake of convention or romance’.<sup>23</sup> The ‘quality film’ was thus required to represent the ‘real world’ on screen without embellishment or caprice. To illustrate how critics from the period assessed films which defied this commitment to ‘realism’, we can analyse critical response to the collaborative work of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. It could be argued that the films of Powell and Pressburger (under their production

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<sup>21</sup> James Leggott, *Contemporary British Cinema: From Heritage to Horror*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2008), p.9

<sup>22</sup> John Ellis, “The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the Cinema 1942-1948” in Andrew Higson, Ed. *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, (London: Cassell, 1996), p.66-93.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.79.

company name ‘The Archers’) represent the exact opposite of the ‘quality film’ as described by Ellis. In a retrospective study of their collective partnership, Andrew Moor states:

taken as a whole their output is notably experimental and thematically complex. Ideas recur throughout this work: journeys are undertaken or arrested; “quest” narratives imbued with a sense of fairy-tale; drama and spectacle interact in a constructive dialogue between the picaresque and the picturesque.<sup>24</sup>

Although popular with both domestic and international audiences during the 1940s and 1950s, their films were widely considered by British critics as ‘amongst the most reviled films of the period’.<sup>25</sup> The majority of critics at this time considered the films as projecting an uneasy mix of ‘realism’, melodrama and fantasy. As an example, in a contemporary review of *The Red Shoes* (1948), the respected film magazine *Sight and Sound* actively criticised the ‘ineffective’ narrative and ‘stupid plot’.<sup>26</sup> This source demonstrates how critics responded to the presence of fantastical sequences in *The Red Shoes*, which were considered a disruption of narrative cohesion and realistic characterisation: important features embedded within the British ‘quality film’ at this period.

As James Chapman contends in an article on *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) ‘the crux of many critics’ dissatisfaction [was] that for all its visual imagination and technical proficiency, its content was trivial, shallow and insignificant. It was [...] the antithesis of the ‘quality film’ as the term was understood within the contemporary critical discourse’.<sup>27</sup> Chapman not only provides an insight into how critics from the period responded to *A Matter of Life and Death* as a British film but also reveals how the critical establishment approached fantasy genre more generally around this time. He claims that critics were not ‘hostile’ to fantasy and that, despite ‘evidence of unease’ concerning ‘appropriate evaluative criteria’, what concerned critics more was the perceived absence of

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<sup>24</sup> Andrew Moor, *Powell & Pressburger: A Cinema of Magic Spaces*, (London: I.B Tauris & Co Ltd., 2005), p.3.

<sup>25</sup> Ellis, “The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the Cinema 1942-1948”, p.72.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur Vesselo, *Sight and Sound*, Vol.17, No.67, 1948.

<sup>27</sup> James Chapman, “The True Business of the British Movie?: *A Matter of Life and Death* and British Film Culture”, *Screen*, Vol.46, No.1, Spring 2005, p.40.

serious allegory or subtext found in such films.<sup>28</sup> This overview provides a series of critical benchmarks that British films were expected to attain to achieve ‘quality’ status at this particular moment in history. A commitment to the ‘prevalent realist aesthetic’<sup>29</sup> which reflected the everyday lives of British people was the principal signifier of ‘quality’, and films that deviated from ‘real world’ concerns were still expected to maintain serious intentions. When this contention is positioned within a contemporary context of British cinema, critical evaluations of ‘relevance’ are still determined by how much a given film engages with a true or ‘serious’ reflection on British society. What this would clearly suggest is that the preference towards ‘realism’ and the realist aesthetic still resonates strongly in critical discourse on British cinema today.

An example of this discursive approach can be seen in studies which explore the British critical reception of horror film. In Kate Egan’s extensive study on the ‘video nasties’, she argues that British critics continue to employ similar criteria of ‘quality’ in assessments of films. Egan contends that horror films are routinely ‘measured against a realist norm, where the logic and plausibility of narrative and characterisation always takes priority over the visual and spectacular’.<sup>30</sup> The emphasis in such critical assessments is typically drawn on a distinction between ‘realism’ and escapism which, as Egan argues, is reinforced by the dominant presence of Hollywood, and a more inherent fear of cultural ‘Americanisation’.<sup>31</sup> This tendency to view American culture, particularly Hollywood film, in a negative light provides a critical benchmark to assess varying standards of ‘quality’. In contrast to American film, British cinema is typically characterised by the following euphemisms: ‘understated, un-sensational, “true”, anti-fantastic,

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<sup>28</sup> Chapman notes that British films such as *The Halfway House* (1943) and *They Came to a City* (1944) were praised by critics for their use of ‘non-realist techniques and imaginary sequences’ to explore serious themes such as the social problems caused by war and commitment to the post-war Welfare State, p.40.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40.

<sup>30</sup> Kate Egan, *Trash or Treasure?: Censorship and the Changing Meanings of the Video Nasties*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p.27.

<sup>31</sup> Petley makes reference to the ‘visceral anti-Americanism’ and ‘deep-seated hostility to the commercialisation of [British] culture’ which took effect during the 1960s and 1970s, in “A Crude Sort of Entertainment for a Crude Sort of Audience: the British Critics and Horror Cinema”, p.38.



restrained, un-Hollywood: a set of qualities which echo ideas about national character'.<sup>32</sup> In this context, 'quality' is also defined by its perceived opposition and contrast to Hollywood 'tinsel', and this critical distinction underpins the main discourses explored in further detail throughout this study.

What this all comes back to are questions concerning the perceived ownership of British films and how certain genre films appear to be at odds with the aesthetic and production tendencies established during the formative years of British cinema, and maintained ever since. However, this series of critical distinctions would appear increasingly contentious and difficult to apply in the modern world of globalised film production and government legislation that actively encourages the involvement of international studios and financing. In addition, there are inherent complexities surrounding ideas of 'national character' and 'Britishness' which need to be addressed. Clearly, such concepts are vast and there are limitations which dictate how far this study can explore specific issues and concerns. However, what this overview of existing literature demonstrates is the need to be vigilant about assumptions or generalisations in critical assessments relating to British cinema, particularly the continued 'inclination to prioritise "respectable" films over popular genre cinema'.<sup>33</sup> Persistent and conflicting debates concerning the validity of *Harry Potter* as a British fantasy film provide compelling incentives for further research, not only on this isolated example but also across a wider spectrum of fantasy genre films. In addition, and perhaps most significant for this study, such prevalence of disagreement emphasises the importance of *discourse* and how different authorities with different interests approach the same topic: that is, what might constitute contemporary British fantasy cinema.

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<sup>32</sup> Moor, Powell & Pressburger: A Cinema of Magic Spaces, p.5.

<sup>33</sup> Leggott, *Contemporary British Cinema: From Heritage to Horror*, p.13.

## Fantasy Cinema and Critical Approaches to Genre

According to David Butler, cinema has witnessed a recent ‘golden age’ of fantasy film-making worldwide.<sup>34</sup> The popularity and success of film franchises such as *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings* (2001 – 2003) and *The Chronicles of Narnia* (2005 -), has also prompted renewed and engaged critical interest in fantasy genre.<sup>35</sup> This study acknowledges the need to understand theoretical work conducted in this area, and to assess shared similarities between generic tropes and iconographical features associated with fantasy genre to then understand how it might operate within a wider context of cultural and critical reception. Indeed, as a principal aim of this research is to determine extra-textual meaning(s) surrounding fantasy film, the issues and complexities associated with genre categorisation and labelling practices should first be addressed.

A key text in studies on fantasy genre is Tzvetan Todorov’s comprehensive *The Fantastic*, which offers a structural approach to examining formal and generic qualities. Todorov defines the fantastic as a ‘hesitation’ which exists in the real and imaginary world. He argues:

once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.<sup>36</sup>

Todorov contends that this ‘hesitation’ lies not just with the experiences of the fictional character depicted in the story but also with the reader who actively engages with the text. He claims that the fantastic ‘implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters [...] defined

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<sup>34</sup> David Butler, *Fantasy Cinema: Impossible Worlds on Screen*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), p.5.

<sup>35</sup> See Butler and also Alec Worley, *Empires of the Imagination*, (USA: McFarland & Company Inc., 2005); Katherine Fowkes, *The Fantasy Film: Wizards, Witches and Wonders: New Approaches to Film Genre*, (USA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); James Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, (Oxford: Berg, 2011); Jacqueline Furby and Claire Hines, *Fantasy*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), Frances Pheasant-Kelly, *Fantasy Film Post 9/11*, (USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) amongst others, for examples of studies dedicated towards fantasy cinema.

<sup>36</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, (USA: Cornell Paperbacks, 1975), p.25.

by the reader's own ambiguous perception of the events narrated'.<sup>37</sup> However, despite rigorous analysis of generic form, structure and references to reader involvement, Todorov's study is somewhat limited. By restricting definition to a few specific texts that he cites as definitive examples, Todorov overlooks the vast body of existing fantasy literature and his work remains explicitly ahistorical. As Rosemary Jackson contends, his analysis:

fails to consider the social and political implications [of literature]. Its attention is confined to the effects of the text and the means of its operation. It does not move outwards again to relate the forms literary texts to their cultural formation.<sup>38</sup>

Jackson's argument serves to extend Todorov's definition by considering the relationship between fantasy literature and cultural, social and political history, including aspects of psychoanalytical theory. This shifting focus on fantasy as a *mode* of writing, as opposed to a stable genre, opens up analysis beyond structuralism to include other literary forms. As Lucie Armitt concurs in a later study, there is a risk of 'critical redundancy' in attempting to contain fantasy within strict generic definition. She goes on to argue that 'where genre definitions tend to seal up texts, the fantastic opens them up to an ambivalence that must conspire against the formulaic'.<sup>39</sup> Both Jackson and Armitt emphasise the fluidity of fantasy which can be experienced beyond prescribed boundaries, although such observations are less obvious when applied to studies on fantasy cinema.

The fantasy film has only received significant critical attention throughout the last twenty years or so, and is consequently still in its relative infancy in terms of academic study. Published in 1989, James Donald's *Fantasy and the Cinema* provides one of the first major works dedicated to this subject.<sup>40</sup> However, the study focuses primarily on

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31.

<sup>38</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, (Oxon: Routledge, 1981), p.6.

<sup>39</sup> Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic*, (London: Arnold, 1996), p.33.

<sup>40</sup> James Donald, Ed. *Fantasy and the Cinema* (London: BFI, 1989) was designed as a reader for film students and includes an edited collection of essays which approach fantasy predominantly from semiotic and psychoanalytical standpoints.

fantasy in the context of the horror and science fiction film, and a coherent or rigorous assessment of fantasy genre remains elusive throughout. Donald identifies the issues associated with succinct definition in the introductory paragraph, claiming that fantasy can be applied to:

any forms of entertainment [and] broadened to that degree, the category of fantasy becomes virtually useless as a means of distinguishing between different types of film. So is it useful to attempt a definition of a cinematic genre of the fantastic in cinema at all?<sup>41</sup>

As Donald and his contributors do not offer a conclusive answer to this question at any point throughout *Fantasy Cinema*, it must be asked whether the generic borders of fantasy film are too malleable to establish distinct definition. This appears to be a perennial problem that has characterised subsequent critiques of fantasy film. Broad historical accounts commonly locate fantasy films into recognisable categories and tropes, such as the fairy-tale, epic quest narrative, surrealism and so forth. Common themes and iconography associated with fantasy cinema include: ‘spectacular journeys, hallucinations, malevolent entities, tireless heroes, magic, fearsome creatures, alternate realms and lands of the dead’.<sup>42</sup> However, whilst this list includes many of the generic tropes we might associate with fantasy fiction, the question raised by Donald concerning generic hybridity and overlap persists. As an example, *Star Wars* (1977) is recognisable to most viewers as science fiction due to its deep space setting and use of fictional technology such as death stars and lightsabers. However, the film’s epic qualities, hero’s quest theme, magic and mysticism, most obviously witnessed through the spiritual use of the ‘Force’, ‘serves to blur the line between science fiction and fantasy’.<sup>43</sup> This ‘blurring’ presents a significant problem when attempting to distinguish fantasy in relation to closely related genres such as horror, science fiction, musicals and the adventure film. As Steve Neale argues, ‘water-tight definitions’ are almost impossible to achieve because of ‘the

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<sup>41</sup> Donald, *Fantasy and the Cinema*, p.10.

<sup>42</sup> James Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, (Oxford: Berg, 2011), p.31.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.81.

propensity for multiplicity and overlap among and between these genres'.<sup>44</sup> The concerns raised by Donald thus continue to resonate in theoretical studies on fantasy cinema and they need to be addressed.

The issues of definition and categorisation are fundamental to understanding how genres operate more generally. Film theorists such as Neale and Rick Altman have outlined the problems associated with 'purely theoretical definitions of genre', arguing for a more concerted, socio-cultural approach to genre analysis and stressing the impact of critical discourse, industrial motivation and the importance of audience.<sup>45</sup> In *Film / Genre*, Altman contends that our understanding of film genre is complex and shaped by a multitude of culturally divergent interests which are often historically determined. He contends:

whatever intrinsic characteristics generic material may have had prior to its recognition as a genre, it is actively modified by those who pronounce the genre's name, describe its traits, exhibit it, reproduce parts of it, or otherwise make use of its potential [...] we must attend to the ways in which diverse genre users have placed texts in widely divergent contexts.<sup>46</sup>

This 'user-orientated approach'<sup>47</sup> to genre analysis emphasises how genre definitions can shift, dependent on the 'context' in which a film is categorised. This allows for a more concerted assessment of the *discursive processes* that influence, determine and ultimately *change* genre definitions over time. As Altman argues, 'any understanding of genre terminology must begin with the critics and compliers who constitute our major source of genre terms [...] only when a film is subjected to critical reception is its generic potential concretised and stabilised by reviewers'.<sup>48</sup> In applying this contention, critical reception performs a highly influential role in the genre labelling process. This is

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<sup>44</sup> Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p.92. In response to this, Neale discusses the 'fantastic' and the work of Tzvetan Todorov however does not offer rigorous exploration of fantasy genre and instead provides more extensive analysis of 'major genres' such as horror and science fiction.

<sup>45</sup> Rick Altman, *Film / Genre*, (London: BFI, 1999, 2009 Edition), p.9. Christine Gledhill also emphasises this point when she claims that genre is 'what journalists, critics, film scholars and publishing houses are interested in', in *Reinventing Film Studies*, (London: Arnold, 2000), p.226.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.98.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.99.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p.124-127.

significant when applied to the aims of this study because it reinforces the need to examine the ‘writing machine’ as an important form of discourse in the establishment of meaning(s) around fantasy. This approach to genre can also provide an alternative platform to explore the malleable boundaries associated with fantasy fiction as discussed. As James Walters contends in a recent study, there is vital work still to be done in this area, ‘given the multitudinous forms in which fantasy is manifested and played out in the cinema and given the relative sparseness of critical literature investigating the matter’.<sup>49</sup> In response to such assertions, this study investigates how fantasy is determined within a wider discursive sphere beyond the confines of theoretical application and analysis.

In addition, this ‘user-orientated approach’ towards genre categorisation provides an opportunity to conduct a more concerted investigation into critical negotiations relating to fantasy. At the core of existing genre scholarship, there is a series of oppositional signifiers which command how fantasy *should* be perceived: as a secondary impulse to ‘realism’. The concept of ‘verisimilitude’ determines the degree of ‘plausibility’ and ‘probability’ found within a given genre.<sup>50</sup> In *Genre and Hollywood*, Neale argues that:

the predominance of ideologies of realism in our culture tends to mean that, unless marked as high art, many avowedly non-realist genres are viewed as frivolously escapist, as “mere fantasy” and thus as suitable only for children or “mindless, irresponsible” adults’.<sup>51</sup>

Such determination has implications for non-verisimilitudinous genres such as fantasy; typically characterised as escapist and facile entertainment: ‘the lowbrow, popular, pulp, childish and lightweight poor relation of more highbrow, grown-up and serious forms based on the realist (mimetic) arts’.<sup>52</sup> There are implicit assumptions here that fantasy

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<sup>49</sup> Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, p.52. Mark Bould makes a similar claim when he refers to the ‘critical neglect of fantasy as a distinct genre from other theoretical perspectives’, in “The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things: A Tendency in Fantasy Theory”, *Historical Materialism*, Vol.10, Issue 4, p.52.

<sup>50</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p.35.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35.

<sup>52</sup> Jacqueline Furby and Claire Hines, *Fantasy*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), p.2. This contention also appears in studies of fantasy literature, for example Rosemary Jackson

cannot provide serious reflection of ‘real world’ concerns because of its escapist tendencies. Such debates are important for this study, because they resonate with critical approaches towards ‘realism’ and British cinema, as discussed. This contention also raises significant questions concerning cultural hierarchies and distinctions of ‘taste’. The argument that fantasy functions merely as escapist ‘entertainment’, ‘suitable only for children or “mindless, irresponsible” adults’,<sup>53</sup> devalues the active consumers of such texts. Whilst this study does not consider the relationship between fantasy fiction and fandom, the vast popularity of recent fantasy films such as *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* would appear to de-stabilise this position. As Kristin Thompson argues, the success of such films lies in their ability to command interest with ‘both children and adults’, outside their existing core fan base.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, critical distinctions around ‘suitability’ and ‘grown-up’ tastes are actively contested by the wider appeal of recent fantasy films witnessed across different age groups. Thompson also suggests that the cinematic connection with British fantasy literature provided a significant reason for this widespread appeal, and the issue of adaptation status is explored in further detail in later chapters. What this overview therefore demonstrates is that one of the main problems associated with theoretical approaches to fantasy genre is the assumption that attached evaluations of cultural value are pre-determined and *unchangeable*.

This study proposes that critical approaches towards fantasy genre are not actually fixed or static, but instead represent ‘discursive constructs whose functions and meanings can be modified, to varying degrees and for varying reasons, by different users in different contexts through time’.<sup>55</sup> To explore how this discursive approach to fantasy might change over time, this study draws on the work of Jason Mittell. In *Genre and*

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argues fantasy is typically dismissed by critics when compared with the ‘humane and more civilized practices of realistic literature’ in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, p.172; Lucie Armitt contends fantasy consistently attracts two negative constants: escapism and pulp fiction in *Theorising the Fantastic*, p.1.

<sup>53</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p.35.

<sup>54</sup> Kristin Thompson, “Fantasy, Franchises, and Frodo Baggins: *The Lord of the Rings* and Modern Hollywood”, *The Velvet Light Trap*, Number 52, Autumn 2003, p.45.

<sup>55</sup> Egan, *Trash or Treasure?: Censorship and the Changing Meanings of the Video Nasties*, p.6.

*Television*, Mittell highlights a tendency in existing scholarship ‘to treat genres as ahistorical and static, ignoring the ways genres shift and evolve meaning in relation to their cultural contexts’.<sup>56</sup> He contends that genre cannot be ‘tied to aesthetic and formalist paradigms’<sup>57</sup> and analysed in isolation because it forms an intricate part of cultural activity and practice. Drawing on Mittell’s argument, fantasy is subject to the same processes, dependent on the ‘cultural context’ in which it is applied and where it is announced. The outcome of such an approach would suggest that fantasy can develop new cultural meanings and appropriations over time. In a similar way, concepts such as high and low culture should not be considered as fixed, but instead subject to similar fluctuations. The decision to examine how fantasy operates as a ‘cultural category’<sup>58</sup> not only compliments the ‘user-orientated approach’ to genre by examining the discursive nature of categorisation practices, but also allows for a more trans-historical assessment of fantasy film. It acknowledges the important role performed by cultural processes, including the mass media, in the continued (re)definition, (re)interpretation and (re)evaluation of fantasy genre. This point is fundamental to the objectives of this thesis, which intends to interrogate the functions of the critical ‘writing machine’ as a prominent cultural institution operating within this discursive process. As a result, this study examines how critics (as ‘users’) apply labels to categorise ‘fantasy’. This includes an assessment of the meaning(s) around escapism and spectacle, pre-determined critical distinctions, and the instability of fantasy’s generic boundaries.

### **Summary**

By analysing existing scholarship in the areas of British cinema and fantasy genre, this study has identified an absence of literature which explicitly addresses and combines both fields. The potential reasons for this are certainly complex and complicated by disagreements concerning industrial practice, government policy, film aesthetics, genre distinctions and representations of ‘Britishness’ on screen. However, this overview

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<sup>56</sup> Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, p.5.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.



has also identified a persistent theme: the importance of discourse. By adopting a reception studies approach, this thesis investigates the discursive processes at work within the critical ‘writing machine’ and positions this research within a historical framework of analysis. In doing so, this study argues that to ascertain *how* and *why* such discourse has influenced and contributed to prevailing meanings around ‘British cinema’ and ‘fantasy genre’, the institutional functions and mechanisms inherent within the critical ‘writing machine’ need to be fully scrutinised.

## **Method**

This study has so far alluded to critical reception analysis as a useful methodological approach to facilitate exploring the aims and objectives of this research. The following section outlines how this analysis will be conducted and considers potential limitations or problems. Crucially, we need to understand what constitutes the critical ‘writing machine’ and determine what features will be examined within the context of this study. Petley’s article on the ‘lost continent’ of British film references the theoretical work of Christian Metz when describing the institutional ‘mechanics’ of cinema. Metz outlines the industrial processes associated with film production, distribution, exhibition and reception, arguing that the ‘cinematic writer’ performs a crucial role in determining the ‘oscillation between good and bad’ film, to the extent where ‘it is very often to exalt a certain cinema that another has been violently attacked’.<sup>59</sup> This theoretical position provides Petley with the framework to develop his central argument concerning critical preferences towards cinematic ‘realism’ in British film.

In a similar fashion to Metz, Petley determines the ‘writing machine’ as representing the ‘dominant critical discourse [...] be it weighty works of film history or the film criticism in the daily and Sunday press’.<sup>60</sup> This study therefore draws on Petley’s definition to analyse the output of the ‘cinematic writer’ as found within British newspapers. The decision to examine this specific function of the British press means that this research is focused on publications that appear

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<sup>59</sup> Christian Metz, “The Imaginary Signifier”, *Screen*, Vol.16, No.2, Summer 1975, p.21.

<sup>60</sup> Petley, “The Lost Continent”, p.100.

specifically within mainstream circulation. Other sites of film criticism which fall outside this category, such as magazines, television, radio or online sources, whilst referenced throughout, do not constitute the primary concern of this research. In addition, this study does not include publications which are not widely accessible by the British public. By creating these margins, this thesis attends to Petley's definition of film criticism as found within the written pages of the 'daily and Sunday press'. However, this study also recognises that the notion of a dominant 'writing machine' is problematic. As discussed, describing journalistic practices as a 'machine' creates an impression of a homogenous entity in which film criticism functions to provide collective and unanimous opinion. As demonstrated so far, this process is much more complex and subject to multiple and conflicting discourses 'whose functions and meanings can be modified, to varying degrees and for varying reasons, by different users [and] in different contexts'.<sup>61</sup>

To understand how these factors might influence and determine the output of the critical 'writing machine', this thesis draws on methodological approaches as conducted within historical reception studies and, specifically, the work of Egan and Barbara Klinger. By examining film reviews and associated publicity materials as historical 'documents', Klinger and Egan have explored the 'vivid array of meanings films may have and range of particular ideological functions they may adopt during the course of their public existence and circulation'.<sup>62</sup> Both have examined meanings associated with particular films or categories of films such as 'video nasties', and considered the impact of differing users in changing meanings at various times throughout history. In relation to critical discourse specifically, Egan and Klinger consider review and publicity materials as a form of 'social discourse' which 'informs the relation between film and spectator at [any] given moment'.<sup>63</sup> This emphasis on critical reception as 'social discourse' is significant for this study for the following reasons. Firstly,

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<sup>61</sup> Egan, *Trash or Treasure?*, p.6.

<sup>62</sup> See Egan, *Trash or Treasure?*, p.6 and Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the Films of Douglas Sirk*, (USA: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.xv.

<sup>63</sup> Klinger, *Melodrama & Meaning*, p.69.

this argument locates the theoretical ‘cinematic writer’ within a practical and ‘real world’ context; functioning as part of a wider institution that is not impervious to cultural, social and ideological influences. Secondly, this approach recognises the active relationship between ‘film and spectator’ as an important factor in this discursive process. This reciprocation not only emphasises the potential impact of film criticism on the individual’s perception and understanding of a given film, but also addresses how the interests and concerns of intended readerships can have an effect on critical discourse. This approach serves to re-assess the role of the ‘cinematic writer’, suggesting that he or she does not constitute a single, authoritative voice on a particular topic, and instead forms part of a negotiated discourse between critic, audience and film. As demonstrated in later chapters, this relationship is important to acknowledge, particularly when considering the public interest in major fantasy films such as the *Harry Potter* series.

Finally, by adopting a historical reception approach, this study also recognises the importance of the ‘given moment’. This allows for historical analysis of meaning(s) in relation to ‘specific times and social circumstances’.<sup>64</sup> This thesis will adopt a similar methodological framework to examine the critical ‘writing machine’ as a form of ‘social discourse’. In doing so, this study offers an alternative approach to the work conducted by Petley and Higson et al., principally because it investigates the critical ‘writing machine’ not as a fixed entity, but as a transient and fluid component which is informed and shaped by various cultural, social and ideological processes over time. This intervention thus expands on previous studies by providing a concerted analysis of how and why the British mainstream press operates as a major discursive site in the dissemination of meaning(s) at any ‘given moment’. This study recognises the potential for shifts in meaning(s) over time and considers how the critical ‘writing machine’ responded to extenuating social, cultural and political factors, such as the notable increase in popular adaptations from British fantasy literature, or the succession of

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<sup>64</sup> Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p.162-163.

successful, co-produced fantasy films in the period since 2001. In acknowledging the discursive disposition of the British press, this research attends to the symbiotic relationships that inform our understanding of what constitutes British fantasy and British cinema.

However, the British mainstream press presents a distinctly diverse and multifarious institution to investigate. As Mark Jancovich contends:

There are deep struggles not only *between* many of the media but also *within* specific media [...] examining a range of publications addressing a variety of readerships will reveal very different interests and preoccupations in any given film, and even clarify the contexts within which these publications are themselves meaningful as texts.<sup>65</sup>

This distinction is important to consider when analysing the functions and operations of media institutions. Jancovich delineates the varying and often conflicting approaches different publications perpetuate in their critical assessments of films. By drawing on this argument, this study considers how factors such as political, industrial and readership interests can affect not only the approach of the individual ‘cinematic writer’, as located within a single newspaper organisation, but also how this can change across a ‘range of publications’. Michael Billig provides further assessment of the ‘different interests and preoccupations’ which influence the newspaper industry in his work *Banal Nationalism*. Billig argues that the British mainstream press are divided into ‘three market groups’:

the ‘sensational tabloids’ - *Daily Star*, *Daily Mirror* and *Sun*, aimed principally at working class readers; the ‘respectable’ tabloids - *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*; and the ‘heavies’ or broadsheets - *The Times*, *Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Independent*, addressed at a middle-class audience [...] the terms ‘tabloid’ and ‘broadsheet’ refer to more than the size of the newspaper’s page: they refer to the paper’s own sense of its readership [and] the distinction between tabloid and broadsheet is not a political one, for it cuts across editorial commitments.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Mark Jancovich, “Genre and the Audience: Genre Classifications and Cultural Distinctions in the Mediation of *The Silence of the Lambs*”, in Mark Jancovich, Ed. *Horror, The Film Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2002), p.155.

<sup>66</sup> Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 1995, 2010 Edition), p.110.

Billig articulates how British newspapers are differentiated by readership, ideology and political allegiance. Indeed, the politicised nature of the British press means that a ‘conservative tabloid’, such as *The Sun*, may promote a very different ideological position when compared to a more ‘left of centre’ publication such as *The Guardian*.<sup>67</sup> In addition, this tendency is not restricted to news coverage and opinion columns, but filters through all aspects of the newspaper’s identity and therefore needs to be considered in critical assessments of the chosen films. The intention is to determine both sites of ‘struggle’ and agreement between newspaper critics, and consider evidence for discursive trends across the different press materials examined. This research therefore includes a ‘range of publications’, selected from the ‘market groups’ Billig outlines.

However, this study also recognises the need to examine newspaper publications beyond the London-based centre. This study therefore aims to investigate the British mainstream press as a national institution which also commands a whole range of regional and local interests. As Billig argues, ‘some papers publish separate, editorially independent editions [...] in the case of *The Mirror*, the Scottish equivalent has its own title - the *Daily Record*’.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have a separate press that operate alongside the national publications, which convey their own ‘interests and preoccupations’. Regional and local newspapers thus provide an insight into the concerns of local communities across the UK, which can impact on the critical reception of a given film.<sup>69</sup> As Raymond Williams outlines, local and regional newspapers are ‘produced for a known community [...] in contrast with most national newspapers, which are produced for a market interpreted by “mass” criteria’.<sup>70</sup> To understand how such processes might affect film reception practices, and the

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p.110-111.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p.111.

<sup>69</sup> Melanie Selfe argues this point effectively when she contends the need to ‘consider film critics as geographically and culturally located audiences who experience films as “professional” viewers’, in “Circles, Columns and Screenings: Mapping the Institutional, Discursive, Physical and Gendered Spaces of Film Criticism in 1940’s London”, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, Vol. 9, No. 4, October 2012, p.588.

<sup>70</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780 – 1950*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967), p.312.

variation between publications, this study draws on a range of newspapers extracted from different sections of the national, regional and local press. Although this approach presents certain complexities, particularly in terms of scale, this method allows for a more comprehensive investigation of publications which exist outside the parameters of London-based press organisations, and offers useful comparison and contrast to the national titles. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the newspapers selected for this study.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> This list includes most of the major national and regional newspaper titles published throughout England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. As demonstrated in later chapters, the local newspapers were selected due to their close production connections and associations with the chosen case studies.

<b>National Titles</b>	<b>Scottish, Welsh &amp; Northern Ireland Titles</b>	<b>Regional &amp; Local Titles</b>
<i>Daily Express</i>	<i>Aberdeen Press and Journal</i>	<i>Birmingham Evening Mail</i>
<i>Sunday Express</i>	<i>Belfast News Letter</i>	<i>Derby Evening Telegraph</i>
<i>Daily Mail</i>	<i>Belfast Telegraph</i>	<i>Eastern Daily Press</i>
<i>Mail on Sunday</i>	<i>Daily Record</i>	<i>Hertfordshire Mercury</i>
<i>Daily Star</i>	<i>Glasgow Evening Times</i>	<i>Leicester Mercury</i>
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	<i>Scotland on Sunday</i>	<i>Norwich Evening News</i>
<i>Sunday Telegraph</i>	<i>South Wales Echo</i>	<i>Oxford Mail</i>
<i>The Financial Times</i>	<i>South Wales Evening Post</i>	<i>The Evening Standard</i>
<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Glasgow Herald</i>	<i>The Oxford Times</i>
<i>The Independent</i>	<i>The Scotsman</i>	<i>The Metro (London)</i>
<i>Independent on Sunday</i>	<i>The Sunday Herald</i>	<i>The Northern Echo</i>
<i>The Daily Mirror</i>	<i>The Western Mail</i>	
<i>Sunday Mirror</i>	<i>This is Gwent</i>	
<i>The News of the World</i>	<i>Wales on Sunday</i>	
<i>The Observer</i>		
<i>The People</i>		
<i>The Sun</i>		
<i>The Times</i>		
<i>The Sunday Times</i>		

**Table 1**  
**Selected Newspaper Titles**

This study therefore stresses the need to examine critical response within a more widely dispersed national context in order to fully comprehend the ‘different interests and preoccupations’ associated with press criticism. This approach provides a more concerted analysis of *where* the discourse originates from and how this might influence assessments of films.

In order to interrogate how and why critics apply meaning(s) around ‘British cinema’ and ‘fantasy genre’, this study locates the ‘cinematic writer’ in its most pluralistic sense. By expanding on this concept, this thesis also draws on the work of Thomas Austin, who has explored the diverse and competing critical readings attributed to popular Hollywood films. In *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences*, Austin investigates not only film reviews but also the activities of ‘other cultural commentators’.<sup>72</sup> He goes on to describe the actions of the press as follows: ‘newspapers [...] trade in star images, background stories, gossip and controversy’.<sup>73</sup> Critics also refer to films in press commentaries on lifestyle, morality, culture and society, thus mobilising intertextual discourses in the process. Austin emphasises the tendency for newspapers to produce written ‘commentaries’ about films, which circulate through related articles or features. He contends that this approach can influence public perceptions of a given film, particularly when considered across a wider reception context. This focus on ‘intertextual discourse’ provides a useful framework for this study, to explore a broad range of critical sources, extending analysis beyond the confines of the individual film review by including other forms of press ‘commentaries’ such as feature articles, opinion columns and travelogues. In applying this assessment of newspaper practices, the theoretical ‘cinematic writer’ assumes a more multifarious role, identified across a variety of different discursive platforms.

This approach also attends to the ‘agenda-setting’ functions of the critical press. Klinger contends that this process determines how a film is ‘perceived in the culture at large and [also] signifies the cultural

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<sup>72</sup> Thomas Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences: Selling and Watching Popular Film in the 1990s*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.7.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.



hierarchies of aesthetic value reigning at particular times'.<sup>74</sup> Whilst Klinger's assertion is focused specifically on the importance of film reviews, this idea can be extended to consider how the 'agenda-setting' process functions across other sites of criticism. For example, in an assessment of how cultural value and 'legitimacy' is determined by the print media, Jancovich argues:

reviews and feature articles set agendas for audiences by drawing attention to what is taken to be interesting or noteworthy about a film. They also reflect the differing attitudes of differing sections of the press [by focusing] on differing features and [employing] differing notions of cinematic value'.<sup>75</sup>

Jancovich includes an explicit consideration of both reviews *and* articles in outlining 'agenda-setting' practices, emphasising significant variation between different sections of the press. By adopting a similar approach towards the 'cinematic writer', this study addresses how value distinctions relating to British cinema and fantasy genre are formulated and applied across a wide range of print journalism. By positioning this research within a historical context, this also allows for analysis of press reviews and articles to determine political, social and cultural attitudes circulating at any particular 'moment' in British history. To explore how such factors might impact or influence journalistic practices, this thesis also draws on the work of Ernest Mathijs. In an extensive study of British press reaction to *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003), Mathijs argued that to 'ensure topicality', newspapers displayed a distinct tendency to 'submit to the lures and appeals of either the product or the cultural context it attains to'.<sup>76</sup> This evidence is significant, as it suggests that critical discourse permeated beyond isolated film reviews and into other 'commentaries' which both reflected and engaged with heightened public interest in the fantasy film franchise. Indeed, the impact and 'public presence' of *The Return of the King* was so extensive that the 'story of the release [...] had become as important as stories about the

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<sup>74</sup> Klinger, *Melodrama & Meaning*, p.70.

<sup>75</sup> Jancovich, "Genre and the Audience: Genre Classifications and Cultural Distinctions in the Mediation of *The Silence of the Lambs*", p.155.

<sup>76</sup> Ernest Mathijs, "Reviews, Previews and Premieres: The Critical Reception of *The Lord of the Rings* in the United Kingdom", in Ernest Mathijs, Ed. *The Lord of the Rings: Popular Culture in Global Context*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), p.123.

film’, with numerous articles focused on the film’s British star appeal.<sup>77</sup> This position resonates with arguments put forward by Jancovich and Austin because it emphasises the need to consider how reviews and articles establish or mobilise ‘intertextual discourses’ and also how extenuating factors have the potential to influence the ‘agenda-setting’ process.

This study adopts a similar approach to determine evidence of ‘agenda-setting’ practices across a selection of reviews *and* articles sourced from across the spectrum of the British mainstream press on a national, regional and local level. This primary material has been collated from two main sources: online (by searching specific newspaper-owned websites) and via Nexis UK (a database which includes archive press materials).<sup>78</sup> Utilising both search engines provided the vital tools required to trace relevant press materials. For each film, up to forty pieces of critical material were examined, before twenty were selected.<sup>79</sup> This approach was necessary to enable clear research boundaries and also limit the potential for overwhelm in the amount of source material provided as evidence.<sup>80</sup> The research was conducted by searching principal terms such as ‘British’ and ‘fantasy’, to determine a broad selection of source material. However, this study also attends to what Mathijs describes as ‘mentions’: words or phrases that contain meaning in the form of ‘references, allusions, opinions, indications or implications’.<sup>81</sup> In Mathijs’ study of *The Return of the King*, his analysis of the British mainstream press was conducted through a combination of qualitative and quantitative survey. Whilst this study does not provide a quantitative account, the proclivity of direct and indirect ‘mentions’ relating or ‘alluding’ towards a notion of British fantasy film will be assessed throughout. In doing so, this approach provides a close investigation of

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.120.

<sup>78</sup> For an example of similar Nexis-led research within a critical reception studies context, see Martin Barker’s “The Reception of Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*”, in *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, Vol.9, Issue 2, November 2012, p.58-73.

<sup>79</sup> This figure was substantially less for the final chapter due to the lack of press reviews and articles found in relation to *Franklyn* (2008) and *Malice in Wonderland* (2010).

<sup>80</sup> All the primary sources quoted in this study are fully referenced with citations including where and when they were accessed as footnotes and also in the bibliography.

<sup>81</sup> Mathijs, “Reviews, Previews and Premieres: The Critical Reception of *The Lord of the Rings* in the United Kingdom”, p.127.

how specific terms are appropriated meaning(s) by the British press. The importance of the 'given moment' is also attended to by analysing a period in cinema and cultural history, when fantasy films witnessed global resurgence and increased popularity with audiences worldwide. This research therefore engages with the 'golden age' Butler describes and is organised around a ten year period from 2001 to 2011.<sup>82</sup>

By employing a historical reception studies approach, this thesis provides an intervention towards existing studies of the critical 'writing machine' by locating the theoretical 'cinematic writer' within the practical context of contemporary journalism. The application of a more discursive approach towards critical reception processes also supports certain decisions established during the initial stages of this research, particularly around film selection. As this study is structured around a methodological framework which investigates how the critical 'writing machine' determines meaning(s) relating to British fantasy film, textual definitions of fantasy cinema were effectively negated from such decisions. Instead, this study employs a 'user-orientated approach' to consider how audiences, critics, industry professionals and policy decision-makers categorise films. This method supports Altman's argument, as to fully understand the processes at work in film categorisation practices, particularly genre definitions, we need to consider the motivations of those who 'describe its traits, exhibit it, reproduce parts of it, or otherwise make use of its potential'.<sup>83</sup> Drawing on Altman's contention, the film selection process attended to the following set criteria. Firstly, the chosen films received UK theatrical release in the period 2001 to 2011. All published critical material and other related sources examined thus correspond with this timeframe. Secondly, the selected films adhered to established definitions of UK film and fantasy, assigned by a range of different 'users'. This required extensive research through various online archives and resources. These included popular 'user-organised' and content-driven websites such as

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<sup>82</sup> Butler describes 2001 as a 'pivotal year' for fantasy in Western cinema due to the release of the first *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* films, in *Fantasy Cinema: Impossible Worlds on Screen*, p.5.

<sup>83</sup> Altman, *Film / Genre*, p.98.

IMDB and Wikipedia, which are augmented by the general public and informed by film industry sources and statistics. The films also subscribed to definitions set out by professional ‘users’ from both non-departmental organisations such as the British Film Council and other, public-funded agencies (the BFI and UKFC). The chosen films therefore adhere to official criteria of domestic film production as established in Schedule 1 of the Films Act 1985 (amended by the Films ‘Definition of a British Film’ (No.2) Order 2006), which also includes guidelines for ‘official Bi-Lateral Co-production Agreements’. In assessing the period before the establishment of the UKFC Cultural Test in 2007, all definitions for certified UK films / official co-productions were sourced directly from the BFI online archive and the UKFC Statistical Yearbooks.<sup>84</sup> In the period since 2007, all chosen films conformed to descriptors set out within Cultural Test criteria.<sup>85</sup> The selected films share common production traits such as the utilisation of domestic locations, and the employment of British actors, crew and personnel. This comprehensive approach to film selection also allowed for greater discrimination between the fantasy films selected for this study. For example, whereas the *Harry Potter* series is included because the films subscribe to this criterion, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001 - 2003), although referenced throughout, is not considered a relevant case study because the films are not certified as either UK or official UK co-productions.<sup>86</sup>

However, as demonstrated, there are inherent issues associated with the inclusion of film titles certified as ‘co-productions’ with international studios located outside the UK. The contestation on this particular topic underpins the initial reasons for embarking on this project, as a main objective is to challenge certain set assumptions regarding

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<sup>84</sup> See Appendices B & C for full lists of relevant films that matched this criteria. Source: BFI <[www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/film-industry-statistics-research/statistical-yearbook](http://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/film-industry-statistics-research/statistical-yearbook)> Accessed online 05/02/2014

<sup>85</sup> See Appendix A. The official descriptors of the Cultural Test offered useful guidelines for this research. All films selected after 2007 conform to the points-based categories of ‘cultural content’, ‘cultural contribution’, ‘cultural hubs’ and ‘cultural practitioners’ to qualify as British films or co-productions.

<sup>86</sup> Although based on a British fantasy novel by J.R.R Tolkien and featuring many British actors, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001 - 2003) was certified as a USA/New Zealand co-production and filmed exclusively in New Zealand by director Peter Jackson.

national cinema. Indeed, this process of film selection draws attention towards inconsistencies in applications of British film production. For example, this study includes *Looking for Eric* (2009), a film directed by Ken Loach, whose extensive cinematic and televisual output is regarded as committed to ‘realism’, constituting ‘both a reflection of, and a conscious reflection on, the prevailing social and political condition of Britain’.<sup>87</sup> However, *Looking for Eric* is certified as a British / French / Italian / Spanish co-production and features Eric Cantona, a retired international footballer and French celebrity, in a prominent star role.<sup>88</sup> In addition, despite Loach’s directorial associations with British social realism, this film is included because it is categorised as ‘fantasy’ on reference sites such as IMDB.<sup>89</sup> The reasons why ‘users’ and critics categorised the film in this way informs chapter four of this thesis. *Looking for Eric* would thus appear to de-stabilise critical arguments concerning both the ‘control’ and aesthetic characteristics typically associated with domestic film production. This distinction is significant because it reinforces the main concerns of this study: it highlights the need to examine how and why films are perceived as ‘British’, what extenuating factors influence this response and also whether such discourse changes when examined across different applications of fantasy. By analysing where the ‘cinematic writers’ agree (and where they disagree), this study aims to locate what features might potentially constitute British fantasy cinema.

In creating this method, this study advocates a ‘user-orientated’ and discursive approach towards film selection. The reasons for this emphasise the absence of an existing canon of British fantasy cinema which made the process of film selection particularly difficult. In previous studies, historical reception analysis has been utilised to investigate the reputations of film stars or directors, as seen in works by

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<sup>87</sup> Stuart Laing, “Ken Loach: Histories and Contexts”, in George McKnight, Ed. *Agent of Challenge and Defiance: The Films of Ken Loach*, (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1997), p.11.

<sup>88</sup> The listed production companies for *Looking for Eric* (2009) include Sixteen Films, Film Four, Canto Bros., Wild Bunch, France 2 Cinema, BIM Distribuzione, Tornasol Films, Les Films du Fleuve. The film was certified as a ‘UK / European’ co-production in 2010. Source: BFI <[www.bfi.org.uk/film-industry/british-certification-tax-relief/co-production](http://www.bfi.org.uk/film-industry/british-certification-tax-relief/co-production)> Accessed online 30/01/2014. See Appendix B.

<sup>89</sup> Source: IMDB <[www.imdb.com/title/tt1242545/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1242545/)> Accessed online 30/01/2014

Klinger and Janet Staiger, or films with common studio / production qualities, such as Austin's study on 1990's Hollywood cinema. In contrast, the films selected for this study share no tangible affiliations between directors, cast members, studios, production values or investment and financial costs. Instead, the films are only connected by two qualities: at a particular 'moment' in recent history, they were categorised by a range of disparate 'users' as 'British' and 'fantasy' films. As a result, this research shares close methodological similarities with Egan's work on 'video nasties' because it examines 'British fantasy film' specifically as a 'cultural category'; defined and shaped by an 'accumulation of meanings and associations' prescribed by different discursive sites over time.<sup>90</sup> However, whilst Egan investigated the cultural fluctuations associated with the 'video nasty', a recognised category or generic term already in circulation, this study covers films which do not currently form part of an established or recognised canon of British fantasy cinema. To fully appreciate the potential complexities involved with such an approach, particularly decisions around film selection, the following section focuses on a film which was selected as a suitable case study during the early stages of research and later discounted. By including this film as an illustrative example, this section helps to clarify the wider aims and objectives of this study, and also reinforce choices relating to methodology.

**'We're not heroes, we're from Finchley!': The British Appeal of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* (2005)**

During the initial stages of research, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* (2005) was selected as a suitable film for analysis. The methodological approach was still in relative infancy at this time, the intention being to utilise theoretical applications of fantasy genre to determine an appropriate selection of case studies. *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* subscribed to generic tropes and iconography associated with fantasy film, such as: 'spectacular journeys, malevolent entities, tireless heroes, magic, fearsome creatures [and] alternate

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<sup>90</sup> Egan, *Trash or Treasure?*, p.9.

realms'.<sup>91</sup> In addition, the film included many features associated with Britain and 'Britishness'. The film was adapted from the classic British fantasy novel by C.S Lewis and is largely sympathetic to the original text.<sup>92</sup> Most of the characters are played with 'stiff upper lips'<sup>93</sup> by a host of British actors, including Jim Broadbent and James McAvoy. The film is located deep within the British countryside during the outbreak of World War Two, and the fantastical world of Narnia is distinctly Anglicised. Consequently, the film was considered a relevant case study to include in the initial chapter for this thesis, which examines critical response towards the popularity and success of fantasy adaptations from British literature. Press reviews and articles which circulated around the film's UK cinematic release in December 2005 also reinforced this British connection. The majority of critics commented on the close similarities between Lewis' original novel and the film adaptation. For example, the *Sunday Mirror* described how the film 'manages to capture the magic and charm of the story',<sup>94</sup> whilst *The Independent* stated the film appeared 'rather fustily English in a way that feels true to Lewis'.<sup>95</sup> In both these reviews, and across other examples sourced from the period, the film was appropriated in terms of its 'Britishness'. The British press ran feature articles about leading British cast members and the film was consistently described as 'old-fashioned' and 'charming', qualities emphasised by its perceived close fidelity with the original British text.

*The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* appeared to provide a useful case study because of this enthusiastic press response. However, after consulting criteria and guidelines set out in government policy documents, it transpired that the film was officially certified as a US / New Zealand production.<sup>96</sup> As a result, the film is thus more closely

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<sup>91</sup> Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, p.31.

<sup>92</sup> The film adaptation was reportedly given official approval by Lewis' stepson Douglas Gresham, who also received a producer credit for the film. Source: Kim Newman, *Sight & Sound*, Vol. XVI, Issue 2, 2006, p.47-48.

<sup>93</sup> Johnny Vaughan, "Narn Better", *The Sun*, 09/12/2005 <Nexis UK, accessed 08/02/2012>

<sup>94</sup> Mark Adams, "Magical Narnia", *Sunday Mirror*, 04/12/2005 <Nexis UK, accessed 01/02/2012>

<sup>95</sup> Jonathan Romney, "You're not in Finchley anymore", *Independent on Sunday*, 11/12/2005, <Nexis UK, accessed 01/02/2012>

<sup>96</sup> The film is a joint co-production by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox and Walt Disney Studios and was mostly filmed on location in New Zealand. Source: UKFC Statistical Yearbook 2005 -

aligned with *The Lord of The Rings* as both films appear to showcase strong cultural connections with Britain, yet neither was produced or located within the UK in a similar way to *Harry Potter*, as an example. On reflection, *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* was first selected because it *appeared* to represent a British film, albeit a collaborative and internationally-funded co-production. This was also supported by the media response which circulated around the film's UK theatrical release. Industry definitions thus provided a highly useful framework to determine the fantasy films included in this study. The films had to be at least *made* within the UK and officially certified by other 'users' as either 'British' or British 'co-productions'. This reduced the potential overwhelm in the number of fantasy titles included for this research. By setting such parameters, this also allowed for a more structured and robust approach towards film selection, rather than applying restrictive theoretical definitions or relying on personal judgement alone.<sup>97</sup> In addition, all the selected films can be traced and sourced via the same method, by accessing online sites and resources listed in footnotes, bibliography and appendices.<sup>98</sup>

Although *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* is exempt from the final analysis, the film still provides an extremely useful case study to assess what qualities the critical 'writing machine' prescribe as a 'British fantasy'. Institutional definitions merely highlight the complexities associated with the national ownership of the film. For example, *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* was still included in the UKFC Statistical Yearbook for 2005 – 2006, where it was described emphatically as 'based on UK story material',<sup>99</sup> and as a major movie with a 'distinctive local flavour'.<sup>100</sup> What this would suggest is that, despite the international and globalised status of the film's production, *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* was still *perceived* as maintaining close cultural associations with Britain and links to national

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2006, p.17 <[www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/film-industry-statistics-research/statistical-yearbook](http://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/film-industry-statistics-research/statistical-yearbook)> Accessed online 05/02/2014

<sup>97</sup> As a personal aside, it should be noted that I didn't consider including *V for Vendetta* (2005) as a case study for Chapter Five principally because I didn't think of it as fantasy.

<sup>98</sup> See Appendices B and C.

<sup>99</sup> UKFC Statistical Yearbook 2005 - 2006, p.16.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.



heritage. This thesis does not intend to reconcile competing or conflicting opinions between the various institutions that define or categorise the national identity of fantasy films. However, what this overview alludes towards is the importance of discourse and how professional organisations, with very different interests, ideologies and audiences, attend to such concepts. The critical ‘writing machine’ also performs a significant and influential role in this discursive process. By analysing critical response towards *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, it is clear that the film’s perceived ‘Britishness’ was determined by specific features and themes that will go on to inform the following chapters of this study.

### **Chapter Overview**

The most prevalent themes, repeated across the press materials examined in relation to *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, include: the film’s faithful adaptation from the original British novel, the sincere evocation of British location and period, and its ability to ‘capture the magic and charm’ of the children’s fantasy world of Narnia.<sup>101</sup> In response to this evidence, the first three chapters are organised around these specific features. The fantasy films selected as case studies also reflect the ‘inward investment’ status of the *Narnia* film. The later chapters include films which offer more complex generic identities and this provides an opportunity to explore films which are not typically considered as fantasy. Indeed, a principal aim is to expand on existing debates around genre, and this approach allows consideration towards films which may not be categorised as fantasy in other critical circles. The appearance of such films in this study means that they were contextualised as ‘fantasy’ at some ‘moment’ in the history of British press criticism. This thesis intends to trace patterns of discursive relations and scrutinise cumulative meaning(s) associated with fantasy genre and national cinema identified across the source materials.

The first chapter explores the recent proliferation of films adapted from British fantasy literature. This study begins with an overview of a

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<sup>101</sup> Vaughan, “Narn Better”, *The Sun*, 09/12/2005

survey conducted by the BBC in 2003 entitled the ‘Big Read’, which set out to determine the nation’s favourite book of all time. The dominance of fantasy novels in the top ten illustrates the increased popularity of fantasy fiction around this time, particularly books that were written by British authors. Critical response to the ‘Big Read’ provides a useful route into debates surrounding the cultural ‘pulling power’ and ‘topicality’ associated with recent major fantasy adaptations. Drawing on Klinger’s approach, the aim is to determine how British literary association influences the ‘cultural hierarchies of aesthetic value’<sup>102</sup> applied to fantasy film adaptations. This study argues that fantasy films which have a close connection with British fantasy literature secure more critical attention and serious appraisal. In addition, whilst acknowledgement of the original source text is important, this chapter also finds that the same critical impulses apply to film adaptations with much less literary recognition. This analysis thus contends that the suggested connection with literary heritage provides the benchmark of quality and ‘aesthetic value’ applied to the fantasy film. What this chapter finds is evidence of a more general, highly emotive response towards representations of ‘Britishness’ in fantasy adaptations from British literature.

Drawing on evidence of heightened subjectivity and personalised response to fantasy adaptations, chapter two investigates the role of the adult ‘cinematic writer’ in assessments of fantasy films which are child-orientated, or involve strong investments in childhood. This analysis attends to the argument that children’s cinema is ‘often overlooked in critical discussions’, due to negative connotations and prejudice regarding cheap production values and trivial narrative themes.<sup>103</sup> This study interrogates this contention, particularly given the recent upsurge in popularity of child-orientated fantasy fiction across different age groups and notable ‘advances in CGI [and] superior budgets’ allocated to fantasy film productions.<sup>104</sup> This chapter therefore argues that the children’s fantasy film commands renewed critical engagement and interest because

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<sup>102</sup> Klinger, *Melodrama & Meaning*, p.70.

<sup>103</sup> Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, p.74.

<sup>104</sup> Butler, *Fantasy Cinema: Impossible Worlds on Screen*, p.82.

it appeals to both children *and* adults, with an aim to determine what specific features dictate such response. Issues relating to fantasy genre are also scrutinised in this assessment, specifically the contention that fantasy is ‘suitable only for children and “mindless, irresponsible” adults’.<sup>105</sup> By analysing critical appropriations of ‘taste’, narrative themes, domestic star appeal and applied meanings behind the definition of ‘crowd-pleaser’, this chapter interrogates how critics negotiate the wider public appeal of the children’s fantasy film and how the ‘Britishness’ associated with such films performs a crucial factor in such assessments.

The findings from this analysis locate the fantasy films distinctly in terms of their British appeal. The following chapter develops themes of cultural and national ‘specificity’ by exploring critical response to evocations of period and ‘place’ in the fantasy film. The first section considers the idea that fantasy offers an alternative version of reality; a ‘world divorced from our own’.<sup>106</sup> The intention is to determine how critics discuss depictions of not only a fictionalised, but a fantasised Britain on screen, and whether the otherworldly locations serve to complicate the perceived ‘Britishness’ of such films. This chapter considers previous work conducted on location and landscape in British cinema, and the importance of ‘place’ as represented on screen. This analysis is focused less on special effects and computer technology used in altering landscapes, and more on the perceived ‘blurring’ between ‘real’ and imaginary locations, as discussed across the reviews and articles. This study argues that press response to ‘place’ in the fantasy film is largely determined by the critic’s personal recognition of, or emotional connection towards, specific locations depicted on screen. Furthermore, this chapter considers how and why such response is often connected to themes of nostalgia and romanticism, and what potential factors motivate the critical press to engage with this particular evocation of ‘Britishness’. The second section develops this idea by investigating regional and local press response towards actual locations used during

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<sup>105</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p.35.

<sup>106</sup> Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, p.6.

film production. This study questions why ‘place’ is considered so important in localised press coverage of the films and how this could be reconciled with the fantastical and imaginary landscapes depicted on screen.

The ‘blurring’ between the ‘real’ and imaginary provides a central concern of chapter four, which focuses on theoretical distinctions between ‘realism’ and fantasy in more detail. This presents a shift from earlier chapters because it includes press response to films which are considered the antithesis of the ‘inward investment’ film. Instead, the films are more typically associated with domestic film production due to their ‘smaller budgets’ and aesthetic qualities. In addition, the films provide contrast by their depiction of adult-orientated content. This chapter contends that the presence of fantasy in such films challenges critical expectations, particularly around genre labelling practices and more traditional understandings of national cinema and aesthetics. This study utilises Charles Barr’s argument that British critics prefer films which maintain ‘a certain kind of realistic surface [...] an “everyday” verisimilitude’.<sup>107</sup> The aim is to examine critical response to films which appear to be located within the ‘real’ world and to be concerned with the lives of ‘real people’, but then depart, often quite dramatically, from ‘everyday “realistic” expectations’.<sup>108</sup> *Looking for Eric* (2009) and *My Talks with Dean Spanley* (2008) provide useful case studies principally because they are not considered fantasy genre films in the same meaning as a film such as *Harry Potter*; however they are still categorised as ‘fantasy’ on public websites such as IMDB and Wikipedia.<sup>109</sup> Drawing on Barr’s contention, both films ‘fall between categories’ and should therefore provide some evidence of critical contention. A central aim is to investigate how fantasy is provided meaning within critical discourse when applied to British films which appear to deviate from the expected ‘realist’ norm.

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<sup>107</sup> Charles Barr, “*Straw Dogs, A Clockwork Orange and the Critics*”, *Screen*, Vol.13, No.2, 1972, p.21.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>109</sup> Wikipedia describes *Dean Spanley* as a ‘New Zealand and British comedy drama with fantastic elements’. Source: <[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dean\\_Spanley](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dean_Spanley)> *Looking for Eric* is categorised as a ‘fantasy film’ on IMDB <[www.imdb.com/title/tt1242545/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1242545/)> Accessed online 30/01/2014

The final chapter moves from an exclusively socio-cultural perspective to examine the perceived greater economic impact of fantasy films produced and located within the UK. This includes analysis of the differences in critical approaches towards low-budget, independent British film when compared to the ‘inward investment’ fantasy blockbusters. The intention is to determine how the British mainstream press respond to fantasy films which pertain to different ends of this industrial and economic spectrum of film production. This final chapter is structured into three sections. Section one considers the graphic fantasy *V for Vendetta* (2005), a UK / US co-production which, again, adheres to the ‘inward investment’ film, ‘where the bulk of the funding is coming from non-English sources’.<sup>110</sup> Critical response will be analysed in terms of the extrinsic qualities *V for Vendetta* is perceived to contribute, not only to the domestic film industry but also towards the wider cultural landscape and the national economy. Section two examines press response to *Franklyn* (2009), an independent British fantasy film which covers the low-to-middle range of UK film investment. This analysis considers issues such as limited distribution opportunities, problems with genre hybridity and categorisation, and the questions concerning wider public appeal.

The final section explores critical response to the low-budget, British independent film *Malice in Wonderland* (2010). This film is the antithesis of the blockbuster, ‘inward investment’ fantasy film production. Issues of genre hybridity and complexities around budget, spectacle and aesthetics again informed press response towards *Malice in Wonderland*. This final section also draws on previous findings relating to location and ‘place’ to examine local press coverage of the film. By analysing how the film was received across both national and local reception practices, the aim is to determine the reciprocal relationship between different sections of the critical ‘writing machine’ in discussing issues of associated economic and cultural impact. This chapter argues that the critical negotiations of fantasy films as an important, dynamic and relevant genre are determined by how closely the films represent national interests and

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<sup>110</sup> Higson, *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s*, p.27.

concerns. This chapter intends to unpack and determine what this press response might tell us about wider issues relating to economic investment and British film production. The final conclusion draws these findings together to assess the cultural and cinematic place of British fantasy.

### **Summary**

By analysing the discursive properties associated with the critical ‘writing machine’, this research provides significant intervention to previous work conducted in this area of film studies because it examines the functions and processes involved in determining how and why dominant discourse is established and maintained. This is important if we are to interrogate whether contemporary film criticism continues to “write” British cinema ‘into film cultural memory as a realist cinema’.<sup>111</sup> This research adopts a historical reception studies approach to scrutinise the actual operations of the critical ‘writing machine’ and consider what factors relating to British culture, society, politics and industrial economics underpin such critical assessments. In doing so, this study contends that the polemics established by film scholars, such as Higson and Petley, et al., have shifted in recent years due to an influx of fantasy films created, produced and located within the UK. Whilst this research does not propose that this has resulted in a complete reversal in how the British critical establishment attend to ingrained concepts associated with national cinema and domestic film production, the findings reveal a complex set of meanings which would suggest a revised approach is required. This study contributes to this continued debate by concluding what this critical discourse potentially means for contemporary British fantasy film in terms of a recognised generic, cultural and cinematic identity.

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<sup>111</sup> Higson, “Critical Theory and British Cinema”, p.91-93.

## Chapter One

### The Rise and Rise of British Fantasy Adaptation

A year-long survey, commissioned in 2003 by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and entitled the 'Big Read', set out to determine the nation's best-loved novel of all time.<sup>112</sup> The results, from close to one million people,<sup>113</sup> placed fantasy genre firmly at the top of the table and included *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* by J.K Rowling, *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman and *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R Tolkien.<sup>114</sup> The predominance of fantasy fiction in this survey is notable, particularly as the 'Big Read' was conducted during a period of substantial growth in films adapted from British fantasy literature. The first two film instalments of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) and *The Two Towers* (2002) had achieved overwhelming worldwide recognition and popularity and the final film, *The Return of the King*, was highly anticipated for a Christmas holiday release in December 2003. Film adaptations of Rowling's *Harry Potter* series were also well underway by this time, with both *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (2001) and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (2002) released to global box office success. The first instalment of Pullman's award-winning trilogy, *Northern Lights*, was also in the process of studio talks for a feature film adaptation.<sup>115</sup>

The BBC's 'Big Read' demonstrates the heightened level of public awareness, interest and engagement in British fantasy novels and film adaptations which was prominent at this time. Higson highlights the recent proliferation of film adaptations from British literature more

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<sup>112</sup> Source: <[www.bbc.co.uk/arts/bigread/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/bigread/)> Accessed online 02/02/2012

<sup>113</sup> Source: <[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Big\\_Read](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Big_Read)> Accessed online 02/02/2012

<sup>114</sup> The BBC listed the top five nominated books as follows: 1. *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R Tolkien; 2. *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen; 3. *His Dark Materials*, Philip Pullman; 4. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Douglas Adams; 5. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, JK Rowling.

<sup>115</sup> Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials* received the 'Carnegie Medal' for children's literature and won the prestigious 'Whitbred Book of the Year' in 2001. The first adaptation, *Northern Lights*, received theatrical release in 2007 as *The Golden Compass* to reflect the US title. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was released as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in the US for similar reasons.

generally when he describes the ‘pulling power and global cultural presence of [such] fiction, especially in the period since the publication of the first *Harry Potter* novel and its adaptation.’<sup>116</sup> Higson also contends that, whilst more prevalent in recent years, this is not a new phenomenon and instead symptomatic of the ‘close and dynamic relationship between the English novel and the cinema, in both the highbrow and the middlebrow sections of the market, and for both established classics and contemporary novels’.<sup>117</sup> The propensity of feature film adaptations from English or, in a wider context, British fantasy literature witnessed throughout the last decade is notable, providing an example of a cinematic trend that has continued to enjoy public interest and acclaim both at home and abroad. This chapter intends to interrogate this ‘close and dynamic relationship’ by examining how the critical ‘writing machine’ responded to recent British fantasy adaptations, specifically within the context of their perceived ‘pulling power’ and ‘cultural presence’ as British films.

This study argues that to understand what is meant by the ‘cultural presence’ of British fantasy adaptations, we need to examine wider discourse surrounding such films. This approach allows significant insight by analysing how fantasy adaptations are ascribed culturally specific meaning within a domestic reception context. Consequently, this work stands apart from the theoretical approach often found in film adaptation studies which is typically concerned with the transference of material across different texts, particularly in relation to issues of fidelity with the original source text. In contrast, this chapter does not intend to analyse critical perceptions of the perceived differences or similarities between novels and adapted films in any significant detail. In addition, this study does not provide comparative analysis between such texts, focusing instead on the meaning(s) established by the critical reception of fantasy film adaptations within the British mainstream press. However, despite this deviation in methodological approach, adaptation theory still offers a useful paradigm, particularly when applied to debates concerning

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<sup>116</sup> Higson, *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s*, p.99.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p.101



the cultural ‘value’ of cinematic adaptations. In his extensive work on the relationship between literature and film, Robert Stam argues that film adaptations are commonly referred to in ‘extremely judgmental, proliferating terms that imply the film has performed a disservice to literature [...] their drift seems always to be the same – the book was better’.<sup>118</sup> Linda Hutcheon also addresses this issue in *A Theory of Adaptation*:

in both academic criticism and journalistic reviewing, contemporary popular adaptations are most often put down as secondary and derivative [...] even in our postmodern age of cultural recycling, something – perhaps the commercial success of adaptations - would appear to make us uneasy’.<sup>119</sup>

Both Stam and Hutcheon, amongst others,<sup>120</sup> identify significant critical negativity towards adaptations, particularly films which are considered popular or commercially successful. This contention is extremely relevant when analysing critical response towards the continued success of films adapted from British literature, as discussed by Higson. Specifically, this provides a useful framework to scrutinise press reaction towards British fantasy film adaptations to determine how critics engaged with highly popular and successful texts in terms of their perceived cultural value. The evidence collated from the sources would suggest that issues such as popularity, ‘pulling power’ and distinctions of ‘taste’ appear to have a significant, and at times often contradictory, effect on press response towards the films, dependent on when and, crucially, in what *context* the adaptations are assessed.

The importance of context is considered throughout this chapter and the first section is dedicated towards examining British press reaction to the BBC’s ‘Big Read’ survey results. By including contemporary British press response to the ‘Big Read’, this chapter therefore adheres to the method developed for this study and commands a more

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<sup>118</sup> Robert Stam, *Literature Through Film: Realism, Magic and the Art of Adaptation*, (USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p.3.

<sup>119</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p.2-3.

<sup>120</sup> Brian McFarlane also maintains ‘newspaper and journal reviews almost invariably offer comparison between a film and its literary precursor’, in *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.3.

comprehensive analysis of national press discourse which circulated during this period of renewed and engaged public and media interest in British fantasy fiction. This analysis draws on Staiger's idea of the 'event'<sup>121</sup> by examining critical interpretations of the survey at a particular 'moment' when the 'Big Read' results were announced by the British media. The sources demonstrate the 'uneasiness' Hutcheon outlines, as critics deliberated over the perceived popularity and commercial success of the film adaptations as having a direct influence on the public vote. The importance of the journalist as 'cultural gatekeeper' is discussed in a consideration of how and why critics apply 'cultural hierarchies of aesthetic value'<sup>122</sup> to both the fantasy novels and film adaptations listed in the survey results. The significance of context is also scrutinised by analysing how the British mainstream press responded to the 'Big Read' as a survey commissioned and conducted by the BBC. This point is later revisited in a summational assessment of how critical 'interpretations' can change when applied within a different context and the potential reasons for such variation.

The findings from this initial section inform the following case study assessments of two films adapted from British fantasy literature: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (2001) and *Nanny McPhee* (2005). The intention is to determine how the films were received by the British press in terms of their 'cultural presence' as British fantasy films. Issues identified from press reception towards the 'Big Read' survey, such as populist and commercial appeal and the general 'pulling power' of British literary adaptations, are examined alongside an assessment of subjectivity and how this approach can influence the overall tone of a given review or article; occasionally with dramatic effect. The potential reasons for this approach are assessed by drawing on Mathijs' notion of 'topicality' and the tendency of newspapers to 'submit to the lures and appeals of either the product [film adaptation] or the cultural context it

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<sup>121</sup> Staiger describes an 'event' as: 'a set of interpretations or affective experiences produced by individuals from an encounter with a text or set of texts within a social situation', in *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, p.163.

<sup>122</sup> Klinger, *Melodrama & Meaning*, p.70.

attains to'.<sup>123</sup> British press response towards Rowling's *Harry Potter* series provides a marked illustration of this process in action, particularly the media frenzy which accompanied the UK cinema release of *The Philosopher's Stone* in 2001. As Andrew Collins described in a contemporary review, the film was not only an eagerly anticipated film adaptation but also part of a much wider 'cultural phenomenon'.<sup>124</sup> The 'agenda-setting' functions of the national press are also foregrounded in a comparative analysis with *Nanny McPhee*. As with *Harry Potter*, the film is similarly adapted from a series of established children's fantasy literature.<sup>125</sup> However, *Nanny McPhee* did not command the same level of media attention and the source materials offer only brief commentary, or complete ignorance, towards the film's adaptation status. The differences in critical approach towards both films will be considered throughout, however it is worth re-emphasising the need to address 'topicality' beyond an individual film review in order to fully determine wider discursive trends.

Drawing on works by Jancovich and Austin, this analysis examines a wide selection of press material to determine how 'topicality' functions and changes across different 'products' and within different contexts, and the varied appropriations of cultural value applied as a direct result. Finally, this chapter aims to demonstrate the critical 'pulling power' of *The Philosopher's Stone* and *Nanny McPhee*, specifically as British fantasy films. This study interrogates how the national press performed a prominent role in establishing connections and associations which emphasised the films' 'Britishness', both on immediate textual readings of the films and also through intertextual references. The reasons why the British mainstream press addressed both films in this manner and the suggested outcomes of this approach are scrutinised throughout. In relation to *The Philosopher's Stone*, such critical response is particularly significant, given the film's prominent 'inward investment'

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<sup>123</sup> Mathijs, "Reviews, Previews and Premieres: The Critical Reception of *The Lord of the Rings* in the United Kingdom", p.123.

<sup>124</sup> Andrew Collins, *Radio Times* <[www.radiotimes.com/film/ytmr/harry-potter-and-the-philosophers-stone](http://www.radiotimes.com/film/ytmr/harry-potter-and-the-philosophers-stone)> Accessed online 13/02/2012

<sup>125</sup> The film is based on the *Nurse Matilda* children's novels published in the 1960s by British author Christianna Brand. Emma Thompson adapted the screenplay with a change of title for the film release.

status as discussed, and the persistent debates concerning the true ‘Britishness’ of the *Harry Potter* film franchise. The remaining chapter seeks to determine how the critical ‘writing machine’ contributed towards such discourse and whether the ‘pulling power’ of the films was influenced not only by ‘topicality’, but also, more emphatically, by their perceived ‘cultural presence’ as British fantasy films.

### **Critical Response to the BBC’s ‘Big Read’ Survey**

As discussed, the BBC’s ‘Big Read’ was commissioned to engage the British public in determining the nation’s favourite novel. The survey provided the ‘biggest single test of public reading taste’<sup>126</sup> to date and was accompanied by a marketing campaign headed by British celebrities, politicians and media figures such as William Hague, John Humphreys and the gardening expert Alan Titchmarsh, amongst others, who ‘championed’ their favourite novels in a series of mini broadcasts featured on the BBC throughout the autumn of 2003.<sup>127</sup> Whilst the ‘Big Read’ appeared to offer an enterprising opportunity for democratic and representative public opinion, the survey came under substantial press scrutiny and criticism. However, such concern was not founded on issues of wider public accessibility, or the social and political demographics of BBC viewers who actively responded to the survey, or even the production values associated with ‘event’ television. Instead, the main criticism centred on the final survey results and the perceived sensationalist approach adopted by the BBC in discussions and debates around populist literature. This was most clearly targeted towards novels which had received subsequent adaptation since publication. Applying Hutcheon’s contention, popular and commercially successful film adaptations were considered as ‘secondary and derivative’<sup>128</sup> when compared with the original novels. However, for recent fantasy films such as *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* this approach was complicated by the source texts, which were framed by critics in a

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<sup>126</sup> John Ezard, “Tolkien runs rings round Big Read rivals”, *The Guardian*, 15/12/2003  
<[www.theguardian.com/media/2003/dec/15/bbc.books](http://www.theguardian.com/media/2003/dec/15/bbc.books)> Accessed online 02/02/2012

<sup>127</sup> Source: <[www.bbc.co.uk/arts/bigread/bookchampions.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/bigread/bookchampions.shtml)> Accessed online 02/02/2012

<sup>128</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, p.2-3.

similarly negative context. The following analysis examines what cultural, social or political factors influenced such critical assessments and considers how distinctions of cultural value and ‘taste’ informed more negative appropriations from certain sections of the British mainstream press.

In an article by John Ezard in *The Guardian* newspaper, the ‘Big Read’ survey results were announced as follows:

Colin Firth in wet underpants was no match for Peter Jackson's hulking cyber-monsters [...] In a final dominated by titles whose profiles were raised by recent film or television tie-ins, a poll totalling half a million people at the weekend voted Tolkien's epic trilogy of struggle above Jane Austen's comedy of love and manners.<sup>129</sup>

This article firmly establishes a causal link between the ‘Big Read’ survey results and recent film and television adaptations. This can be seen from the opening line, whereby the adaptation is given priority over the original novel. This approach not only creates a humorous and eye-catching introduction to the main piece (citing actor Colin Firth’s infamous ‘wet underpants’ sequence in the BBC’s 1995 television adaptation of Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice*) but also demonstrates the degree to which successful adaptations ‘determine the perception and marketing of literary works’.<sup>130</sup> The impact of ‘recent film and television tie-ins’ is demonstrated in Ezard’s article, which creates an artificial ‘grudge match’ between the televised adaptation of Austen’s novel and the recent film version of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. In this statement, the notable absence of a film title, replaced by the director’s name ‘Peter Jackson’, highlights the ‘public presence’ which *The Lord of the Rings* franchise commanded at this time. The meaning behind ‘Peter Jackson’s hulking cyber-monsters’ therefore takes on further significance as it evokes not only the technical prowess of the film’s advanced CGI and special effects, but also wider cultural dominance associated with the film’s global popularity and success.

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<sup>129</sup> Ezard, “Tolkien Runs Rings Round Big Read Rivals”, *The Guardian*, 15/12/2003

<sup>130</sup> Eckart Voigts-Virchow, Ed. *Janespotting and Beyond: British Heritage Retrovisions since the Mid-1990s*, (Germany: Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 2004), p.12.

Ezard's comments also reinforce the 'perception' that the 'Big Read' both reflected and encouraged public interest in recent big screen fantasy adaptations.

This discourse can be identified across other critical sources from the period. For example, in an article by Nick Britten in the *Daily Telegraph*, the 'Big Read' was described in the following context:

[...] while the BBC's 'Big Read' campaign has undoubtedly reawakened interest in the classics, it is sales of videos and DVDs that have soared [...] It was promoted as a way of encouraging people to watch less television and read more, but according to Amazon it has, if anything, led us to spend more time in front of the small screen.<sup>131</sup>

This response by Britten is clearly situated from a position of moral concern, adopting the role of 'cultural gatekeeper', 'dedicated to close examination of cultural products, the relationship of products to their contexts and their social roles'.<sup>132</sup> This can be seen in the connections established between the 'Big Read' and wider cultural and social interests. Whilst the initial intentions of the 'Big Read' are acknowledged and even congratulated by the 'reawakened interest' in some literary genres, the prominent concern is that the survey ultimately failed to engage people to read more books; a moral prerogative from Britten's perspective. In similarity with Ezard's comments, Britten identifies a causal relationship between the 'Big Read' survey results and the current status and popularity of adaptations. Britten cites the increase in DVD sales on the Amazon website and also includes statistics from the online booksellers as evidence of this trend. The applied meaning behind this opinion is clear: the adapted texts represent an inferior 'cultural product' when compared to the original novels. This statement displays distinctions of quality and 'taste' around the perceived low cultural value of the visual medium (citing the dismissive 'small screen') and the 'secondary and derivative' nature of adaptations. This opinion projects a conservative and negative assessment of the 'Big Read' survey results,

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<sup>131</sup> Nick Britten, "Big Read? I'd rather sit down and watch my favourite book", *Daily Telegraph*, 13/12/2003, <Nexis UK, accessed 02/02/2012>

<sup>132</sup> Mathijs, "Reviews, Previews and Premieres: The Critical Reception of *The Lord of the Rings* in the United Kingdom", p.123.

with criticism directed towards the BBC for ‘dumbing down’<sup>133</sup> literature and ‘encouraging’ inappropriate cultural behaviour.

This article by Britten in the *Daily Telegraph* demonstrates how the role of the critical commentator can operate as a public voice of authority on social and moral matters. Colin McArthur considers this tendency in *British Film Reviewing: A Complaint* where he suggests that the ability to determine hierarchy amongst cultural artefacts or products is ‘one of the major sources of the reviewers’ hidden power’.<sup>134</sup> In similarity with Klinger’s contention, McArthur argues that ‘display[s] of taste and consumer guidance’<sup>135</sup> can be identified across the spectrum of the mainstream press and is most concentrated in the quality broadsheets. Although McArthur’s work is focused on film reviewing practices, his analysis can be extended to a more general assessment of how the British press functions and operates. The opinion piece offered by Britten in the broadsheet newspaper the *Daily Telegraph* is indicative of this ‘consumer guidance’ approach, as the article is formulated around distinctions of cultural value and ‘taste’, designed to engage reader sympathy and agreement. The negative discourse which dominated press reaction towards the ‘Big Read’ was thus informed by a perceived failure of the survey to ‘encourage’ people to ‘read more’, and the wider implications concerning the BBC’s corporate responsibility as a public service broadcaster.

This tendency was most prominent in the conservative broadsheet and middle range tabloids which used the ‘Big Read’ as a public platform to voice their concerns. For example, John Mortimer announced the survey results in the *Daily Mail* as follows:

And the winner of this literary quest for the most popular book of all time? *The Lord of the Rings*: a three volume story set in a never-never land of meaningless fantasy that is by turns portentous and embarrassingly jokey [...] We’ve become

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<sup>133</sup> Britten, “Big Read? I’d rather sit down and watch my favourite book”, *Daily Telegraph*, 13/12/2003

<sup>134</sup> Colin McArthur, “British Film Reviewing: A Complaint”, *Screen*, Vol.26, No.1, 1985, p.80.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p.81.

immersed in the world of television adaptations, videos and DVDs, and we have lost the habit of reading truly great fiction.<sup>136</sup>

In similarity with Britten's article, which utilises the collective 'us' to emphasise the issues associated with spending 'more time in front of the small screen', this piece also offers a reflection on wider societal trends, with the added lament that 'we've become immersed' in adaptations which are considered inferior by both their 'secondary' status and visual medium. By expressing such opinion, the comments by Mortimer and Britten not only reinforce 'cultural hierarchies' but also signpost this as an important moral concern. This approach exemplifies the arguments expressed by McArthur and Klinger, as the articles function as public platforms on which to valorise literature over film or television adaptations. In doing so, the general public are criticised for voting in novels which have recently been adapted. However, the articles also reveal a tendency to distinguish between different types of literary genre alongside the general dismissals of adapted texts. This can be seen in Britten's piece, which emphasises the importance of 'classic' literature, and is foregrounded more emphatically by Mortimer who contends that *The Lord of the Rings* is 'meaningless', 'jokey' and does not constitute 'truly great fiction'. Mortimer is implicit in his contention that fantasy is 'frivolously escapist'<sup>137</sup> and facile entertainment when compared to aesthetic realism, and in a later extract from the article compares Tolstoy's *War and Peace* with Tolkien's novel, which in contrast 'does not reveal much about the reality of our lives'.<sup>138</sup> This distinction is significant because it demonstrates critical appropriation and segregation between fantasy and 'classic' (or realist) literature.

Consequently, if we accept that the critical reception of films such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* is influenced by their 'secondary and derivative' adaptation status we also need to consider how their pre-existing and recognised labelling as fantasy influenced such media response. Certainly, the most pressing concern for some

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<sup>136</sup> John Mortimer, "Bored of the Rings", *Daily Mail*, 16/12/2003 <Nexis UK, accessed 27/01/2012>

<sup>137</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p.35.

<sup>138</sup> Mortimer, "Bored of the Rings", *Daily Mail*, 16/12/2003



commentators, particularly within the more conservative press, was the prominent presence of fantasy film adaptations in the ‘Big Read’ survey and the potential implications of this result. As Mortimer goes on to contend, ‘far too many people have lost touch with the best literature and part of this must be down to the way we are being taught’.<sup>139</sup> In this statement, the national education system receives substantial criticism for advocating ‘meaningless’ fantasy literature such as *The Lord of the Rings* as opposed to promoting and teaching realist ‘classics’. The ‘consumer guidance’ role is again foregrounded here, appealing to *Daily Mail* readers who might sympathise with the critical sentiment expressed towards the current educational policies of the incumbent Labour government in political power at this time.

This sample of press reaction towards the ‘Big Read’ is significant because it demonstrates multi-layered critical discourse that existed well beyond the remit of the public survey itself. Such commentary associated the seemingly arbitrary (individual book preference) to more general and ideological concerns about the current state of the nation. For some critics, this presented an opportunity to attack not only the recent rise of ‘secondary and derivative’ film and television adaptations, but also the popularity of ‘meaningless’ fantasy novels which were considered actively promoted and endorsed by the BBC survey over ‘classic’ literature. This response illustrates how critics, particularly within the more conservative press, performed ‘displays of taste’ which applied and reinforced ‘cultural hierarchies of aesthetic value’ associated with different textual forms. Crucially, the findings also suggest that, despite the recognised intentions of the BBC to encourage more reading, the survey did not achieve its initial objective because it was ‘dominated’ by ‘escapist’ fantasy texts that had witnessed recent success as major film adaptations, thus influencing the final results. The press negativity which followed the ‘Big Read’ campaign actively criticised the BBC for ‘promoting’ such texts, with added celebrity endorsement, as opposed to scrutinising or questioning the cultural value of the most popular novels chosen by the general public. Consequently, this intense criticism could

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<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*

also be interpreted as a collective reaction by the British press against the perceived populist bias of the BBC as a public service broadcaster. In the absence of reflective debate by the BBC, the national press assumed the role of cultural commentator to discuss the cultural, social and political implications of the survey results. This evidence is significant because it highlights important issues which need to be considered throughout the remaining chapter. Critical distinctions between adaptation and novel appear to be compounded by the low cultural value applied to fantasy texts. *The Philosopher's Stone* and *Nanny McPhee* therefore provide useful case studies to assess whether this critical discourse was also prominent in press coverage of each film. Issues of adaptation status and genre will be assessed against the moral concerns articulated by the individual critic and newspaper. In doing so, the importance of context is foregrounded to scrutinise differences or trends in press criticism which might impact on the final findings.

### ***Harry Potter and the Great British Cultural Phenomenon***

The British mainstream press response to the 'Big Read' highlights the popularity and success of fantasy film adaptations witnessed in the period since the early 2000s. In particular, the UK cinema release of *The Philosopher's Stone* in November 2001 coincided with enthusiastic public interest and extensive coverage in the national media. Expectations for the first film adaptation of the *Harry Potter* series were high amongst devoted fans of the book and this level of public anticipation, both in the UK and abroad, provided an opportunity for the media to stir further excitement and interest in the film.<sup>140</sup> This is demonstrated in Jonathan Romney's review for the *Independent on Sunday*, who claimed:

it doesn't matter what I say about *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, arguably the most critic-proof film ever. If I told you not to bother, you wouldn't listen. If I urged you to see it – well, chances are you've already stumped up for last weekend's advanced screenings.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> The *Harry Potter* series has currently sold over 450 million novels worldwide, making it the most successful book franchise of all time. Source: Wikipedia <[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry\\_Potter](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Potter)> Accessed online 10/06/2012

<sup>141</sup> Jonathan Romney, "Resistance is Futile – the magic is just too strong", *Independent on Sunday*, 18/11/2001, <Nexis UK, accessed 08/02/2012>

This statement by Romney is notable because there is an implicit assumption here that *everyone* had at least some familiarity with, expectancy of, and interest in the adaptation. The comment: ‘the most critic-proof film ever’ emphasises this point, suggesting that his critical opinion is essentially void and cannot be contained by the heightened public interest in everything *Potter*-related. This sentiment is perhaps unexpected, given the negative connotations surrounding fantasy genre, as discussed in critical response towards the ‘Big Read’, and more general issues concerning the appeal of children’s fantasy for adults. However, Romney’s article provides an example of how the British mainstream press responded to *The Philosopher’s Stone* around this time. The reasons for such a positive approach towards the film emphasises the enormous ‘pulling power’ the *Harry Potter* franchise witnessed during this period with domestic audiences. Critics and cultural commentators in the mainstream British press responded to this public interest, building momentum to actively promote and heighten anticipation around the forthcoming film release. Drawing on Mathijs, the following analysis examines how the ‘lures and appeals’ of the *Harry Potter* ‘phenomenon’ influenced and contributed towards press response. The ‘close and dynamic relationship’ between the original novel and film is also assessed in determining the cultural ‘pulling power’ of *Harry Potter* as a British fantasy adaptation.

Whilst the role of the film critic is, arguably, to ‘entertain, advise and stir’ the reader,<sup>142</sup> towards ‘what is worthwhile in the week’s releases’,<sup>143</sup> British press reviews for *The Philosopher’s Stone* reveal a particularly heightened subjective engagement with the film. This is most prominent in critical discussions around fidelity. Instead of receiving intense criticism for being ‘secondary and derivative’ to the original text, which might be expected given the popularity of the literary series, *The Philosopher’s Stone* was assessed in a much more positive and congratulatory manner. Critical reviews from the time were in general

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<sup>142</sup> Philip French, “The Historical Context”, in John Boorman and Walter Donahue, Eds., *Projections 8: Film-makers on Film-making*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1998), p.12.

<sup>143</sup> McArthur, “British Film Reviewing: A Complaint”, p.79.

agreement that the film represented a ‘faithful adaptation of JK Rowling’s novel’,<sup>144</sup> with ‘utter subservience to the written word [and] shrewdly respectful’.<sup>145</sup> This response would suggest that most adult critics were familiar with *Harry Potter* and consequently reacted to the film with highly subjective readings and appropriations. Hutcheon contends that such reactions are typical and indicative of audience readings of fantasy texts. She argues that fantasy adaptations allow for a greater level of subjective interpretation than other forms of literary adaptation because ‘although our imaginative visualisations of literary worlds are always highly individual, the variance among [audiences] is likely even greater in fantasy fiction than in realist fiction’.<sup>146</sup> This consequence may result from the fact that fantasy offers a re-created world, or series of magical events, that are often not directly comparable to our real lives and accordingly the imagination takes precedence to formulate understanding, comprehension and meaning.<sup>147</sup> Whilst this is not to suggest that critical assessments are opined in the same way as the casual cinema viewer and accepts that press reviews and articles constitute constructed texts, created for specific purposes and intentions, the sources indicate that many critics responded to the film with highly engaged recognition. For example, in a review by Dominic Mohan in *The Sun*, the film was described as follows:

Somehow, the film-makers have perfectly recreated my mental pictures of Gringotts Bank, Hogwarts School and the Dursleys. Everything is exactly how I imagined it – something that so rarely happens in film adaptations of books [and] as with the books, you will find yourself transported into another world. I didn’t want this movie to end and I don’t know how I’m going to be able to wait for the sequels.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Christopher Tookey, “Magical, Hogwarts and All”, *Daily Mail*, 16/11/2001, <Nexis UK, accessed 27/01/2012>

<sup>145</sup> Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 16/11/2001  
<[www.theguardian.com/film/2001/nov/16/jkjoannekathleenrowling](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2001/nov/16/jkjoannekathleenrowling)> Accessed online 27/01/2012

<sup>146</sup> Hutcheon claims that the visual recreation of the *Harry Potter* ‘Quidditch’ match on screen means ‘I will never be able to capture my first imagined versions again’, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, p.29.

<sup>147</sup> Todorov also argues that involvement with a fantastical literary text requires ‘an integration of the reader into the world of the characters [a] world defined by the reader’s own ambiguous perception of the events narrated’, in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, p.31.

<sup>148</sup> Dominic Mohan, “It’s Pure Magic”, *The Sun*, 05/11/2001 <Nexis UK, accessed 27/01/2012>

The comments by Mohan reveal a keen recognition of successful fidelity with the original text and a personal engagement with the *Harry Potter* universe, as seen by the emphasis on ‘my mental pictures’ and how the film projected ‘everything [...] exactly how I imagined it’. This highly subjective response not only corresponds with Hutcheon’s theory on viewer involvement with fantasy adaptations, particularly the idea of being ‘transported into another world’ where ‘everything’ is recognised and appropriated on an individual level, but also highlights some interesting questions concerning the designated ‘function’ of a film review.

In particular, there are potential issues for any readers not familiar with *Harry Potter*. The description of the film offered by Mohan is extremely exclusive, referencing specific locations (‘Gringotts Bank’; ‘Hogwarts’) and characters (‘the Dursleys’) without any further explanation or emphasis. As a result, the review appears to ignore the ‘advice’ provision associated with film criticism and instead focuses, almost exclusively, on Mohan’s personal response to the film. The review omits any objective assessment of narrative, fails to expand on observations of characters, locations and events, and is more akin to a diary entry, rather than a professional article on a new film release, ending with the final flourish: ‘I just wish I was 11 again’.<sup>149</sup> Whilst this informal use of language and tone is perhaps typical of critical discourse found in populist, tabloid British newspapers such as *The Sun*, what Mohan’s comments reveal is a ‘display of taste and consumer guidance’<sup>150</sup> aimed at a specific target audience: the adult *Harry Potter* fan. Mohan’s review appeals to readers of *The Sun* who have prior knowledge and appreciation of the *Harry Potter* novels. The intention is to ‘entertain’ and ‘stir’ fans of the *Harry Potter* series into excitement about the forthcoming film (‘as with the books, you will find yourself transported into another world’). Consequently, this emotive and subjective critical response not only provides a personal reaction to the diegetic qualities of *The Philosopher’s Stone*, in terms of fidelity with the

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<sup>149</sup> Mohan, “It’s Pure Magic”, *The Sun*, 05/11/2001

<sup>150</sup> McArthur, “British Film Reviewing: A Complaint”, p.81.

original text, but also demonstrates the cultural ‘pulling power’ of the film adaptation. Another example of such discourse can be seen in a contemporary review by film critic Jonathan Ross in the *Daily Mirror*:

Sometimes I really love this job. This week sees the release of [*The Philosopher’s Stone*], a movie that I’ve been looking forward to all year and which manages to live up to my very high expectations [...] my kids were begging me to take them to see it again the very moment it ended. And you know what? I can’t wait either!<sup>151</sup>

In similarity with Mohan’s review, the sense of personal anticipation and expectation is displayed by the use of language and tone: ‘I’ve been looking forward to’ and ‘I can’t wait’. Ross also demonstrates similar prior knowledge of the *Harry Potter* novels and clear excitement regarding the film adaptation. The comment ‘my very high expectations’ can be interpreted not only as a statement about Ross’ personal engagement with the adaptation but also as a reflection on his perceived role as critic, offering readers advice and ‘consumer guidance’ towards ‘worthwhile’ film releases. Ross’ public persona and position as an established film critic is conducive to reader recognition of his knowledge and expertise in this particular area.<sup>152</sup> To enthuse that the film registers with ‘my very high expectations’ and repeat this sentiment towards the end of the piece, suggesting that he will go and watch the film for a second time, demonstrates a critical ‘display of taste’ which the informed reader and *Harry Potter* aficionado is encouraged to engage with.

A further ‘display of taste’ can also be identified in Ross’ reference to ‘my kids’ reaction to the film. This emphasis on children represents a common discourse identified in press reviews of *The Philosopher’s Stone* and acts as a ‘display of taste and consumer guidance’ in a number of notable ways.<sup>153</sup> Firstly, the ‘kids’ mentioned in

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<sup>151</sup> Jonathan Ross, “The *Harry Potter* Movie is a Fantastic Blast of Unforgettable, Thrilling, Magical Entertainment”, *Daily Mirror*, 16/11/2001 <Nexis UK, accessed 08/02/2012>

<sup>152</sup> In addition to writing film reviews for the *Daily Mirror* at this time, Ross was also host of the BBC flagship *Film* review program after veteran film critic Barry Norman left the series for BSkyB in 1999.

<sup>153</sup> Other examples include Christopher Tookey who referred to ‘my ultra-critical ten year old’, in “Magical, Hogwarts and All”, *Daily Mail*, 16/11/2001 and Barbara Ellen who

such reviews are considered the fiercest critics of the film, presumably because they represent the target audience of the *Harry Potter* franchise. The positive reaction engendered by Ross' children who 'were begging me to take them to see it again the very moment it ended' is thus sound endorsement for any parents or carers contemplating whether to go and watch the film with their own children. Secondly, whilst this sentiment acknowledges the content of *The Philosopher's Stone*, both as a children's novel and a PG certified film adaptation, the critics utilise positive responses by their own children to back up their laudatory assessments. The outcome of this critical approach signposts *Harry Potter* as a film adaptation for both children *and* adults.

What the sources reveal is that a significant amount of British press coverage was dedicated towards adults readers who had pre-existing interest in the *Harry Potter* universe. In *The Sun* and *Mirror* reviews, and across other press materials from the period, there is evidence of tangible anticipation and excitement regarding *The Philosopher's Stone* and most of this critical response is situated from a position of personal knowledge and familiarity with the original text. The reviews and articles also reveal a tendency for critics to engage with the film beyond comparisons with the novel, which are again aimed towards the adult reader. This can be seen in the frequent references and allusions to other British cultural texts. By analysing such discourse, this shifts from an exclusive focus on issues of adaptation and fidelity, and engages with multiple, extra-textual themes which circulated around the film. What this approach finds is a concerted attempt by the British press to locate *The Philosopher's Stone* in terms of its 'Britishness'. For example, in a later comment from Romney's review in *The Independent*, the film is described in the following context:

When the Hogwarts Express pulls up at a rural platform, you expect to see the *Railway Children* waving cheerfully from the level crossing. The cast of British stalwarts seems to have come hotfoot from a vintage BBC teatime Dickens adaptation – Richard

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'took three young Potter fans to see it with me', in "Access Small Areas", *The Times*, 15/11/2001 <Nexis UK, accessed 28/03/2014>

Griffiths as Harry's Bumble-like tormentor, John Hurt as a generic Curious Old Gentleman.<sup>154</sup>

Romney's description of the film's aesthetic and diegesis is firmly rooted in an evocation of the past which is informed by a fictionalised sense of British national identity based on interpretations of literary and visual culture. The references to Edith Nesbit's novel *The Railway Children*, published in 1906, works by Victorian author Charles Dickens and later 'vintage' television adaptations, create an intertextual reading of *The Philosopher's Stone* which embraces a mood of nostalgia. This can be seen in the allusions to pastoral landscape (the 'Hogwarts Express' steam train arriving at a 'rural platform') and 'Dickensian' ambiance.<sup>155</sup> In addition, the mention of certain characters and actors such as Richard Griffiths as Harry's uncle and 'tormentor' Vernon Dursley, and John Hurt's wand maker Mr Ollivander, are positioned in relation to their intertextuality. The actors, and the characters they assume, are recognisable as the 'eccentrics, villains and grotesques who populate Dickens' novels' and adaptations.<sup>156</sup> Whilst Romney's critical response may be informed by 'stylistic features inherent [within] the text itself',<sup>157</sup> referencing works by Dickens and Nesbit also has an impact on the film's 'aesthetic value'. In his work on British television drama, John Caughie argues that 'classic' literary adaptations are typically framed within an established heritage culture which is bound by notions of national identity and 'quality'. Caughie contends that adaptations of 'classic' British literary texts 'help to shape the perception of Britishness [...] as a quality whose real meaning can be found in the past, and whose commodity value can be found in the heritage industry'.<sup>158</sup> Critical assessments that assigned *The Philosopher's Stone* with the same nostalgic 'qualities' as

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<sup>154</sup> Romney, "Resistance is Futile – the magic is just too strong", *Independent on Sunday*, 18/11/2001

<sup>155</sup> Such allusions are repeated across the sources such as describing the 'subterranean London of Dickensian colour and jollity', Philip French, "If ever a wiz there was - it's Harry", *The Observer*, 18/11/2001 and scenes that evoke a 'good old-fashioned knees-up in *Oliver*', Allan Hunter, "The weekend starts here – Hogwarts and All", *Daily Express*, 16/11/2001 <Nexis UK, accessed 08/02/2012>

<sup>156</sup> John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.218.

<sup>157</sup> Sarah Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.146-147.

<sup>158</sup> Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture*, p.207-208.



‘classic’ British literary texts would certainly appear to correspond with Caughie’s assertion.

This critical approach to the film, and *Harry Potter* more generally, would also contest theoretical arguments concerning fantasy genre, as common accusations levelled against fantasy such as ‘lowbrow’, ‘childish’ and ‘escapist’ are absent from the reviews and articles. Instead, *The Philosopher’s Stone* was generally described by critics as a film which engages with serious subtexts, such as treatment of the ‘archetypal’ orphan boy Harry by the Dursley family; they are ‘psychologically abusive’, keeping him ‘under the stairs, half-starved’.<sup>159</sup> References to the serious tropes associated with Dickens are also reaffirmed by critical allusions to ‘classic’ film adaptations of his work, such as Allan Hunter’s comment in the *Daily Express* that the opening sequence of *The Philosopher’s Stone* (‘all swirling mist and menace’) was similar to David Lean’s 1946 adaptation of *Great Expectations*.<sup>160</sup> By comparing the film with ‘realist’ fiction, most notably in the positioning of *Harry Potter* in the same cultural league as Dickens’ and Nesbit’s more verisimilitudinous work, the negative signifiers and meanings more commonly associated with fantasy are clearly absent. The findings from Romney’s review, amongst others, would suggest that *The Philosopher’s Stone* was received with a level of serious engagement by sections of the British mainstream press. In that event, the cultural and ‘aesthetic value’ of the film was emphasised and heightened by critics with the intention of encouraging adult readers both to watch and enjoy a children’s fantasy film. This critical response is not only unexpected, given the negative connotations routinely applied in theoretical assessments of both adapted texts and fantasy genre, but would also appear to contest later articles published in reaction to the BBC’s ‘Big Read’, which overtly criticised fantasy films such as *Harry Potter* as constituting populist entertainment. The potential reasons for such variation underpin the central arguments associated with this study, principally that different discourses offer varying and multiple

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<sup>159</sup> Roni Natov, “*Harry Potter* and the Extraordinariness of the Ordinary”, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Vol. 25, No. 2, April 2001, p.312.

<sup>160</sup> Hunter, “The weekend starts here – Hogwarts and All”, *Daily Express*, 16/11/2001

‘notions of cinematic value’<sup>161</sup> dependent on when and where the review or article is published. At the ‘moment’ when *The Philosopher’s Stone* was released in UK cinemas in November 2001, the national press appeared unanimous in offering a positive response towards the fantasy film as a British adaptation. This analysis finds that whilst the ‘Britishness’ associated with the *Harry Potter* novels underpinned such discourse, extra-textual cultural references attributed to the film reinforced this sense of national identity.

In order to determine why the national press were so committed to emphasising the film’s ‘Britishness’, we need to consider the ‘cultural context’ in more detail. A discourse which featured in newspaper articles prior to the UK release of *The Philosopher’s Stone* was the critical assessment of the commercialisation of the *Harry Potter* franchise. This concern largely focused on the numerous sponsorship deals that the US studio Warner Bros. had secured with major conglomerates, including Coca-Cola, Lego and Mars. In an article in the *Mail on Sunday*, published shortly before the film’s UK cinema release date, Alice Fowler stated: ‘will big business spoil the magic of Britain’s best-loved child wizard? [...] can the moral dimension [of] support for the underdog, the importance of friendship and loyalty - survive the onslaught of big business?’.<sup>162</sup> The predominance of film-related commercial products and sponsorship not only appeared to destabilise the ‘moral dimensions’ Fowler associated with the *Harry Potter* novels but also threatened wider social imperatives, such as teaching children the importance of friendship and loyalty. The moral concern evident in Fowler’s article is similar to press response elicited in reaction to the ‘Big Read’, as our national culture is considered threatened by the ‘onslaught’ of commercial interests. What such comments reveal is a distinction between internationalised ‘big business’ (in this example, American companies such as Warner Bros. and Coca-Cola) and domestic culture. In this cultural context, *Harry Potter* is therefore positioned as emphatically

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<sup>161</sup> Jancovich, “Genre and the Audience: Genre Classifications and Cultural Distinctions in Mediation of *The Silence of the Lambs*”, p.155.

<sup>162</sup> Alice Fowler, “Who’s counting on Harry?”, *Mail on Sunday*, 07/10/2001 <Nexis UK, accessed 02/04/2014>

British: the plucky ‘underdog’ which is perceived as ‘moral’, ‘restrained’ and ‘un-Hollywood’.<sup>163</sup> This issue is provided further deliberation in a review by Philip French for *The Observer*:

It’s difficult to separate the film [...] from *Harry Potter* the phenomenon - that astronomical budget; the producers’ worldwide deal with Coca-Cola; the billion dollars-worth of associated merchandise; the actors’ complaints of being exploited by Hollywood [...] I went into the movie prejudiced by the hype. I left having enjoyed it immensely and admiring the skill which had gone into the making.<sup>164</sup>

In French’s review, the moral concerns which Fowler articulates are again foregrounded, particularly in language such as ‘astronomical budget’, ‘hype’ and ‘exploitation’. In addition, the connection between ‘Americanisation’ and ‘big business’ is similarly reinforced by references to the sponsorship deal made between Warner Bros. and Coca-Cola, the ‘billion dollars-worth of associated merchandise’ and the supposed ‘exploitation’ by Hollywood.<sup>165</sup> In similarity with Fowler’s article, French appears to create a distinction between the inherently British *Harry Potter* and American entertainment, media and corporate agencies, which appeared to threaten the moral values associated with the literary series, and also destabilise domestic film production incentives via the underpayment of British actors.<sup>166</sup> There are numerous complexities and contradictions in the articles by Fowler and French, most obviously the disassociation between the continued success and popularity of *Harry Potter* as ‘Britain’s best-loved child wizard’ and the process of intense marketing and mass production which engendered this outcome. However, such criticism is so significant because it demonstrates clear differentiation between the *Harry Potter* ‘phenomenon’, perceived as a

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<sup>163</sup> Moor, *Powell & Pressburger: A Cinema of Magic Spaces*, p.5.

<sup>164</sup> French, “If ever a wiz there was - it’s Harry”, *The Observer*, 18/11/2001

<sup>165</sup> See also Barbara Ellen who refers to the pre-release hype surrounding the massive budget, ‘Coca-Cola deal, and endless merchandising’, in “Access Small Areas”, *The Times*, 15/11/2001; Andrew O’Hagan who referred to the ‘Coca-Cola sponsorship and merchandising’ criticism which preceded the film’s release in the *Daily Telegraph*, 16/11/2001; and also Cassandra Jardine who described ‘my irritation at the involvement of Coca-Cola’, in the *Daily Telegraph*, 07/11/2001 <Nexis UK, accessed 04/04/2014>

<sup>166</sup> This issue is also raised by Christopher Tookey who states that Warner Bros. underpaid British actors in the film ‘from the very start of production’, “Magical, Hogwarts and All”, *Daily Mail*, 16/11/2001

global enterprise initiated by American companies to promote and endorse 'big business' interests, and the original novel and its adaptation, which were both framed and promoted by the press as distinctly British. This distinction is important to consider when analysing shifting critical perceptions associated with the fantasy film adaptation.

Press criticism directed towards financial and distribution interests of major American companies typically circulated *before* the release of *The Philosopher's Stone*. However, at the 'moment' of the film's UK cinema release in November 2001, critical discourse shifted from moral concerns regarding the perceived 'Americanisation' of an inherently British literary text to a commendation of the 'Britishness' maintained within the film adaptation. The 'cultural context' into which the first *Harry Potter* film emerged was immersed in critical praise, not only for the novels but also for early production decisions made around film location and casting, where the authorial presence of JK Rowling was greeted with particular enthusiasm: 'exercising her massive clout [she] insisted on British actors and British accents'.<sup>167</sup> For the national press, this British presence in front of and behind the camera constituted a major feature of the film's 'pulling power'. Applying Romney's description, the presence of 'British stalwarts', such as Richard Griffiths and John Hurt, amongst others, represented the 'best of British acting' on screen, locating the film within well-recognised national theatrical and cinematic traditions.<sup>168</sup> The involvement of British actors in *The Philosopher's Stone* thus represented a further 'display of taste' which most critics appeared eager to comment on to some extent. In *The Observer* review, French utilised World War II analogy to describe the presence of: 'seasoned British veterans and young recruits everywhere, and not a Yank in sight'.<sup>169</sup> French's comments could be interpreted as rather old-fashioned and conservative; however this discourse is repeated across the

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<sup>167</sup> Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 16/11/2001. Rowling had significant control over production decisions, insisting that the entire cast be British or Irish. Source: Wikipedia <[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry\\_Potter\\_and\\_the\\_Philosopher's\\_Stone\\_\(film\)](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Potter_and_the_Philosopher's_Stone_(film))> Accessed online 27/01/2012

<sup>168</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon discusses the presence of British actors who are theatrically trained and notions of 'quality' and television in "Problems with Quality", *Screen*, Vol.31, No.1, Spring 1990, p.85.

<sup>169</sup> French, "If ever a wiz there was - it's Harry", *The Observer*, 18/11/2001

critical sources, regardless of political allegiance or ideological perspective. The findings reveal a repeated emphasis on distinction and difference between American cinema, particularly the ‘dangerous and flamboyant and vigorous aspects of Hollywood’,<sup>170</sup> and the ‘Britishness’ of *The Philosopher’s Stone*. Articles and reviews from across a wide spectrum of newspapers alluded to other extra-textual features which associated the film with its domestic connections such as citing scenes filmed at various British locations that included Alnwick Castle, Durham Cathedral and Leavesden Studios: ‘*Harry Potter’s* cinematic home’.<sup>171</sup>

This critical discourse therefore combined the British literary origins of *Harry Potter* with the perceived British production values of the film, maintained by decisions around locations, casting, characterisation and close fidelity with the novel. Initial press concerns regarding big business intervention and international interests ‘spoiling’ the ‘Britishness’ of *Harry Potter* therefore subdued once the film adaptation was released in UK cinemas. This shift from a discourse based on the threat of external interference to an embracement of national identity defined how *The Philosopher’s Stone* was received by the vast majority of British newspapers at this time, as a celebrated British cultural product. This response by the British mainstream press provides a number of recurring themes and motifs associated with *The Philosopher’s Stone*. The most prominent concerns the ‘display[s] of taste’ which the critical establishment applied towards the film adaptation. Whilst this may have been influenced by prior knowledge of the novel to some extent, as seen in reviews by Mohan and Ross, accusations of the adaptation as ‘secondary and derivative’ are absent. This response would suggest that most critics and cultural commentators considered the film to be ‘worthwhile in the week’s releases’. The film was assessed as suitable for both children *and* adults with enough interest and engagement to attract a large audience beyond the pre-existing *Harry Potter* fan base. The repeated comparisons with other forms of literature, cinema and

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<sup>170</sup> Brian McFarlane, “A Literary Cinema? British Films and British Novels”, in Charles Barr, Ed. *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, (London: BFI, 1986), p.120-121.

<sup>171</sup> Martyn Palmer, “Harry Potter Special”, *Daily Mirror*, 28/10/2001 <Nexis UK, accessed 04/04/2014>

television anchored adult reader familiarity with ‘classic’ texts which added to its appeal. This approach also allocated the film with the same cultural currency as established works from literature and ‘vintage’ television drama, signposting serious narrative and aesthetic detail found within the film. Such ‘display[s] of taste’ are significant because they reveal more intrinsic critical concerns surrounding the national ownership of *Harry Potter*. What this evidence finds is that *The Philosopher’s Stone* was positioned within a ‘cultural context’ defined by its innate ‘Britishness’. This contextualisation ultimately distanced the film from the more negative connotations associated with ‘inward investment’ film production, specifically the threat posed by foreign intervention and ‘control’ by Hollywood interests. As a result, the most prominent ‘display of taste’ resided in the perceived ‘pulling power’ of *The Philosopher’s Stone* as a British fantasy film.

### ***Nanny McPhee* and the Great British (Female) Stereotype**

*Nanny McPhee* provides a useful case study for comparison with *The Philosopher’s Stone* because, whilst sharing many similar features, the film was received with relatively minimal media publicity and hype. Adapted from the *Nurse Matilda* children’s fantasy novels by British author Christianna Brand, the film includes an all-star British cast including Emma Thompson who also wrote the screenplay. In similarity with *The Philosopher’s Stone*, the film was also located and produced in Britain with financial involvement from major American studios.<sup>172</sup> However, *Nanny McPhee* did not receive the same heightened amount of press attention when released in UK cinemas in October 2005. This is mainly because the film failed to attain significant recognition as a children’s fantasy adaptation and lacked the enormous ‘pulling power’ of the *Harry Potter* franchise. However, despite notable differences in critical reception, *Nanny McPhee* was still positioned in a similar ‘cultural context’ to *The Philosopher’s Stone* as a British fantasy film. This study examines critical response to *Nanny McPhee* and considers how the ‘Britishness’ of the film adaptation resonated beyond the immediate ‘lures and appeals’ of public appeal or media interest.

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<sup>172</sup> Source: IMDB <[www.imdb.com/title/tt0396752/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0396752/)> Accessed online 07/04/2014

In contrast to Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, the majority of critics appeared unaware of Brand's literary work and failed to identify *Nanny McPhee* as an adaptation of her novel. The comments found on occasions where the original text was cited were relatively brief, describing the *Nurse Matilda* books as 'little known' or even 'entirely forgotten'.<sup>173</sup> In a review by the *Mail on Sunday*, critic Matthew Bond stated: 'Emma Thompson herself has written the screenplay, adapting it from Brand's [novel] which, to be honest, neither I nor my absolutely target audience children have never even heard of, let alone read'.<sup>174</sup> The difference in critical approach is palpable when compared with press coverage for *The Philosopher's Stone* and this reaction certainly impacted on assessments of *Nanny McPhee*. As with the *Harry Potter* review by Ross, amongst others, the opinion of both the individual critic and their own children (as the 'target audience') is considered important; a 'display of taste' which again reinforces the expert position of Bond, as an adult critic offering 'consumer guidance' on a children's fantasy film. However, the enthusiastic recollection and familiarity with the original text, as seen in reviews of the *Harry Potter* film, is absent in Bond's critique. In contrast, the tone of the *Mail on Sunday* review is rather critical about this particular aspect of *Nanny McPhee*. In similarity to other press reviews from this period, the apparent failure to establish firm association between the 'little known' novel and film presented critics with a real dilemma about how to engage potential interest both for adults and the 'target' child audience. The issue for critics appeared to originate from this lack of (pre) recognition with the original text. Whilst this study does not suggest that this proved entirely detrimental to the film's reception by the British mainstream press, failure to establish a 'close and dynamic relationship' between novel and film clearly affected the overall enjoyment of *Nanny McPhee*, as experienced by some critics. This response highlights a contention towards theoretical claims that all contemporary and popular adaptations are considered 'secondary and

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<sup>173</sup> Allan Hunter, *Daily Express*, 21/10/2005. See also Christopher Tookey, who described the *Nurse Matilda* novels as 'little known', in "She's Scary Poppins", *Daily Mail*, 21/10/2005 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

<sup>174</sup> Matthew Bond, "The Ugly Truth", *Mail on Sunday*, 23/10/2005 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

derivative' within journalism practices. In contrast, this evidence finds that *Nanny McPhee* suffered to some extent in the critical press because it was *not* universally recognised as an adaptation. This positioned the film at odds with other fantasy films released around this time, such as *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which were avidly assessed and compared to their original texts. Critics responded to *Nanny McPhee* as an unknown entity, displaying some trepidation regarding personal expectation, interest and wider audience appeal.

In the absence of recognised adaptation status, the main 'pulling power' associated with *Nanny McPhee* was the presence of British actress Emma Thompson, who received media recognition as both star and authorial voice behind the film. The most prominent discourse centred on Thompson's appearance as the lead protagonist McPhee. In a review from *The Times*, Anita James described the actress' role in the film as follows:

Take Thompson, dress her up as Mary Poppins, give her the figure of Bernard Manning, Jeffrey Bernard's nose, a liberal sprinkling of hairy moles and a mutant front tooth and you have Nanny McPhee, the Victorian child minder with a mysterious power over children [...] With each task accomplished, an element of Nanny McPhee's ugliness drops away [until] the real Thompson is revealed.<sup>175</sup>

This review reflects similar press discourse about Thompson's star presence in the film. What such comments reveal is a tendency for attentive comparison between the actress and her on-screen persona. The amount of character detail that James utilises is notable, describing her 'ugly' figure, facial features and 'mutant' front tooth. The gendered character tropes associated with the wicked witch in fairy tales are clearly foregrounded in such description.<sup>176</sup> However, this response also offers a decidedly conventional approach to normative ideas of beauty and

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<sup>175</sup> Anita James, "*Nanny McPhee*", *The Times*, 22/10/2005 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

<sup>176</sup> Furby and Hines refer to the 'often cruel' female characters found in fairy tales such as 'wicked witches, sadistic stepmothers, evil fairies and ogresses', in *Fantasy*, p.69. In a review for the *Sunday Times*, Peter Whittle also refers to McPhee as resembling "the Wicked Witch of the West", in "Not good with children", *The Sunday Times*, 23/10/2005 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>



femininity, particularly the comparison between ‘ugly’, ‘grotesque’<sup>177</sup> and ‘shapeless’<sup>178</sup> McPhee and the ‘real’ Thompson who is ‘revealed’, quite literally, at the end of the film. The comparison between Thompson’s good looks and McPhee’s ‘ugliness’ formed part of wider media discourse which circulated around the British actress during this period. For example, *The Observer* newspaper featured a full length interview with Thompson in which Kate Kellaway observed: ‘it is a relief to see her looking like herself [...] because in her tremendous new film for children, *Nanny McPhee*, she is transformed into the ugliest character she is ever likely to play’.<sup>179</sup> The ‘relief’ Kellaway expresses in this comment is similar to James’ response when the prosthetic makeup is finally cast away and McPhee is ‘transformed’ into the ‘real’ Emma Thompson.

The amount of press coverage the actress received in the weeks preceding the release of the film is articulated in Bond’s piece for the *Mail on Sunday*, which claimed: ‘it has been virtually impossible to escape the sight of Thompson resplendent in sexy and seductive pose [and with] good reason because in *Nanny McPhee* she looks an absolute sight’.<sup>180</sup> Across the majority of source materials examined, at least some comment is made about Thompson’s appearance and transformation in the film (her ‘ugliness drops away’) alongside contrasting fictional character with her ‘real’ persona (by ‘the end she is handsome and blooming as herself’).<sup>181</sup> This critical approach not only reinforces expectations about genre and female characterisation displayed in *Nanny McPhee* as a fairy tale film, but also informs a wider intertextual discourse around conventional ideas of beauty, femininity and star appeal. As Austin contends in his study on the critical reception of Hollywood films in the 1990s, newspapers often trade in star images, drawing on both textual and extra-textual elements to promote films for potential

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<sup>177</sup> Mark Adams, “Brat Nan Forever”, *Sunday Mirror*, 16/10/2005 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

<sup>178</sup> Anon., *Daily Star*, 21/10/2005 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

<sup>179</sup> Kate Kellaway, “Warts ‘n’ All”, *The Observer*, 16/10/2005  
<[www.theguardian.com/film/2005/oct/16/features.review1](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2005/oct/16/features.review1)> Accessed online 09/04/2014

<sup>180</sup> Bond, “The Ugly Truth”, *Mail on Sunday*, 23/10/2005

<sup>181</sup> Philip French, *The Observer*, 23/10/2014  
<[www.theguardian.com/culture/2005/oct/23/features.review6](http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2005/oct/23/features.review6)> Accessed online 14/04/2014

audiences.<sup>182</sup> This can be evidenced by the heightened level of media interest and press publicity that Thompson received, through photo opportunities, interviews and feature articles, which informed the main ‘pulling power’ critics attributed towards *Nanny McPhee*. This response is also directed specifically towards adult readers who might have prior knowledge of Thompson. In a number of reviews, Thompson is referred to as ‘our Em’,<sup>183</sup> suggesting informal recognition, familiarity and even national ownership of a well-known British actress and public figure.<sup>184</sup>

The intense focus on Thompson’s appearance forms a repeated discourse in press reviews and articles related to *Nanny McPhee*. This emphasis on her gender also alludes to other extra-textual features which the critical press actively responded to when assessing the film. In particular, Thompson’s character was frequently compared with Mary Poppins from the 1964 Disney film musical of the same name. Whilst Julie Andrews’ portrayal of the titular nanny is framed as the complete opposite to McPhee in terms of conventional feminine appearance, certain shared characteristics were familiarised. For example, in a review in *The Sunday Times*, Peter Whittle articulated the Poppins analogy by stating that both characters project a ‘no-nonsense, schoolmarmish manner’.<sup>185</sup> The description of the ‘no-nonsense’ nanny who teaches children the importance of good manners through a series of magical ‘tasks’ associates similar genre, narrative and characterisation found in *Mary Poppins* and *Nanny McPhee* which are also entrenched in traditional values. The conservative press proved the most enthusiastic about this particular aspect of film, as seen in *The Times*:

*Nanny McPhee* is a wholesome comedy about the importance of manners [and] is perfect half term entertainment [...] As the children learn to behave, her gruesome face visibly softens [...]

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<sup>182</sup> Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences: Selling and Watching Popular Film in the 1990s*, p.3.

<sup>183</sup> See Whittle, “Not good with children”, *The Sunday Times*, 23/10/2005; Tim Robey, “This warty Mary Poppins is strictly for children”, *Daily Telegraph*, 21/10/2005 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

<sup>184</sup> Thompson was also mentioned as a double Oscar winner in a number of reviews, again restating her national identity and cultural presence both in the UK and abroad.

<sup>185</sup> Whittle, “Not good with children”, *The Sunday Times*, 23/10/2005

the moral is as clear as a parking ticket [and] it's all reassuring and old-fashioned as boiled sweets.<sup>186</sup>

James Christopher's assessment of *Nanny McPhee* is couched in language which reinforces the appeal of traditional and 'old-fashioned' values. Indeed, across all the *Times* reviews examined for this chapter, there exists a repeated discourse concerning the positive moral values associated with *Nanny McPhee*. This response actively endorses the film's narrative which centres on teaching naughty children the importance of good behaviour. This assessment is framed in relation to 'super wholesome'<sup>187</sup> values which are reinforced by the aesthetic setting of the film in 'Victorian' England, a historical period associated, at least superficially, with decency and good manners. The sources reveal a positive response to such traditional ideals, particularly in the conservative broadsheets, which embraced the moral values identified within the film and located this within a distinctly feminine context. In addition, most critics endorsed the representation of conventional archetypes such as the 'nanny', 'child minder', and 'pretty scullery maid'<sup>188</sup>; familiar female figures of differing levels of authority typically found in the upper class homes associated with traditional children's fiction (such as *Mary Poppins*). The British nanny thus provided a potent motif which informed critical response to the morals and values displayed within the film. This discourse performed an active 'display of taste' which adult critics could recognise and actively endorse as appropriate children's viewing: 'perfect half-term entertainment'.

Thompson's staunch British nanny and the moral values she articulated extended beyond immediate textual readings of the film itself. In similarity with press response to *The Philosopher's Stone*, the film elicited wider critical concerns about modern culture and society, particularly in relation to children. Whilst adult critics actively endorsed the 'old-fashioned' values imbedded in the narrative, the sources reveal a tendency to question whether children would respond positively to the

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<sup>186</sup> James Christopher, *The Times*, 20/10/2005, <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

<sup>187</sup> Whittle, "Not good with children", *The Sunday Times*, 23/10/2005

<sup>188</sup> Tookey, "She's Scary Poppins", *Daily Mail*, 21/10/2005

film. This hesitancy is illustrated by the amount of contradictory opinion on this matter. What such analysis reveals is further evidence of ‘agenda-setting’ and ‘deep struggles’ between different publications. In the conservative and broadsheet press, *Nanny McPhee* was largely positioned as a family-orientated fantasy film; however this assessment was underpinned by trepidation and scepticism regarding the film’s direct appeal to children:

For your average ten year old, it might appear too, well, polite [...] I’m not sure how the tweeness of the Brown [family] household will play in the modern inner city multiplex [and by] the sweet finale, with fidgety kids hankering after their Xboxes, it really won’t come a moment too soon.<sup>189</sup>

In this comment by Whittle for *The Sunday Times* newspaper, there is conflict between the ‘polite’ and ‘wholesome’ narrative and the interests of the ‘modern’ child audience. The description of ‘inner city multiplex’ and ‘Xbox’ game console creates an image of contemporary Britain which is fundamentally opposed to the ‘old-fashioned’ Victorian aesthetic found in *Nanny McPhee*. This juxtaposition is framed from a position of wider social concern, as Whittle assesses how the film would appeal to the ‘average ten year old’, whose modern lifestyle is far removed from the ‘tweeness’ depicted by the Brown children. Consequently, whilst *Nanny McPhee* was positioned by some critics in the conservative broadsheets as a film which adults might embrace and consider appropriate for children to watch because of the firm emphasis on the ‘importance of manners’ and good behaviour, it was also considered potentially problematic for the target audience.

This response is so interesting because it re-emphasises the ‘cultural gatekeeper’ role which Klinger outlines. Firstly, such assessment is positioned from a top-down approach; the voice of the critical ‘expert’ advising the reader that whilst adults may appreciate the moral values of the film, children will remain bored or ‘fidgety’ throughout. Such discourse undermines the child viewer as unable to enjoy or appreciate the film because of the perceived lack of action,

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<sup>189</sup> Whittle, “Not good with children”, *The Sunday Times*, 23/10/2005

spectacle and ‘diverting set pieces’.<sup>190</sup> Secondly, this assessment of *Nanny McPhee* functions as a politicised platform from which to comment on the perceived experience of young people growing up in modern Britain. In this ‘cultural context’, the conflict between contemporary and commercialised culture (‘multiplexes’; ‘Xboxes’) and ‘old-fashioned’ Victorian ideals are considered too diametrically opposed for modern younger audiences. The implicit class consciousness of the critic also underpins this review, particularly when describing the ‘inner city multiplex’ where the film will presumably be shown to ‘inner city’ children who have less recognition or interest in *Nanny McPhee*’s deeply rural aesthetic. Whilst such claims can certainly, and perhaps rightly, be challenged, this assessment by Whittle in *The Sunday Times* exemplifies the ‘cultural gatekeeper’ role in action, as extra-textual moral and social concerns are foregrounded in direct critical response to the film.

In contrast to film critics and commentators in the conservative broadsheets, the more populist and tabloid press offered an alternative discourse. For example, a review by Johnny Vaughan in *The Sun* newspaper described *Nanny McPhee* in the following terms: ‘raucous shenanigans duly ensue [alongside] pantomime silliness [...] funny and heart-warming, this is a slice of family fun that I guarantee your kids will think is simply magic’.<sup>191</sup> In this piece, the film is described in terms of action and spectacle, offering distinct contrast to *The Times* reviews which focused more on narrative and characterisation. In doing so, the review deviates from the realist preference by commending the visual and spectacular. If we consider the theoretical arguments put forward by Petley and Higson et al., this critical approach to genre and spectacle should have impacted on the perceived national identity of *Nanny McPhee* as a cultural product. However, in Vaughn’s review, amongst others, there is evidence to suggest a positive embrace of the spectacular which was also positioned in a British cultural context. In a number of articles and reviews, the ‘gaudy’<sup>192</sup> visual aesthetic was compared with ‘pantomime’, a British theatrical tradition that excels in extravagant

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Johnny Vaughan, *The Sun*, 21/10/2005 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

displays of overt spectacle. In addition, the more comedic elements of the film were appropriated in different ways by different sections of the British press. For example, the moral implications associated with Christopher's application in *The Times* ('wholesome comedy about the importance of manners') are absent in Vaughn's review, which provides very different connotations around the generic term 'comedy'. In *The Sun*, the comedic aspects of *Nanny McPhee* were framed as much less refined; more 'raucous', 'silly' and entertaining and suitable for adults and children to enjoy: 'a slice of family fun'.<sup>193</sup> Any concerns regarding the current state of modern Britain and childhood experience are also clearly absent from *The Sun* review. In contrast to contemplating whether children will understand or appreciate the moral values associated with the narrative, Vaughn offers a much more simple and positive assessment: 'your kids will think [it] is simply magic'.

Applying Jancovich's assertion, the source materials therefore provide evidence of the variation and 'deep struggles' that exist across different publications. The reviews and articles not only discuss what is considered as interesting or 'worthwhile' about *Nanny McPhee*, but also reveal 'different interests and preoccupations' in the film. This critical response is influenced by extenuating factors such as readership, organisational and related political interests, which determined how *Nanny McPhee* was contextualised. For the more conservative critics, the film was considered 'wholesome' children's fantasy with a robust moral centre; sentiment which adult readers of *The Times* might well appreciate but which may have less appeal for younger viewers, particularly 'inner city' children. In the tabloid press, the focus on action and spectacle spoke to a more convivial cinema audience of families with young children, seeking 'undemanding'<sup>194</sup> and enjoyable holiday entertainment. Such assessments ascribed *Nanny McPhee* with multiple identities, dependent on the 'agenda-setting' functions of the individual critic or publication concerned. However, this study also reveals recurring themes

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<sup>193</sup> This can also be seen in a contemporary review by the *Daily Star* which described the comedic elements of *Nanny McPhee* as 'messy slapstick' and 'wild whimsy', in Anon., *Daily Star*, 21/10/2005

<sup>194</sup> Anon., *Daily Star*, 21/10/2005

and motifs which defined *Nanny McPhee's* 'cultural presence' as a British fantasy film, including the highly publicised appearance of British actress Emma Thompson in the lead role, and the determination of domestic locations, historical period and national identity.

### **Summary**

The conclusions drawn from this chapter appear to present conflicting critical approaches towards concepts of fantasy genre and film adaptation. Press response to the BBC 'Big Read' provided more typical distinctions between 'classic' or 'realist' literature and fantasy texts which were judged 'frivolously escapist'. The continued popularity of film and television adaptations was also considered in negative terms and as having detrimental effect on influencing the survey results. In addition, the 'secondary and derivative' accusations levelled against recent popular and highly successful adaptations, such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*, were compounded further by their generic status as 'meaningless' and 'jokey' fantasy texts. In the vast majority of press response to the 'Big Read', the cultural value attributed to fantasy fiction more generally is very low or non-existent. However, the findings from critical reviews and articles sourced both before and after the 'Big Read' survey provide significantly different readings and appropriations. In press coverage of *The Philosopher's Stone* there is strong evidence to suggest a positive and enthusiastic collective response by the British press which was stimulated by the continued popular appeal of the *Harry Potter* book franchise. In contrast to comments identified in relation to the 'Big Read', newspaper critics and commentators embraced the 'close and dynamic relationship' between the original novel and the film adaptation. This presents a different assessment when compared to the arguments put forward by Stam and Hutcheon. Whilst this study does not refute the idea that 'journalistic reviewing' and other critical practices often construct negative discourses around film adaptations, as shown in some of the sources examined, the evidence would suggest that this critical tendency is not absolute. Instead, the findings from this chapter demonstrate how different interpretations and meaning(s) are often determined by the context in which a particular film is discussed. Such response has

important implications for this study because it also suggests that critical approaches towards fantasy are also not fixed, and have the potential to shift and change.

This chapter also provides some evidence to determine critical perceptions of the ‘cultural presence’ and national identity associated with the chosen film adaptations. This was demonstrated in the following ways. Firstly, the British literary connection was widely considered as an important feature of a film’s overall appeal. This aspect represented the most important ‘pulling power’ associated with *The Philosopher’s Stone*, whilst the absence of recognised adaptation status in relation to *Nanny McPhee* was considered problematic. This discourse serves to highlight the enormous ‘pulling power’ British fantasy film adaptations commanded during this time. Secondly, this critical approach was positioned from a point of moral authority and concern which infiltrated press debates regarding the importance of children’s literature or wider social and cultural values relating to modern Britain. The ‘cultural gatekeeper’ role of the critic and commentator, as prescribed by Klinger, is thus provided further currency in such observations and criticisms. This manifested in ‘display[s] of taste’ which were connected to on screen representations of national culture, character and identity. Critical response to *The Philosopher’s Stone* and *Nanny McPhee* was therefore informed not only by the adaptation status of the films from British fantasy literature but also by a combination of textual and extra-textual readings. What connects these strands of discourse is the perceived ‘Britishness’ of the films which was considered the most appealing feature across different sections of the critical press. However, it is important to acknowledge that this repeated discourse of ‘Britishness’ displayed a preferred tendency towards conservative and conventional ideology by celebrating the traditional and nostalgic representations of national identity in both films. This critical notion of cultural, social and political British identity, and its relationship to contemporary British fantasy film, will go on to inform the following chapters of this study.



## Chapter Two

### The British Appeal of the Children's Fantasy Film

This chapter seeks to investigate critical response to contemporary British fantasy films which are child-orientated or involve strong investments in childhood. This analysis draws on findings established in the previous chapter concerning the British 'pulling power' of fantasy films such as *Harry Potter*, and positions this within the specific context of the children's film. The intention is to examine how adult critics assess children's fantasy and also how such films are framed towards adult readership of the British mainstream press. This analysis is situated in the contention that children's film and fantasy film appear to suffer from substantial 'critical neglect'.<sup>195</sup> As Walters argues, both 'are somewhat indistinct in formulations of genre and, furthermore [...] these two branches of cinema, which enjoy such close association, can often be overlooked'.<sup>196</sup> Walters raises two central issues in this statement that will inform this study. Firstly, the idea that the terms 'children's film' and 'fantasy film' maintain 'indistinct' genre or category boundaries. In practice, this would mean that such terms are subject to instability and overlap in critical definitions. Secondly, this issue highlights a common concern that children's film and fantasy film are also 'overlooked' because they are perceived as juvenile, escapist or 'mindless' entertainment.<sup>197</sup>

In response to the arguments put forward by Walters, amongst others, this study contends that the critical impulse for outright dismissal of children's fantasy has been tempered in recent years by an output of

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<sup>195</sup> Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, p.74. There have been more recent studies published which revisit children's telefantasy such as Helen Wheatley's "Uncanny Children, Haunted Houses, Hidden Rooms: Children's Gothic Television in the 1970s and 80s", *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol.13, Issue 3, November 2012, p.383-397 and Alison Peirse's study, "A Broken Tradition: British Telefantasy and Children's Television in the 1980s and 1990s", *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol.11, Issue 1, March 2010, p.109-124.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p.74.

<sup>197</sup> See: Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p.35; Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic*, p.1; Furby and Hines, *Fantasy*, p.2; Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, p.75; Butler, *Fantasy Cinema: Impossible Worlds on Screen*, p.3.

films that, whilst perhaps principally intended for children, also generated interest and appeal amongst adult audiences. By utilising a historical reception studies approach, this chapter examines how the critical ‘writing machine’ responded to this popular trend. In addition, this study also considers how the British mainstream press promoted and engaged with such films, and the potential reasons that underpinned this response. In accepting that newspaper critics and commentators write for a predominantly adult readership, the aim is to determine what aspects of the children’s fantasy film are perceived as either appealing or interesting for the adult audience. This study analyses criteria of ‘quality’ and ‘taste’ and also considers evidence to counteract accusations of children’s fantasy as constituting mere ‘facile’ and ‘lightweight’ entertainment which offers negligible serious engagement with ‘real world’ concerns.<sup>198</sup> This chapter therefore engages with common issues associated with critical distinctions of the children’s fantasy film.

In addition, this study draws on Mathijs’ notion of ‘topicality’<sup>199</sup> to assess whether British ‘pulling power’ had any notable impact on how the national press approached such films. This idea is situated in the contention that a significant proportion of children’s films produced in the period since 2001 have either originated from British source material, drawing on the ‘close and dynamic relationship’<sup>200</sup> between novel and film outlined in the previous chapter, or committed to representing British locations and casting decisions. Higson’s critique of the recent increase in adaptations from ‘English children’s novels’,<sup>201</sup> including films such as *The Golden Compass* and *Harry Potter* series, is positioned more from the perspective of interest and intervention from international organisations and potential opportunities for future franchises on a global scale.<sup>202</sup> The popular appeal of the children’s fantasy adaptation for domestic audiences, and what this might mean in terms of interest across

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<sup>198</sup> Furby and Hines, *Fantasy*, p.2.

<sup>199</sup> Mathijs, “Reviews, Previews and Premieres: The Critical Reception of *The Lord of the Rings* in the United Kingdom”, p.119-143.

<sup>200</sup> Higson, *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s*, p.101.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35.

<sup>202</sup> This point is emphasised in Leggott’s comment that such films should be considered as ‘manifestations of global trends in the entertainment industry’, *Contemporary British Cinema: From Heritage to Horror*, p.9.

different age groups, is largely absent from Higson's account. However, the success of recent children's fantasy films, many of which originate from British literature, provides compelling reasons to scrutinise the actual reception of such films. This chapter contends that the 'Britishness' associated with some of these films influenced critical response which also resonated with wider public interest, beyond the child audience. To understand the close relationship between children and fantasy fiction and why certain themes continue to influence debates, this chapter begins with an overview of fantasy and fairy tale in literature and sociological theories of child development. This study also addresses issues regarding generic definition, target audience and critical assumptions commonly applied to the children's film. This overview goes on to inform the critical reception analysis which is divided into the identified themes and issues as addressed. The films chosen as case studies are *Inkheart* (2008) and *Five Children and It* (2004). Both provide examples of contemporary fantasy films with child protagonists, which were also produced and marketed specifically towards the target child audience.<sup>203</sup> The films also constitute 'inward investment' productions, which had varying levels of British and American involvement.<sup>204</sup> Whilst this study does not provide complete overhaul of existing theory, this analysis aims to address whether existing 'critical neglect' surrounding the children's fantasy film has the potential for reconciliation based on the evidence presented.

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<sup>203</sup> For this study, the intended audience for such films is for children under the age of twelve. This age group is defined by Peter Krämer, "The Best Disney Film Never Made: Children's Films and the Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s", in Steve Neale, ed., *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, (London: BFI, 2002, reprinted 2006), p.186; Cary Bazalgette and Terry Staples, "Unshrinking the Kids: Children's Cinema and the Family Film", in Bazalgette and David Buckingham, Eds., *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences*, (London: BFI, 1997), p.92.

<sup>204</sup> *Inkheart* is a New Line Cinema co-production and filmed at various UK locations including Shepperton Studios; *Five Children and It* is an adaptation from Edith Nesbit's novel of the same title, and a British / US co-production with involvement from The Jim Henson Company in the creation and design of the 'Psammead'.

## Children's Fantasy: Issues of Definition, Categorisation and Audience

Children are often thought to live in a world in which fantasy and reality are undifferentiated – in which horses can talk, fish can fly and wishes can come true.<sup>205</sup>

The idea that childhood exists in 'another world' provides an evocative conception of the perceived differences between adults and children. The associations between fantasy narratives and the child figure, as both fictional protagonist and audience, typically inform common understanding and comprehension of early childhood experience. The reasons for this are deeply connected to pre-established social and cultural norms. During the 1970s, psychologist Bruno Bettelheim famously advocated the sociological links between fantasy narrative and child development.<sup>206</sup> Bettelheim claimed fantasy addressed fundamental psychological 'needs' which were crucial for early education and socialisation. This approach informs the majority of critical readings of fantasy texts as important social, educational and cultural tools for children. Whilst Bettelheim's practitioner work has received substantial criticism over the years, his assessment concerning the functional role of fantasy and fairy tale in formative child development has since been advanced by sociological and cultural theorists. For example, in a more recent study on screen entertainment and young audiences, Cary Bazalgette and David Buckingham contend:

children need to be able to come to terms with the fear of annihilation, of power [...] of anger and of sexuality. Fairy tales, especially in their earlier, un-sentimentalised versions, are prime examples of narratives which offer ways of facing up to fundamental dilemmas and anxieties through fantasy.<sup>207</sup>

In the majority of fantasy narratives, the child figure represents the central motif for projecting such 'anxieties'. A common technique is the

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<sup>205</sup> Jacqueline D. Woolley, "Thinking About Fantasy: Are Children Fundamentally Different Thinkers and Believers from Adults?", *Child Development*, Vol.68, No.6, December 1997, p.991.

<sup>206</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, (London: Penguin Books, 1976, Revised Edition 1991)

<sup>207</sup> Bazalgette and Buckingham, Eds., *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences*, p.3.

‘coming of age’ trajectory, whereby the child protagonist encounters a series of magical events, designed to enable the child audience to ‘understand themselves [and] their own emotional processes, to overcome self-doubt and to arrive at an empowered feeling of maturity and self-worth’.<sup>208</sup> The child character performs a vital role within this narrative, providing the ‘lens’ through which fantastical events are projected, comprehended and finally, if necessary, overcome. This approach can be seen across an abundance of fantasy and fairy tale texts from *Little Red Riding Hood* through to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, and also in more contemporary fantasy fiction such as Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy.

However, in his major study on children’s novels, Colin Manlove contends that whilst fantasy literature comprises ‘its own internal development and preoccupations’, it should also be acknowledged that ‘the concept of the child is partly shaped by adults who either wish to preserve a province they recall as childhood, or have designs on those inhabiting it’.<sup>209</sup> Marina Warner similarly points to the involvement of adult authors in portraying childhood and the child character as ‘innocent witness’ to the imaginary world presented.<sup>210</sup> Both Manlove and Warner highlight a common concern, principally the influence of the adult, authorial ‘voice’ in constructing depictions of childhood. In addition, this is further complicated by the propensity of adult readers who actively engage with such texts. As Manlove argues, the categorisation of ‘children’s fantasy’ does not mean ‘that children and adults do not read one another’s books, nor that children’s fantasy is without adult features, or cut off from adult literary tradition’.<sup>211</sup> The outcome Manlove describes has particular resonance when applied to the children’s fantasy film. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the huge popularity and success of the *Harry Potter* novels and film series would suggest that fantastical narratives generate engagement with both adult and child audiences. The implications of this tendency would destabilise some of

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<sup>208</sup> Furby and Hines, *Fantasy*, p.19.

<sup>209</sup> Colin Manlove, *The Fantasy Literature of England*, (London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1999), p.6.

<sup>210</sup> Marina Warner, *Cinema and the Realms of Enchantment*, (London: BFI, 1993), p.42.

<sup>211</sup> Manlove, *The Fantasy Literature of England*, p.6.

the arguments made around audience and categorisation, which has resulted in the ‘critical neglect’ Walters outlines. Peter Krämer provides a similar argument, claiming that the children’s film is considered ‘very low on the academic agenda’<sup>212</sup> and cites potential reasons for this by addressing the problems of definition and categorisation. Krämer identifies ‘sheer diversity’ as a major contributing factor, stating that many children’s films overlap with other genres and consequently lack common iconography, shared narrative patterns or thematic concerns.<sup>213</sup>

The case studies chosen for this chapter exemplify Krämer’s argument. Both *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It* are examples of the ‘children’s film’ and display similar narrative themes such as the ‘coming of age’ journey of the child towards emotional maturity. However, the presence of children and child-orientated narrative does not mean each film was therefore defined or categorised exclusively as a ‘children’s film’. This can be seen if we consider the descriptions of *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It* on the popular, user-orientated site IMDB, where each film is categorised under three separate genre headings: ‘adventure’, ‘fantasy’ and ‘family’.<sup>214</sup> The notable absence of ‘children’s film’ from this list reinforces Krämer’s argument and delineates how genre hybridity can impact on film categorisation. The inclusion of ‘family’ also complicates this process, as this extends the audience of *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It* to include adult parents, carers and relatives. Krämer’s assertion therefore emphasises that the ‘children’s film’ is not always a distinct category and instead open to a substantial plethora of different meaning(s) and applied connotations that can change dependent on where and when they are situated.

Krämer highlights a further reason for ‘critical neglect’ surrounding the children’s film, which revolves around a specific ‘set of prejudices, namely that by and large they are cheaply made and simply

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<sup>212</sup> Krämer, “The Best Disney Film Never Made: Children’s Films and the Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s”, p.185.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., p.186.

<sup>214</sup> Source: IMDB *Inkheart* <[www.imdb.com/title/tt0494238/?ref=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0494238/?ref=fn_al_tt_1)> *Five Children and It* <[www.imdb.com/title/tt0366450/?ref=sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0366450/?ref=sr_1)> Accessed online 11/04/2013

not very good, and not even very important commercially’.<sup>215</sup> The negative criticism levelled towards the children’s film is underpinned by a series of contributing factors, such as cheap production values and the limited potential for box-office success. Krämer goes on to re-evaluate this claim by examining successful films which display generic hybridity, but are primarily intended for children, including big-budget Hollywood productions *ET – The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and *Star Wars* (1977), and the output of Disney animation since 1966. Krämer argues that the commercial and critical success of such films provides substantial evidence to counteract ‘prejudice’ found within certain sections of film criticism and academic scholarship. This contention would suggest that at least a proportion of designated ‘children’s films’ have the potential for major financial investment and commercial success. Krämer conducted his study prior to the release of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* in 2001. However, he does include reference towards the vast public and media interest generated by the forthcoming film around this time, concluding that the trend for popular and successful children’s films is on the ascendancy.<sup>216</sup> On reflection, it is now clearly evident that some of the most commercially successful and popular movies released in the period since 2001 have included films which are aimed at children and the wider family audience. *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It* provide pertinent examples of films released during this period of increased investment and production in children’s fantasy. The intention of this study is to determine whether the critical press identified and assessed the films in relation to this trend.

Following on from this argument, there is another important issue to address which corresponds with the contentions expressed by Krämer and Walters. The ‘prejudices’ considered inherent within film criticism represent established views and concepts which have been reinforced over time. Consequently, the claim that fantasy cinema is ‘escapist’ entertainment ‘suitable only for children or for “mindless”,

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<sup>215</sup> Krämer, “The Best Disney Film Never Made: Children’s Films and the Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s”, p.186.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, p.196.

“irresponsible” adults<sup>217</sup> is perhaps more acute when applied directly to the fantasy film which displays strong investments in childhood. This issue is discussed at length in Robin Wood’s derisive criticism of films by Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, where he argues that their combined output celebrates an innate desire for adult regression and infantilism:

Crucial here, no doubt, is the urge to evade responsibility – responsibility for actions, decisions, thought, responsibility for changing things: children do not have to be responsible, there are older people to look after them. That is one reason why these films must be intellectually undemanding.<sup>218</sup>

There are numerous points to extract and consider in this statement by Wood. Firstly, the assertion that film narrative aimed at, or concerning, children encompasses a lack of serious engagement or ‘responsibility’ can be contested by evidence to suggest otherwise. In particular, this contention counteracts sociological theories put forward by Bettelheim, Bazalgette and Buckingham, amongst others, who argue that the child figure typically *assumes* responsibilities from the individual experiences encountered in fictional narratives, particularly in the complex and often perplexing worlds of fantasy and fairy tale. A second issue is the assertion that films aimed at children are intellectually deficient. According to Wood, adult interest and engagement with such films thus amounts to pure escapism and sheer infantilism at the worst extreme. As Walters’ contends, when fantasy films are associated with children, and ‘more specifically even childishness, the temptation to assume they are not intended for the adult viewer is for obvious reasons intensified’.<sup>219</sup> This apprehension can certainly be identified in Wood’s critical assertion that the fantastical premise found in certain popular films is childish, infantile and not intended for adult audiences. This contention forms the centre of continued theoretical debates surrounding children’s film and fantasy genre more generally.

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<sup>217</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p.35.

<sup>218</sup> Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.165.

<sup>219</sup> Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, p.76.



By applying this approach towards the press materials, this study aims to determine whether such ‘prejudices’ can be identified in recent critical response towards *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It*. Drawing on the arguments by Krämer and Walters, it is perhaps expected that adult critics will provide at least some negative assessments of the films based on the ‘prejudices’ outlined. However, this analysis also considers whether critics and commentators signposted the films as interesting or engaging for their adult readerships. In doing so, this study finds that the perceived appeal for adults was based on criteria of ‘taste’, ‘quality’ and British appeal. Drawing on these findings, the final summary debates whether this analysis provides evidence to suggest a potential shift in critical assessments of the children’s fantasy film.

### **The Critical Moral Compass: ‘Quality’ and Children’s Fantasy Film**

To conduct this study, the reviews and articles of *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It* are analysed initially in relation to aspects of the films considered by critics to offer appeal or interest to children as the ‘target audience’. Krämer’s assertion that children’s films are prone to certain ‘prejudices’ will be assessed in relation to issues of ‘quality’ and ‘taste’. Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of ‘legitimate culture’ and ‘taste’ define ‘quality’ in relation to cultural products and activities based on socio-economic divisions of status.<sup>220</sup> As Klinger outlines, negotiations of ‘quality’ also form an important feature of the critical film review. The critic’s role in this discursive process is to act as ‘public tastemaker’, designating and applying criteria of ‘taste’ and ‘quality’ according to pre-established social and moral values.<sup>221</sup> The ‘moral imperative’<sup>222</sup> which informs critical applications of ‘quality’ is therefore influenced by more general public concern. Specifically, this can be demonstrated in arguments surrounding the perceived function and role of children’s television, film and media. As Bazalgette and Buckingham contend,

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<sup>220</sup> Bourdieu refers to the ‘systems of disposition (habitus)’ which are ‘characteristic of the different classes and class fractions. Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier’, in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (London: Routledge, 1979; reprinted English edition 1992), p.6.

<sup>221</sup> Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the Films of Douglas Sirk*, p.70.

<sup>222</sup> Ellis, “The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the Cinema 1942-1948”, p.79.

children have ‘specific “needs” as an audience, which are related to their developmental level or to their broader emotional or social needs’.<sup>223</sup> When applied to children’s fantasy fiction, the argument is that such texts should not only inform child development and socialisation but also display a moral centre. Describing a film as ‘cheap’ or ‘simply not very good’<sup>224</sup> thus has deeper intrinsic meaning because it connotes a lack of serious intent and moral substance. Bearing this in mind, this study contends that critical assessments of children’s film function as a moral compass for the adult parent, carer or relative, signposting the potential suitability or appropriateness for children from a recognised position of critical authority. The following section examines this process in action by analysing British press coverage of the children’s fantasy films *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It*. This study considers how applications of ‘taste’ and ‘quality’ are appropriated not only by textual readings of the films but also generated from inherent moral concerns related to the self-perceived function and role of the British mainstream press.

In an article published by *The Independent* newspaper in December 2008, James Rampton assessed the forthcoming release of *Inkheart*. The article emphasised the film’s literary associations by describing the film’s adaptation from a popular novel by German author Cornelia Funk and also the fantastical narrative of *Inkheart* in which imaginary characters from a magical book come to life. According to Rampton, both these factors provided the film with ‘certain kudos’,<sup>225</sup> an endorsement of ‘quality’ based almost exclusively on the film’s literary associations. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the national press appeared to provide positive assessments of fantasy films which promoted reading and engagement with literature, and Rampton’s glowing account is certainly reflective of other reviews and articles which circulated around this time. This tendency is also exemplified by critical response sourced from *The Sun* and *The Observer* newspapers. *The Observer* critic

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<sup>223</sup> Bazalgette and Buckingham, Eds., *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences*, p.9.

<sup>224</sup> Krämer, “The Best Disney Film Never Made: Children’s Films and the Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s”, p.186.

<sup>225</sup> James Rampton, “Will *Inkheart* become the next *Harry Potter*?”, *The Independent*, 06/12/2008 < Nexis UK, accessed 27/03/2013 >

Philip French described *Inkheart* as ‘witty, exciting and imbued with a love of literature’.<sup>226</sup> French embraces the literary aspects of the film, providing emotive reflection on reading as a ‘legitimate’ cultural activity which should be enjoyed and celebrated, especially by children who might go and watch the film. *The Sun* newspaper offered similar sentiment, claiming the film is ‘clever’ because ‘it performs the trick of encouraging our kids to love both books and films’.<sup>227</sup> In both examples, the critics foreground the film’s literary associations as commendable, citing reading as a cultural pursuit which should be ‘loved’. The moral concerns of the critics are expressed clearly in the reviews. In particular, *The Sun* resonates with the opinion of the concerned parent, emphasising the social and moral imperative of encouraging children (‘our kids’) to appreciate and engage with literature. This critical response supports the arguments put forward by Bazalgette and Buckingham, as it shows acute adult awareness and concern regarding the perceived development needs of children. Whilst the tabloid *Sun* and broadsheet *Observer* are differentiated by the socio-economic backgrounds of their target readerships, the importance of reading literature, particularly for children, represented a common moral concern. The critic’s role in this process was to determine ‘quality’ based on the moral and social attributes in film themes and narrative. *Inkheart* was thus appropriated ‘certain kudos’ by many critics because it engaged with a literary identity which adults could identify as suitable and appropriate for children.

In addition to press concerns about ‘legitimate’ cultural pursuits for children, the critical moral compass was also directed towards what Bazalgette and Buckingham define as ‘nostalgic adult notions about the universality of childhood’.<sup>228</sup> This evocation of nostalgia can be identified in press coverage for *Five Children and It*. For example, in two separate reviews from different critics in *The Times* newspaper, the film is described almost exclusively within this context. Wendy Ide claimed: ‘its gentle, old-fashioned charm is rather refreshing after the hyperactive

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<sup>226</sup> Philip French, *The Observer*, 14/12/2008 < Nexis UK, accessed 27/03/2013 >

<sup>227</sup> Anon. *The Sun*, 12/12/2008 < Nexis UK, accessed 27/03/2013 >

<sup>228</sup> Bazalgette and Buckingham, Eds., *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences*, p.11.

onslaught of noise and colour that all too often passes for children's cinema these days',<sup>229</sup> whilst Carola Long stated: 'this family adventure should appeal to young children and parents nostalgic for polite offspring who make their own fun'.<sup>230</sup> In both examples, the nostalgia associated with *Five Children and It* is embedded within two distinct meanings of the term. Firstly, Long's review provides a sentimentalised, adult reflection on an idealised childhood, suggesting an 'other world' of innocence and polite 'fun'. In doing so, adult nostalgia evoked by childhood memory and fantasised 'reality' is engaged in dual response towards the film. Secondly, this nostalgia is prompted by the film's 'old-fashioned charm', which is located within a decidedly British context. This response is principally informed by the film's historical period, set during World War I, and English country manor location.<sup>231</sup> This critical response to the film not only provides a personal and adult reflection of the purity and innocence of a (lost) childhood, but is also enthused with a strong sense of national identity and tradition. 'Quality' associated with *Five Children and It* is therefore appropriated within a critical discourse of traditional values which might well appeal to the adult *Times* reader. However, this evocation of 'Britishness' could be interpreted as a conservative and fantasised engagement with the nostalgic past. This particular critical response towards period and 'place' in the fantasy film represents a repeated theme throughout this study.<sup>232</sup>

In addition to literary connections and nostalgic representations of British childhood, 'quality' for some critics was also determined by minimal reliance on special effects. The increasing demand for technological solutions, such as computer-generated information (CGI), within the film industry, and the issues associated with this trend, are discussed by Butler, who considers the numerous 'challenges facing

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<sup>229</sup> Wendy Ide, "Half-term and Beyond: More family treats", *The Times*, 14/10/2004 < Nexis UK, accessed 27/03/2013 >

<sup>230</sup> Carola Long, *The Times*, 16/10/2004 < Nexis UK, accessed 27/03/2013 >

<sup>231</sup> Peirse refers to the popularity of 1980s British children's telefantasy such as *The Box of Delights* (1984) and *Moondial* (1988) which represented nostalgic visions of Britain in a similar fantasised manner including: 'country mansions, received pronunciation [and] polite children', in "A Broken Tradition: British Telefantasy and Children's Television in the 1980s and 1990s", p.111.

<sup>232</sup> This theme is discussed in further detail in Chapter Three which examines critical response to British location, 'place' and period in the contemporary fantasy film.

fantasy film-makers in the construction and portrayal of the worlds and spaces in which their narratives take place'.<sup>233</sup> According to Butler, the impulse to create evermore 'realistic' fantasy landscapes and characters is also tempered by the need to maintain an authentic 'storytelling function', considered an essential feature within mainstream narrative cinema.<sup>234</sup> This conflict of narrative and effect is expressed in Ide's comments in *The Times* review which dismiss the 'hyperactive' visuals more commonly observed in contemporary children's film. In describing special effects and CGI as an 'onslaught of noise and colour',<sup>235</sup> this creates negative connotations around children's films which commit to this advanced technology. This sentiment is repeated across press coverage of *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It*. Although both films utilise CGI to varying degrees, the critical emphasis is on the notable *absence* of visual effects. For example, Rampton's feature on *Inkheart* in *The Independent* concludes that the film 'may make more of an impression than some because it does not rely so heavily on special effects'.<sup>236</sup> *Five Children and It* received similar positive comments regarding the lack of CGI, as seen in Ide's review for *The Times*. In a *Mail on Sunday* review, the critic announced that the film provided 'evidence that there is more to children's films than computer-generated entertainment [and] camera trickery'.<sup>237</sup> What this discourse illustrates is a sense of opposition and difference. *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It* were considered in direct contrast to the significant majority of contemporary children's films, which were perceived as too reliant on special effects and 'camera trickery', often to the detriment of cohesive narrative and characterisation. The films achieved recognition and appreciation for providing something different to the standard children's fantasy film.

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<sup>233</sup> Butler, *Fantasy Cinema: Impossible Worlds on Screen*, p.79.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid. See also Furby and Hines who claim that in the 2000s: 'CGI is increasingly used to construct story worlds without which there would quite simply be no film to watch', in *Fantasy*, p.119.

<sup>235</sup> Ide, "Half-term and Beyond: More family treats", *The Times*, 14/10/2004

<sup>236</sup> Rampton, "Will *Inkheart* become the next *Harry Potter*?", *The Independent*, 06/12/2008

<sup>237</sup> Anon., "Alfie's a little too fond of the Ladies", *Mail on Sunday*, 24/10/2004 < Nexis UK, accessed 27/03/2013 >

As the sources have shown so far, critical opinion is typically situated in terms of a response by adults which dictates what *they* consider appealing or suitable for the child audience. There is also a strong tendency for critics to allocate assessments of ‘quality’ based on the perceived social, educational and developmental ‘needs’ of children. *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It* were positioned primarily in relation to moral values and concerns, such as emphasising the films literary associations or promoting the installation of good manners. This discourse presents recurring themes when compared to press response towards *The Philosopher’s Stone* and *Nanny McPhee*. In addition, certainly for the more conservative critics, such features were bound in traditional or nostalgic recollections of what childhood *should* be: another world, distinguished by its separation from the trials of modern society. This critical approach was also underpinned by a strong distrust of ‘modern’ special effects and CGI. This discourse not only reveals how some critics attended to perceived over-reliance of technology in the children’s film, but also stresses the importance of ‘old-fashioned’ narratives. In conducting this analysis, we can begin to determine repeated examples of commentary and opinion. The following section builds on this evidence to consider how the British mainstream press responded to *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It* as children’s fantasy films which engaged interest and appeal, beyond the target child audience.

### **Categorisations and Definitions**

In an article published the week before Christmas in December 2008, critic Mark Kermode asked readers of *The Observer* newspaper to consider: ‘what makes a perfect family film? [...] a movie that has something for everyone’.<sup>238</sup> Kermode goes on to assess *Inkheart* as a prime example of a ‘perfect family film’ that appeals to both children and adults. For Kermode, the film offered such broad audience interest because it ‘manages to balance the bookish wit of its literary source with the visual pizzazz of a fantasy crowd-pleaser’.<sup>239</sup> As seen in the critical

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<sup>238</sup> Mark Kermode, “What Makes the Perfect Family Film?”, *The Observer*, 21/12/2008 < Nexis UK, accessed 27/03/2013>

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

sources examined for this study so far, literary adaptation proved a significant and often positive factor in how fantasy films were assessed by the British mainstream press at this time. However, Kermode's response to *Inkheart* also raises important questions concerning the more recent impact of children's fantasy and wider audience appeal. As discussed, Mathijs' study on the critical reception of *The Lord of The Rings* film trilogy provides some insight into how the mainstream British press operates during sustained periods of heightened media interest in a major movie release which operates as part of a wider cultural phenomenon. A similar trajectory can be seen in the public and media response towards the *Harry Potter* film franchise, which sustained continued interest and engagement with a broad audience in the period post-2001. In analysing press materials, it is apparent that both *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It* were compared to *Harry Potter* to some extent when assessing the potential for public appeal. This study thus draws on Mathijs' approach to explore the frequency and repetition of 'mentions'<sup>240</sup> attributed towards *Harry Potter* in critical assessments of *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It*. What the sources reveal is that the *Harry Potter* film series provided the cinematic benchmark in critical assessments of themes, narratives and generic tropes, and also the potential for box office success. The reasons for this tendency, and what this might suggest about the critical reception of children's fantasy film more generally, are examined in the following section.

In Rampton's article in *The Independent*, the piece begins with the headline 'will *Inkheart* become the next *Harry Potter*?'.<sup>241</sup> Rampton emphasises shared themes including parental loss and epic fights between good and evil, and also the literary associations of both films. He then goes on to consider how the *Harry Potter* films had provided film-makers with a template for future children's fantasy productions: 'within the industry, it is known by a technical term: "doing a Potter"'.<sup>242</sup> The continued success and popularity of the film franchise also informed how

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<sup>240</sup> Mathijs, "Reviews, Previews and Premieres: The Critical Reception of *The Lord of the Rings* in the United Kingdom", p.127.

<sup>241</sup> Rampton, "Will *Inkheart* become the next *Harry Potter*?", *The Independent*,

06/12/2008

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

many critics responded to *Inkheart* as a similar family film primarily aimed at the child audience yet with the capacity for wider appeal. In another review for the Scottish tabloid newspaper the *Daily Record*, the article begins as follows:

So here we have another fantasy spectacular and I hate to mention the P word but I will. Potter. Harry Potter. The film has got nothing to do with him but it is squarely aimed at his fans and lovers of fantasy'.<sup>243</sup>

The article demonstrates the cultural 'pulling power' of *Harry Potter* witnessed in press coverage at this time. This is clear from the outset, as the review references *Harry Potter* first before assessing *Inkheart* as the new film release. Whilst the critic acknowledges variations in narrative, theme and characterisation ('the film has nothing to do with him') *Harry Potter* is still used as the comparative touchstone. This critical approach towards *Inkheart* is repeated across other press reviews and articles sourced from this period.<sup>244</sup> What this discourse reveals is not only press recognition and embracement of the *Harry Potter* phenomenon but also the cultural presence of child-orientated fantasy more generally. This point is reciprocated in an article by James Mottram, writing for the *Sunday Times*, who claimed: 'put it down to the *Harry Potter* factor if you will but children's movies are big business like never before'.<sup>245</sup> In correspondence to debates surrounding popular cinematic trends, the *Daily Record* review also draws attention to the issue of intended audience. Whilst the critic suggests that *Inkheart* is principally aimed at 'kids 14 and under',<sup>246</sup> the review is clearly aimed at adult readerships. The tone is comedic with appeal to the adult reader through the whispered use of the 'P word', standing in for the implied expletive 'F word'. The

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<sup>243</sup> Anon., "Storytelling Fantasy is a Magical Treat", *Daily Record*, 12/12/2008 < Nexis UK, accessed 27/03/2013>

<sup>244</sup> See also David Gritten who comments: 'in the absence of a *Harry Potter* film this winter, it fills a gap neatly', in "High Adventure by the Book", *Daily Telegraph*, 12/12/2008 and also more negative reviews such as Conor Nolan who described *Inkheart* as 'a woeful attempt to conjure up a *Harry Potter*-style movie', in *The People*, 09/11/2008 and Christopher Tookey who suggests: 'the new *Harry Potter*, it ain't', in "If books came to life, they wouldn't be this dull", *Daily Mail*, 12/12/2008 < Nexis UK, accessed 27/03/2013>

<sup>245</sup> James Mottram, "The Kid Stays in the Picture", *Sunday Times*, 11/01/2004 <Nexis UK, accessed 27/03/2013>

<sup>246</sup> Anon., "Storytelling Fantasy is a Magical Treat", *Daily Record*, 12/12/2008



ubiquitous cultural presence of *Harry Potter* is again re-emphasised and re-iterated in this expression. The critic also pitches the film towards ‘lovers of fantasy’ suggesting that, in a similar manner to *Harry Potter*, the cinematic reach and appeal of *Inkheart* might well extend beyond the target ‘14 and under’ audience. This approach resonates with Kermode’s assessment of *Inkheart* as a ‘fantasy crowd-pleaser’, suggesting a potential wider audience than the simple categorisation of ‘children’s film’ or ‘family film’.

In analysing critical response to *Five Children and It*, the associations created between children’s fantasy films and discussions around potential audience become more apparent. Despite the relative time difference in UK cinema release dates, *Five Children and It* was framed by critics in a similar way to *Inkheart* through comparisons with *Harry Potter*. For example, David Edwards in *The Mirror* claimed: ‘with its magical theme, comparisons to *Harry Potter* are inevitable’.<sup>247</sup> This comment by Edwards signposts *Harry Potter* as a film with similar fantastical and child-orientated themes, that most readers of *The Mirror* would have at least some knowledge or familiarity with. This comparison was also used by some critics to actively criticise *Five Children and It*. As Edwards later comments: ‘this is a far less ambitious film [than *Harry Potter*] and kids raised on a diet of *Shrek* and *Spiderman* certainly won’t be convinced’.<sup>248</sup> In a review for *The Observer*, French draws on similar comparisons and differences between the two films: ‘J.K Rowling is a great admirer of E. Nesbit, but no child who has seen the *Harry Potter* films is going to be satisfied by this one’.<sup>249</sup> In both these examples, and across other sources examined, the implication is that, in contrast to the *Harry Potter* films, children will not be interested or engaged by the film.<sup>250</sup> This would suggest that the ‘quality’ features critics identified in relation to *Five Children and It*, such as the ‘old-fashioned charm’ and absence of special effects referred to in *The Times* reviews, were

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<sup>247</sup> David Edwards, “Try It”, *The Mirror*, 22/10/2004 < Nexis UK, accessed 27/03/2013 >

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Philip French, *The Observer*, 24/10/2004 < Nexis UK, accessed 27/03/2013 >

<sup>250</sup> See also Nicholas Barber who claimed ‘the film is aimed at *Harry Potter* fans [but] only the very youngest viewers won’t spot that the acting, plotting and CGI are as creaky as the mansion itself’, in “What’s it all About?”, *Independent on Sunday*, 24/10/2004 < Nexis UK, accessed 27/03/2013 >

considered unappealing or uninteresting for the child audience. As discussed in the previous chapter, this response reflects the moral concerns expressed by more conservative and broadsheet commentators in assessing the potential popularity of *Nanny McPhee*, with modern children ‘hankering after their Xboxes’.<sup>251</sup> However, this critical discourse fails to consider that children might actually enjoy the ‘old-fashioned’ aesthetic displayed in such films. In addition, it should be acknowledged that most critics positioned *The Philosopher’s Stone* within a similar context of ‘old-fashioned’ values and nostalgia.

This evidence would therefore suggest that despite similarities in narrative, themes and generic tropes, *Five Children and It* was considered fundamentally less appealing than the *Harry Potter* films. Whilst critics responded more positively to *Inkheart*, this opinion was framed from a similar position of comparison. Consequently, to attain critical recognition and ‘quality’ status, children’s fantasy films in the period after 2001 were expected to display comparable features to the *Harry Potter* films by offering interest and excitement for the intended child viewer and also, crucially, for the wider cinema audience. The problems in defining what constitutes a ‘children’s fantasy film’ are exemplified in the critical sources examined. What this discourse reveals is that the ‘fantasy crowd-pleaser’, constituted a film that was expected to engage and interest the ‘14 and under’ age group, families and adult viewers outside the target audience: a film that appealed to *everyone*. To understand what factors influenced this critical opinion, we need to evaluate reasons why critics promoted *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It* towards their adult readerships.

### **Adult Appeal of the Children’s Fantasy Film**

As demonstrated so far in this study, the critical press appeared to discriminate between children’s fantasy films, distinguishing those which commanded the potential for wider audience appeal beyond the target child audience. This final section examines what factors influenced this tendency and why this was considered so important at this time. By

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<sup>251</sup> Whittle, “Not good with children”, *The Sunday Times*, 23/10/2005

interrogating the meanings and connotations associated with the term ‘fantasy crowd-pleaser’, the following study explores what specific features of *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It* critics perceived as offering appeal and interest, specifically for the adult audience.

In analysing the source materials, the involvement of British stars in *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It* represents a persistent discourse in press coverage of the films. This is perhaps not surprising given the propensity for press interest in this particular area. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Emma Thompson received substantial newspaper coverage for her role in *Nanny McPhee*. Drawing on Bourdieu’s cultural theory, Austin claims that such media exposition and public ‘knowledge of stars indicates “ordinary”, common taste’.<sup>252</sup> Applying this contention, the star figure is often associated with low cultural value, exacerbated by a preference towards controversy and gossip often found within the mainstream media and particularly demonstrated in the popular tabloid press. However, the sources for this study reveal a different critical approach towards the stars featured in *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It*. In contrast, this analysis finds that the presence of certain British actors and actresses in the films were signposted as further indicators of ‘quality’. For example, according to some critics, the ‘stellar cast’<sup>253</sup> of *Inkheart* included ‘class and clout from Helen Mirren’ and ‘impressive’ performances from other British actors such as Paul Bettany and Jim Broadbent.<sup>254</sup>

In particular, the presence of Mirren in the film generated significant interest across the British mainstream press. This response was perhaps influenced by Mirren’s recent success at the Oscars, winning a Best Actress Academy Award for her leading role in the British biopic *The Queen* (2006). The heightened publicity surrounding the international success of a British film with a British actress was reflected in media coverage associated with *Inkheart* at the time of its UK

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<sup>252</sup> Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences: Selling and Watching Popular Films in the 1990s*, p.52.

<sup>253</sup> Anon., “Storytelling Fantasy is a Magical Treat”, *Daily Record*, 12/12/2008

<sup>254</sup> Mark Adams, “Your Movies: Fantasy’s Fantastic”, *Sunday Mirror*, 07/12/2008 <Nexis UK, accessed 27/03/2013>

cinematic release. *The Telegraph* and *The Independent* both published full-length articles about the film, which included interviews with Mirren and other cast and crew members on set during production. This press discourse is clearly intended for the adult reader. For example, Mirren was described as commanding star appeal in *Inkheart* through her ‘charisma’, ‘vibrant sense of humour’ and ‘sexiness’.<sup>255</sup> Such language and tone would be inappropriate when assessing the film from the perspective of interest for children. In addition, both articles discussed in some detail the style of vintage dress chosen for her character in the film, Elinor Loredan.<sup>256</sup> The star appeal of Mirren is reciprocated in the description of the fictional Loredan. In doing so, the British appeal of both character and actress commands a ‘culturally specific form of elegance and class’.<sup>257</sup> This press discourse not only reinforces the film’s perceived national identity as British but also associates *Inkheart* with an established and renowned ‘quality’ actress from British stage and screen. For example, in a review in *The Observer*, French paid the ultimate compliment by describing Mirren as a ‘national treasure’.<sup>258</sup> The term ‘national treasure’ is an accolade typically used by the media to describe public figures considered to be valued, national commodities, and who command respect and admiration at home and abroad. In a similar way that Thompson’s British identity was emphasised and commended in press coverage of *Nanny McPhee* (‘our Em’), Mirren received critical praise as one of ‘our finest actors’.<sup>259</sup> This critical discourse not only claims national ownership of *Inkheart* as a British fantasy film but also has a substantial effect on the perceived cultural value applied to the film.

This ‘quality’ star factor can also be identified in critical reviews and articles for *Five Children and It*. In similarity with *Inkheart*, the film showcased star talent from British cinema and theatre tradition, including

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<sup>255</sup> Rampton, “Will *Inkheart* become the next *Harry Potter*?”, *The Independent*, 06/12/2008

<sup>256</sup> Helen Mirren describes how her character’s dress reflects the flamboyant British poet and ‘grand dame’ Edith Sitwell, in “Page turner *Inkheart* makes the Big Screen”, *The Telegraph*, 03/12/2008 <Nexis UK, accessed 18/04/2013>

<sup>257</sup> Rayna Denison, “(Trans) National X-Factor: Patrick Stewart, Britishness and the Promotion of *X-Men*”, *Critical Survey*, Vol.18, No.3, Winter 2006, p.72.

<sup>258</sup> French, *The Observer*, 14/12/2008

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

‘classical actors’<sup>260</sup> Kenneth Branagh and Zoë Wanamaker. The *Harry Potter* connection is again established through the appearance of Branagh and Wanamaker, whom the *Sunday Times* described as ‘Potter alumni’.<sup>261</sup> In addition, the film championed the off-screen talents of British comedian Eddie Izzard as the voice of the ‘Psammead’. The presence of Izzard in *Five Children and It* provided substantial interest and positive comments from the British mainstream press at this time. For example, Long writing in *The Times* stated that ‘despite being the one actor you don’t actually see, Izzard steals the show’.<sup>262</sup> Most critics praised his vocal performance from an informed understanding and appreciation of Izzard’s comedy routine. For example, the Scottish *Evening Times* claimed Izzard ‘adapted his surreal questioning stand-up style to marvellous effect’,<sup>263</sup> whilst *The Northern Echo* stated that he ‘brings a welcome touch of madness’.<sup>264</sup> This critical positioning of the film reveals how the star figure of Izzard was promoted as an interest for adult audiences, presumably under the impression that the majority of children would have no real awareness or recognition of him as a stand-up comedian. Izzard’s presence in the film thus operates at different levels for different audiences and is appropriated by the critical press accordingly. For the child audience, the ‘Psammead’ is a mischievous sand fairy who is 8000 years old and grants people wishes. However, this character is provided extra-textual significance for adult viewers because of Izzard’s comedic status, offering the potential for interest and engagement in the film.

In press coverage that followed the cinema release of *Five Children and It* and *Inkheart*, British star presence was therefore consistently applied as an indicator of ‘quality’. Furthermore, this discourse was infused with critical negotiations of films which were considered British and American, or Hollywood, film productions. This approach can be seen in Kermode’s feature on the ‘perfect family film’ in

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<sup>260</sup> Steve Pratt, “Cinema Scary Feat”, *The Northern Echo*, 21/10/2004 <Nexis UK, accessed 19/04/2014>

<sup>261</sup> Mottram, “The Kid Stays in the Picture”, *Sunday Times*, 11/01/2004

<sup>262</sup> Long, *The Times*, 16/10/2004

<sup>263</sup> Andy Dougan, “Holiday Highlights”, *Evening Times*, 14/10/2004 <Nexis UK, accessed 19/04/2013>

<sup>264</sup> Pratt, “Cinema Scary Feat”, *The Northern Echo*, 21/10/2004

*The Observer*. In this article, Kermode bemoans the proliferation of ‘Christmas turkeys’ associated with recent holiday offerings at the UK box office, citing ‘emotionally and artistically moribund’ films such as *Fred Claus* (2007) and *Four Christmases* (2008) as examples.<sup>265</sup> However, he makes an exception to *Inkheart* as follows:

Let’s hope this Brit-packed gem doesn’t get overshadowed by Disney’s heavily advertised Boxing Day release *Bedtime Stories*, which has a worryingly similar theme (stories coming to life) but is fronted by Adam Sandler, who is even more annoying than [Vince] Vaughn.<sup>266</sup>

This assertion is notable for a number of reasons. Firstly, Kermode suggests a sustained trend in children’s fantasy films with ‘similar themes’ identified between *Inkheart* and the recent Disney film release *Bedtime Stories* (2008). This recognition again emphasises the proclivity of children’s fantasy film production during this time and the ‘topicality’ associated with this trend. Secondly, this article establishes a clear distinction of ‘quality’ between the two films. Whilst *Inkheart* was described as a ‘fantasy crowd-pleaser’ with ‘bookish wit’ and ‘visual pizzazz’, *Bedtime Stories* was allocated the unbecoming label of ‘Christmas turkey’. The most prominent difference between *Inkheart* and *Bedtime Stories* lies in the national identity associated with each film. For example, Kermode describes *Inkheart* as a ‘Brit-packed gem’, emphasising the British star presence in the film. In contrast, *Bedtime Stories* is considered a distinctly American enterprise, financed by Disney and with ‘annoying’ Hollywood actors such as Adam Sandler and Vince Vaughn. This distinction concerning national origin and identity is also reinforced by the differences of scale administered between each film. *Inkheart* is positioned as the plucky British ‘underdog’ which has the very serious potential to be ‘overshadowed’ at the Christmas box office by the

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<sup>265</sup> Kermode, “What Makes the Perfect Family Film?”, *The Observer*, 21/12/2008. For another example of this type of critique, *The Sun* described *Inkheart* as ‘far better than Vince Vaughn’s hit *Four Christmases*’ because of the film’s ‘clever fantasy’ and ‘predominantly British cast’, Anon., *The Sun*, 12/12/2008 <Nexis UK, accessed 27/03/2013>

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*

‘heavily advertised’ Disney behemoth.<sup>267</sup> Kermode’s article is therefore intended to encourage readers to go and watch *Inkheart* at the cinema as opposed to the ‘worryingly similar’ American film. Whilst the two films share generic features and narrative themes, *Inkheart* is considered as more ‘bookish’, ‘witty’ and appealing overall. This article, published in *The Observer*, is arguably aimed at an educated, middle-class and domestic readership, who might well sympathise with Kermode’s sardonic criticism. However, what this discourse reveals is a more general tendency towards positive assessments of *Inkheart* which were influenced by the film’s British associations. The involvement of British actors and actresses clearly influenced this approach. In contrast to Austin’s argument, this evidence would suggest that the star figure can be associated with ‘taste’ and ‘quality’ in certain circumstances. For children’s fantasy films such as *Nanny McPhee*, *Inkheart*, *Five Children and It* and the *Harry Potter* series, the presence of British stars provided contrast to the low cultural status applied towards American counterparts. This critical response engaged interest through the appropriation of ‘quality’ British actors, which was also intended specifically for the adult British audience.

In addition to British star presence, the critical sources demonstrate other elements of the children’s fantasy film considered to offer appeal and interest for the adult audience. Rampton’s article in *The Independent* outlines possible reasons why such films have witnessed widespread audience attention and popularity in recent years. He suggests that a major factor is because ‘these films don’t chime only with children [and instead] have different things to say to different generations’.<sup>268</sup> As discussed, to be considered a successful ‘fantasy crowd-pleaser’, films had to display certain narrative themes and visual elements that appealed to both children *and* adults, beyond the definitional confines of the ‘family film’. In assessing what factors might

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<sup>267</sup> The box office takings reflect this difference in comparative scale. *Inkheart* had an estimated budget of \$60m and grossed £700,146 in its opening weekend in UK cinemas. In contrast, *Bedtime Stories* had a budget of \$80m (approx.) and grossed £1.5m in its opening weekend in the UK. Source: IMDB

<[www.imdb.com/title/tt0960731/?ref=mv\\_sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0960731/?ref=mv_sr_1)> Accessed online 20/10/2014

<sup>268</sup> Rampton, “Will *Inkheart* become the next *Harry Potter*?”, *The Independent*, 06/12/2008

interest adult viewers watching *Inkheart*, Rampton refers to ‘grown-up themes’, including depictions of parental absence and loss. As British director Iain Softley stated in interview: ‘children's stories should have that strain of darkness. They all deal with loss. That’s fundamental to all the enduring children’s tales [fantasy] contains all the thrills and sadness of life’.<sup>269</sup> According to cultural and social theorists, this ‘coming of age’ narrative is designed to encourage children to address ‘fundamental dilemmas and anxieties’,<sup>270</sup> and themes of parental absence can be found in numerous children’s fantasy texts from *The Chronicles of Narnia* through to *Harry Potter*. However, as Rampton claims, serious themes of absence and loss also present a universal narrative which resonates across the generational divide.

The relationship between child and parent is commented on in almost all the reviews as critics established the plotline of each film. In *Five Children and It*, the backdrop of World War I introduces the story of the five child evacuees who are sent to live with their uncle. Some critics established connections with Edith Nesbit’s other classic novel *The Railway Children*, which offers similar narrative themes of the father missing in action.<sup>271</sup> This assessment of *Five Children and It* is therefore located within an adult understanding of extra-textual elements of the film, such as wartime Britain and the emotional plight facing children who were separated from their parents at this time. In the film, the discovery of Izzard’s ‘hilariously sardonic’<sup>272</sup> ‘Psammead’ provides the children with relief from the disturbances of war and also with the guidance they need to overcome their anxiety and upset. *Inkheart* was also assessed by critics in terms of its familial and parental themes. For example, Mark Adams, in the *Sunday Mirror*, described the film as depicting a ‘tormented father trying to raise an impulsive teenage daughter while also searching for a lost book that might offer him a way

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<sup>269</sup> *Inkheart* director Iain Softley quoted in Rampton, “Will *Inkheart* become the next *Harry Potter*?”, *The Independent*, 06/12/2008

<sup>270</sup> Bazalgette and Buckingham, Eds., *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences*, p.3.

<sup>271</sup> *The Railway Children* was also referenced in Dougan, “Holiday Highlights”, *Evening Times*, 14/10/2004; French, *The Observer*, 24/10/2004 and Andrew Osmond, *Sight and Sound*, Vol. XIV, Issue 11, Nov 2004.

<sup>272</sup> Long, *The Times*, 16/10/2004



of getting back his wife'.<sup>273</sup> The family relationship is emphasised in the review which again highlights 'real' life concerns, such as the 'tormented' single parent or difficult and 'impulsive' teenager. Critical assessments of both films are centred on themes of loss and separation, offering adult perspectives on narratives which are considered complex and emotionally demanding. This approach emphasises the more serious intention of the fantasy narrative. As Walters argues, 'fantasy films have something to say about the human experience [they] encourage a re-engagement with the world and its conditions'.<sup>274</sup> By approaching children's fantasy texts such as *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It* from this critical perspective, associated meaning(s) 'extend beyond categorisations based around notions of escapist pleasure or a suppression of reality'.<sup>275</sup> Instead, the films are positioned in terms of their engagement with real-life concerns, connected to family problems or displacement through conflict and war. This approach transcends beyond the escapist connotations more commonly associated with fantasy film.

This discourse reveals a level of critical engagement with the films which is positioned from an adult perspective and directed towards an adult readership. As a result, the films are signposted as providing some level of interest for viewers beyond the target child audience. When the press reviews and articles from this chapter are compared, the findings reveal notable shifts in language and tone. Specifically, the discourse aimed towards the adult reader is focused more on the British production values and the domestic star presence associated with each film. Where film plotlines are discussed, this is appropriated from an emotional engagement with 'grown-up' themes. Such features may also appeal to children; however they have more potential interest for the adult viewer who is aware of Helen Mirren as a renowned British actress, or has some understanding or personal knowledge of the realities facing families and child evacuees during World War I. The repeated emphasis on adult engagement throughout the sources would suggest that both films

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<sup>273</sup> Mark Adams, "Your Movies: Fantasy's Fantastic", *Sunday Mirror*, 07/12/2008

<sup>274</sup> Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, p.30.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid*, p.30.

displayed at least some of the key attributes critics associated with the ‘fantasy crowd-pleaser’ at this time.

### Summary

In his assessment of the filmic output of Lucas and Spielberg, Krämer argues that what they ‘tried to achieve [...] was a return to old-fashioned family entertainment which was suitable for children not because it exclusively or even primarily was addressed to them but because it was accessible to everyone’.<sup>276</sup> This sense of universal ‘accessibility’ also underpins how critics responded to *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It*, as the films were assessed by how appealing, interesting and engaging they might be for the child *and* adult audience. This approach towards the child-orientated fantasy film can be identified across the sources examined not only for this chapter but also in response to similar films from this period. What this discourse reveals is a concerted attempt by the critical press to promote children’s fantasy films which pertained to certain narrative themes and features. The results from this chapter provide interesting reading when considered against the claims put forward by Krämer and Walters, amongst others, concerning the low status of the children’s film. The findings show that at least some children’s fantasy films released in the post-2001 period were considered ‘good’ and ‘important commercially’<sup>277</sup> by the critical press during this time. In light of this evidence, we might also consider extending this response rate to include a greater number of film titles which received a similar reception. However, this critical assessment was determined by how closely the films adhered to certain features such as a positive endorsement of moral values, nostalgia, literary tradition, and a more measured approach towards special effects. Criteria of ‘taste’ and ‘quality’ was also determined by how much the films differed from similar genre films produced in America or Hollywood. This is significant, principally because *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It* are both examples of ‘inward investment’ films which received some level of

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<sup>276</sup> Krämer, “The Best Disney Film Never Made: Children’s Films and the Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s”, p.190.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, p.186.

American studio investment. Despite this fact, the films were appropriated as 'British' through critical distinctions of cultural identity and domestic involvement, such as the presence of British stars. This discourse served as a prime indicator of 'quality', as films which showcased British connections were seen as more insightful, interesting and engaging than their American counterparts; as demonstrated in Kermode's negative reaction to Disney's *Bedtime Stories*.

Critical associations between 'quality' and 'Britishness' were also synonymous with the perceived potential for popular appeal and commercial success. This response was largely influenced by the dominant cultural presence of *Harry Potter*, which provided the cinematic template for assessing later children's fantasy films, including chosen case studies *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It*. The *Harry Potter* series was considered a 'fantasy crowd-pleaser' which enjoyed the universality Krämer outlines. In response to the continued popularity and success of the franchise, other children's fantasy films from this period were expected to appeal to both children and adults in a similar fashion. In assessing films for the adult audience, the British mainstream press utilised a combination of textual and extra-textual features to engage interest with their adult readerships. Certain narrative themes were promoted as offering emotional investment for the adult viewer, particularly storylines involving bereavement and loss. This approach reinforces Warner's and Manlove's contention that child-orientated fantasy texts provide interest and appeal across the generational divide. The more serious connotations associated with *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It* would also suggest a critical engagement with the films which transcends more common accusations of fantasy as mere escapism or 'facile' entertainment.

This evidence is important for the wider aims of this research because it supports arguments put forward regarding shifts in critical discourse towards the children's fantasy film. Specifically, the 'Britishness' appropriated towards fantasy films such as *Inkheart* and *Five Children and It* was associated with 'quality' by a significant section of the critical press. This does not mean that the films were consistently

awarded positive reviews. However, as seen in articles by Rampton and Kermode, where critical reflections of ‘quality’ and the children’s fantasy film occurred, such assessments were underpinned by this specific attribute. For the British mainstream press, the successful and popular ‘fantasy crowd-pleaser’ not only engaged a wider audience beyond the designated children’s film, but also displayed a commitment to national representation and identity. In response to these findings, the following chapter explores other features which resonated with this discourse.

## Chapter Three

### Locating the ‘Real’

An article in the regional British newspaper the *Eastern Daily Press* (*EDP*), published in October 2007, concerning the forthcoming UK cinema release of *Stardust* (2007), enthused:

The team behind the epic blockbuster *Stardust* were looking for charisma and photogenic good looks. They found exactly the right candidate tucked away in Norwich [...] with its chocolate-box pretty historic buildings [and] Elm Hill - in particular the Briton's Arms - was just the location they had scouted far and wide for.<sup>278</sup>

In this article, the emphasis is focused less on the new film release and directed towards a more detailed description about Norwich, the medieval British city used for location shots. The film is still considered notable but only within the context of where and when *Stardust* was filmed.<sup>279</sup> This article by the *EDP* demonstrates the importance of context, and how associations and meanings around ‘place’ in relation to film are influenced by cultural institutions such as the mainstream press. This discourse about *Stardust* is shaped and dictated by implicit ‘contextual determinants’,<sup>280</sup> such as the location of readerships, and the economic and institutional interests of the *EDP* itself as a regional newspaper. In this example, the article locates the fantastical world in *Stardust* directly with the ‘real’ city of Norwich and the architecture, history and heritage all connected to an actual ‘place’. The film is thus allocated another identity, which lies extra-textual to the film itself and is grounded in the ‘real’: a ‘place’ which not only exists in Britain but is also recognisable and familiar to local readers of the *EDP*. This example of press response towards location and ‘place’ in *Stardust* was ultimately determined by

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<sup>278</sup> Emma Lee, “From Cobbled Streets to Silver Screen”, *Eastern Daily Press*, 17/10/2007 <Nexis UK, accessed 14/09/2012>

<sup>279</sup> The actual film review of *Stardust* only makes an appearance towards the end of the *EDP* article.

<sup>280</sup> This process describes how cultural meanings are applied to filmic texts ‘in specific times and social circumstances’, in Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p.68. See also Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, p.162.

when and where the article was published. What this also means is that critical discourse surrounding 'place' and the film has the potential for variation dependent on the given context. This study contends that to understand how wider socio-cultural meanings associated with 'place' are formed and established by the critical 'writing machine', we need to consider the potential 'contextual determinants' across a more extensive range of national, regional and local critical discourse.

This study argues that location and 'place' represent crucial factors in the British mainstream press reception of films and have particular resonance in relation to the fantasy films selected. The importance of 'place' in film is articulated by Steve Chibnall and Julian Petley, who contend that cinematic landscapes represent 'a site of rhetorical claims and ideological connotations, not simply a location where the action was set, but a crucial part of the film's signifying system, a topography that [is] infused with covert, nascent or over-determined meaning'.<sup>281</sup> Chibnall and Petley position their analysis in relation to British realist film. However, they acknowledge that assessments of 'place' can also be applied to 'other cinemas' which are subject to the same spatial and visual signifiers on screen. 'Place' performs an important role in establishing the environment in which a fictional narrative unfolds, and also informs general viewer understanding or appreciation towards the 'real' locations and identities represented on screen. As Higson articulates:

place is never neutral, but is always invested in meaning; how those meanings are constructed by audiences will depend on how and where they are situated in the complex web of local, national and global relations that characterise the contemporary world.<sup>282</sup>

Higson emphasises the 'complexities' associated with 'place' and ascribed meanings which are appropriated by different films and in different contexts. In relation to British cinema, national identity is not allocated one single meaning but is instead 'constructed' by multiple filmic representations and audience interpretations of such images. When

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<sup>281</sup> Steve Chibnall and Julian Petley, "Introduction", *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, Vol.4, No.2, November 2007, p.213.

<sup>282</sup> Higson, *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s*, p.88.

applied to fantasy film, 'place' is more obscure and ambiguous, and arguably provides a more complicated topography to navigate. As Walters contends, fantasy cinema offers a distinct detachment from reality, 'a world divorced from our own'.<sup>283</sup> This 'alternative' world is typically populated with 'different landscapes and architectures', representing a topography defined by opposition to the 'real'.<sup>284</sup> As a result, associations between imaginary, or non-mimetic representations of 'place' on screen, and 'real' locations, should be compromised. However, when analysing critical response to the fantasy films selected for this study, it is clear that location and period informed a significant element of the reviews and articles.<sup>285</sup> As an example of how this applies to the localised press, within the *EDP* article the 'real' locations used for *Stardust* provided more interest and coverage than the actual film. This would suggest that the identification of 'place' constituted an important feature of the film's reception within the British mainstream press, which also impacted on cultural and national signifiers attached to the film. What this would imply is that 'place' is attributed a varied and complex set of meanings, not only informed by fantastical landscapes presented in such films, but also by critical interpretations based on 'how and where they are situated'.<sup>286</sup>

By analysing the press coverage of fantasy films, this approach positions theoretical applications of cinematic 'place' and meaning within a reception context. In doing so, this study draws on Austin's contention that the text 'does not determine its own meaning' in isolation and instead is 'dependent on the various positions of those approaching the text and on the array of intertextual material surrounding it'.<sup>287</sup> In line with Austin, this chapter examines critical reception as performing a crucial function within the interpretative process of defining 'place' and associated meaning around cinematic representations of fantastical

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<sup>283</sup> Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, p.6.

<sup>284</sup> Butler, *Fantasy Cinema: Impossible Worlds on Screen*, p.79.

<sup>285</sup> For example, as demonstrated in press reception of *The Philosopher's Stone*, critics consistently situated 'place' in the film within specific period and landscapes, and real British locations used for filming purposes.

<sup>286</sup> Higson, *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s*, p.88.

<sup>287</sup> Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences: Selling and Watching Popular Film in the 1990s*, p.13.

landscapes. This study will address two central issues. Firstly, the contention that fantasy provides a complete detachment from reality ('a world divorced from our own') is applied in analysing critical negotiations between 'real' and imaginary locations used in the fantasy film. This study considers whether the use of fantastical landscapes complicates national determinants of 'place' identified by the press. In response to work conducted in previous chapters, this analysis intends to reveal how the imagery and iconography associated with fantasised urban and rural British landscapes is provided meaning by the critical 'writing machine' and how this discourse impacts on associated ideas of cultural and national identity. Secondly, the significance of the local, regional and national is also explored in press response towards the 'real' British locations used in fantasy film productions. The intention is to identify what 'contextual determinants' influenced varying press reception to this particular aspect of the films, and the potential impact on understandings and meanings around 'place'. This study therefore develops Austin's argument that meaning is established and maintained through the 'various positions of those approaching the text', by examining local and regional publications, such as the *EDP*, in a comparison with the national titles. Drawing on Melanie Selfe's contention, this study thus acknowledges the 'need to consider film critics [and commentators] as geographically and culturally located audiences who experience films as "professional" viewers'.<sup>288</sup> Selfe articulates the importance of personal circumstance and location in critical assessments, including how this can change the associated meanings attached to a given film. This chapter adopts a similar position to explore press response as a series of multiple and 'situated' critical interpretations, which influence and determine varied meanings attached to cinematic representations of British landscapes in the fantasy film.

This study builds on existing scholarship conducted on cinematic space by applying film and cultural theory within a reception studies framework. In doing so, theoretical debates concerning 'place' are

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<sup>288</sup> Selfe, "Circles, Columns and Screenings: Mapping the Institutional, Discursive, Physical and Gendered Spaces of Film Criticism in 1940's London", p.588.



scrutinised beyond the immediate text itself and applied to other sites where rhetoric and ideology have potential impact. Given this context, critical response is crucial to consider because meanings associated with ‘place’, and how they are ‘constructed by audiences’, can clearly be influenced or informed by the discursive processes outlined by Austin and Klinger, amongst others. This reception process has wider implications for arguments of cultural and national specificity in the fantasy film. What this study aims to determine is a strong critical investment in on-screen representations of ‘place’ in the fantasy film which align the imaginary worlds depicted within a ‘real’ recognition of British period and location, and the varying reasons for this appropriation across a national, regional and local context. The selected case studies correspond with this approach. *Stardust* and *The Golden Compass* (2007) are examples of major ‘inward investment’ fantasy films which were predominantly produced and located within the UK. The initial section examines critical appropriations of ‘place’ in response to fantastical depictions of urban and rural Britain displayed within the films. The following section explores localised press response to *Stardust* and *The Golden Compass*, with a focus on the ‘contextual determinants’ that influenced the reception of ‘real’ locations used in each film.

### **‘A World Familiar, Yet Strange’:<sup>289</sup> Landscape and Location in the Fantasy Film**

In an article entitled “Space, Place, Spectacle”, Higson assesses the role of landscape and townscape shots in establishing film narrative and plot development. He goes on to argue: ‘more than a neutral space, these location shots demand to be read as a real historical *place*, authenticating the fiction’ shown on screen.<sup>290</sup> In this article, Higson is discussing location shots used in the British ‘kitchen sink’ cycle of films, most commonly associated with British social realist cinema during the period 1958 – 1963. Yet, the contention that cinematic location shots are defined by ‘authenticity’, a real ‘place’ which has historical significance

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<sup>289</sup> Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, p.35.

<sup>290</sup> Andrew Higson, “Space, Place, Spectacle: Landscape and Townscape in the ‘Kitchen Sink’ Film”, *Screen*, Vol.25, No.4-5, 1984, p.3.

and meaning, can also be applied to other fictional films. In relation to fantasy cinema, representations of landscape and location are typically constructed around a series of aesthetic distinctions between the ‘real’ / mimetic and ‘unreal’ / fantastic. As discussed, the diegetic coherence and structure in the fantasy film is not always immediately apparent or even stable, often presenting alternative worlds which are unfamiliar and strange. However, applying Higson’s terms, this study finds that the fantasised landscapes depicted in *Stardust* and *The Golden Compass* were not only ‘read’ by the British press as constituting ‘real’ locations, existing outside their imaginary worlds, but were also enthused with extra-textual meaning, recognition and familiarity which reinforced this association with ‘place’. The reasons for this critical approach, and the wider cultural and national significance of such discourse, informs the following section, which analyses press response towards townscapes used in *The Golden Compass* before moving on to consider the rural landscapes of *Stardust*.

### **Fantasised Oxford and Urban Romantic Heritage**

*The Golden Compass* film adaptation was released in UK cinemas in 2007 and followed on from the continued success of fantasy franchises such as the *Harry Potter* and *Chronicles of Narnia* series. Press reviews and articles from this period typically compared *The Golden Compass* to such films, again highlighting the ‘cultural context’ in which the film was released in cinemas, at a time when fantasy was high on the cultural and public agenda.<sup>291</sup> *The Golden Compass* is set in a parallel universe which features similar landscapes to our own world, including a frozen Arctic North, but which is also populated by ‘daemons’ and other imaginary, talking beasts. In analysing the British press response, it is clear that the most compelling aspect of the film for some critics was the fantasised representation of national landscape. This was most evident in assessments of re-imagined cities such as London and Oxford, where

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<sup>291</sup> In addition, the press contributed to more general media controversy that surrounded the release of *The Golden Compass*, particularly the ‘anti-religious themes’ contained within Pullman’s original narrative. Many critics considered the film appeared to ‘have those themes watered down and virtually excised from the film’, John Hiscock, “Special effects shine more than the stars”, *Daily Telegraph*, 20/11/2007 <Nexis UK, accessed 01/02/2012>

child protagonist Lyra Belacqua lives within the hallowed grounds of ‘Jordan College’. In the film, the cities are fantasised versions of their ‘real’ counterparts and this difference is determined by the depiction of strange architecture and technology that does not exist in our own world. However, critical response to the film provides evidence of how urban locations in *The Golden Compass* were read as a ‘real historical place’. For example, the film was described in a review by Philip French in *The Observer* as follows:

Now we have *The Golden Compass* [...] set in a parallel universe much like our own and compelling us to come to terms with another strange glossary [...] the film begins in a warm, romantic, mythical Oxford (Pullman studied at the same college as Tolkien, and there’s a brief, beautiful shot of Exeter’s quadrangle and its Sainte Chapelle-style chapel) sometime between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and 1930.<sup>292</sup>

There are a number of points to extrapolate from this source. Firstly, the comment ‘now we have *The Golden Compass*’ again reinforces the idea that the film is following a well- established line of recent popular and successful fantasy productions. In the preamble prior to the film synopsis, French discusses his general disinterest in fantasy and his ‘problems’ and ‘trouble’ with the genre. This is demonstrated when French describes the fictionalised language used in *The Golden Compass* as ‘another strange glossary’ that requires considerable effort to comprehend. This also represents a common complaint directed towards the film at this time, with critics describing the difficulties in understanding the film ‘if you’re not au fait with Pullman’s universe’.<sup>293</sup> As Cosmo Landesman stated in *The Sunday Times*, ‘call me stupid [but] I had difficulty following what it was all about’.<sup>294</sup> Issues of coherence and feasibility are commonly applied to fantasy genre, particularly as such works often ‘expand the boundaries of conceivability beyond the confines of ordinary experience’.<sup>295</sup> As seen in *The Observer* review, amongst

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<sup>292</sup> Philip French, *The Observer*, 09/12/2007 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

<sup>293</sup> Tim Robey, “An epic grandeur that’s hard to resist”, *Daily Telegraph*, 28/11/2007 <Nexis UK, accessed 01/02/2012>

<sup>294</sup> Cosmo Landesman, *The Sunday Times*, 02/12/2007 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

<sup>295</sup> Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, p.113.

others, French not only divulges his own personal ‘trouble’ with fantasy fiction but also draws attention to more general structural concerns regarding fantastical narratives and the ‘problems’ associated with coherence and credibility. Secondly, this opinion might explain why a substantial section of the review is dedicated to describing landscape, architecture and period. Despite the fantastical setting, French clearly identifies both Oxford and Exeter College as the location used for the fictional ‘Jordan College’. The detailed description of Exeter College’s central quadrangle and ‘Sainte Chapelle-style chapel’ is grounded within the ‘real’. This comment provides association and connection with a ‘real’ place, ‘authenticating’ the fantastical location and heritage. This discourse has the effect of stabilising the more obscure or unrecognisable features of the film.

The review by French provides anchorage for the reader, particularly those who are not ‘au fait’ with the original novel or have similar ‘trouble’ deciphering fantasy narratives. However, this piece also reveals how critical identification of ‘place’ in the film was complicated by a convergence of the ‘real’ and imaginary. In French’s review, Oxford is allocated dual identity, representing both a ‘real’ city with existing ‘beautiful’ heritage and architecture, and a ‘mythical’ place: an urban location which is intrinsically linked to a romanticised past. Higson provides a description which can be used to outline the potential reasons for this appropriation as follows: ‘in becoming the spectacular object of a diegetic and spectatorial gaze – something precisely “to-be-looked-at” – [the city] is emptied of socio-historical signification in a process of romanticisation, aestheticisation (even humanisation).<sup>296</sup> Higson identifies how the city, more commonly associated with urban industrialisation, poverty and decay, can also provide an arena where aesthetic ‘romanticisation’ can take place. In *The Observer* review, the ‘spectatorial’, or critical ‘gaze’, is directed towards the more spectacular iconography associated with Oxford, such as the university colleges. However, because this description is constructed around a ‘mythical’ past,

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<sup>296</sup> Higson, “Space, Place, Spectacle: Landscape and Townscape in the ‘Kitchen Sink’ Film”, p.16.

the city is also ‘emptied of socio-historical signification’. This is demonstrated by French’s evocation of period (‘sometime between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and 1930’) which is vague and non-descript. This description locates the ‘real’ Oxford within a romanticised past which extends beyond the film’s mise-en-scène and presents an idealised account of the city’s history and heritage. The response to depictions of ‘Oxford’ in *The Golden Compass* is significant because it establishes an association between the ‘real’ and fantastical. The film is set in a parallel world which does not adhere to the same properties as our own however the review locates the ‘real’ place within an equally spectacular ‘gaze’. Whilst this critical review is enthused with personal familiarity and recognition, the urban landscape is also complicated by a complex set of meanings surrounding the ‘real’ and the mythical, fantasised ‘place’.

*The Observer* review by French represents a common critical response from the quality broadsheet press towards the parallel Oxford depicted in *The Golden Compass*. The recognition and authentication of ‘place’ formed a significant feature in such sources, suggesting that most critics had some familiarity or personal connections with the city. However, this discourse varied substantially across different publications and the shifts in tone and language reveal divergent approaches to describing the fantasised Oxford. For example, Robbie Collin in *The News of the World* offered the following synopsis:

Lyra Belacqua is an 11 year old girl living at Jordan College, Oxford – a parallel Oxford in another dimension where people’s souls follow them around in the form of animals [...] Confused? You will be – especially if you’ve not read the books.<sup>297</sup>

In common with other sources, ‘problems’ of comprehension and coherence in fantasy fiction are again reinforced by the comment that the narrative is complex and ‘confusing’.<sup>298</sup> This statement considers the importance of Pullman’s text in establishing audience clarity and

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<sup>297</sup> Robbie Collin, “Pure Gold”, *The News of the World*, 02/12/2007 <Nexis UK, accessed 01/02/2012>

<sup>298</sup> See also Mark Adams who described the film as a ‘complex affair’ in “Solid Gold”, *Sunday Mirror*, 02/12/2007 and Roger Cox who issued a ‘bluffers guide to *The Golden Compass*’ which offered a description of terms, language and locations used in the film, in *The Scotsman*, 01/12/2007 <Nexis UK, accessed 01/02/2012>

understanding about unfamiliar language or magical events. This comment not only implicitly connects the film with the original novel but also underpins the continued popular appeal of film adaptations from British fantasy literature witnessed during this period. However, in contrast with French's review in *The Observer*, the location of Oxford and 'Jordan College' used in the film is allowed relatively minimal detail. Collin refrains from the evocative language utilised by French and instead merely confirms that the city, whilst perhaps reminiscent of the 'real' Oxford, is also significantly different. This is reflected by the choice of language and addition of a faux clarification: 'Oxford - a parallel Oxford in another dimension'. The effect is twofold, serving to identify and 'authenticate' the actual location used in the film and also to emphasise difference. In addition, Collin's review does not engage the reader in a description of Oxford's ornate architecture and college buildings.

Consequently, the critical 'gaze' does not function in the same manner between each publication and this variation has a significant effect on how meaning is established. In *The Observer*, the fantasised Oxford depicted in the film is imbued with romanticism and 'mythical' qualities which are reflected and reinforced by the review. The amount of dedicated article space also allows French the freedom to elaborate on his own personal knowledge and familiarity with the 'real' Oxford, identifying the city's colleges and past alumni ('Pullman studied at the same college as Tolkien').<sup>299</sup> The description offered by French has a profound effect on the wider cultural meanings attached to the 'real' and fantastical Oxford. This discourse positions the city as a romanticised urban space, a spectacular 'place' that demands 'to-be-looked-at'. In French's review, Oxford is a recognised 'real' city, but is also assigned 'mythical' qualities which extend beyond the fantastical realms of *The Golden Compass* and are located within a (semi) fictionalised past. In contrast, *The News of the World* review emphasises difference, suggesting a potential lack of personal familiarity or interest in the actual location used in the film. It is possible that such variation is determined by how

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<sup>299</sup> French's innate recognition of university buildings is perhaps unsurprising as he studied law at Oxford University. Source: Wikipedia  
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip\\_French](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_French)> Accessed online 06/11/2012

well-acquainted critics are with the locations shown on screen, and if we consider later sequences in *The Golden Compass*, when the action moves to the Arctic North, critics provided a minimum of details concerning the snowy landscapes depicted.<sup>300</sup> In addition, this difference in approach may also be influenced by other contributing factors, such as dedicated column length or perceived readership interest.

This critical discourse has an effect on the meanings associated with the ‘Oxford’ depicted in the film and the ‘real place’. Other examples can be found across press reviews and articles sourced from this period. In a review for the broadsheet *Guardian* newspaper, Peter Bradshaw described the ‘British cities of London and Oxford’ as ‘crowded, bulbous, Gilliamesque places of cod-classical architecture’.<sup>301</sup> In this comment, Oxford is again identified as the ‘British’ city where the story is located, but also emphasises difference from the ‘real’ by emphasising the fantastical elements of the urban landscape. This is perhaps most apparent in Bradshaw’s reference to the artist and film director Terry Gilliam, who is known for his imaginative depictions of alternate realities in films such as *Brazil* (1985) and *Time Bandits* (1981). Whilst this description is not as lengthy or informed as French’s elaborate review in its sister paper *The Observer*, the *Guardian* article still establishes a sense of British location and ‘place’ in the film. Another example can be seen in Tim Robey’s review for the *Daily Telegraph*, which described the ‘rather magical’ sight of a ‘burgundy zeppelin floating over Christ Church, Oxford’.<sup>302</sup> Once again, the fantasised urban landscape of *The Golden Compass* is confirmed for the reader in terms of the ‘real’. Despite some variation in the length of description offered by different critical commentators, the sources reveal evidence of repeated identification and ‘authentication’ of ‘place’ in contemporary press reviews of *The Golden Compass*. This would suggest that the ‘real’ locations used in the film were considered important. The fantasised city

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<sup>300</sup> Most of these scenes were filmed on the Norwegian island of Svalbard. Source: Robin Gauldie, “Northern Exposure in the Arctic”, *Daily Telegraph*, 10/12/2007 <Nexis UK, accessed 14/10/2014>

<sup>301</sup> Peter Bradshaw, “*The Golden Compass*”, *The Guardian*, 30/11/2007 <Nexis UK, accessed 29/09/2012>

<sup>302</sup> Robey, “An epic grandeur that’s hard to resist”, *Daily Telegraph*, 28/11/2007

of Oxford in the film provided a location which critics used to establish familiarity and coherence; although set in a parallel universe, this is a recognisable world which shares similar features to our own. In addition, this appropriation of ‘place’ reinforced the fantastical narrative with extra-textual meaning and understanding which was based firmly within the ‘real’. For some critics, including French and Robey, this provided further appeal because the fantastical elements merely enhanced the romanticism already established with a familiarised ‘place’. Drawing on Higson’s argument, it is clear that this parallel world city of ‘Oxford’ was still read as a ‘real’ historical place, ‘authenticating the fiction’ shown on screen. Crucially, this critical approach determined recognisable cultural and national signifiers to British locations used in the film. The following section explores this tendency further in an analysis of critical response to fantasy landscapes where ‘place’ is more obscure and enigmatic.

### **Rural Landscapes and the British Countryside Idyll**

In a historical overview of British cinema, Chibnall and Petley argue that depictions of ‘place’, particularly the ‘pictorial representation of landscape [and] beauty of the countryside’, perform a significant role in establishing a sense of British national identity.<sup>303</sup> They assess the capacity of the British rural landscape, captured on screen, to convey and promote a romanticised notion of national character and identity. The following section applies this argument within a reception studies context, analysing how visual images of rural Britain were assigned meaning in press discourse surrounding the fantasy film *Stardust*. As with most of the other case studies examined so far, the film is an adaptation from a British fantasy novel (by author Neil Gaiman) and was also released in UK cinemas in late 2007. *Stardust* begins in a fictional English village known as Wall before moving into the magical realm of Stormhold.<sup>304</sup> The film is thus located within a fantasised Britain of witches and fairies, presenting a topography which is strange and different to our ‘real’ world. Building on the evidence collated so far, the aim of this analysis is to

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<sup>303</sup> Chibnall and Petley, “Introduction”, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, p.213.

<sup>304</sup> The location is confirmed by Ian McKellen’s voice-over narrator. For a full list of locations and production information, see IMDB:

[www.imdb.com/title/tt0486655/locations](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0486655/locations)> Accessed online 10/11/2012



determine how 'place' was 'authenticated' and provided meaning in critical response to the rural landscapes on display.

The sources reveal a tendency to locate the fantasy landscapes of *Stardust* within various evocations of British history, myth and fairy tale. In a review from the *Sunday Mirror*, Mark Adams described the film in the following context: 'Once upon a time, around 200 years ago, there was a picturesque English village called Wall [...] separated from the enchanted kingdom of Stormhold'.<sup>305</sup> This quotation by Adams is interesting because it amalgamates 'real' and fictionalised British history from the initial opening sentence. The use of 'once upon a time' immediately links the film within the fairy tale narrative, as seen in famous literary works by Charles Perrault and Brothers Grimm. This introduction connects the film with recognised fairy tale tradition, signposting the world of *Stardust* as fantasy, a 'place' 'regarded as unreal by the teller and audience'.<sup>306</sup> However, the review also locates the fictional village of Wall within a 'real' period of British history: 'around 200 years ago'. If we accept Adams' timescale, this would locate the story at some point within the extended Regency period of the early 1800s. This critical approach emphasises the cultural and national signifiers attached to the film. However, this discourse also provides an amalgamation of 'real' and fictionalised history applied to the film. For example, Wall was also described by some critics as a 'Victorian village',<sup>307</sup> which would suggest that the signified period of time depicted in the film, whilst identified as existing at some point in British history, was certainly not stable. Critical descriptions of the village of Wall and surrounding countryside in *Stardust* thus resonate with Chibnall's and Petley's argument because they establish the British location in the film and also provide romanticised descriptions of the 'pictorial' landscape.

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<sup>305</sup> Mark Adams, "At the Movies: Starmust", *Sunday Mirror*, 14/10/2007 <Nexis UK, accessed 08/11/2012>

<sup>306</sup> Donald Haase, *The Greenwood Encyclopaedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), p.653.

<sup>307</sup> See reviews by Nicholas Barber who describes Wall as on the 'border between Victorian Britain and the mystical realm', in the *Independent on Sunday*, 21/10/2007; Alan Morrison comments on the 'Victorian village of Wall', in *The Daily Record* 19/10/2007; Wendy Ide who describes the 'nearby Victorian village of Wall' in "This familiar brew of fantasy and fun", *The Times*, 22/08/2007 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

The fictional Wall is contextualised as a ‘picturesque’ English village; a static ‘place’, situated within a timeless landscape that has existed throughout the ages. This response is connected to deep understandings and connotations associated with the British countryside.

To understand how and why the fantasised rural landscapes of *Stardust* were appropriated in this manner by the British press, this study draws on work conducted by John Urry. In *Consuming Places*, Urry describes how certain ‘places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is an anticipation, especially through day-dreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered’.<sup>308</sup> Urry applies this theory in his assessment of the ‘place myth’: rural landscapes that command escapist or romanticised appeal because they exist beyond the ordinary or every day.<sup>309</sup> In press reviews for *Stardust*, Urry’s ‘place myth’ is provided particular currency. Critics considered the locations presented in the film as extraordinary, ‘brimming with wicked witches, evil princes [and] mischievous spells’.<sup>310</sup> However, this spectacular landscape was also deeply entrenched within a British past underscored by a semi-fictionalised sense of nostalgia. Higson outlines how the urban cityscape on film can be ‘emptied of socio-historical signification’, and the countryside depicted in *Stardust* is addressed in a similar approach through this critical process. Consequently, the *actual* time period in the film becomes obsolete and instead represents an amalgamation of the fictional and ‘real’ past: ‘a golden age in a nation’s collective imagination and memory that seems comparatively simple [...] a way of life that has [existed] for centuries’.<sup>311</sup> The fantasised landscapes of *Stardust* could therefore be located within any notable period associated with British history that evokes such emotional response. This is significant because it reinforces the ‘place myth’ ideal, where the ‘real’ British rural

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<sup>308</sup> John Urry, *Consuming Places*, (London: Routledge, 1995), p.132.

<sup>309</sup> Urry references the English Lake District to outline how the ‘place myth’ can develop through the romantic evocation of landscape in literature and poetry, *Consuming Places*, p.193-210.

<sup>310</sup> Adams, “At the Movies: Stardust”, *Sunday Mirror*, 14/10/2007

<sup>311</sup> Catherine Fowler and Gillian Helfield, Eds. *Representing the Rural: Space, Place and Identity in Films about the Land*, (Detroit, USA: Wayne State University Press, 2006), p.10-11.

landscape is (re)constructed as an ideological ‘place’ opposed to modernity, and existing in historical perpetuity.

What this critical discourse reveals is a tendency towards evocation and romanticism, representing a common tactic employed by the British mainstream press. In an article by John Vincent and John Hill on this issue, they contend that the ‘selective use of history and the shared sense of destiny it imparts serves not only to differentiate the nation but also promotes a sense of exceptionalism or superiority over other nations’.<sup>312</sup> Vincent’s and Hill’s article concerns UK press coverage of the English football team’s performance during the 2010 World Cup. They claim that the ‘selective use’ of national legend, myth and ideology coveted by journalists at this time, including references to Saint George and the Dragon, was designed with the specific intention of engaging public enthusiasm for the football team abroad and generating national pride in England more generally. This ‘selective use’ of fictionalised and ‘real’ history can be applied to press reviews for *Stardust*. The sources display an attempt to associate the landscapes with ‘real’ historical periods (such as the ‘Victorian age’) alongside repeated references to British folklore and mythology. Initially, this might not be considered so surprising. As Furby and Hines state, whilst the fairy tale is considered wholly fictional, myths and legends are generally ‘believed to have actually happened at some time in the real historical past’.<sup>313</sup> This combination of reality and fiction is demonstrated in a review by Richard Bacon for *The People* newspaper who announced: ‘Folklore has it that beyond a village called Wall lies the magical kingdom of Stormhold [a land] of miniature two headed elephants, jars of eyeballs, evil witches and enslaved princesses’.<sup>314</sup> Similar to Adams’ review in the *Sunday Mirror*, Bacon locates the village of Wall as a ‘real’ place which lies adjacent to the fantastical kingdom of Stormhold. The use of the term ‘folklore has it’ again positions the ‘real’ world as somehow separate from the strange

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<sup>312</sup> John Vincent and John Hill, “Flying the Flag for En-ger-land: *The Sun’s* (re) construction of English identity during the 2010 World Cup”, *Journal of Sport and Tourism*, Vol.16, No.3, August 2011, p.188.

<sup>313</sup> Furby and Hines, *Fantasy*, p.7.

<sup>314</sup> Richard Bacon, “Soppy Stardust”, *The People*, 14/10/2007 <Nexis UK, accessed 08/11/2012>

and unfamiliar. Coherence and recognition is established around the ‘picturesque’, pre-industrial country village which is associated with folklore tradition and heritage. In doing so, the review ‘differentiates’ the ‘real’ settlement of Wall with the ‘other’: the unknown world existing beyond the pastoral and familiar borders of the recognised nation.

Applying Chibnall’s and Petley’s argument, the ‘pictorial representation of rural landscape’ depicted in *Stardust* was appropriated by the critical press with a particular evocation of national identity and character which was firmly associated with decency, virtue and a ‘certain purity and continuation of culture’.<sup>315</sup> In this context, the ‘place myth’ resonates deeply with nostalgic concepts of ‘Britishness’ which are closely intertwined with ‘real’ history and heritage and also fantasised ‘spectacles of pastness’.<sup>316</sup> The rural British landscape, as depicted in the pastoral and eternal countryside of *Stardust*, thus assumes the much ‘lauded’ position as an ‘icon of national heritage’.<sup>317</sup> The sources offer some insight into how the critical ‘writing machine’ contributed to this process, not only by describing aspects of rural landscapes depicted in *Stardust* but also by constructing and applying meanings of ‘Britishness’ around such locations. Critical response would therefore appear to be influenced by ‘collective’ notions of the mythical British countryside and national identity. However, the sources also reveal a ‘selective’ approach towards history which is principally informed by ‘contextual determinants’, such as differing readership interests and also the personal knowledge, experience and circumstance of the ‘situated’ critic themselves. The final section extends this analysis to consider what other potential factors contributed to British press response to domestic locations portrayed in *Stardust* and *The Golden Compass*.

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<sup>315</sup> Fowler and Helfield, Eds. *Representing the Rural: Space, Place and Identity in Films about the Land*, p.11.

<sup>316</sup> Andrew Higson, “Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film”, in Lester Friedman, Ed., *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, (London: UCL Press, 1993, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 2006), p.118.

<sup>317</sup> David Lowenthal, “British National Identity and the English Landscape”, *Rural History*, Vol.2, Issue 2, October 1991, p.213.

## Negotiating the 'Real'

The beginning of this chapter considered a quotation taken from an article published in the *EDP* newspaper concerning the cinematic release of *Stardust*. As discussed, this piece engaged with the 'real' locations used in the film, effectively to promote the city of Norwich. This critical authentication of 'place' was therefore determined by a range of 'contextual determinants' which included when and where the article was published. In contrast to the national press, which serves a wide catchment of UK readership, local and regional newspapers have different factors to consider, often connected to the interests of the immediate community. The *EDP* article highlights this process in action, as the diegetic space of *Stardust* is (re)constructed and (re)framed within a localised context. This would suggest that critical recognition of the 'real' locations used in *Stardust* formed an important aspect of the film's local reception. This final section examines what specific local and regional 'contextual determinants' influenced the critical appropriations of landscapes and locations used in *Stardust* and *The Golden Compass*, and also considers how and why this varied across the different sources examined. This analysis also addresses the impact on subsequent meaning(s) attached to 'place' when contrasted with the national press.

In an article published in the local newspaper the *Oxford Mail*, Andrew Ffrench announced the following in relation to the forthcoming UK release of *The Golden Compass*:

Oxford author Philip Pullman is hoping thousands of Oxfordshire residents visit local cinemas to see *The Golden Compass*, which opens in cinemas today [...] speaking from his home in Cumnor, near Oxford, after attending the London premiere, Mr Pullman said: "I like it very much – I hope lots of people in Oxford do go and see it". [...] Parts of the film were shot in several city locations [and] tourism bosses in Oxford estimate the film will give the city's economy a £15m boost.<sup>318</sup>

There are several points to scrutinise from this opening paragraph in the *Oxford Mail*. Firstly, there is a definite sense of local ownership

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<sup>318</sup> Andrew Ffrench, "Gold Rush for New Film", *Oxford Mail*, 05/12/2007 <Nexis UK, accessed 05/09/2012>

surrounding *The Golden Compass* as a film which is firmly associated with Oxford. This connection is established from the start, citing Pullman as the author of the original novel and his personal and professional attachments with the city. This is further emphasised by stating where he lives ('Cumnor, near Oxford') and by describing Pullman as an established and well-known 'Oxford author'.<sup>319</sup> The local association is reinforced by the mention of 'several city locations'<sup>320</sup> which were used for filming purposes and also in Pullman's later comment: 'I hope lots of people in Oxford do go and see it'. This press discourse is notable because it is defined by a local distinction. Whilst describing the 'London premiere' of *The Golden Compass* emphasises the national and global dimensions of the film release, the focus on Pullman's personal opinion, and his 'home' residence near the city, connects the film with its Oxford origins. This critical discourse re-positions the '£90m blockbuster film',<sup>321</sup> which typically connotes big-budget Hollywood investment, implicitly within the local. Secondly, this local association can also be found in the attempt by Ffrench to garner more regionalised audience interest in the film. For example, the article begins with an appeal for 'thousands of Oxfordshire residents' to 'visit [their] local cinemas' to watch the film. This statement is followed in the article with the mention of an event, including a Q&A session with Pullman, taking place at the Phoenix Picturehouse in Oxford later that month.

What such discourse reveals is an attempt to encourage readers of the *Oxford Mail* to attend 'local cinemas' to watch a film which offers potential economic gain for the immediate area. Furthermore, this press promotion of Oxford as a vibrant city of literature, film and culture also has the potential for associated tourism opportunities. Ffrench outlines an estimate that the city will benefit substantially through the increase in visitors generated by the film's international scope, providing a massive '£15m boost' to the local economy. The appeal of visiting 'real' film locations is explored in a comprehensive study by Sue Beeton, who

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<sup>319</sup> The literary appeal of *The Golden Compass* as a film adaptation is also enthused by Ffrench, who describes Pullman's original text as an 'award-winning novel'.

<sup>320</sup> Ffrench identifies Oxford locations used within *The Golden Compass* as including Radcliffe Square, Christ Church College and Exeter College.

<sup>321</sup> Ffrench, "Gold Rush for New Film", *Oxford Mail*, 05/12/2007

applies the term ‘film-induced tourism’ to describe ‘on-location tourism that follows the success of a movie made (or set) in a particular region’.<sup>322</sup> Beeton argues that successful marketing of film locations for tourism opportunities can have a significant effect on economic revenue and income for a given community. In the *Oxford Mail*, the repetition of ‘place’ and location formed the central focus of the article. Drawing on Beeton’s assertion, this would suggest that the potential for ‘film-induced tourism’ generated by *The Golden Compass* was considered important for the local press to encourage and promote. As a result, ‘contextual determinants’ associated with local and community interests influenced how ‘place’ was prioritised by the local media in their press coverage of the new film release.

In contrast with *The Golden Compass*, which although set in a parallel world was still identifiable as located within ‘Oxford’, *Stardust* was filmed in various locations throughout the UK. Yet, this sense of localised ownership can also be found in dispersed local and regional press coverage of *Stardust*. As demonstrated in the *EDP* article, which focused on Norwich as a prime location used in the film, this critical discourse was informed by describing and publicising the ‘real’ attractions associated with the city. However, the *EDP* was not alone in establishing connections between the fantasised landscapes of *Stardust* and the ‘real’ locations used for film production. The following comparative analysis concerns the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* and *Wales on Sunday*: newspapers which both claimed some degree of local or regional ownership of the ‘real’ locations used in *Stardust*. The intention is to determine what factors influenced press response to the locations used and to draw comparisons between the different publications. For example, in an article for *Wales on Sunday*, Nathan Bevan provided an account of location filming for *Stardust* as follows:

Robert De Niro swapped the Hollywood hills for the high peaks of mid-Wales for his role [...] in major new fantasy blockbuster *Stardust*. The cast and crew spent a week during this summer on location shooting around Llyn Y Fan Fach [...] in the breath-

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<sup>322</sup> Sue Beeton, *Film-Induced Tourism*, (Clevedon: Channel View Publications, 2005), p.9.

taking National Park [...] chosen due to its mythical connections, shrouded in Celtic legend [and] stunning scenery.<sup>323</sup>

This source reveals striking similarity with the *EDP* article, particularly in the comment that the Brecon Beacons National Park was ‘chosen’ by the *Stardust* production team because of its ‘stunning scenery’; providing ‘just the location they had scouted far and wide for’.<sup>324</sup> According to Bevan, the rural landscape was considered the perfect location to depict a fantastical realm because of its ‘mythical’ qualities. In this comment, the landscape of mid-Wales is allocated a complex set of extra-textual connotations and signifiers around the fantastical / fictional / ‘real’. The lakes and mountains are contained within the ‘place myth’ ideal, signifying a ‘quasi-spiritual’ natural landscape which has profound meaning.<sup>325</sup> This can be seen in mixed references to the ‘mythical connections’ established between the Welsh landscape, ancient Celtic tradition and ‘Arthurian legend’.<sup>326</sup> In comparison with the reviews examined for *Stardust*, this amalgamation of fiction, folklore and history is designed to engage the reader with the rural locations portrayed in the film. However, this critical discourse is also constructed to publicise the ‘real’ landscapes, as places to visit and enjoy. Bevan dedicates a significant amount of time to describing exact locations where the filming took place, with added quotations confirming how much the cast and crew ‘loved Wales’.<sup>327</sup> This discourse actively promotes the natural beauty of the local landscape and as a ‘place’ which has significant appeal because of its history and heritage.

As a further example, Eilidh Davies in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* offered a very similar description of the Scottish locations used in the film production of *Stardust*:

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<sup>323</sup> Nathan Bevan, “Ewe Talkin’ to Me?”, *Wales on Sunday*, 29/10/2006 <Nexis UK, accessed 05/09/2012>

<sup>324</sup> Lee, “From Cobbled Streets to Silver Screen”, *Eastern Daily Press*, 17/10/2007

<sup>325</sup> Urry, *Consuming Places*, p.197.

<sup>326</sup> Bevan describes the film site as ‘purported to be the location where the lady of the lake handed the sword Excalibur to King Arthur’. It is worth noting there many similar local legends associated with this particular location in the Brecon Beacons. Source: <[www.inspirationalwales.com/kingarthur/](http://www.inspirationalwales.com/kingarthur/)> Accessed online 04/11/2012

<sup>327</sup> *Stardust* spokeswoman quoted in Bevan, “Ewe Talkin’ to Me?”, *Wales on Sunday*, 29/10/2006



Hollywood came to the Highlands yesterday [...] the cast are to be filming in the Kinlochewe Village Hall today before heading to Skye this afternoon [...] The movie is directed by Matthew Vaughn [who] fell in love with area after attending Madonna and Guy Ritchie's wedding at Dornoch Cathedral and nearby Skibo Castle in 2000.<sup>328</sup>

As with Bevan's piece, this article positions the fantasised landscapes of *Stardust* within the 'real' locations of the Scottish Highlands. This discourse also promotes the local scenery, emphasising how the director Matthew Vaughn 'fell in love' with the area. The romanticised qualities associated with the 'place myth', as a landscape which exists beyond the ordinary and every day, are reinforced by such comments. This evocation associated with 'place' is also foregrounded in describing how famous stars, celebrities (Madonna and Guy Ritchie) and directors 'love' to visit the area. In a similar approach to the *Oxford Mail*, both the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* and *Wales on Sunday* create a distinction between the American glamour of the 'Hollywood Hills' and the ruggedly British 'peaks of mid-Wales' and 'Highlands'.<sup>329</sup> This may be intended as a humorous comparison however it elicits a more serious intention, informing the reader that the local landscapes provide 'exactly the right candidate[s]'<sup>330</sup> required for the film because they evoke a sense of history, mythology and tradition which is unattainable anywhere else. Drawing on Beeton's contention, the articles could be considered as promotional pieces designed to publicise the 'chocolate box' appeal of historical British cities such as Oxford, or the 'breath-taking' characteristics of national landscapes, engaging interest in the local area with the added potential for wider tourism opportunities and economic investment. This critical discourse differs from the national press because it is based on specific 'contextual determinants' associated with local community interests, as opposed to distributing to a wider audience of

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<sup>328</sup> Eilidh Davies, "A-list stars bring Hollywood to the Highlands", *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 22/04/2006 <Nexis UK, accessed 05/09/2012>

<sup>329</sup> See also Alison Rowat's review which mentions the "Highlands and Islands landscape", in "Life's simple for fantasy straight out of panto land", *The Glasgow Herald*, 18/10/2007 and Alan Morrison's review for the *Scottish Daily Record* that claimed "three cheers for Scotland as several of the outdoor scenes were shot on Skye", in "Simply Spellbinding", *Daily Record*, 19/10/2007 <Nexis UK, accessed 05/09/2012>

<sup>330</sup> Lee, "From Cobbled Streets to Silver Screen", *Eastern Daily Press*, 17/10/2007

national readerships.<sup>331</sup> This localised press response to ‘place’ was therefore shaped and informed, almost exclusively, by where the article or review was published. In relation to *Stardust*, the local connections and associations with the film were highly dispersed, principally because the film was shot at various different locations within the UK. Consequently, the filmic landscapes *could* be located in Norwich, Skye, Bibury,<sup>332</sup> Hoddesdon<sup>333</sup> or the Brecon Beacons, dependent on where the particular press review or article originated from. The ownership of urban and rural landscapes featured in *The Golden Compass* and *Stardust* therefore had subsequent impact on the meanings attached to the local and regional locations depicted in the films.

### Summary

This chapter provides evidence to suggest that location and ‘place’ represented important factors in press response to *Stardust* and *The Golden Compass*. Applying Higson’s contention, the idea that ‘place’ in film is ‘always invested in meaning’ is thus provided currency in the source materials examined. The identification of British landscapes and locations informed a prominent aspect of this discourse. Despite offering ‘world[s] divorced from our own’,<sup>334</sup> the critical press described the urban cities and rural landscapes as recognisable to our ‘real’ world. This provided some coherence and comprehension to the fantastical realms or parallel worlds depicted in each film, and also positioned the imaginary locations within a historicised context of national identity. However, this critical application is complex and analysis of the source materials discloses evidence of substantial variation. What the reviews and articles reveal is that there is no uniformed ‘meaning’ which connects critical appropriations of landscapes depicted in the films, apart from their identification as British locations. Instead, meanings around ‘place’ are

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<sup>331</sup> The comparison between national, regional and local critical reception in relation to community interest and economic investment is considered in more detail in Chapter Five which explores press response to the perceived ‘impact’ of British fantasy films.

<sup>332</sup> Emma Tilley, “Welcome to the Lake District?”, *This is Gwent*, 08/11/2007 <Nexis UK, accessed 05/09/2012>

<sup>333</sup> Anon., “Hollywood comes to Hoddesdon”, *Hertfordshire Mercury*, 05/05/2006 <Nexis UK, accessed 05/09/2012>

<sup>334</sup> Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, p.6.

informed and ‘constructed’ by what Austin describes as ‘the various positions of those approaching the text’.<sup>335</sup>

This is important to consider, principally because the determination of ‘real’ locations in the films varies significantly depending on *where* this discourse originates from. In the national press, the locations depicted in *Stardust* and *The Golden Compass* were appropriated based on critical response to diegetic space. As a result, the determination of ‘place’ was informed, to an extent, by personal recognition of locations and landscapes. In relation to *The Golden Compass*, the ‘real’ city of Oxford was identified as the fictional city featured in the film (albeit a ‘parallel Oxford’). However, the extent to which the ‘real’ Oxford was recognised and ‘authenticated’ was based on the critics’ own personal connections to the city, and also on the perceived interests of national readerships. This factor influenced the amount of detail critics dedicated to describing the ‘real’ and fantasised ‘Oxford’ in their reviews. This difference in approach is most clearly demonstrated in French’s elaborate description in *The Observer*, compared to Robbie Collin’s minimal acknowledgement in *The News of the World*. The varying level of critical engagement changes the tone and sentiment of the articles and reviews. For Collin, the location is mentioned merely because it is where the story takes place during the film. However, in French’s review, the film location is layered with recognition, and the spectacle of ‘steampunk’ ‘airships’ flying over ‘Exeter’s quadrangle’<sup>336</sup> is considered a fantastical intervention within the more familiar cityscape of Oxford. In contrast, the rural landscapes of *Stardust* were assessed in a much more generalised context where the pastoral countryside functioned as a signified space and amalgamation of the ‘real and imagined’,<sup>337</sup> evoking timeless landscapes and inspired by British history, folklore, mythology and fairy tale.

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<sup>335</sup> Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences: Selling and Watching Popular Film in the 1990s*, p.13.

<sup>336</sup> French, *The Observer*, 09/12/2007

<sup>337</sup> Beeton, *Film-Induced Tourism*, p.4.

Despite some differences, what connects critical response to *Stardust* and *The Golden Compass* is a sense of recognised national identity that is also grounded in nostalgia and a romanticised view of British landscapes. Such themes represent a repeated discourse that resonates with other examples of fantasy films considered thus far. This sense of domestic ownership of British cities and landscapes, as identified in the national press, was also repeated in local and regional newspapers. However, the sources provide evidence of contrast with greater emphasis centred on the actual locations used during film production. Drawing on Selfe's assertion, the importance of the 'geographically and culturally-located'<sup>338</sup> writer is provided particular currency in such assessments. The sources demonstrate how the location of the individual journalist or newspaper had an effect on how film reviews and articles relating to *Stardust* and *The Golden Compass* were constructed. In the local and regional press, the critical emphasis is focused more on the potential economic benefits connected with 'film-induced tourism' within the local community. This discourse is centred less on the film itself and more on the actual locations featured in the film, which people can actually visit and enjoy. In this context, the dramatic landscapes and romanticised locations associated with the films are provided extra-textual meaning as 'real' places which exist beyond the text. What this study shows is that the 'contextual determinants' that informed assessments of 'place' are fundamentally based on the interests of the local newspaper organisations, and their involvement and representation amongst the wider communities. The influence of localised readerships and audiences thus performed a major role in this discursive process.

In conclusion, this study reveals that meanings of 'place' attributed to fantastical locations in *Stardust* and *The Golden Compass* were determined by a complex set of critical responses to the films. However, the sources display repeated evidence of critical engagement with the British locations. Despite the 'inward investment' status of the films, and the acknowledged presence of Hollywood production studios,

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<sup>338</sup> Selfe, "Circles, Columns and Screenings: Mapping the Institutional, Discursive, Physical and Gendered Spaces of Film Criticism in 1940's London", p.588.

this critical appropriation of ‘place’ ultimately determined the films’ ‘Britishness’. The British landscapes featured in *Stardust* and *The Golden Compass* were therefore considered an important aspect of the appeal and marketability of the films on a national, regional and local level of press reception. The reasons why may well shift, dependent on a notable range of ‘contextual determinants’. However, what this analysis reveals is a concerted attempt by the critical press to emphasise British locations and landscapes. In relation to the wider aims of this thesis, this response is so significant because it would suggest that imaginary landscapes inherent within the fantasy film can attain positive and meaningful connotations of national and cultural identity. This evidence resonates with the findings established so far and will go on to inform the final chapters of this thesis.

## Chapter Four

### ‘Categories’ of Fantasy and Realism in British Film

In previous chapters, this study has focused primarily on British press response to films which are categorised as ‘fantasy’ and also principally aimed towards the child audience. Whilst such definitions are certainly complex and subject to instability, as seen in the cross-generational appeal of fantasy films such as *Harry Potter* and *Inkheart*, the primary generic definition and target child audience remains a consistent feature identified in the films’ critical reception. This chapter broadens this analysis to include British films which are aimed more at the adult viewer and which also subvert conventional generic categorisations. This study involves a more thorough consideration of definitions of realism and fantasy, particularly within the context of British cinema, and also the multiple meanings and connotations associated with critical assessments of film aesthetics and genre. The main intention is to determine whether films which destabilise the diegetic boundaries between realism and fantasy are considered problematic within the context of their critical reception. Central to this study is Barr’s assertion that the British press exhibit ‘preference for a certain kind of realistic surface, for an “everyday” verisimilitude’.<sup>339</sup> Barr continues that where films display non-realist tendencies:

At least, such films are required to announce themselves clearly, so that they can be given a non-realistic label like Black Comedy, Fantasy, Thriller. A film should either be realistic or [...] create ‘a world of its own’. Films which always tend to suffer critically are those which fall between categories [which] deal with ‘real’ people but whose surface and spread of characters depart, by compression, heightening, etc, from everyday ‘realistic’ expectations.<sup>340</sup>

Barr’s argument resonates with claims put forward by Higson and Petley, amongst others, concerning the dominant realist ‘preference’ found in

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<sup>339</sup> In this article, Barr refers to ‘English film criticism’ for his illustration of press response to films however this definition can be extended to include British film criticism more generally, “*Straw Dogs, A Clockwork Orange and the Critics*”, p.21.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

critical discourse on British film. In particular, this statement emphasises how critics approach films which deviate from a 'realistic' aesthetic and also fail to 'announce themselves clearly' as genre films. This assertion underpins a central aim of this chapter which is to scrutinise critical meanings and connotations attached to filmic representations of realism in British cinema, including the tendency towards value judgements based on 'established' ideas of 'quality' and aesthetics. In doing so, this study interrogates Barr's claim that films which 'suffer critically' do not meet generic or aesthetic 'norms' and 'expectations' associated with more established labelling and categorisation processes. This contention reinforces Altman's assertion that 'critics must simultaneously particularise films and establish their connection to valued, established traditions and categories [and] thus gravitate towards strong genre recognition and clear generic affiliation'.<sup>341</sup> Altman's argument that critics define film genres based on recognition of shared iconographical features or tropes and 'established traditions' of categorisation is important to consider, particularly when applied to Barr's assessment. Specifically, this would suggest that films which have no obvious generic 'affiliation' are considered problematic to categorise or label and are thus subject to intense scrutiny, negativity or even outright dismissal by the critical establishment. This study aims to investigate such claims and identify any evidence to confirm or dispute the arguments put forward. Drawing on Barr's argument, the following chapter therefore examines British press criticism and coverage of British films that 'fall between categories'.<sup>342</sup>

In identifying suitable case studies for this chapter, the process of film selection had to be extremely considered. As the objective is to analyse press response to films which 'fall between categories' applying such terminology to select a given film would suggest prior recognition and acknowledgement of existing critical discourse. To avoid a conflict of interests, the chosen case studies, *Looking for Eric* (2009) and *My Talks With Dean Spanley* (2008), were selected because of their generic

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<sup>341</sup> Altman, *Film/Genre*, p.142.

<sup>342</sup> Barr, "Straw Dogs, A Clockwork Orange and the Critics", p.21.

categorisation as both ‘drama’ and ‘fantasy’ on popular user-orientated sites such as IMDB and Wikipedia.<sup>343</sup> This approach to film selection not only adheres to the wider methodological aims of this research but also provides a useful template to interrogate the arguments put forward. To understand how *Looking for Eric* and *Dean Spanley* operate as both ‘drama’ and ‘fantasy’, and how this generic hybridity affected their critical reception, this chapter examines the potential instabilities associated with their categorisation and labelling in the British press. In doing so, this analysis draws on Mittell’s argument to consider how fantasy genre might operate as a ‘cultural category’ which can shift and evolve over time, and across different user sites.<sup>344</sup>

This is significant because despite their recognised status as ‘fantasy’ films on websites such as IMDB, the chosen films are first and foremost ‘serious’ dramas which are aimed specifically towards adult viewers, as opposed to child audiences. Applying Barr’s description, each film deals with ‘real’ people, albeit in fictionalised settings, whose lives depart from ‘everyday “realistic” expectations’ through the presence of fantasy. This distinction positions *Looking for Eric* and *Dean Spanley* apart from the other genre films examined in this study so far. A key aim therefore is to determine how the application of ‘fantasy’ is utilised by the critical press in relation to the films. Consequently, this study not only builds on findings determined from previous chapters, which demonstrate positive critical engagement with fantasy films perceived to offer adult audiences ‘serious’ narratives based on ‘real world’ concerns, but also examines critical applications of ‘realism’ and ‘fantasy’ within a more comprehensive and structured assessment of such terms. The presence of fantasy in British films such as *Looking for Eric* and *Dean Spanley* raises significant questions for this study, specifically around issues of aesthetics, domestic film culture and ‘established traditions’<sup>345</sup> more commonly associated with British film production.

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<sup>343</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>344</sup> Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, p.18.

<sup>345</sup> Altman, *Film/Genre*, p.142.



## The 'Truth of the Real': Aesthetics, Genre and 'Quality' in British Cinema

This study has touched on theoretical definitions of realism and fantasy in earlier chapters. However, to understand fully how *Looking for Eric* and *Dean Spanley* might operate as examples of films that 'fall between categories', the oppositional differences between the realist and formative aesthetic need to be considered in more detail. In particular, this assessment is important when applied to British critical discourse and the acknowledged tendency for critics to 'prefer' British films which maintain adherence to realism. Certainly, in theoretical debates on this issue, realism and fantasy are consistently characterised by contrast. Walters provides an effective assessment of this approach when he claims:

distinguishing strongly between fantasy and reality in terms of the means by which we experience our world makes the implicit claim that there are ways of viewing existence that are "real" – objective, unbiased, non-emotive – and ways of seeing that are blighted by their "unrealness" – subjective, biased, emotive. In this formulation, there would be a type of experience that was based in reality and one that was conditionally based in fantasy.<sup>346</sup>

In this context, the two tendencies of realism and fantasy are explicitly opposed and irreconcilable, performing different functions and evoking different responses. The realist 'predominance'<sup>347</sup> is tangible in this sentiment: fantasy performs a secondary impulse. According to the renowned film critic André Bazin, a vocal proponent of cinematic realism, film functions as a mode of visual representation that is almost exclusively defined by its reliance on 'real' technology. The primary objective of this moving image is to document and record the 'real world' before attempting to criticise, interpret or subscribe to forms of artistic contemplation. Bazin articulates this point as follows: 'the fantastic in cinema is possible only because of the irresistible realism of the photographic image. It is the image that can bring us face to face with the

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<sup>346</sup> Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, p.96.

<sup>347</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p.35.

unreal, that can introduce the unreal into the world of the visible'.<sup>348</sup> In this assessment, fantasy is viable only as a result of cinematic realism and engagement with the reproduced photographic image. The critical status applied to fantasy, or indeed any other form of visually artistic endeavour, is therefore always considered in the secondary context to the realist prerogative. Bazin's contention also underpins the argument that fantasy provides mere escapism and a lack of serious engagement with the 'real world'. Whilst this critical approach is certainly not stable, the dominant realist tendency still functions as the aesthetic barometer in critical assessments of the fantasy films examined throughout this study.

As Siegfried Kracauer contends in *The Theory of Film*, 'everything depends on the right balance between the realist and formative tendency; and the two tendencies are well-balanced if the latter does not try to overwhelm the former but eventually follows its lead'.<sup>349</sup> This assertion would suggest that a successful and coherent film has to engage with cinematic realism through narrative, characterisation or mise-en-scène. Furthermore, Kracauer's implicit suggestion that films which offer a disproportionate 'balance' between the two aesthetic tendencies are unstable and prone to confusion or disruption resonates with the type of films Barr outlines in his assessment. In describing films that 'deal with "real" people' yet depart from 'everyday realistic expectations', Barr delineates the same aesthetical differences and compulsions outlined by Kracauer. The problem for critics therefore occurs when a seemingly 'realist' text with serious intentions includes sequences which are considered unexpected, or at significant odds with the established mise-en-scène. In light of such arguments, it could be proposed that any film which 'fall[s] between categories' is potentially at risk and thus prone to 'suffer critically'. As discussed elsewhere in this study, the critical preference for films which demonstrate a commitment towards realism is potentially exacerbated when applied to British cinema. Whilst the argument that British film is exclusively defined by an adherence towards

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<sup>348</sup> André Bazin, "The Life and Death of Superimposition", in Bert Cordell, Ed. *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*, (London: Routledge, 1997), p.73.

<sup>349</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, "The Theory of Film", in Leo Brady and Marshall Cohen, Eds. *Film Theory and Criticism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2004), p.152.

coherent visuals, uninterrupted narrative flow and restrained tone has clearly evolved since the ‘quality films’ of the 1940s, with new approaches to British cinema offering fresh perspectives, terms such as ‘authenticity’, ‘naturalism’ and the ‘truth of the real’<sup>350</sup> still resonate in contemporary criticism.

Central to this is a tangible distinction between British cinema and the escapism and spectacle more commonly associated with American cinema, and more specifically Hollywood film production. Robert Murphy provides a pertinent description of this oppositional approach, when he refers to ‘realism and tinsel’.<sup>351</sup> Originating from the period of the 1940s, this expression continues to inform dominant critical discourse applied to understandings of national cinema. In particular, this term delineates the perceived difference between American style and British substance. As Peter Wollen contends in his critique of the British ‘spiv-cycle’ of the 1940s and 1950s, this approach has ‘fostered a long-lasting emphasis on realism as the destiny and duty of a truly British cinema, in distinction to Hollywood tinsel’.<sup>352</sup> This evocation can certainly be identified in the critical discourse and press materials analysed so far in this study. As demonstrated, there appears to be a critical ‘preference’ towards fantasy films which embrace more ‘realist’ elements, such as a commitment to moral and social issues or an emphasis of ‘serious’ narrative over technical special effects. In part, this approach is influenced by the critical distinctions between American and British cinema, particularly found in press reaction to films such as *Inkheart* and *Harry Potter*, where the associations and connections towards domestic film culture are not only emphasised but also repeated across the sources.

In response to this contention, it is perhaps expected that films such as *Looking for Eric* and *Dean Spanley* would provide a more

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<sup>350</sup> Ellis, “The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the Cinema 1942-1948”, p.79.

<sup>351</sup> Murphy is quoting the title of a pamphlet, published in 1944, based on a talk by British film producer Michael Balcon to the Film Workers Association in Brighton in 1943. Balcon encouraged a departure from the ‘tinsel’ associated with melodramas and ‘cheap romances’ in preference for a ‘realist’ approach. Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1939 – 1949*, (London: Routledge, 1989; 1992 Edition), p.39.

<sup>352</sup> Peter Wollen, “Riff-raff Realism”, *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 8, Issue 4, 1998, p.18-22.

concerted critical engagement with the qualities and characteristics associated with British cinema because of their more obvious links with British film production. In contrast to the case studies examined so far, the films also correspond with recognisable tropes associated with established British cinematic genres. *Dean Spanley* was adapted from Lord Dunsany's 1936 novella of the same title, filmed on location in the UK and features British actors Jeremy Northam and Peter O'Toole, in a twilight role as his cantankerous father, Horatio Fisk.<sup>353</sup> In addition, *Dean Spanley* displays iconography associated with the British period film, specifically in the design and detail established by the period setting in Edwardian Britain.<sup>354</sup> However, in describing *Dean Spanley* as a period (or 'heritage') film, there are numerous complexities associated with 'realism' when applied within this context. As Higson argues:

a version of realism is [...] at work in the production and consumption of the heritage genre, just as it is in the documentary-realist tradition – except that it is a different version of realism, stressing the value of reproducing what is taken to be a pre-existing historical reality rather than a contemporary reality.<sup>355</sup>

In Higson's assertion, the period film engages with a reproduction of history which subscribes towards realism within a (re)constructed version of the past. As a result, the period film evokes what Sarah Street describes as 'nostalgic responses for times not directly experienced by its consumers', and also provides retrospective 'commentary' about the past as opposed to a documentary account of historical 'reality'.<sup>356</sup> *Dean Spanley* adheres to the descriptions put forward by Higson and Street,

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<sup>353</sup> Most of *Dean Spanley* was filmed on location in Norfolk and Cambridgeshire. According to the *EDP*, 'what makes the film even more enjoyable is that the majority of the film's beautiful backdrops are right here on our doorstep: Norwich Cathedral, Peckover House at Wisbech, Holkham and Elveden Halls and Norwich's Elm Hill', in Anon., "Dean Spanley Tipped for Oscar", *Eastern Daily Press*, 12/12/2008 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

<sup>354</sup> Claire Monk and Amy Sargent outline the 'British period film' as 'set in the past – recent or distant – actual or imagined [and] designated as belonging to the historical or costume genre', in *British Historical Cinema: The History, Heritage and Costume Film*, (London: Routledge, 2002), p.1.

<sup>355</sup> Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.27.

<sup>356</sup> Sarah Street, *British National Cinema*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 2009), p.127. As demonstrated in earlier chapters, this presents a familiar and repeated theme in British press response to fantasy films such as *Inkheart*, *The Philosopher's Stone*, *Five Children and It*, etc...

through the reproduction of artefacts, architecture and costume to (re)construct Edwardian Britain. However, this seemingly sympathetic, albeit dramatised, recreation of ‘real’ historical period is disrupted by a fantastical premise which involves emotional re-engagement with past memory and re-incarnation. In the narrative, the arrival of Dean Spanley (played by Sam Neill) sparks intrigue within the Fisk household and the clergyman’s final revelation serves to heal the emotional wounds between father and son.<sup>357</sup> This fantastical element proves a highly unexpected intervention to the period ‘realism’ established within the film’s mise-en-scène. This provides the impetus for analysing how the critical press responded to a film which ultimately departs from the ‘realistic expectations’<sup>358</sup> associated with British period drama. *Dean Spanley* provides such a useful case study to engage with arguments put forward by Barr and Altman, amongst others, because the film subverts this realist imperative through the inclusion of a fantastical narrative. The intention is to determine whether the film ‘suffered critically’ as a result of indistinct genre boundaries and aesthetic demarcation.

Directed by British film-maker Ken Loach, *Looking for Eric* is ostensibly a film which pertains towards aesthetic realism. The film embraces a ‘realistic surface’ [and] “everyday” verisimilitude<sup>359</sup> through the depiction of actual, as opposed to (semi) fictionalised, British locations and a focus on the lives of ‘real’ people. In contrast to the period ‘nostalgia’ of *Dean Spanley*, the film also portrays characters within contemporary settings. *Looking for Eric* positions the storyline and narrative within a northern, working class background to convey the ‘effects of environmental factors [and] emphasise the close relationship between location and identity’.<sup>360</sup> The film is an example of British ‘social realist cinema’, a term which moves on from the documentary tradition associated with the ‘quality film’ yet still remains faithful to the ethos of realism and ‘authenticity’. *Looking for Eric* actively engages

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<sup>357</sup> The character of Dean Spanley is revealed as the reincarnation of ‘Wag’, Horatio Fisk’s faithful Welsh Spaniel.

<sup>358</sup> Barr “*Straw Dogs, A Clockwork Orange and the Critics*”, p.21.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>360</sup> Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p.184.

with a political and social subtext in its portrayal of middle-aged, northern postman Eric Bishop (played by Steve Evets), who is on the verge of a severe nervous breakdown following the collapse of his marriage. This ‘social realist’ approach as seen in *Looking for Eric* is underpinned by the directorial presence of Loach. As Hill outlines:

the guiding impulse throughout much of Loach’s work has been a pursuit of verisimilitude and authenticity in the telling of stories about ordinary people. As a result, it is the terms ‘realist’, ‘naturalist’ or ‘documentary drama’ that have most commonly been used to describe his work.<sup>361</sup>

Loach’s extensive output in British television and film production since the early 1960s has largely connected with such ‘realist’ depictions of ‘ordinary people’ which are themselves linked to wider political and social concerns. This commitment to realism underpins the films associated with Loach and provides the template for analysing critical response to *Looking for Eric*. What this study finds is conflicting discourse regarding certain aspects of the film, in particular the looming presence of infamous French footballer, Eric Cantona. Cantona appears in the film as ‘himself’,<sup>362</sup> which would at first appear to correspond with Hill’s contention regarding ‘authenticity’, albeit through the depiction of a ‘real’ famous celebrity as opposed to an unknown.<sup>363</sup> However, Cantona’s presence in the film is complicated, principally because he appears as an imaginary figure only visible to Bishop. Consequently, the ‘realist’ element of the film is disrupted by a character that exists somewhere between the fractured boundaries of the protagonist’s mind and the ‘real’ world.

In assessing how fantasy operates in *Looking for Eric* and *Dean Spanley*, and how this might be addressed in the sources, this study draws on Walters’ definition of ‘interior fantasy’. Walters applies this term to describe the ‘role that fantasy plays in guiding characters’ understanding

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<sup>361</sup> John Hill, *Ken Loach: The Politics of Film and Television*, (London: BFI, 2011), p.5.

<sup>362</sup> The film credits for *Looking for Eric* describe Cantona’s role in French as “lui-même” (meaning ‘himself’).

<sup>363</sup> Loach is renowned for choosing unknown actors who have some life experience to play characters, such as Crissy Rock in *Ladybird*, *Ladybird* (1994) and Evets was relatively unknown before his leading role in *Looking for Eric*.

of their own reality'.<sup>364</sup> In this context, fantasy provides insight into the personal thoughts and emotions of the characters. This visual approach can be seen in *Looking for Eric*, as the ethereal figure of Cantona becomes the primary guiding force in the protagonist's life, resolving to help Bishop in his personal quest for redemption. The film engages with 'interior fantasy' to portray the personal problems and issues Bishop encounters. In doing so, this approach shares notable similarities with the imaginary sequences in John Schlesinger's 1963 film *Billy Liar*, where 'realism and fantasy jostle in the hero's larkish mind'.<sup>365</sup> However, whilst both films embrace elements of 'interior fantasy', the more serious narrative themes in *Looking for Eric*, including divorce, gun violence and even attempted suicide, distinguishes the film from the more 'larkish' antics of young daydreamer, William 'Billy' Fisher. In *Dean Spanley*, the fantasy on display is even more liminal, engaging other characters in the story. However, the fantastic elements of the narrative produce a similar effect, 'guiding' the main protagonists towards eventual reconciliation and offering some insight into personal memory and past lives. In both *Looking for Eric* and *Dean Spanley*, fantasy performs a 'constituent feature of everyday life rather than something that is divorced from or an opposite to reality'.<sup>366</sup> As a result, the presence of fantasy becomes part of 'everyday' reality for the central characters involved.

This overview reinforces the inclusion of *Looking for Eric* and *Dean Spanley* within this study. In contrast to the case studies examined so far, the films are clearly not located in another separate or secondary world, yet still correspond with recognised generic tropes and iconography associated with fantasy. In addition, the acknowledged presence of both 'drama' and 'fantasy', registered on popular user-orientated sites such as IMDB and Wikipedia, emphasises the hybrid generic and aesthetic tendencies associated with each film. The central concern of this chapter is to determine whether the films 'fall between categories' and also 'suffer critically' as a result. Questions to consider

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<sup>364</sup> Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, p.97.

<sup>365</sup> Geoff Brown, "Paradise Found and Lost: The Course of British Realism", in Robert Murphy, Ed. *The British Cinema Book*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2009), p.33.

<sup>366</sup> Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*, p.97.

include how critics responded to the fantastical elements in the films, including the language used and the intention and meaning behind such terms. A central concern for this chapter is to determine whether critics identified the films as ‘fantasy’ and how this impacted on press coverage surrounding the films. To address these issues and relate them to the different types of films examined, this chapter is organised into two sections. The first section examines British press response to *Dean Spanley* with attention towards discourse concerning the presence of fantasy in a British period drama. The following section explores critical reaction to *Looking for Eric* as a ‘social realist’ film from the recognised canon of Loach that includes fantastical elements. This chapter draws on genre, aesthetics and authorship theory, and also the continued critical debates concerning ‘realism and tinsel’ and British cinema. In accepting that the critical press endorse ‘established traditions and categories’ and simple ‘genre recognition and affiliation’,<sup>367</sup> this study interrogates the processes involved with this practice within a contemporary context.

**‘A delightful, oddly moving film, immaculately acted, carefully skirting whimsy, and nicely located in its period’.**<sup>368</sup>

The primary discourse found in British mainstream press coverage of *Dean Spanley* at the time of the film’s cinematic release in 2008 concerned difference and distinction. For example, a review from the *London Evening Standard* described the film as an ‘eccentric mixture of the shrewd and the naïve [...] an original and imaginative piece of storytelling’.<sup>369</sup> This would suggest that the film was perceived as somehow different to more conventional films which deal with similar issues and themes. The description of *Dean Spanley* as both ‘original’ and ‘imaginative’ supports this contention and emphasises how the film subverts the generic norms and conventions commonly associated with British heritage cinema. The ‘version of realism’ Higson outlines in his description of the period film as constituting a faithful ‘reproduction’ of

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<sup>367</sup> Altman, *Film/Genre*, p.142.

<sup>368</sup> Philip French, “A Fine Pair of Christmas Miracles”, *The Observer*, 14/12/2008 <Nexis UK, accessed 08/02/2012>

<sup>369</sup> Derek Malcolm, “A Shaggy Dog Story”, *London Evening Standard*, 11/12/2008 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>



the past is effectively challenged by the *London Evening Standard*, which instead implies that the film offers a substantially different aesthetic approach. This opinion is substantiated in other press materials from the period describing the film in a similar context: ‘charming and original’,<sup>370</sup> ‘decidedly odd’,<sup>371</sup> and a ‘rarefied period piece’.<sup>372</sup> In each comment, repeated across the sources, the focus on ‘originality’ and difference is emphasised as a unique and interesting aspect of the film.

However, this critical response is not fundamentally determined by the film’s visual representation of the past, which is considered a faithful reproduction of period style and character across the reviews and articles examined, successfully ‘turning back the clock to early 20<sup>th</sup> century London’.<sup>373</sup> Instead, this discourse is more concerned with Sam Neill’s protagonist who disrupts the otherwise ‘realist’ commitment to period and setting. The ‘everyday “realistic” expectations’<sup>374</sup> established by the initial critical response towards certain aspects of characterisation and mise-en-scène are essentially challenged by this ‘imaginative’ intervention, prompting repeated phrases such as ‘eccentric’, ‘odd’ and ‘original’. This would suggest that the fantastical narrative witnessed in *Dean Spanley’s* re-incarnation storyline impinges on the ‘realist’ norms and conventions typically associated with and, perhaps more significantly, *expected* to be found within the British period film. However, whilst this discourse clearly provides evidence of hesitation and potential uncertainty regarding the film’s final reveal, *Dean Spanley* received mostly positive assessments across the British mainstream press. Furthermore, the distinctive style of the film was considered to be an important feature in terms of critical interest and appeal. For example, in the populist, middlebrow tabloid *Daily Mail*, the film was introduced as follows:

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<sup>370</sup> Anon., *The Sun*, 12/12/2008 <Nexis UK, accessed 08/02/2012>

<sup>371</sup> Tim Robey, “Keanu and a Waste of Space”, *Daily Telegraph*, 12/12/2008 <Nexis UK, accessed 08/02/2012>

<sup>372</sup> David Parkinson, *The Oxford Times*, 10/12/2008 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

<sup>373</sup> Anon., “A Bonding Tale”, *South Wales Evening Post*, 11/12/2008 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012> Most of the press materials analysed recognised and described the Edwardian period setting of the film.

<sup>374</sup> Barr, “*Straw Dogs*, *A Clockwork Orange* and the Critics”, p.21.

here is the unexpected delight of the week – and though it’s low budget and arrives un-hyped, it could be an unlikely hit with all the family [...] it’s a slight piece of whimsy but extremely charming [...] I don’t know of any film quite like *Dean Spanley*, and I mean that as a compliment.<sup>375</sup>

In this review by prominent *Daily Mail* critic Christopher Tookey, the presumptions instigated by the film’s period setting and heritage association are again challenged. By referring to *Dean Spanley* as an ‘unexpected delight’, this would suggest that the film confounded the critic’s initial expectations of what a British period drama *should* entail. In addition, this phrase conjures a secondary meaning, with the implication that Tookey had relatively low expectations prior to watching the film. This opinion may be a result of his existing film knowledge and position as a film critic who reviews new releases on a weekly basis. However, this extract from the *Daily Mail* reveals other potential factors that influenced this summation. As seen in previous chapters, the ‘topicality’ associated with a new cinematic release, generated and sustained by the media, can have a substantial impact on the potential box office success of a given film. In Tookey’s review, *Dean Spanley* is assessed in precisely the opposite terms as a film with minimal marketing affiliation and a subsequent absence of wider media interest. The connotations attached to the expression ‘unexpected delight’ would therefore suggest that the film exceeded critical expectations despite the acknowledged ‘low budget’ and lack of ‘hype’ attached to the film. For Tookey, such factors provided a significant measure of *Dean Spanley*’s ‘charm’ and appeal. This assessment of scale and ‘quality’ is significant because it represents a repeated discourse found in press coverage of the film.

What the critical sources reveal is a concerted emphasis on the perceived ‘Britishness’ associated with *Dean Spanley* as a small-scale, domestic film. This can be seen in the following reviews taken from *The Mirror* and *The Observer* newspapers respectively:

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<sup>375</sup> Christopher Tookey, “At last - an intelligent, charming WAG!”, *Daily Mail*, 12/12/2008 <Nexis UK, accessed 08/02/2012>

[*Dean Spanley*] is a deliciously dotty British charmer that really will warm your heart, tickle your ribs and restore your faith in the movies [...] if you don't fancy having your soul crushed by Keanu and co (see above), do check this one out.<sup>376</sup>

This is a delightful, oddly moving film, immaculately acted, carefully skirting whimsy, and nicely located in its period. It goes far beyond those wacky Disney comedies in which humans find themselves occupying the bodies of cats and dogs.<sup>377</sup>

In this discourse, *Dean Spanley* is clearly distinguished from American films which were released around the same period, specifically the output of Hollywood and Disney studios.<sup>378</sup> The difference in style and aesthetics between the national cinemas is pronounced, using terms such as 'wacky Disney comedies' and 'soul-crushing' to describe *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) in direct comparison to 'charming', 'warming' and 'delightful'. This critical approach demarcates *Dean Spanley* as 'British' because it does not attempt to match the scale and spectacle of American film productions. In addition, whilst the fantasy elements are acknowledged, particularly when compared to similar visual effects and techniques utilised by major American blockbusters, the film is still considered more involved and focussed on elements of characterisation, narrative and performance. In this context, *Dean Spanley* was appropriated as a British film because it adhered to aesthetic styles and production values more closely associated with domestic British cinema. This evidence is surprising, given that *Dean Spanley* is officially categorised as a UK / New Zealand co-production.<sup>379</sup> In addition, the film's emphatic departure from period 'realism' through embracement of the fantastic would also appear to be at odds with the aesthetic tendency typically associated with British cinema. What such assessments in *The Mirror* and *The Observer* therefore display is an embracement of the 'tinsel' determined within the film. However, *Dean Spanley* was

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<sup>376</sup> Anon., *The Mirror*, 12/12/2008 <Nexis UK, accessed 08/02/2012>

<sup>377</sup> French, "A Fine Pair of Christmas Miracles", *The Observer*, 14/12/2008

<sup>378</sup> *The Mirror's* comment regarding 'Keanu and co' refers to the big budget remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) which stars American actor Keanu Reeves and was released in cinemas around the same period.

<sup>379</sup> See Appendix B. The director, Toa Fraser, is from New Zealand where some of the film's post-production was also conducted. Source: IMDB

<[www.imdb.com/title/tt1135968/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1135968/)> Accessed online 04/08/2014

considered far removed from the American counterparts released in cinemas around the same period. Instead, the film was assessed in relation to distinctions of ‘quality’ and ‘taste’ that were fundamentally based around national identity.

The function of the critical press to ascertain ‘cultural hierarchies of aesthetic value’<sup>380</sup> is inherent in the sources examined. Central to this approach is the need to establish distinctions between films. As Richard Maltby contends, the critical establishment have a tendency to contribute towards ‘cultural assumptions about the autonomy of art and the aesthetic poverty of mass taste’.<sup>381</sup> As seen in press coverage of *Dean Spanley*, the film becomes a cultural signifier for ‘quality’ and ‘taste’ which is directly opposed to the mass appeal of ‘heavily advertised’ American films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, or the latest ‘wacky’ release from Disney studios. This critical discourse reflects Kermode’s comments from an earlier chapter, which compared the ‘Brit-packed gem’ *Inkheart* with Disney’s ‘heavily advertised’ and highly ‘annoying’ *Bedtime Stories*.<sup>382</sup> In a similar way, *Dean Spanley* is contextualised by the critical press as a British film because it displays features perceived as ‘understated [...] restrained [and] un-Hollywood: a set of qualities which echo ideas about national character’.<sup>383</sup> This sense of ‘Britishness’ is repeated across the sources examined and resonates with ideas of ‘quality’, ‘national character’ and associated ‘aesthetic value’. For example, *The Mirror*’s claim that the film is a ‘deliciously dotty British charmer’ exudes imagery associated with certain cultural characteristics, particularly around concepts of national humour and eccentricity. This connection is emphasised later on in *The Observer* article, which described interactions between the characters of Henslowe Fisk and Dean Spanley as follows: ‘their repasts recall the wonderful encounter between Alec Guinness and Dennis Price in *Kind Hearts and Coronets*’.<sup>384</sup> This review draws on direct comparison between *Dean Spanley* and the class-

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<sup>380</sup> Klinger, *Melodrama & Meaning*, p.70.

<sup>381</sup> Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes, *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, (London: BFI, 1999), p.3.

<sup>382</sup> Kermode, “What Makes the Perfect Family Film?”, *The Observer*, 21/12/2008

<sup>383</sup> Moor, *Powell & Pressburger: A Cinema of Magic Spaces*, p.5.

<sup>384</sup> French, “A fine pair of Christmas miracles”, *The Observer*, 14/12/2008

conscious comedy associated with famous Ealing productions from the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>385</sup> The evocation of Guinness and Price, both established and well-regarded actors in the pantheon of British cinema, also serves to emphasise the ‘quality’ of the film. In doing so, the ‘aesthetic value’ attributed to *Dean Spanley* is not only embellished but also serves to connect the film to artistic and cultural values firmly entrenched within British film history. This discourse provides the most compelling evidence for distinction and differentiation from American cinema. Whilst there are obvious challenges that could be raised against this critical position, most notably in the perceived ‘low’ cultural status attached to Hollywood film production and more general negative associations surrounding ‘Americanisation’, the majority of sources positioned *Dean Spanley* almost exclusively within the context of ‘quality’ British cinema.

However, within this cultural contextualisation there is also evidence of what Maltby and Stokes identify as a ‘marginalisation’ of the majority audience.<sup>386</sup> In the more general ‘agenda-setting’ processes administered by the critical press, the potential box office appeal of a new film release provides an opportunity for the media to deliberate audience interest. *Dean Spanley* received substantial consideration on this issue as the British press appeared unsure about who would find the film appealing. For example, despite notable ‘charm and quirkiness’, it was frequently suggested that the film ‘will struggle to find an audience’.<sup>387</sup> The reasons for this summation are linked intrinsically with aspects of the film which received most critical acclaim. By describing *Dean Spanley* as ‘charming’, ‘quirky’, ‘deliciously dotty’ and ‘decidedly odd’, this signposts the film as ‘different’, not only in relation to the new American releases found at the local cinema but also in comparison with more

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<sup>385</sup> *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949) was adapted by director Robert Hamer and John Dighton from a novel by Roy Horniman entitled *Israel Rank: The Autobiography of a Criminal* (1907). Source: BFI Screenonline.

<sup>386</sup> Maltby and Melvyn Stokes, *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, p.94.

<sup>387</sup> Anon., “A Bonding Tale”, *South Wales Evening Post*, 11/12/2008. See also: Anon., *The Western Mail*, 12/12/2008 who claimed ‘it’s difficult to imagine what type of audience this will really appeal to’ and Robey who stated: ‘how well it slips down is a matter of taste’, in “Keanu and a Waste of Space”, *Daily Telegraph*, 12/12/2008 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

typical British period films. This position resonates with arguments relating to genre and aesthetics and, crucially, provides evidence of ‘agenda-setting’ practices at work. Such comments correspond with Egan’s contention that distinctions of ‘quality’ and ‘taste’ determine the agenda ‘for each reviewed film’ with an aim to ‘slot it neatly into its socially prescribed place’.<sup>388</sup> The issue of potential audience appeal therefore becomes one of ‘socially prescribed’ contestation and moral concern. As seen in previous chapters, the critical press typically assume the role of authority in such matters, praising what they consider to represent the positive attributes of a given film whilst also questioning the potential for wider audience appeal, and thus emphasising the ‘aesthetic poverty of mass taste’<sup>389</sup> as a result.

The outcome of this approach would suggest a pre-conceived and effectively ‘marginalised’ audience for *Dean Spanley* based on critical distinctions and criteria of ‘quality’ and ‘taste’. The release date of the film (around Christmas, 2008) also prompted some press commentators to discuss the suitability of the film for family audiences. This can be seen in Tookey’s review for the *Daily Mail* which claimed the film ‘could be an unlikely hit with all the family’.<sup>390</sup> However, this comment again signposts caution by asserting that the film *could* be an *unlikely* success with family audiences over the holiday season.<sup>391</sup> The ‘marginalisation’ of audience is explicit in the *Mail* review, which later suggests that, despite this potential for wider audience and family appeal, only ‘intelligent children’ would find the film a ‘unique and rewarding experience’.<sup>392</sup> The overwhelming assumption in Tookey’s review is that because of the film’s ‘unfashionably leisurely and literate’<sup>393</sup> pace, ‘low-

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<sup>388</sup> Egan, *Trash or Treasure?*, p.30.

<sup>389</sup> Maltby and Melvyn Stokes, *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, p.3.

<sup>390</sup> Tookey, “At last - an intelligent, charming WAG!”, *Daily Mail*, 12/12/2008

<sup>391</sup> It should also be noted that not all critics agreed with this sentiment. For example, Peter Bradshaw described the film as a ‘family comedy’ but ‘like a Werther’s Original sweet that’s for grandpa only’ in *The Guardian*, 12/12/2008

<[www.theguardian.com/film/2008/dec/12/dean-spanley-toa-fraser-review](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2008/dec/12/dean-spanley-toa-fraser-review)> Accessed online 06/08/2014

<sup>392</sup> Tookey, “At last - an intelligent, charming WAG!”, *Daily Mail*, 12/12/2008. This response also reflects the moral concerns of critics determined in other conservative newspapers, specifically in relation to children’s fantasy films and the child audience.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*

budget' and lack of associated media 'hype', *Dean Spanley* may not perform well at the Christmas box office when compared to other films which might appeal more towards the 'mass taste' of cinema audiences. The argument that the film would 'struggle to find an audience'<sup>394</sup> based on such factors resonates with Egan's assertion. The critical sources locate *Dean Spanley* within a 'socially prescribed place' bound by specific contextual features which ultimately limit the perceived potential for wider audience appeal.

The findings would suggest that British press response to *Dean Spanley* was informed by opposition and difference. Critics recognised that the film departed from the 'everyday "realistic" expectations' commonly associated with the British period drama aesthetic, signposting the film as 'charming', 'original', 'rarefied' and 'decidedly odd'. However, whilst the fantastical intervention influenced this response, this did not result in negative criticism. Instead, the film was framed in relation to criteria of 'quality' and 'taste', and closely associated with British cinematic and cultural tradition. *Dean Spanley* was thus positioned in direct opposition to American films that shared similar generic qualities as fantasy films or were released in cinemas around this time. The critical press achieved this by emphasising the 'understated', 'un-sensational' and 'restrained'<sup>395</sup> appeal of the film: a British period drama with inherent cultural links to literary and cinematic tradition. The fantastical elements merely added to the film's perceived eccentricity, originality and charm. However, the outcome of such an approach presents issues, most notably around the 'marginalised' audience and the perceived limited potential for box office success. This critical discourse positioned *Dean Spanley* as a film which may not offer interest or appeal for most readerships precisely because of the 'quality' features which made the film so different and unique.

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<sup>394</sup> Anon., "A Bonding Tale", *South Wales Evening Post*, 11/12/2008

<sup>395</sup> Moor, *Powell & Pressburger: A Cinema of Magic Spaces*, p.5.

**‘Once you've got Eric Cantona popping up and giving life-lessons, maybe realism isn't the main priority’.<sup>396</sup>**

In similarity with *Dean Spanley*, British mainstream press coverage of *Looking for Eric* can be assessed in terms of contrast and difference from the expected norm. The film generated vast interest in the British media at the time of its cinematic release because it offered a distinct departure from the ‘gritty’ social realism more commonly associated with Loach. What this study finds is critical recognition and appraisal of the ‘fantasy’ elements determined in *Looking for Eric*, and intense discussion about meaning and intention. This extract from James Christopher in *The Times* offers compelling evidence of this response:

Ken Loach’s terrific comedy [...] breaks two of his own golden rules. The film stars a celebrity actor, Eric Cantona, and it basks in magical realism. Once upon a time Loach would rather shoot himself than employ either of these Hollywood crutches [but] it’s a sublime piece of magic by a director famously associated with raw kitchen sink grit.<sup>397</sup>

There are a number of points to consider from this assessment which again emphasise opposition and difference. Firstly, the presence of Loach as director provides significant interest because the film appears to subvert certain aesthetic characteristics typically associated with his personal style of film-making. Most critics acknowledged that Loach is best known for his more serious portrayals of ‘real’ life and ‘raw kitchen sink grit’, and considered *Looking for Eric* to be his most feel-good film to date, largely due to the more comedic elements of the narrative. However, Christopher’s assertion that Loach ‘breaks two of his own golden rules’ in the film reveals ingrained opinion about the director’s output. Specifically, the presence of Cantona would appear to challenge the ‘authenticity’ associated with Loach’s usual approach to ‘telling stories about ordinary people’.<sup>398</sup> According to Deborah Knight, the impulse for ‘naturalism’ associated with Loach’s work embraces the

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<sup>396</sup> Peter Bradshaw, “Goalmouth Scramble”, *The Guardian*, 12/06/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 07/01/2013>

<sup>397</sup> James Christopher, “Loach Dazzles in the Fantasy League”, *The Times*, 11/06/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 07/01/2013>

<sup>398</sup> Hill, *Ken Loach: The Politics of Film and Television*, p.5.



sympathetic projection of ‘marginalised’, ‘powerless’ characters who are typically ‘representative of their class, race, gender and economic and social positions’.<sup>399</sup> Consequently, Cantona’s prominent role in *Looking For Eric* not only goes against this ‘naturalist’ dramatic tendency, but his renowned status as a prominent ex-footballer and ‘celebrity actor’ would also appear to contradict Loach’s casting decisions.<sup>400</sup> This star presence is thus perceived as an unusual intervention which challenges existing preconceptions surrounding Loach as a director committed to British social realism. However, the inclusion of ‘celebrity actor’ Cantona in the film is also notable for other reasons which evoke critical debates concerning genre, aesthetics and British cinema. As discussed previously, only the character of Eric Bishop can actually see or hear Cantona and he remains confined to Bishop’s ‘interior fantasy’ throughout the film. According to Christopher, amongst others, this fantastical intervention is considered at significant odds with Loach’s perceived realist commitment to ‘verisimilitude’ and naturalistic ‘authenticity’.

In *The Times* review, the term ‘magical realism’ was utilised to describe this fantastical premise. ‘Magical realism’ derives from literature and describes instances where magic events form a natural part of an otherwise mundane, ‘realistic’ setting.<sup>401</sup> In relation to cinema, the term has been applied to describe films such as *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006) and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), which engage with religious iconography, mythology and fairy tale to explore social and political subtexts. However, the phrase ‘magical realism’ is not commonly applied to critical assessments of mainstream British cinema. An exception can be found in Paul Dave’s study *Visions of England*, where he utilises the

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<sup>399</sup> Deborah Knight, “Naturalism, Narration and Critical Perspective: Ken Loach and the Experimental Method”, in George McKnight, Ed. *Agent of Challenge and Defiance: The Films of Ken Loach*, (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1997), p.74.

<sup>400</sup> In an interview with John Hill in November 1994, Loach emphasised his commitment to ‘the people you have in the film. One of the things you try to do is give a dignity and an importance to ordinary people’, quoted in Hill, *Ken Loach: The Politics of Film and Television*, p.168.

<sup>401</sup> Farah Mendlesohn describes the effect of ‘magic realism’ as an opportunity for Anglo-American readers to enter a ‘other world’ in which ‘ghosts and gods fit fully into that structure’, in *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, (Middletown, USA: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p.107.

term in an analysis of *Trainspotting* (1996). Dave argues that fantasy elements embedded in the film, such as the infamous sequence where Ewan McGregor's character appears to fully submerge himself into a public toilet, amount to a 'complex "real" in which the awful and the wonderful can co-exist'.<sup>402</sup> This reading of *Trainspotting*, in which gritty 'realism' and fantasy merge on screen, resonates with Christopher's description of *Looking for Eric*, constituting a 'wonderful' mix of 'sublime magic' and 'kitchen sink' drama.<sup>403</sup> In the quality broadsheets, such as *The Times*, the fantastical elements of the film were consistently referred to within this context. For example, *The Independent* alluded towards 'a hint of magic realism',<sup>404</sup> whilst *The Guardian* noted the 'dirty magic realism' on display in the film.<sup>405</sup> Such critical discourse not only describes interesting combinations of aesthetic style but also provides a more implicit response towards 'quality'. As Leslie Stratyner and James R. Keller contend in their collective study on fantasy genre, magical elements are often acceptable but only when 'contained within a rational setting. Thus, magical realism is highly praised [whilst] magical fantasy is more often not'.<sup>406</sup>

This distinction is significant when applied to some of the reviews and articles relating to *Looking for Eric*. By describing the film as 'magic realism', as opposed to pure 'fantasy', this emphasises the film's 'realist' commitment towards other 'rational' elements such as characterisation and narrative. In addition, for any readers not fully aware of what this term might mean, the implicit connotations associated with 'magical realism' suggest differentiation from the 'magical fantasy' associated with more child-orientated or family films such as *Harry Potter*. This critical approach not only signposts *Looking for Eric* as specifically intended for adult audiences but also engages with a more 'serious' application of fantasy. In doing so, the cultural value and 'quality'

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<sup>402</sup> Paul Dave, *Visions of England: Class & Culture in Contemporary Cinema*, (Oxford: Berg, 2006), p.91.

<sup>403</sup> Christopher, "Loach Dazzles in the Fantasy League", *The Times*, 11/06/2009

<sup>404</sup> Laurence Phelan, *The Independent*, 13/06/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 07/01/2013>

<sup>405</sup> Simon Hattenstone, "The Awkward Squad", *The Guardian*, 09/05/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 07/01/2013>

<sup>406</sup> Leslie Stratyner and James R. Keller Ed., *Fantasy Fiction into Film*, (Jefferson, USA: McFarland, 2007), p.1.

attached to the film is raised through such ‘agenda-setting’ practices. For broadsheet newspapers such as *The Times* and *The Independent*, the film provided both difference from the ‘social realist’ aesthetic yet also maintained ‘quality’ through the application of ‘magical realism’; a term more commonly applied to foreign language films which often command critical acclaim. In a similar response to *Dean Spanley*, such evidence would suggest that the perceived uniqueness of *Looking for Eric* informed more positive critical assessments.

However, this discourse only constituted *some* of the press coverage attributed to the film. In contrast to the quality broadsheets, the more middlebrow and tabloid newspapers appeared more apprehensive about fantastical elements of the film. What this analysis reveals is a mixed response which raises questions concerning generic identity and labelling practices. From most sections of the British mainstream press there was clear amusement and even hesitancy about the presence of fantasy in *Looking for Eric*. As Hill rightly observes, ‘given Loach’s realist commitments, the use of fantasy is a rare occurrence’.<sup>407</sup> As a result, the vast majority of press response scrutinised the film’s commitment to the ‘social realism’ more commonly found within Loach’s directorial output and production style. This response is grounded in the accepted opinion that, despite the occasional glimpse of wit and humour in films such as *Kes* (1969) and *Riff Raff* (1991), Loach is certainly not known for the type of fantastical comedy on display in *Looking for Eric*. As Siobhan Synnot’s review for the *Scotland on Sunday* states, ‘Ken Loach doing whimsy is rather like your granddad doing a pole dance - you appreciate the effort and the novelty but the execution isn’t all it could be’.<sup>408</sup> The connotations attached to this bracing comment by Synnot convey a manifold of meanings around critical expectations of authorship, aesthetics and ‘quality’. Firstly, the reference to Loach and his well-recognised associations with British social realism suggests that

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<sup>407</sup> However, Hill does reference the ‘imaginary goal’ sequence in Loach’s *The Golden Vision* as ‘one of the very few’ examples, in *Ken Loach: The Politics of Film and Television*, p.197. The final scene involves one of the main characters fantasising about scoring a crucial goal for his Everton team mates. *The Golden Vision* was a *Wednesday Play*, directed by Loach, and aired on the BBC in 1968.

<sup>408</sup> Siobhan Synnot, *Scotland on Sunday*, 07/06/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 07/01/2013>

at his more senior age ('granddad'), he should not attempt to try something different (or 'novel') in his accepted film direction style. Secondly, Synnot's comments re-affirm the perceived aesthetic opposition between social realism and 'whimsical' comedy. This opinion corresponds with the more hesitant responses directed towards *Looking for Eric* as a 'Ken Loach film'. As a result, whilst most critics acknowledged Cantona's presence in the film, specifically as a humorous projection of Bishop's 'interior fantasy', there was still an attempt to focus more on the 'realist' prerogative. For example, many critics praised Evets' leading performance in the film as the weary everyman who struggles to 'keep things grounded in reality'.<sup>409</sup> Allan Hunter's review in the *Daily Express* is even more explicit, assessing Eric Bishop's character as follows: 'fantasy and comedy are spun around him but he provides the emotional truth at the heart of the film'.<sup>410</sup> The opinion inherent in such comments is that, despite Cantona's high profile appearance, Evets' 'naturalistic' portrayal is the most compelling aspect of the film. The overwhelming critical response was that his character provided the emotional anchorage required to align *Looking for Eric* with the more typical aesthetic and production conventions associated with British social realism.

However, for critics such as Synnot, and others in the middlebrow tabloids, the 'quality' associated with *Looking for Eric* as a British social realist film was ultimately compromised. The presence of 'whimsy' and 'fantastical comedy' presented a generic intervention perceived at significant odds with Loach's directorial approach, and British cinema more generally. In addition, much of this criticism revolved around the film's narrative which, as Hunter described, 'struggles to find a consistent tone'.<sup>411</sup> Many of the reviews and articles adopted football terminology to describe *Looking for Eric*, specifically as a 'film of two halves',<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> David Edwards, "Cantona's Special Delivery", *The Mirror*, 12/06/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 07/01/2013>

<sup>410</sup> Allan Hunter, "Reputation is a Strange Thing", *Daily Express*, 12/06/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 07/01/2013>

<sup>411</sup> Hunter, "Reputation is a Strange Thing", *Daily Express*, 12/06/2009

<sup>412</sup> Christopher, "Loach Dazzles in the Fantasy League", *The Times*, 11/06/2009. See also Vincent Moss, "Cool Cantona's Back on the Ball", *Sunday Mirror*, 07/06/2009 and

outlining how the narrative fluctuates between the ‘fantastical’ comedy impelled by Cantona’s unexpected appearance as an imaginary confidant to Bishop, and the ‘darker’<sup>413</sup> sequences later in the film which involve drug trafficking and gang violence. What this critical response reveals is a distinct tendency to question and interrogate the generic hybridity of the film. As another example, the *Daily Mail* described the film as an ‘uneasy mix of social realism, earthy comedy, fantastical whimsy, romantic drama and urban thriller’.<sup>414</sup> In this assessment, the *Daily Mail* critic Tookey responds to the inconsistent tone of the film, which skirts from comedy to romantic drama, as Bishop attempts to reconcile his relationship with his ex-wife, to ‘unconvincing crime thriller’, and the final ‘crowd pleasing climax’.<sup>415</sup> Tookey utilises football commentary to describe this ‘uneasy mix’ of generic styles as a ‘chaotic kick-about in which the rules of the game keep changing’.<sup>416</sup> The shifting ‘rules of the game’, evident in the oppositional language (such as ‘earthy comedy’ and ‘fantastical whimsy’), evoke varied connotation and meaning. The apparent inability to pigeonhole *Looking for Eric* presents a repeated theme across the sources analysed. For example, the film is also described as a ‘buddy movie’<sup>417</sup>, ‘melodrama’<sup>418</sup> and ‘best football film ever’.<sup>419</sup> What this evidence finds is a varied and at times hesitant response to the film which is influenced by critical perceptions and subsequent critical determinations of genre. In the reviews by the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*, amongst others, the main contention with *Looking for Eric* is the perceived failure to conform to generic conventions or authorial expectations, which ultimately impacted on the overall critical engagement with the film.

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Christopher Tookey, *Daily Mail*, 12/06/2009, who both described the film in a similar football commentary context <Nexis UK, accessed 07/01/2013>

<sup>413</sup> Conor Nolan, “Cantona’s a Blast”, *The People*, 14/06/2009. See also Tookey who states the ‘crime thriller elements darken the tone’, *Daily Mail*, 12/06/2009 and Bradshaw who claims the film takes ‘an uneasy lurch into darker dramatic territory’, “Goalmouth Scramble”, *The Guardian*, 12/06/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 07/01/2013>

<sup>414</sup> Tookey, *Daily Mail*, 12/06/2009

<sup>415</sup> Ibid.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

<sup>417</sup> Bradshaw, “Goalmouth Scramble”, *The Guardian*, 12/06/2009

<sup>418</sup> Synnot, *Scotland on Sunday*, 07/06/2009

<sup>419</sup> Graham Young, “Best footy film ever is found”, *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 12/06/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 07/01/2013>

This critical response to genre, aesthetics and authorship is also influenced by what Christopher describes as a perceived reliance on ‘Hollywood crutches’.<sup>420</sup> As discussed, the presence of a ‘celebrity actor’ (Cantona) and ‘fantastical whimsy’ are considered more typically aligned with Hollywood film production and also directly opposed to Loach’s approach towards ‘naturalism’, ‘verisimilitude’ and ‘authenticity’.<sup>421</sup> However, press coverage of *Looking for Eric* would appear to question the distinction between British ‘realism’ and ‘Hollywood tinsel’. For example, the *Daily Express* commented on how the film ‘emulates the Christmas classic *It’s a Wonderful Life*’ in the inclusion of Cantona as ‘guardian angel’ to Bishop’s tormented soul.<sup>422</sup> In *The Guardian*, Peter Bradshaw offered further comparison with another slice of classic American cinema, claiming: ‘Loach must have been inspired by Woody Allen’s *Play It Again, Sam* in which a nerdy film buff gets romantic advice from Humphrey Bogart’.<sup>423</sup> In similarity with *Looking for Eric*, in both examples cited, fantasy intrudes into ‘real’ world concerns and the imaginary characters provide significant comfort and advice for the main protagonists. This use of ‘interior fantasy’, whilst recognised and perhaps even expected within the diegesis of American cinema, is certainly perceived by critics as atypical when found in British filmic output. Press response to *Looking for Eric* was therefore fundamentally concerned with a focus on difference and opposition to expected conventions and norms. The film’s divergence from the ‘naturalism’ and ‘verisimilitude’ more commonly associated with British social realism had a profound effect on critical assessments, compounded by the presence of Loach as director.

Whilst most critics and commentators acknowledged that *Looking for Eric* constituted his ‘lightest [and] happiest film for some time’,<sup>424</sup> the combination of ‘kitchen sink grit’ and ‘fantastical whimsy’ was generally perceived as an ‘uneasy mix’ of opposing styles. As a result, the genre categorisation process which Altman describes was effectively compromised, as critics mediated over how to label the film: as a

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<sup>420</sup> Christopher, “Loach Dazzles in the Fantasy League”, *The Times*, 11/06/2009

<sup>421</sup> Hill, *Ken Loach: The Politics of Film and Television*, p.5.

<sup>422</sup> Hunter, “Reputation is a Strange Thing”, *Daily Express*, 12/06/2009

<sup>423</sup> Bradshaw, “Goalmouth Scramble”, *The Guardian*, 12/06/2009

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*

‘comedy’, ‘melodrama’, ‘fantasy’, ‘sports film’ or ‘social magic realism’. *Looking for Eric*’s accepted status as a British film is certainly not in doubt here, despite the brooding star presence of the Gallic Cantona,<sup>425</sup> and the decision by Loach to abandon ‘his own golden rules’ in terms of production.<sup>426</sup> However, the inclusion of fantasy had a significant impact on critical discussions around content and intention. The outcome of this debate resulted in a notable split between the broadsheet newspapers such as *The Times* and *Independent*, both of which appropriated signifiers of ‘quality’ through the use of certain terms (such as ‘magical realism’), and the tabloid press which positioned the fantastical elements in relation to more general concerns regarding genre, aesthetics and authorship. Central to this discourse are issues surrounding clear categorisation and labelling practices, in response to a film that defied critical expectations. The overwhelming response reflected on *why* fantasy was used at all in *Looking for Eric* and a deliberation over how this changed the essence of the film.

### Summary

What this study finds is that critical response to *Dean Spanley* and *Looking for Eric* was determined by ingrained expectations relating to norms and conventions around genre, aesthetics, ‘quality’ and national cinema. In this context, *Dean Spanley* was assessed by critics as a British period drama, located in a ‘reconstructed’ and recognised past, and belonging to the historical costume genre. *Looking for Eric* was appropriated in terms of British social realism, particularly the ‘naturalistic’ character portrayal of Bishop’s weary (anti) hero and in the ‘authentic’ representation of contemporary period and ‘place’. However, the presence of fantasy in both films disrupted the “realistic” expectations<sup>427</sup> informed by the films’ aesthetic and this led to hesitation and scrutiny in their reception. Whilst the findings determine that neither film was questioned outright in terms of its ‘Britishness’, even given the

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<sup>425</sup> Cantona was also an executive producer for the film. Source: IMDB  
<[www.imdb.com/title/tt1242545/fullcredits?ref=ttco\\_sa\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1242545/fullcredits?ref=ttco_sa_1)> Accessed online 10/10/2014

<sup>426</sup> Christopher, “Loach Dazzles in the Fantasy League”, *The Times*, 11/06/2009

<sup>427</sup> Barr, “*Straw Dogs*, *A Clockwork Orange* and the Critics”, p.21.

presence and involvement of international studios, critical concerns focused on the apparent departure from expected norms, displaying repeated tendency to address difference and opposition to recognised and ‘established traditions’.<sup>428</sup>

In relation to *Dean Spanley*, the presence of fantasy was considered an ‘eccentric’ intervention which, whilst perhaps unexpected, was entirely in keeping with the ‘rarefied’ period setting and ‘charming’, ‘decidedly odd’ *mise-en-scène*. This unique approach differentiated the film from the more typical British period drama yet still maintained elements of ‘quality’ through the employment of ‘restrained’ narrative and realistic characterisation. This sentiment was reinforced by the absence of marketing and media ‘hype’ surrounding the film’s release. However, this critical praise had unintended consequences, because the ‘uniqueness’ critics associated with the film instigated some concern regarding the potential for wider public appeal to readerships and audiences. In contrast, *Looking for Eric* was provided extensive press coverage due to the unexpected presence of Cantona as a controversial ex-footballer and ‘celebrity actor’. Across the majority of critical reviews and articles that followed the UK cinema release of *Looking for Eric* in 2009, the process of distinct categorisation and labelling practices was also compromised because the comedic and ‘whimsical’ features of the film appeared to divert from generic and aesthetic expectations connected with social realist cinema. Furthermore, the authorial involvement of Loach as an established British director, ‘famously associated with raw kitchen sink grit’,<sup>429</sup> merely provoked further interest, debate and hesitation. However, it could be argued that *Looking for Eric* might be symptomatic of more general shifts in domestic film production, particularly in relation to British social realism. As Samantha Lay contends, this aesthetic is ‘unstable, dynamic and ever-changing, precisely because realism is irrevocably tied to the specifics of time and place, or “moment”’.<sup>430</sup> In this context, attributes and characteristics

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<sup>428</sup> Altman, *Film/Genre*, p.142.

<sup>429</sup> Christopher, “Loach Dazzles in the Fantasy League”, *The Times*, 11/06/2009

<sup>430</sup> Samantha Lay, *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit Grit*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), p.6.



more commonly associated with British social realist cinema are not actually static but instead are prone to shift and change over time.<sup>431</sup>

Consequently, the fantastical elements or ‘magical realism’ on display in *Looking for Eric* could be construed as a potential new avenue for the genre which, whilst sympathetic to traditional modes and methods, is also more accommodating towards different ideological approaches and production techniques. Unfortunately, the pursuit of this particular idea remains beyond the remit of this thesis. However, within the context of contemporaneous, mainstream critical discourse, generic and aesthetic recognition and expectancy constituted an important aspect of the film’s domestic reception. The findings from this chapter reveal how the British press operate when presented with films which ‘fall between categories’. The evidence emphasises how critical assessments and labelling practices were essentially disrupted by the generic intervention of the fantastic. Specifically, the ‘realist’ imperative associated with *Dean Spanley* and *Looking for Eric* functions as the focal point to assess difference and ‘uniqueness’. Whilst this does not mean that either film ‘suffered’ extensive criticism as a result, the sources reveal a distinct tendency towards hesitation and scrutiny surrounding the *reasons* for including fantastical elements, and this response informed the most prominent and repeated discourse across the majority of source materials examined.

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<sup>431</sup> David Forrest offers an insight into the ‘textual and philosophical shifts that have occurred within this mode in the last decade’ with the rise of ‘new British realist directors’, in “*Better Things* (Duane Hopkins, 2008) and New British Realism”, *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, Vol.8, No.1, 2010, p.31.

## Chapter Five

### The Impact of British Fantasy

In previous chapters, this study has investigated critical response to British fantasy films primarily from a socio-cultural perspective and representations of ‘Britishness’ on screen. However, as outlined in the introduction and demonstrated throughout, questions of economic or financial viability and national cinema present recurring themes. This is particularly animated in discussions of style and substance where attributes associated with domestic cinema and culture are linked with ingrained understandings of national identity. As seen repeated in press coverage of major UK co-productions such as *Harry Potter* and *Inkheart*, foreign investment and financial support or funding attached to a given film can impact on press concerns surrounding domestic involvement and representation both on screen and within the wider context of British cinema.

Yet, to appreciate fully what specific factors underpin such evaluations, and how they might influence critical perceptions of British film culture, we need to examine issues connected with budget size, financing and economic viability and impact in more detail. Whilst this theme has been re-visited on several occasions, particularly exploring debates regarding the perceived and on-going ‘Americanisation’ of British culture, the following chapter examines how and why fantasy films are subject to scrutiny based on critical assessments of budget size, domestic and foreign involvement and the potential for economic and cultural impact on a national scale. For this study, ‘impact’ covers a range of factors including contribution to the national economy, either as manifestations of domestic film production or through associated means such as cultural tourism and community investment. Central to this study is the argument that the perceived nationality associated with a given film is largely determined by a combination of such factors. As Higson contends, the ‘inward investment’ film, where the ‘bulk’ of financial funding derives from abroad, is aligned with ‘medium-to-high-budgeted

films that require blockbuster treatment at the point of distribution and exhibition'.<sup>432</sup> Following Higson's assertion, 'high budgeted', blockbuster films 'such as the *Harry Potter* franchise [...] which passed the cultural test',<sup>433</sup> *should* be considered solely as internationalised products that offer a conservative view of 'Britishness' and provide no tangible economic benefits to domestic cultural output because of foreign 'control'. In contrast, low-budget, small-scale domestic films with minimal external funding or intervention *should* be perceived as representing British cinema which has a positive economic impact on the national, cultural landscape.

Consequently, this study is principally concerned with how the critical 'writing machine' responds to distinctions of budget size and scale. In assessing whether the British mainstream press attend to contemporary British fantasy films in a similar manner as outlined, this study determines potential reasons for such a critical approach. This chapter examines how the press responded to issues connected to budget and financial expediency including foreign involvement; domestic funding (primarily through public bodies and organisations such as the UKFC and related screen agencies); production, distribution and exhibition practices; commercial and tourism opportunities and also the potential for box office success. All these factors are important when considering the wider cultural and economic benefits associated with sustained and successful film production within the UK. The importance of financial contribution provided by domestic arts and cultural industries has proved an increasingly popular area of research over the last thirty years.<sup>434</sup> The potential for economic impact and investment through related employment opportunities, income generation, cultural tourism and the associated benefits to businesses and communities, on a regional

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<sup>432</sup> Higson, *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s*, p.13.

<sup>433</sup> Hill, "This is for the *Batmans* as well as the *Vera Drakes*: Economics, Culture and UK Government Film Production Policy in the 2000s", p.350.

<sup>434</sup> John Hill describes how *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Great Britain* (1988) by John Myerscough 'paved the way for research' into the economic importance of cultural industries including cinema. Hill also describes how the 1998 and 2001 Creative Industries Mapping Documents became a 'key component' of economic policy debates for the UK film industry in "This is for the *Batmans* as well as the *Vera Drakes*: Economics, Culture and UK Government Film Production Policy in the 2000s", p.343.

and national level, provides the most compelling evidence for maintaining a vibrant cultural industry. As a report published in 1996 by the Policy Studies Institute outlined, there should be a focus not just on the *intrinsic* values of culture, such as the artistic engagement of concepts and ideas, but also the *extrinsic* qualities of cultural products and the contribution the sector makes towards the wider UK economy.<sup>435</sup> Whilst the remit of this study limits the potential to offer full scale survey or assessment of economic value attached to the selected films, this aspect will be touched on via reference to funding guidelines, production notes, box office statistics and other financial and policy documents. The main objective is to determine how the critical ‘writing machine’ responds to fantasy films in terms of their *perceived* extrinsic qualities within the context of the national and cultural economic landscape, and to consider the significance of this reception narrative applied across the different case studies examined.

This critical discourse is important to acknowledge because it provides insight into how financial features associated with contemporary film production in the UK, such as budget size, production values and studio financing, are intrinsically linked to concerns about national cinema output. In conducting this analysis from a critical reception studies approach, this study aims to provide a more concerted investigation of how the British mainstream press maintain and support traditional connections and associations between genre, aesthetics and national film production. In doing so, this study scrutinises press debates surrounding style, substance and spectacle alongside concerns relating to international ‘intervention’ and domestic propriety. The chosen case studies *V for Vendetta* (2005), *Franklyn* (2009) and *Malice in Wonderland* (2010) reflect this approach, as each film provides an example of varying budget size, production style, domestic and foreign involvement and box office success. Each film also received at least some degree of financing and support from UK bodies and organisations and this presents a key concern, with an aim to determine how the British

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<sup>435</sup> Bernard Casey, Rachael Dunlop and Sara Selwood, *Culture as Commodity? The Economics of the Arts and Built Heritage in the UK*, (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1996), p.4.

mainstream press responded to such investments of public money. To explore critical coverage of the films in more detail, this analysis engages with other forms of printed discourse found within the source materials, such as press interviews with cast and production crews, and also articles regarding potential tourism or leisure opportunities instigated by the promotion of a forthcoming film release. This discourse is important to consider because it engages with how the British press responded to films based on their perceived extrinsic qualities, and also how much added value the films would potentially provide for domestic interests. By including such commentary, this study explores how the print media mobilised ‘intertextual discourses’<sup>436</sup> around the films, which impacted on their overall critical reception and can also be traced across all the sources examined within national, regional and local newspaper coverage. Finally, this approach not only resonates with the main arguments established and explored throughout previous chapters but also expands on the various themes of ‘Britishness’ considered so far.

**‘It’s like the corner shop trying to deal with Tesco. But that doesn’t mean that the corner shop can’t be very successful’<sup>437</sup>**

*V for Vendetta* is perhaps an exemplar of the ‘inward investment’ film which Higson describes, requiring significant ‘blockbuster treatment at the point of distribution and exhibition’.<sup>438</sup> Inspired by the original graphic novel by British author Alan Moore, *V for Vendetta* was written and produced by the American Wachowski siblings, previously known for their highly successful *Matrix* trilogy (1999 – 2003). The film was officially categorised as an ‘incoming co-production’ (ICP)<sup>439</sup> between the UK, Germany and USA, with financial investment by Warner Bros. studios. The film features an international cast, including Hollywood stars Natalie Portman and Hugo Weaving in leading roles. *V for Vendetta*

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<sup>436</sup> Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences: Selling and Watching Popular Film in the 1990s*, p.25-26.

<sup>437</sup> Gerald McMorrow, director of *Franklyn*, quoted in Kevin Maher article, “Who is this Masked Man?”, *The Times*, 12/02/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>438</sup> Higson, *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s*, p.27.

<sup>439</sup> Film production in the UK list of films 2003 – 2012. Source: BFI

<[www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/film-industry-statistics-research/reports/uk-films](http://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/film-industry-statistics-research/reports/uk-films)> Accessed online 15/08/2013

was shot on location in the UK with scenes filmed at Shepperton Studios and London, and showcased well-known British actors such as John Hurt, Rupert Graves and Stephen Fry. The film was estimated to cost around \$54m<sup>440</sup> and displayed an emphatic embracement of special effects, including a spectacular sequence in which the main protagonist ‘V’ destroys the Houses of Parliament. *V for Vendetta* was finally released in UK cinemas in March 2006 after a lengthy period of postponement and heightened media interest.<sup>441</sup> In the British mainstream press the film received mixed reviews, with most critics and commentators discussing the timing of the film, or positioning *V for Vendetta* in relation to production values, scale and spectacle. In this context, visual effects and technical wizardry were considered problematic to coherent and compelling narrative and characterisation. For example, Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian* described the film as follows:

It’s also for Valueless gibberish. Yet another graphic novel has been bulldozed on to the screen, strutting its stuff [a] fanbase product from which the fanbase has been amputated [...] This film manages to be, at all times, weird and bizarre and baffling, but in a completely boring way. Watching it is like having the oxygen supply to your brain slowly starved over more than two hours.<sup>442</sup>

Bradshaw’s comments provide a highly critical attack on the film, utilising the title *V for Vendetta* in a humorous aside (‘also for Valueless gibberish’). This review highlights a common argument against the film’s dialogue, which was considered by most critics as overblown and bombastic at best and, at worst, incoherent and ‘baffling’. For example, Henry Fitzherbert in the *Sunday Express* described *V for Vendetta* in a similar context to Bradshaw, outlining the film’s ‘garbled tortuous syntax’ and ‘tedious dialogue’.<sup>443</sup> Such criticism was positioned within a wider discourse concerning the film’s Hollywood connections,

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<sup>440</sup> Source: IMDB <[www.imdb.com/title/tt0434409/?ref=sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0434409/?ref=sr_1)> Accessed online 15/08/2013

<sup>441</sup> Although *V for Vendetta* is designated as a 2005 film, the UK release date was postponed from November 2005 to March 2006 because of the close proximity to the London terrorist attacks of July 2005 which were considered to mirror the violent content of the film.

<sup>442</sup> Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 17/03/2006 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>443</sup> Henry Fitzherbert, “Torturing terrorist V has Bush down to a T”, *Sunday Express*, 19/03/2006 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

specifically the involvement of producers Andy and Larry Wachowski. According to Fitzherbert, the film displays ‘all the flaws’ of their earlier *Matrix* trilogy, a similar blockbuster phenomenon which garnered ever increasing criticism for its lack of coherency and meaning as the series progressed.<sup>444</sup> *V for Vendetta* received similar accusations in the British press, as critics complained about the ‘bizarre and baffling’ narrative and ‘gobbledygook philosophising’,<sup>445</sup> which also included the protagonist ‘V’ speaking frequent poetic verse and alliterative monologue. Furthermore, despite the vast budget attached to the film and the looming involvement of Hollywood and Warner Bros. studios, the visual effects were heavily criticised for being ‘completely boring’ and displaying ‘set pieces [which] belong to an episode of *Doctor Who*’.<sup>446</sup> In this cultural reference, Fitzherbert aligns *V for Vendetta* with a British science fiction television show known for its historical tendency towards cheap production values and special effects.<sup>447</sup>

Criticism surrounding the film’s visual achievements was also compounded by the predominance of other films released around this period which offered similar spectacle. In *The Guardian* review, Bradshaw described the film as ‘yet another graphic novel’ that has been ‘bulldozed to the screen’. The meanings attached to this statement are twofold. Firstly, Bradshaw connotes the blockbuster production values associated with *V for Vendetta* by utilising the term ‘bulldozed’, suggesting that the film effectively bludgeoned the original (and British) source material for visual effect, foregoing any of the political intent or post-nuclear radicalism of Moore’s novel. Secondly, there is strong implication that *V for Vendetta* is also un-remarkable because it follows a more recent surge in big screen adaptations from similar graphic texts,

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<sup>444</sup> For example, Peter Bradshaw described the final instalment *Matrix Revolutions* (2003) as an ‘ungainly clanking and lumbering to the finish line’, in *The Guardian*, 07/11/2003 <Nexis UK, accessed 21/08/2013>

<sup>445</sup> Fitzherbert, “Torturing terrorist V has Bush down to a T”, *Sunday Express*, 19/03/2006

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>447</sup> It should be noted that this reference is perhaps aimed at older and more informed readers of the *Sunday Express* who might also be familiar with classic episodes of *Doctor Who*. James Chapman claims that popular discourse of *Doctor Who* ‘[also] reflected in fan literature, makes a virtue out of its Heath Robinson production values’, in *Inside the Tardis: the Worlds of Doctor Who*, (London: I.B Tauris, 2006), p.8.

including *Constantine* (2005)<sup>448</sup> and *Sin City* (2005), amongst others. This would suggest that because the penchant for graphic novel adaptation had become so prevalent during this period, *V for Vendetta* was invariably compared against other films which offered similar visual style or thematic content. Consequently, *V for Vendetta* was appropriated as ‘yet another’ Hollywood film which merely followed an increasing lineage of contemporary films, mostly ‘bulldozed’ from their original source material. Any potential critical interest or engagement in the film was thus compromised by a strong awareness of intent. In Bradshaw’s comment, the film is assessed solely in terms of its blockbuster features, and underpinning this statement is the associated propensity for successful financial return generated by box office revenue, marketing, advertising and related commercial and franchise opportunities. The inherent implication is that *V for Vendetta* will still perform well despite its ‘bizarre’, ‘baffling’ and ‘completely boring’ narrative because the film is a Hollywood blockbuster. What this would suggest is that the more vocal critics of *V for Vendetta* targeted the film for not only failing to provide either substance *or* spectacle, but also for ‘bulldozing’ itself on to the big screen as ‘yet another’ Hollywood adaptation which deviated substantially from the original British source text. This presents a very different response to the other ‘inward investment’ fantasy films considered throughout this study so far, and such criticism provides evidence of a highly defensive reaction by the British mainstream press. This appeared to be influenced by a combination of factors that pertained to issues of foreign intervention, as discussed. However, the controversy surrounding the film’s UK cinema release in 2006 also influenced this critical response. This presents another repeated signifier which will be considered in more detail later in this chapter.

In contrast to the high budget vehicle *V for Vendetta*, *Franklyn* constitutes an independent British film at the opposite end of the blockbuster spectrum. The film was co-produced by Recorded Picture Company, Film 4 and the UKFC with an estimated budget of around

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<sup>448</sup> *Constantine* (2005) was another major Hollywood film based on a character creation by Alan Moore.



£6m.<sup>449</sup> This also included £1,200,000 of National Lottery awards and Prints & Advertising (P&A) funding allocated by the UKFC.<sup>450</sup> The film was conceived, written and directed by British-born Gerald McMorrow and shot entirely within the UK. Similar to the bleak aesthetic of *V for Vendetta*, which portrays a dystopian future Britain, *Franklyn* is located within a disturbed London where our ‘real’ world is interconnected with an alternative metropolis known as ‘Meanwhile City’. The film also shared similarities with *V for Vendetta* by employing both American and British actors including Ryan Phillippe, Eva Green, Bernard Hill and Sam Riley, whose previous credits consisted of a breakthrough role in the Ian Curtis biopic *Control* (2007). However, whilst *V for Vendetta* was positioned by the British mainstream press as a blockbuster film which displayed features comparable to other blockbuster adaptations from graphic novels and could therefore potentially compete with such films at the box office, *Franklyn* was consistently assessed by critics as a film which would not command a successful outcome in UK cinemas. This observation was partly determined by the film’s moderate budget which was either alluded to, or discussed directly, across the majority of source materials examined.

For example, in an article for *The Times*, published in advance of the film’s UK cinema release in February 2009, *Franklyn* was compared with other films which share similar generic and aesthetic tropes, including big screen comic book adaptations of *Watchmen* (2009) and the more recent *Batman* franchise, directed by Christopher Nolan. The main contention in this piece concerns how the film is likely to perform in relation to other films which had significantly larger budgets and studio financing. *The Times* article sets out this comparison of budget size and scale in an interview with *Franklyn* director McMorrow, who claimed that *Watchmen* ‘had twenty times our budget’ and ‘we never intended’ to

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<sup>449</sup> Source: IMDB <[www.imdb.com/title/tt0893402/?ref=ttco\\_co\\_tt](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0893402/?ref=ttco_co_tt)> and Wikipedia <[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franklyn](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franklyn)> Accessed online 15/08/2013

<sup>450</sup> Source: BFI <<http://industry.bfi.org.uk/search?articleid=7&x=-1392&y=-82&keyword=Franklyn>> Accessed online 15/08/2013

challenge or compete with major Hollywood films.<sup>451</sup> However, this impulse to compare and contrast *Franklyn* with recent blockbuster movies with similar themes and narratives persisted. For example, Graham Young in the *Birmingham Evening Mail* stated:

Made to look like a 100 million dollar movie when it cost less than £6 million (with £1 million of National Lottery funding), urban fairy-tale *Franklyn* is a very curious beast. Like the equally frustrating *Mirror Ball* and *V for Vendetta* - and next week's *Watchmen* which will sweep it away - it's a sumptuous movie to look at.<sup>452</sup>

In Young's review, the pressing issue of budget is foregrounded from the start, with an emphasis on differences between the huge investment provided towards films such as *V for Vendetta* and *Watchmen* when compared to the small-scale independent status of *Franklyn*. In this statement, the distinction between American, particularly Hollywood, cinema and British film production is also clearly expressed by demarcating the difference between the '100 million dollar movie' and the '£6 million' film (which was also provided with '£1 million' of public funding from the National Lottery). This statement not only offers comparison between *Franklyn* and other films with similar generic traits and larger investment but also locates this evaluation within a wider discourse on national cinema, whereby British film production is considered in a small-scale, domestic context and as heavily reliant on public funding and support. Furthermore, Young's comments also link audience interest and public awareness and engagement with the film, with concerns regarding budget and financial investment. The comparisons offered by both *The Times* article and Young's comments that *Watchmen* 'will sweep it away' at the box office thus reflect Bradshaw's earlier assessment of *V for Vendetta*, as a big budget Hollywood film that will 'bulldoze' any potential competition. The implicit suggestion here across all such comments is that *Franklyn* will not receive the same level of advertising, distribution and media publicity

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<sup>451</sup> McMorrow quoted in article by Maher, "Who is this Masked Man?", *The Times*, 12/02/2009. *Watchmen* had an estimated budget of \$130,000,000. Source: IMDB <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0409459/>> Accessed online 09/08/2013

<sup>452</sup> Graham Young, "Urban fairy tale weaker than sum of likeable parts", *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 27/02/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

precisely because of its status as a low-budget, independent British film production, and will underperform at the box office as a result.

However, despite concerns about budget and investment, Young's comments reveal an interesting critical approach to aesthetic style and visual effects in the film. Despite the relatively low budget, *Franklyn* was described as 'made to look like a 100 million dollar movie', and what this statement would suggest is that the film shared visual tropes more commonly associated with big budget spectacles. This can be seen in other reviews and articles, as numerous critics praised the 'sumptuous' design of 'Meanwhile City', the fantastical metropolis where Ryan Phillippe's character known as 'Preest' performs his vigilante escapades. In describing the aesthetic style of *Franklyn*, critics drew frequent comparison to the dystopian landscapes depicted in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). In a review by David Edwards in the *Daily Mirror*, the film was even described as the 'British *Blade Runner*'. In this context, Edwards states that *Franklyn* is an 'ambitious film that squeezes every penny from its £6m budget and throws it on to the screen to create a terrific futuristic cityscape. Kudos for that'.<sup>453</sup> This comparison, positioned at the introduction to Edwards' review, affirms the similarities of genre and aesthetic style between both films. However, in contrast to *Blade Runner*, which commanded a vast production budget,<sup>454</sup> *Franklyn*'s comparatively small budget and financial cost is re-emphasised in suggestions that the production crew effectively had to struggle ('squeeze every penny') to achieve comparable visual effects on the same scale.

This critical distinction between aesthetic, spectacle and budget also informs a more intense discourse concerning quality. In contrast to *V for Vendetta*, which was considered in mostly negative terms as overblown and hyperbolic, *Franklyn* was compared favourably to films which command cult status and critical acclaim such as *Blade Runner*,<sup>455</sup>

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<sup>453</sup> David Edwards, "City of the Damned", *Daily Mirror*, 27/03/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>454</sup> *Blade Runner* (1982) is estimated to have cost around \$28,000,000. Source: IMDB <[www.imdb.com/title/tt0083658/business?ref=tt\\_dt\\_bus](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083658/business?ref=tt_dt_bus)> Accessed online 23/08/2013

<sup>455</sup> See also a review in the *Scotland on Sunday* which described the futuristic world depicted in *Franklyn* as a 'vision shared and borrowed from *Blade Runner*', 22/02/2009

Nolan's *Batman* franchise ('a gloomy Gotham City')<sup>456</sup> and the creativity of Terry Gilliam ('[almost] as dazzling as *Brazil*;<sup>457</sup> 'set in a Gilliamesque parallel universe').<sup>458</sup> Yet, despite such positive comparisons, particularly in critical enthusiasm towards visual effects and evocative design, *Franklyn* was always positioned within a secondary or subordinate context; as a film which not only followed, but was also heavily influenced by other, more successful predecessors. As seen in Edwards' review, amongst others, the most frequent term applied to describe the film was 'ambitious'.<sup>459</sup> What this would suggest is that whilst *Franklyn* may have the required 'ambition and flair'<sup>460</sup> perhaps to emulate the fantastical worlds of Scott or Gilliam, the film failed to achieve the same level of creative finesse and visual splendour. The main reason appeared to be closely connected to budget size and scale. As one critic suggested, 'it perhaps needed the budget to successfully pull out all the visual stops'.<sup>461</sup> In analysing the response by the British mainstream press, it is clear that *Franklyn* was thus defined by features which provided comparison between similar genre films of differing scale. The description of the film as 'ambitious' for attempting to either imitate or compete with big budget American counterparts past *and* present ('kudos for that')<sup>462</sup> fits more generally with the inherent 'Britishness' associated with the film. By signposting *Franklyn* as the 'British *Blade Runner*', the connotations implicit within this banner statement are linked to more intrinsic concerns associated with budget, domestic film production and national cinema.

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and David Baldwin describes the 'striking design' as 'similar to *Blade Runner*' in "A Mind of His Own", *Metro*, 26/02/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>456</sup> Allan Hunter, "Owen shows his Spy Credentials", *Daily Express*, 27/02/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>457</sup> Anon., "Dark fairy tale is full of promise", *Derby Evening Telegraph*, 27/02/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>458</sup> Nicholas Barber, "Pick your own Hokum", *Independent on Sunday*, 01/03/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>459</sup> *Franklyn* is described as a film that 'certainly doesn't lack ambition' in *Derby Evening Telegraph*, 27/02/2009; 'a triumph of ambition over ability' in *Independent on Sunday*, 01/03/2009 whilst *The Times* stated 'you can't fault its ambition and imagination', 26/02/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>460</sup> Hunter, "Owen shows his Spy Credentials", *Daily Express*, 27/02/2009

<sup>461</sup> Anon., "Dark fairy tale is full of promise", *Derby Evening Telegraph*, 27/02/2009

<sup>462</sup> Edwards, "City of the Damned", *Daily Mirror*, 27/03/2009

**'Alice in Wonderland as a Brit gangland drama with Danny Dyer as the White Rabbit. Curiouser indeed'.<sup>463</sup>**

Press anxieties around international competition directed towards *Franklyn* were still tempered with a sense of critical acclaim and appreciation. In contrast, *Malice in Wonderland*, a low budget, British independent production which appeared for a limited period in UK cinemas in February 2010, received a much more hostile critical reception.<sup>464</sup> The reasons for this response are informed by concerns regarding budget size and scale, providing some insight into how low budget genre films are typically appropriated by the mainstream British press. *Malice in Wonderland* is loosely based on Lewis Carroll's 1865 novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, with the fantasy narrative re-located to contemporary Britain. The film was a domestic co-production between various companies including Mark Williams Films and Future Film Limited. *Malice in Wonderland* also received £25,641 of National Lottery awards distributed by the UKFC via the regional agency Screen East.<sup>465</sup> The film was shot on location in London and Great Yarmouth, Norfolk where the sea-front was transformed into the fantastical land from where heroine Alice attempts to escape. In the film, Carroll's original tale is now infiltrated with gang lords, pimps and other assorted villains. British actor Danny Dyer assumes the role of 'Whitey', a frantic taxi driver obsessed with punctuality and complete with a 'Laaaaahndon geezer dialect',<sup>466</sup> Maggie Grace plays an American Alice and the remaining cast is peppered with British actors including Nathaniel Parker, Matt King and also Pam Ferris, in a truly bizarre role as the Duchess.

In the press coverage, *Malice in Wonderland* was almost exclusively referred to as a 'low budget' and 'independent' British

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<sup>463</sup> Laurence Phelan, *The Independent*, 06/02/2010 <Nexis UK, accessed 05/10/2013>

<sup>464</sup> *Malice in Wonderland* went to DVD a few days after its UK theatrical release in February 2010. Source: IMDB  
<[www.imdb.com/title/tt0374853/releaseinfo?ref=tt\\_q1\\_9](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0374853/releaseinfo?ref=tt_q1_9)> Accessed online 15/08/2013

<sup>465</sup> Source: UKFC Annual Report and Accounts 2007-2008  
<[http://industry.bfi.org.uk/media/pdf/o/j/UKFC\\_Annual\\_Report\\_and\\_Accounts\\_2007-08.pdf](http://industry.bfi.org.uk/media/pdf/o/j/UKFC_Annual_Report_and_Accounts_2007-08.pdf)> Accessed online 15/08/2013

<sup>466</sup> Film 4 <[www.film4.com/reviews/2009/malice-in-wonderland](http://www.film4.com/reviews/2009/malice-in-wonderland)> Accessed online 15/08/2013

production. The UKFC definition of a ‘low budget’ or ‘micro budget’ film constitutes a feature production with a minimum 60 minute running time, which is intended for theatrical release and has a total budget of around £1m or less, with no lower limit.<sup>467</sup> According to a 2008 report co-commissioned by the UKFC and chartered accountancy firm Northern Alliance, the total number of British films produced on a ‘low’ or ‘micro’ budget had increased in more recent years with new opportunities provided by affordable advances in digital technology. The report stated that 15% of films which fall under this category ‘fail to achieve their full potential in distribution or exhibition’, mostly due to lack of awareness or attention in the marketplace, with a claim that ‘some programmers are of the opinion that low and micro budget films are a disincentive for audiences’.<sup>468</sup> For the UKFC, the extrinsic benefits of providing financial assistance for lower budget film productions included the potential for development of new talent; the promotion of the UK as a prime destination for independent and creative filmmaking; the creation and expansion of sector level employment and a commitment to offering a wider choice of domestic films for UK audiences.<sup>469</sup> *Malice in Wonderland* subscribes to the UKFC definition as a film which was produced on a low budget and received limited distribution. Press response towards issues of budget, production and related extrinsic benefits should therefore be assessed with this guidance set out by the UKFC in mind.

In the majority of source materials examined, *Malice in Wonderland* was most commonly located within the context of adaptation, genre and star presence. The film’s close association with *Alice in Wonderland* is certainly reflective of more recent trends in adaptation. For example, *The Times* newspaper published an article in early 2010 which considered how Carroll’s literary work has ‘infiltrated popular culture’, citing film adaptations including the ‘forthcoming’ Tim Burton ‘striking 3-D version’, alongside allegorical references in both *The*

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<sup>467</sup> UKFC, *Low and Micro-Budget Film Production in the UK*, June 2008  
<[www.industry.bfi.org.uk/publications?page=1&step=10&viewby=category&value=17061](http://www.industry.bfi.org.uk/publications?page=1&step=10&viewby=category&value=17061)> Accessed online 04/10/2013

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

*Matrix* and *Star Trek*.<sup>470</sup> This tendency again resonates with Higson's assertion regarding the 'pulling power' and 'global cultural presence' of British fiction, particularly witnessed in the period since 2001 and the success of *Harry Potter*.<sup>471</sup> *Malice in Wonderland* could therefore be located within this popular cultural trend, as a British fantasy film based on a British fantasy novel updated for modern audiences. However, the relocation of Carroll's imaginative world to the criminal underworld of contemporary Britain proved problematic for most critics. Tookey, writing for the *Daily Mail*, described the film as 'one of the worst ever ideas for a movie [...] devoid of point, humour and entertainment. Imagine a talent-free fan of Guy Ritchie trying to turn *Alice in Wonderland* into a British gangster comedy and you have some idea of the torture in store'.<sup>472</sup> As seen in previous reviews, such comments reflect Tookey's conservative approach to film adaptation more generally, where he appears to approve of films which provide 'faithful' (re)interpretations of the original novel.<sup>473</sup> This opinion is clearly evident in his complete disdain for *Malice in Wonderland*, which he considers an 'abomination' of Carroll's 'masterpiece'.<sup>474</sup> The reasons for this criticism mostly concern the 'gritty' style and tone of the film, which Tookey describes as more akin to the directorial work of Guy Ritchie, famous for British gangster films *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998) and *Snatch* (2000). According to Steve Chibnall, such films evoke a ruthless 'ladland' where characters are defined by a masculinised 'struggle for survival and supremacy'.<sup>475</sup> *Malice in Wonderland* subscribes to the aesthetic that Chibnall outlines, where the fantastical land infiltrated by Alice is a dark, shadowy world occupied by various 'ladland' archetypes including Matt King's drug dealer, known as Gonzo, and Nathaniel Parker's resident mobster, Harry Hunt. The presence of Danny Dyer,

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<sup>470</sup> Anon., "How Alice in Wonderland has Infiltrated Popular Culture", *The Times*, 27/02/2010 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>471</sup> Higson, *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s*, p.99.

<sup>472</sup> Christopher Tookey, "Diabolical Nonsense", *Daily Mail*, 05/02/2010 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

<sup>473</sup> As demonstrated in Chapter One and Tookey's review of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.

<sup>474</sup> Tookey, "Diabolical Nonsense", *Daily Mail*, 05/02/2010

<sup>475</sup> Steve Chibnall, "Travels in Ladland: The British Gangster Film Cycle, 1998-2001", in Robert Murphy, Ed. *The British Cinema Book*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2009), p.377.

considered a ‘staple’ actor in the modern British gangster film,<sup>476</sup> embodies the immature and competitive male archetype associated with ‘ladland’ cinema, portraying Whitey as a hired goon employed to run errands for the local mob. For Tookey, amongst others, the film was considered a failed mismatch of conflicting aesthetic styles which was also highly unsympathetic to the original source material.

*Malice in Wonderland* received intense criticism in the British mainstream press for this stylistic approach. Whilst the transportation of Carroll’s original Victorian fantasy to an equally fantastical contemporary Britain was not necessarily considered a major issue, the inclusion of a gangland scenario complete with guns, pimps and prostitutes added another complex generic layer. This combination of fantasy and gangster thriller led critics to describe the film as a ‘bizarre collision’ of different genre styles.<sup>477</sup> Central to this discourse was the assertion that the narrative themes, tropes and iconography associated with the original novel do not transfer successfully when applied within the context of the contemporary British gangster movie. This contention might suggest a complication of generic norms and critical expectations. As the British gangster film is renowned for a commitment to aesthetic ‘realism’, through the projection of ‘real’ characters, narrative and locations, and often extreme violence, this genre is in direct opposition to the escapism and imaginary worlds more commonly associated with fantasy fiction. *Malice in Wonderland* complicates this distinction by establishing a ‘real’ world scenario, located within the aesthetic parameters of the British gangster film,<sup>478</sup> in which characters depart from ‘everyday “realistic” expectations’ through their transportation to another ‘place’ which may not actually exist. As identified in the critical response to *Looking for Eric* and *Dean Spanley*, when aesthetic or generic styles collide or ‘fall

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<sup>476</sup> Anon., *The Mirror*, 19/02/2010 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

<sup>477</sup> Nicholas Barber, *Independent on Sunday*, 14/02/2010 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

<sup>478</sup> See Chibnall’s account of the ‘tensions’ evident in the modern British gangster film between the ‘desire for social realism and needs of melodramatic narrative’ more ‘evident in international cinema’ in “Travels in Ladland: The British Gangster Film Cycle, 1998-2001”, p.384.



between categories',<sup>479</sup> this can evoke conflict and negativity, as seen in Tookey's assessment.

However, even in more accommodating reviews of *Malice in Wonderland*, this issue was foregrounded and repeated. For example, Kevin Maher stated in *The Times* that the film is all 'concept and no heart',<sup>480</sup> whilst Cosmo Landesman described the film in a similar vein as a 'dry concept'.<sup>481</sup> The issue of genre hybridity had a significant impact on discussions of potential audience appeal and interest. For critics such as Maher and Landesman, the 'conceptual' and 'episodic'<sup>482</sup> qualities of the film remained a concern in relation to genre labelling and target audience. Whilst *Malice in Wonderland* clearly emulates the 'ladland' culture reminiscent of the modern British gangster movie as discussed, the film is also principally centred on the journey of Alice. The inclusion of a female heroine softens the highly masculinised world of Whitey and his fellow 'lads', as we follow Alice's personal narrative which is full of confusion and bewilderment. In the film, the fantasy world is portrayed as a neon dreamscape, complete with shooting stars and melodramatic romance as Alice appears to fall for Dyer's frantic cabbie. This mixed approach, towards 'gangster comedy' and art-house cinematic style, shifts consistently throughout the film. For the critical press, this prompted significant uncertainty and questions concerning the initial design and 'concept' of *Malice in Wonderland*. Indeed, the marketing for the film also displays a conflict of interest in this particular area, with some posters and DVD covers portraying a gritty gangster scenario, whilst others framed Alice within an illuminated fairground surrounded by giant clocks and playing cards.<sup>483</sup> Landesman offered a pertinent summary of the film as follows: 'too laddish for art house tastes but too arty to be much good as a cockney gangster caper'.<sup>484</sup> Such comments reveal

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<sup>479</sup> Barr, "Straw Dogs, A Clockwork Orange and the Critics", p.21.

<sup>480</sup> Kevin Maher, *The Times*, 06/02/2010 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

<sup>481</sup> Cosmo Landesman, *The Sunday Times*, 07/02/2010 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

<sup>482</sup> Maher, *The Times*, 06/02/2010

<sup>483</sup> The 'gritty' poster featured Dyer at the centre and included the tagline 'Guns, gangsters, pimps and prostitutes. Wonderland just got dirtier'. For examples of both versions, see IMDB <[www.imdb.com/title/tt0374853/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0374853/)> Accessed online 20/08/2014

<sup>484</sup> Landesman, *The Sunday Times*, 07/02/2010

evidence for critical tension in contextualising *Malice in Wonderland*, and confusion regarding generic and aesthetic style was merely compounded by the film's low budget and limited distribution.

Issues of genre identity, audience appeal and low budget or production status can also be identified in critical response to *Franklyn*. Despite praise towards the visual effects and 'ambitious' vision of McMorro as screenwriter and director, the film received fierce criticism for its perceived lack of coherency and substance. In a similar response to *Malice in Wonderland*, a major factor underpinning such assessments was the problem of genre categorisation, and this presented a repeated concern in press reviews and articles which circulated at the time of *Franklyn*'s release in UK cinemas in February 2009. As noted previously, *The Times* newspaper published a lengthy article which included on-set interviews with cast and crew. Whilst this mainly focused on production and budget constraints, the article also discussed difficulties in categorising the film. The article included quotes from *Franklyn* director McMorro and producer Jeremy Thomas, who described the film as 'a genre of no genre'.<sup>485</sup> In this statement, Thomas outlines narrative and thematic complexities, most prominently the film's portrayal of the secondary and fantasy world of 'Meanwhile City', which may or may not actually exist. Such ambiguity had a consequent impact on genre categorisation practices, as the film appeared to fluctuate between 'urban fairy tale, grim city drama [and] futuristic fantasy'.<sup>486</sup> As Altman and Neale contend, genre labelling in the media functions as descriptive shorthand for critics to signpost the main features and themes of a given film for potential audiences.<sup>487</sup> In similarity with *Malice in Wonderland*, press coverage of *Franklyn* provides an example of critical response to films where generic status is unclear or less apparent. This presents a feature Maher returns to at several points throughout *The Times* article. He initially describes the film as 'difficult to explain, to distil or quantify' and later admits defeat

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<sup>485</sup> Jeremy Thomas, producer of *Franklyn*, quoted in Maher, 'Who is this Masked Man?', *The Times*, 12/02/2009

<sup>486</sup> Anon., "Dark fairy tale is full of promise", *Derby Evening Telegraph*, 27/02/2009

<sup>487</sup> Neale argues that press materials 'always contain terms indicative of a film's generic status', in *Genre and Hollywood*, p.39.

by claiming ‘the prospect of pigeonholing *Franklyn* remains elusive’.<sup>488</sup> This leaves no simple generic indicators in which to signpost the film for both readers and potential viewers, except in references to earlier films which may share similar visual qualities but have significantly different narrative themes, such as *Blade Runner* et al.

The problem of genre hybridity and ambiguity is yet again reflective of more general critical response to films which ‘fall between categories’. The predominant responses to such films are underpinned by critical trepidation and uncertainty. As outlined previously, this does not mean that *every* film that subscribes to such tendencies ‘suffers critically’ as a result. However, where negative criticism did appear, this was generally focused on issues of coherence and feasibility. Bradshaw’s review in *The Guardian* provides an example of this response:

Gerald McMorrow is a first-time feature director whose ambitious interweaving of fantasy and reality is perhaps influenced by *Donnie Darko* or *Pan's Labyrinth*. He is aiming high. And yet, to use a recondite and specialist critical term, this film is massively up itself [...] there is a sense of having sat through a rather tiring puzzle.<sup>489</sup>

Bradshaw refers to the ‘ambitious’ intentions of McMorrow as director, yet again highlighting this as a recurring term in critical assessments used to describe *Franklyn*. However, as seen in other press materials, the ‘ambitious’ qualities of the film are appropriated in a secondary and ultimately inferior context. Whilst Bradshaw draws comparison between *Donnie Darko* (2001) and *Pan's Labyrinth* in the film’s ‘interweaving of fantasy and reality’, *Franklyn* is considered much less successful in the execution of ideas, narrative or visual agency. Bradshaw states that the film does not achieve the artistic accomplishments of either preceding film and when examining his earlier reviews, the difference is notable. For example, *Donnie Darko* was described in *The Guardian* as ‘refreshingly different [a] distinctive piece of work’<sup>490</sup> and *Pan's Labyrinth* as ‘a bold juxtaposition of real and unreal worlds [...] visually

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<sup>488</sup> Maher, “Who is this Masked Man?”, *The Times*, 12/02/2009

<sup>489</sup> Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 27/02/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>490</sup> Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 25/10/2002 <Nexis UK, accessed 03/10/2013>

inventive'.<sup>491</sup> In Bradshaw's comments, the notion that a film can 'fall between categories' of realism and fantasy is not considered an issue for concern, and in reference to *Donnie Darko* and *Pan's Labyrinth*, this constituted a significant feature of their 'distinctive' appeal and 'quality'. However, *Franklyn* is considered by Bradshaw as inferior to both films because it failed to achieve the same level of uniqueness. Aesthetic comparison between the films demonstrates contrast and distinction, claiming that director McMorrow was 'aiming high' by attempting to emulate the earlier films. Although Bradshaw's comments were amongst the most negative relating to *Franklyn*, the film was consistently labelled as 'ambitious' by critics. The connotations attached to this description merely served to emphasise the secondary and inferior position of the film when compared to more successful and acclaimed examples.

Bradshaw's review in *The Guardian* resonates with critical concerns regarding the wider appeal of *Franklyn*. The dual problems of generic hybridity and complex narrative, combined with a relatively low budget and limited theatrical release, prompted some discussion around the potential for box office success. In *The Times* article, Maher's comments that *Franklyn* is 'likely to motivate devotion and derision in equal measure'<sup>492</sup> certainly reflect Bradshaw's criticism, and this hesitancy informed the majority of press comments regarding audience appeal more generally. As a British independent film, its production company E1 Entertainment was awarded £120,000 by the UKFC towards distribution costs. This funding was allocated with the intention to 'increase the exposure of films that audiences might not otherwise be able to see'.<sup>493</sup> The UKFC announced that this level of finance for *Franklyn* would increase the number of release sites from an initial 35 to 54 cinema screens across the UK, and also assist with advertising, media and publicity costs. In response, some sections of the British mainstream press scrutinised the amount of financial support and public funding

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<sup>491</sup> Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 24/11/2006 <Nexis UK, accessed 03/10/2013>

<sup>492</sup> Maher, "Who is this Masked Man?", *The Times*, 12/02/2009

<sup>493</sup> Source: BFI <[www.industry.bfi.org.uk/article/15226/Lottery-funding-boosts-distribution-for-futuristic-fantasy-action-crime-movie-and-revolution-epic](http://www.industry.bfi.org.uk/article/15226/Lottery-funding-boosts-distribution-for-futuristic-fantasy-action-crime-movie-and-revolution-epic)> Accessed online 03/10/2013

allocated to the film. For example, in an article discussing the UK box office successes in the period 2008 - 2009, *The Guardian* stated:

The fund did allocate £120,000 to assist in the marketing of *Franklyn*, British director Gerald McMorrow's ambitious fantasy debut. Judging by an opening weekend of £54,000 from 54 screens, audiences have decoded reviews along the lines of 'an encouraging talent to watch' as 'probably not worth my hard-earned money'.<sup>494</sup>

In a reflection of Bradshaw's earlier review, the overall tone of this *Guardian* article is distinctly negative. By contrasting the amount of money invested in marketing and advertising with the relatively low box office totals for the 'opening weekend', the summation was that *Franklyn* had failed to engage audience interest and engagement. In part, this could have been influenced by the film's independent status and limited release. The term 'ambitious' is again provided providence, as the critical press anticipated the problems involved in competing with American blockbusters released around the same period which were destined to attract more publicity and higher attendance figures. In addition, such comments also reveal some fascinating insights into critical assessments of fantasy genre within the context of the adult-orientated film. By describing *Franklyn* as confusing and 'difficult to explain, distil or quantify',<sup>495</sup> this signposted the film as either challenging and 'tiring' for most adult viewers to fully comprehend at best, and too incomprehensible or even ridiculous to be taken seriously at worst. This press response resonates with other critical assessments of fantasy genre found in academic scholarship, particularly around 'plausibility' and 'probability', as Neale outlines in his discussion of 'realism' and verisimilitude.<sup>496</sup> Such discourse also serves to interrogate existing critical debates concerning genre, British cinema and audience appeal. What the findings would suggest is a complex set of responses to British films financed by public money. As demonstrated in *The Guardian* article, whilst organisations such as the UKFC were considered important in supporting

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<sup>494</sup> Anon., "UK Box Office: Oscar bounce returns Slumdog to the Top Spot", *The Guardian*, 03/03/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>495</sup> Maher, "Who is this Masked Man?", *The Times*, 12/02/2009

<sup>496</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p.35.

the domestic film industry, this funding should be distributed more towards the independent British film productions which have a greater potential for box office success. In this assessment, films such as *Franklyn* and *Malice in Wonderland* will consistently fail or underperform, because they are considered as unappealing towards the mass audience and unable to secure a confident position against other independent films which receive substantially higher critical acclaim. Central to this contention are the issues of genre and aesthetics. *Franklyn* and *Malice in Wonderland* were considered as complex, confusing and ‘bizarre’ due to their tendency to ‘fall between categories’ of ‘realism’ and fantasy. This critical response is most evident in Maher’s reviews for *The Times*, which effectively summarised both *Franklyn* and *Malice in Wonderland* as small scale, low budget, British independent films that generated minimal media attention and public interest because they were more about ‘concept’ than substance.

**‘It’s a great time for this movie. It’s going to make people think’.**<sup>497</sup>

In contrast to *Franklyn* and *Malice in Wonderland*, which were both appropriated by the British mainstream press as low budget, domestic independent films with potentially niche audiences, *V for Vendetta* witnessed a heightened level of publicity and media interest. In part, this was largely due to timing. *V for Vendetta* was initially set for a UK release date to coincide with the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Guy Fawkes Night (or Bonfire Night) on the 5<sup>th</sup> November 2005. This marketing decision was principally designed to emphasise the narrative themes of the film, which present an updated version of the Guy Fawkes vigilante performing the ultimate stance against an oppressive British regime. One of the original publicity taglines even included a phrase, spoken by Natalie Portman’s character Evey Hammond, reciting the famous rhyme: ‘remember, remember, the fifth of November, gunpowder, treason and plot’. However, the release date for *V for Vendetta* was heavily postponed due to the proximity of the London terrorist attacks which

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<sup>497</sup> Joel Silver, producer for *V for Vendetta*, quoted in article “You call it a disaster. Hollywood calls it a vehicle”, Mark Kermode, *The Observer*, 12/03/2006 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

occurred on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005. As John Hiscock commented in the *Daily Telegraph*, ‘the film’s climax features the London Underground [used] to bomb Parliament; days after filming finished, real-life terrorist bombers struck on the Tube. The delay [was] designed to put some time between the tragedy and the film’s release’.<sup>498</sup> However, this postponement was not considered a major disaster for those involved with the film and instead prompted further press conferences and media coverage. In defence of the violence depicted in the film, particularly the terrorist connotations, director James McTeigue remained adamant that the film represented a contemporary ‘allegory’ designed to initiate audience involvement in the ‘ideas it discusses and the questions it asks’.<sup>499</sup> Producer Joel Silver offered a more pronounced opinion by claiming: ‘it’s a controversial film and it’s a controversial time [...] it’s going to make people think’.<sup>500</sup> However, press coverage of *V for Vendetta* would suggest that Silver’s and McTeigue’s repeated defence of the film did not satisfy the critics. Instead, the sources reveal a comprehensive backlash against the film. Such criticism was not only fuelled by recent memories of the London terrorist attacks in the previous year, but also by the perceived intervention by Hollywood as an outsider attempting to comprehend and portray national politics and society on screen. What this evidence reveals is the way in which the defensive position of the British mainstream press contributed to more general understanding and acknowledgement of *V for Vendetta* as a prime example of the ‘inward investment’ film.

The production of *V for Vendetta* provides a persistent theme in critical discourse which surrounded the film’s UK cinematic release in March 2006. Much of this press coverage focused on the utilisation of high security locations associated with the seat of British government, such as Whitehall and the Houses of Parliament. This level of access was considered unprecedented for a major film production. According to

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<sup>498</sup> John Hiscock, “Why *V for Vendetta* spells C for Controversy”, *Daily Telegraph*, 10/03/2006 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>499</sup> James McTeigue quoted in Hiscock, “Why *V for Vendetta* spells C for Controversy”, *Daily Telegraph*, 10/03/2006

<sup>500</sup> Joel Silver, producer for *V for Vendetta*, quoted in Kermode, “You call it a disaster. Hollywood calls it a vehicle”, *The Observer*, 12/03/2006

Hiscock in the *Daily Telegraph*, the planning took ‘nine months of negotiations with fourteen government departments’.<sup>501</sup> For related screen agencies such as Film London, who organised and negotiated the necessary permission and initial access rights, this provided a promotional showcase for the city, designed to ‘welcome and encourage future film-making in London’.<sup>502</sup> This approach certainly reflected a growing trend around this period. According to one article published in *The Guardian* newspaper in early 2006, the number of major movie productions filmed in and around London had grown by 20% in the period 2004 - 2005, ‘consolidating the city’s place as the third busiest production centre in the world after Los Angeles and New York’.<sup>503</sup> According to the report, this impact resulted in a significant upsurge of film crews working in and around the capital, with the added extrinsic benefits generated by film-related industries and organisations. For screen agencies and similar, closely affiliated tourism sites, the showcasing of London in a major new movie release proved a significant marketing and media publicity opportunity. However, in the British mainstream press, this level of access to the political heart of the nation provided an issue of considerable concern. Although production on *V for Vendetta* took place months before the terrorist attacks on London, this formed one of the most prominent themes in press coverage of the film. It would also appear that distinctions between real and fictional events in the fantasised London depicted in *V for Vendetta* became indistinct and interchangeable.

This tendency was most notable in newspapers more politically aligned with the conservative right. A major issue was the involvement of the prime minister’s son, who had worked as a runner during the film’s production. The *Sunday Times* published an article which stated: ‘Euan Blair, the oldest son of the prime minister, has been helping to blow up the Houses of Parliament. He has worked on a Hollywood blockbuster that will be the first film to show the Palace of Westminster being

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<sup>501</sup> Hiscock, “Why *V for Vendetta* spells C for Controversy”, *Daily Telegraph*, 10/03/2006

<sup>502</sup> Source: Film London

<[http://filmlondon.org.uk/location\\_of\\_the\\_month\\_2006/assets/features/march\\_2006\\_-\\_whitehall](http://filmlondon.org.uk/location_of_the_month_2006/assets/features/march_2006_-_whitehall)> Accessed online 19/08/2013

<sup>503</sup> Anon., “London draws the Film Crowd”, *The Guardian*, 26/01/2006. See also Hugh Davies, “World’s film-makers fall in love with London”, *Daily Telegraph*, 30/01/2006 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>



destroyed by a terrorist'.<sup>504</sup> In this comment, criticism is directed towards both the production team and studio behind *V for Vendetta* for creating the 'first film' to depict a full scale terrorist attack on the seat of British government, and also against the prime minister's son for his apparent 'help' in making this happen. This response in the *Sunday Times* serves to connect the on-screen violence in the film with real events and more general concerns relating to national security and domestic terrorism. Such critical opinion is repeated across the conservative press, with the *Daily Express* describing the film as a 'chilling example of art imitating life',<sup>505</sup> whilst the *Daily Telegraph* claimed 'the film could be viewed as an endorsement for terrorism and anarchy'.<sup>506</sup> What this would suggest is that the politically centre-right newspapers considered the allegory of *V for Vendetta* as too similar to recent, 'real' events, providing a damning indictment to the government for even allowing film production at such sensitive locations. The involvement of Blair featured prominently in this discourse and provided a media platform for the Conservative party to provoke further, politicised ammunition. In an article published for the *Sunday Times*, Conservative MP David Davies accused Tony Blair of 'blatant hypocrisy' for allowing his son to work on the film while at the same time purporting to denounce the 'glorification of terrorism' by the media.<sup>507</sup> This furore presents a consistent theme in certain sections of British press response towards the release of the film.<sup>508</sup> Ultimately, the heightened level of media controversy which surrounded the UK cinema release of *V for Vendetta* provided a public platform for critics in the

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<sup>504</sup> Abul Taher, "Euan Blair helps to blow up Parliament", *Sunday Times*, 01/01/2006 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>505</sup> Anon., "Natalie's film goes ahead despite the London bombings", *Daily Express*, 25/07/2005 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>506</sup> Hiscock, "Why *V for Vendetta* spells C for Controversy", *Daily Telegraph*, 10/03/2006

<sup>507</sup> David Davies quoted in Taher article, "Euan Blair helps to blow up Parliament", *Sunday Times*, 01/01/2006. As a result of this heightened press coverage, *V for Vendetta* location manager Nicholas Daubeny was moved to release a statement concerning Euan Blair's involvement claiming he 'did not play any role in getting permission' to film certain locations and stressing that it would have been 'impossible' to secure clearance had filming been scheduled for after 7<sup>th</sup> July. Source: Anon., "How E got the *V in Vendetta*", *The Guardian*, 23/03/2006 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>508</sup> As another example, see Paul Harris who described the 'curiously familiar parallels' between the totalitarian government depicted in the film which 'came to power on a platform of lies, broken promises and weasel words' and Tony Blair's Labour party, in "Don't worry Tony, it's only a film (for now)", *Daily Mail*, 10/03/2006 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

conservative press to attack the political decisions and legislation put forward by the Labour government in power during this period. Whilst it perhaps remains difficult to speculate whether such discourse would have existed if the London bombings had not actually taken place, what the evidence shows is how the fantasy allegory in *V for Vendetta* can be closely aligned with ‘real’ life situations and events.

In addition to concerns regarding political distrust and national security, *V for Vendetta* received vast amounts of press criticism for providing an outsiders’ perspective of Britain. For example, in Bradshaw’s review in *The Guardian*, where the film was slated as constituting ‘valueless gibberish’, he went on to claim:

*V for Vendetta* is such an odd mixture: partly naive post-punk posturing, betraying the original’s 1981 origins, and partly well-meant (but very American) condescension towards London and Britain. Like tourists with a phrasebook, the Wachowskis get people to say “bollocks” a fair bit, and there is a pastiche of *The Benny Hill Show*. On the higher end of the cultural scale, V declaims Shakespeare [and] reels off lots of *Macbeth*. But he fails to quote the only appropriate lines: the ones about it being a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.<sup>509</sup>

In this comment, Bradshaw creates a clear distinction between the British context and American execution. This can be identified from the criticism of how the Hollywood production team behind *V for Vendetta* attempted to engage with, or re-interpret, British politics, society and cultural values. Bradshaw claimed that the film adaptation of Alan Moore’s graphic novel constituted a ‘betrayal’ of the original text due to the decision to update narrative themes concerning 1980’s Thatcherism and threat of nuclear conflict to contemporary world affairs, and also re-create a more spectacular visual style for the film. This reflects on an earlier comment concerning the ‘betrayal’ of graphic novel fans, describing the film as ‘a fanbase product from which the fanbase has been amputated’.<sup>510</sup> Such opinion could certainly resonate with the argument

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<sup>509</sup> Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 17/03/2006

<sup>510</sup> Ibid. Alan Moore distanced himself from the production of *V for Vendetta* due to his issues regarding the changes made to the original text and describing the screenplay as ‘imbecilic’. Source: Hiscock, “Why *V for Vendetta* spells C for Controversy”, *Daily*

that in the critical press, film adaptations ‘are often put down as secondary and derivative’.<sup>511</sup> However, Bradshaw’s comments also connect the changes in narrative and theme to the decision-making and influence of Hollywood studios involved with the production. This sentiment is underpinned by the claim that *V for Vendetta* presents a highly ‘condescending’ portrayal of Britain which is from the perspective of the ‘very American’ outsider. Such criticism emphasises the internationalised qualities of the film’s production whereupon the original source material is effectively lost and instead replaced by an Americanised view on the political and social landscape of contemporary, and fantasised futuristic, Britain. For Bradshaw, the film therefore provided a ‘tourists’ perspective of ‘Britishness’, which included references to popular comedy programmes such as *Benny Hill*, and also Shakespeare; cultural products which are well-known abroad and command different applications of ‘quality’ and ‘taste’. This ‘odd mixture’ of cultural pastiche was considered informed almost entirely from an American perspective, which resulted in a confused and patronising portrayal of national culture and identity.

In analysing the source materials, it would appear that this critical response provided the most repeated observation associated with the film. This perceived American influence and intervention impacted on press response towards many aspects of the film, including the ‘shrill adaptation’<sup>512</sup> from Moore’s original novel, the ‘pompously pretentious’ attempt to include ‘sub-Shakespearean dialogue’<sup>513</sup> and a portrayal of British society and political systems which, despite the fantasised and futuristic setting, was considered as ‘condescending’. As Derek Malcolm opined in *The Evening Standard*, ‘a prologue about the Gunpowder Plot has apparently been inserted for American audiences. This London will undoubtedly seem a strange place to them’.<sup>514</sup> Whilst this sustained level

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*Telegraph*, 10/03/2006. See also: “Alan Moore: Why I Turned my Back on Hollywood”, Tom Lamont, *The Guardian*, 15/12/2012 <Nexis UK, accessed 28/08/2014>

<sup>511</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, p.2-3.

<sup>512</sup> James Christopher, “Gunpowder, Treason, No Plot”, *The Times*, 16/03/2006 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>513</sup> Derek Malcolm, “Gunpowder plot that goes off without a bang”, *The Evening Standard*, 16/03/2006 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*

of criticism may have been compounded by recent events in London around this time, what the evidence reveals is a more inherent distrust and annoyance towards the perceived American intervention into historical and contemporary British political, social and cultural spheres which was misconstrued in the film. *V for Vendetta* was therefore almost exclusively positioned by the British press in terms of its outsider status; as a blockbuster Hollywood movie which ‘intervened’ with domestic concerns and displayed minimal sympathy, similarities or relevance to national affairs.

This critical response to *V for Vendetta* corresponds with the features associated with the ‘inward investment’ film outlined by Higson et al. The level of international financing, interest and ‘control’ had a significant effect on how the film was appropriated by critics. In contrast, *Malice in Wonderland* represents a British independent film at the opposite end of the blockbuster spectrum to *V for Vendetta* and therefore should be considered in a different context; as a film which projects a ‘more extensive range’<sup>515</sup> of British cultural and social values and also a ‘relevance to contemporary British society’.<sup>516</sup> However, as seen in the evidence thus far, *Malice in Wonderland* failed to engage positive critical acclaim in the British press, with substantial criticism directed towards narrative, characterisation and the re-location of Carroll’s original novel to the gangland underworld of contemporary Britain. When this analysis is focused towards regional and local press coverage of the film, the sources reveal a tendency to reflect the opinion of the national newspaper commentators. This similarity is most evident when analysing how the film was assessed by critics during the course of its production.

In the early stages of the film’s development and production, regional papers such as the *Eastern Daily Press (EDP)* appeared enthusiastic about the prospect of showcasing the locality of Great Yarmouth in the film. In a reflection of press response towards *Stardust* and *The Golden Compass*, location and ‘place’ performed a prominent discourse. For example, the *EDP* included an early quote by *Malice in*

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<sup>515</sup> Higson, *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s*, p.29.

<sup>516</sup> Leggott, *Contemporary British Cinema: From Heritage to Horror*, p.9.

*Wonderland* producer Charles Salmon, who claimed the coastal town provided ‘a brilliant set of under used, fantastic locations’.<sup>517</sup> This sentiment was reinforced and repeated by the *EDP* journalist and critic Mark Nicholls, who stated that the production studio chose Great Yarmouth specifically because of ‘its distinctive coast line and impressive venues, such as the Hippodrome’.<sup>518</sup> In this comment, the historical, cultural and natural attributes offered by the town and surrounding area are considered the main point of interest connected to the film. Furthermore, the decision to film *Malice in Wonderland* in Great Yarmouth was initially considered an important success story for the local area. The extrinsic benefits associated with this commitment, including employment opportunities (‘Screen East is supporting Future Films by helping to find local crew’),<sup>519</sup> economic investment, and publicity and tourism potential provided prominent features in this discourse. This approach is most pronounced in the article’s casting call for members of the public to attend auditions for minor roles in the film. The *EDP* claimed that successful applicants would be able to ‘rub shoulders’ with stars such as ‘English born’ actress Mischa Barton and also ‘one of the nation’s best loved and respected actors’, Bob Hoskins, who were both in negotiations to appear in the forthcoming film.<sup>520</sup> In this statement, the article not only highlights the perceived extrinsic qualities of the film in relation to local employment, financed by the regional screen agency designed to create and promote economic opportunities within the area, but also positions this within a wider context of domestic film production. The emphasis on the potential involvement of ‘English born’ Barton and ‘national treasure’ Hoskins, performing alongside other well-known British actors and local volunteers, commended the film-makers’ commitment to home-grown acting talent, as opposed to a reliance on

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<sup>517</sup> Charles Salmon, producer of *Malice in Wonderland*, quoted in Mark Nicholls, *Eastern Daily Press*, 14/06/2008 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>518</sup> Nicholls, *Eastern Daily Press*, 14/06/2008

<sup>519</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.* In the final film, neither actor appeared on screen. It was reported that Maggie Grace replaced Mischa Barton for ‘unspecified reasons’. Source: Wikipedia <[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malice\\_in\\_Wonderland\\_\(2009\\_film\)](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malice_in_Wonderland_(2009_film))> Accessed online 04/10/2013

Hollywood stars for commercial success.<sup>521</sup> Furthermore, the local connection established by the *EDP* was considered highly important for future film production and economic investment for the town and surrounding area; the film was pronounced to be ‘another feather in Yarmouth’s growing cap as a top destination for movie locations’.<sup>522</sup>

In this press coverage, we can see evidence of how British film productions can be appropriated by sections of the critical ‘writing machine’ in terms of their perceived ‘relevance’ and significance towards the national cultural and economic landscape. The location of Great Yarmouth provided initial interest and excitement for the local press because it could re-iterate the extrinsic benefits associated with potential employment opportunities and future investment to their regional readerships. However, this critical discourse circulated during the initial stages of planning and production, months before *Malice in Wonderland* received its UK cinema release in February 2010. The evidence would suggest that the heightened level of local and regional newspaper interest in the film dispersed over this period. The film appeared briefly in an abridged *EDP* article,<sup>523</sup> whilst local sister paper the *Norwich Evening News* mentioned *Malice in Wonderland* in a piece outlining recent film productions located in and around Norfolk.<sup>524</sup> The absence of articles and reviews could be explained by the film’s limited release and distribution, as discussed. However, another potential reason could be the more general lack of media and public interest and also the negative criticism which followed within the national press. For example, it is clear that the use of Great Yarmouth in the film was either overlooked or ignored by the majority of critics. In one review for *The Evening Standard*, the critic described the ‘neon-lit cityscape that might just be night time

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<sup>521</sup> Higson argues that American actors often appear to ‘add a level of box office appeal that can’t always be achieved by English stars’, in *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s*, p.25. The emphasis on the importance of British involvement is again repeated in the term ‘nation’s best loved and respected actor’, which reinforces the argument put forward in Chapter Two around British star appeal.

<sup>522</sup> Nicholls, *Eastern Daily Press*, 14/06/2008

<sup>523</sup> Anthony Carroll, *Eastern Daily Press*, 20/02/2009 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>524</sup> Anon., *Norwich Evening News*, 17/12/2010 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

Sunderland’.<sup>525</sup> In this description, ‘place’ is still invested with meaning but also misdirected towards another coastal town with similar sea-front features. When compared to initial press excitement surrounding the film-makers’ decision to locate *Malice in Wonderland* in Great Yarmouth, and the amount of ownership the local press bestowed on their presence in the town, this misidentification may have proved disappointing or even potentially embarrassing for those invested in promoting the film’s local connections. In instances where the town was identified correctly, this response was positioned within generic and thematic features associated with more negative aspects of the film. For example, *The Times* described the fantasy land depicted in the film as located in the ‘zany criminal nightscapes of 21<sup>st</sup> century Great Yarmouth’.<sup>526</sup> As demonstrated in previous chapters, this critical response illustrates how the press can mobilise ‘intertextual discourses’ around ‘place’ in film. However, in contrast to the romanticised connotations attached to Oxford in *The Golden Compass*, for example, ‘place’ in *Malice in Wonderland* is connected to themes of violence, criminality and gang culture: the *actual* ‘criminal nightscapes’ found in modern, ‘21<sup>st</sup> century’ Great Yarmouth. This discourse is enthused with negative connotations and meaning which undermine the more positive discourse identified in the *EDP* throughout the initial stages of film production.

By tracking such changes in press coverage over a period of time, this allows the potential to determine how the process of critical appropriation influenced the wider critical reception of *Malice in Wonderland*. The notable absence of press coverage following the UK cinema release of the film would substantiate the argument that adverse comments made by the national press had a significant impact on how local and regional papers later responded. What such findings would suggest is that the predominantly negative discourse directed towards the film, and the negative associations established through this process, disrupted any earlier positive commentary regarding extrinsic benefits for

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<sup>525</sup> Derek Malcolm, “More Tales of Virgin Woe”, *The Evening Standard*, 05/02/2010 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/08/2013>

<sup>526</sup> Kevin Maher, *The Times*, 06/02/2010 <Nexis UK, accessed 09/02/2012>

the local community. As a result, association with the film was possibly considered as an eventual embarrassment for the local community and press organisations, as opposed to a useful or beneficial economic asset for the town of Great Yarmouth and surrounding area.

### **Summary**

In examining critical assessments of *V for Vendetta*, *Franklyn* and *Malice in Wonderland*, the sources reveal trends and repeated patterns of discourse which resonate with issues of economic viability, investment and impact. In this analysis, it would appear that the big budget, ‘inward investment’ production of *V for Vendetta* was considered almost exclusively in relation to its American status and Hollywood associations. The film was perceived as genuflecting to the demands of Hollywood by changing the original British novel and updating the narrative to a futuristic, dystopian London, which was also deemed a ‘condescending’ view of contemporary British society as observed from an outsiders’ (‘tourists’) perspective. This opinion was compounded by the inherent need to openly criticise the film-makers bullish attempts to promote *V for Vendetta* at a time of heightened social and political anxiety. In addition, the critics failed to align the film with the extrinsic benefits exhorted by screen agencies such as Film London. In contrast to other films examined throughout this study, which share similar financial and investment connections with foreign studios based outside the UK, *V for Vendetta* was positioned predominantly in terms of its controversial profile and perceived Hollywood misappropriation of British values, including the nation’s domestic cultural, social and political affairs. The findings demonstrate that concerns around foreign ‘intervention’ and ‘control’ are more likely to be raised when a given film projects ‘Britishness’ from a certain perspective considered fundamentally opposed to recognised traits associated with national identity. Based on this evidence, it would appear that the co-produced fantasy blockbuster is thus more likely to attract criticism if it appears to be too far removed from British ‘qualities’ associated with literary adaptation, production values, cultural representation and domestic star appeal.



In contrast, *Franklyn* and *Malice in Wonderland* were appropriated by the British press as independent films, financed and supported by British production studios and funding organisations. However, whilst ‘Britishness’ associated with each film was not overtly questioned, issues of limited distribution, genre, aesthetics and audience appeal filtered through press coverage of both films. This resulted in a tendency to scrutinise the potential impact of each film once released in UK cinemas. *Franklyn* witnessed substantial acclaim from some critics who praised the film’s visual panache and creativity. In the more positive reviews and articles, the film’s generic hybridity was considered as interesting and also different to the majority of British film production, which was ‘preoccupied with wacky gangsters or Working Title-style rom coms’ around this time.<sup>527</sup> However, whilst *Franklyn* was ‘ambitious’ for both attempting to provide something distinctive, and also in emulating more expensive Hollywood counterparts, the mix of generic style and art-house tendencies made the film difficult to categorise. The uneven balance between visual spectacle and narrative substance determined the mixed critical reception, which acknowledged the film’s bold intentions yet failed to offer comprehensive accolade. The issue of public funding allocated by the UKFC also circulated in critical debates, with questions surrounding the potential economic viability and extrinsic benefits associated with McMorrow’s ‘ambitious fantasy debut’,<sup>528</sup> particularly when considered within the wider context of more successful genres associated with British cinema and domestic film production. This emphasis on limited distribution, genre, aesthetics and audience appeal was even more pronounced in press coverage of *Malice in Wonderland*. However, in contrast to *Franklyn*, which was generally considered visually creative and at least ‘ambitious’, *Malice in Wonderland* received much more negative appraisal as ‘one of the worst ever ideas for a movie’.<sup>529</sup> This unfortunate and collective response by the British mainstream press was compounded by the more general absence of media interest. In this context, the operations of the print media are clearly

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<sup>527</sup> Baldwin, “A Mind of His Own”, *Metro*, 26/02/2009

<sup>528</sup> Anon., “UK Box Office: Oscar bounce returns Slumdog to the Top Spot”, *The Guardian*, 03/03/2009

<sup>529</sup> Tookey, “Diabolical Nonsense”, *Daily Mail*, 05/02/2010

exposed, as negative comments initiated by the national newspapers appeared to have an impact on regional press coverage where the film received most critical attention overall. Initial interest in the potential for extrinsic benefits to the community of Great Yarmouth generated by the film's presence in the town was eventually subdued over time, as a result.

In analysing media coverage of *Franklyn* and *Malice in Wonderland*, the sources would suggest that the British mainstream press maintained a highly conservative approach to both films that could be witnessed across the spectrum of tabloid and broadsheet papers, and which was also reflected and reiterated in regional press coverage. This critical tendency reveals a collective approach towards assessments of genre and budget, specifically around the idea that experimental films which offer complexity or hybridity are considered a potential risk within the cinematic mainstream arena. In part, this may be indicative of the assertion that the media prefer to label and categorise films for potential cinema audiences.<sup>530</sup> However, this critical discourse also located the films in terms of their opposition to expected norms associated with domestic cinema and film production. This evidence reveals an emphatic press response to *Franklyn* and *Malice in Wonderland* as 'conceptual' fantasy films, which offer limited appeal to the majority audience and have to compete with other popular genre films with larger budgets and wider public exposure. Critical concerns regarding the potential box office success of *Franklyn* and *Malice in Wonderland* as small-scale and complex films were compounded further by discussions of where and how public funding should be distributed in terms of film production. While this does not mean that their perceived status as British films was questioned or scrutinised, as seen in press response towards *V for Vendetta* which was almost exclusively contextualised as a Hollywood blockbuster movie, the films were positioned, in terms of difference and uniqueness, to films more closely associated with national cinema output.

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<sup>530</sup> This would correspond with both Neale's assessment and Altman's claim that 'only when a film is subjected to critical reception is its generic potential concretised and stabilised by reviewers', in *Film/Genre*, p.124.

## Conclusion

### A Past, Present and Future for British Fantasy Film?

And yet. And yet. And yet... By any reasonable criteria, *Harry Potter* is a quintessentially British phenomenon. The films are based on novels by a British author, set in Britain, they are made entirely in Britain, by an almost entirely British cast and crew, and production is handled by a British company – Heyday Films, who subcontract from Warner Bros. Pretty much the only American thing about the *Harry Potter* films is the money. And actually, where is that money from? Warner Bros most likely generated the budget through a loan arrangement with Korean and Indian banks. They will distribute the film across the world, but we made it.<sup>531</sup>

This comment by film scholar and media commentator, James Russell, appeared in *The Guardian* at around the time of the UK cinema release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1* in 2010. Whilst perhaps located within a humorous subtext, the determined intent of this piece, reiterated in Russell's repeated emphasis 'and yet', alludes to the pressing issues regarding ownership and 'control' of national products and the problems associated with foreign intervention that also concern the central argument of this thesis. The very presence of this discussion published in a mainstream national newspaper again demonstrates how some films remain under intense scrutiny and contestation, despite significant connections with British culture and domestic film production. Certainly, *Harry Potter* remains a key text put forward in the continued debates around representation and intervention in British cinema. However, this sentiment also engages with more inherent complexities around genre and aesthetics which extend well beyond *Harry Potter* as an isolated case study. Consequently, this thesis set out to determine a wider range of contemporary films which shared similar generic properties, and analysed how the critical 'writing machine' appropriated meanings around the films' production values, aesthetic qualities, cultural

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<sup>531</sup> James Russell, "Harry Potter – Hogwarts and All – is Britain's Top Model", *The Guardian*, 19/11/2010 <[www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2010/nov/19/harry-potter-britain-model-vision](http://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2010/nov/19/harry-potter-britain-model-vision)> Accessed online 01/09/2014

associations, and representations of ‘Britishness’ on screen. This study engaged with the arguments put forward by Petley and Higson, amongst others, that the prevailing ‘discourse of British film criticism “writes” British cinema into film cultural memory as a realist cinema’. As demonstrated, this assertion continues to inform British film scholarship and provides a repeated emphasis in existing academic debates. However, as outlined in the early stages of this study, questions of how and why the ‘writing machine’ operates in this particular way are often overlooked or even negated from such debates. Instead, there remains a generally accepted agreement that this critical bias towards some films not only exists but continues to influence how wider perceptions and understandings of British cinema are informed and maintained.

This provided the initial interest and incentive to conduct investigative research into the functions of the ‘writing machine’, to interrogate the arguments put forward (some over twenty years ago) and determine whether this critical tendency continues to be in evidence today. This research examined primary evidence, sourced from what Petley describes as the ‘dominant critical discourse’ found in the ‘daily and Sunday press’, to analyse the operations and processes connected to the contemporary ‘writing machine’.<sup>532</sup> This approach positioned the substantial growth in fantasy genre since 2001 within the context of domestic cinema, and scrutinised prevailing critical discourses relating to recent examples of fantasy film. What this study determines is that the meanings and connotations invested in such terms reveal as much about how the critical press operates, as about how the idea of what constitutes a ‘British fantasy film’ can shift and change over time.

### **The Ownership of British Film**

A repeated concern in the critical press is the contested ownership of fantasy films co-produced in the UK with some level of international investment or studio presence. This is most prominent in response to the *Harry Potter* film series, which evoked what can only be described as a highly emotive reaction across the mainstream British press. The

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<sup>532</sup> Petley, “The Lost Continent”, p.100.

popularity and success of the book franchise permeated critical assessments of *The Philosopher's Stone* film adaptation, although this discourse was not focused solely on subjective comparison or fidelity with the original text. The dominant response also conveyed a strong sense of enthusiasm and national pride about the film, determined by *Harry Potter's* literary origins and connections to British culture. As a result, the potential threat from 'big business' commercialisation of *Harry Potter* provoked a highly defensive reaction by the majority of critics prior to the 2001 cinema release of *The Philosopher's Stone*. Interestingly, the most fervent responses originated from *The Guardian* and the *Mail*; two newspapers at direct opposite ends of the critical spectrum in terms of ideology and readerships. What this discourse shows is that *Harry Potter* was considered by critics and commentators in the conservative tabloids and liberal broadsheets alike as a 'quintessentially' British cultural product. This evidence is compelling, given the accepted argument that the critical establishment operates to promote and maintain British cinema as a 'realist cinema'. This was clearly not the prominent tendency in critical assessments of *The Philosopher's Stone*, which embraced the fantasy adaptation as a British film and a distinctly British cultural 'phenomenon'. In light of existing debates, the national ownership of a fantasy film in this way is unprecedented. However, this critical approach to *The Philosopher's Stone* may have been influenced by other factors, such as the more general 'topicality' surrounding the series and the extensive media interest in the film seen around this period. Consequently, the intention of this study was to extend analysis beyond the *Harry Potter* franchise and include other fantasy films which shared similar production values. As Russell alluded to in *The Guardian*, the *Harry Potter* films fit certain 'criteria' which enforced their perceived 'Britishness'. In light of the wider aims of this research, this analysis considered whether such 'criteria' could be found in critical assessments of fantasy films which shared similar generic, cultural and production qualities, yet existed beyond the immediate realm of the *Harry Potter* universe.

However, by extending this thesis to include a range of different case studies, the film selection process presented a definite challenge. In the absence of an established, pre-existing canon of British fantasy cinema, films were selected in strict accordance with methodological decisions determined during the early stage of research planning. The adoption of a ‘user-orientated approach’,<sup>533</sup> advocated by genre theorists such as Altman and Mittell, provided a useful template to identify an array of films which were appropriated against the ‘cultural categories’<sup>534</sup> of ‘fantasy’ and ‘British’. This involved the close scrutiny of other discursive sites such as the UKFC, IMDB and Wikipedia; sites where an array of different ‘users’ including the general public, industry professionals and policy decision-makers categorise and demarcate films. This approach could be criticised because it appears to fall outside the designated remit of a historical reception study by referring and including texts that exist outside the immediate arena of *critical* discourse. However, as the principal intention of this research was to move away from the textual analysis prerogative more commonly associated with genre studies, and frequently found in critical studies relating to fantasy cinema, this approach proved the most compliant to the ethos of historical reception scholarship.

By selecting films beyond the remit of their generic features or production status as delineated in existing academic literature, this provided a range of case studies which were determined through other *discursive* means. As a result, this approach allowed for the inclusion of films which are considered solely as ‘inward investment’ productions, such as *The Golden Compass*, and those typically overlooked within existing scholarship on British cinema, including fantasy films such as *Nanny McPhee* and *Malice in Wonderland*. The continued omission of such films from the academic agenda not only substantiates the main argument regarding the current status of British fantasy, but also underlines pertinent reasons for providing a different critical approach towards films which are not considered relevant or contingent to national

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<sup>533</sup> Altman, *Film / Genre*, p.99.

<sup>534</sup> Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, p.18.

cinema. This research aimed to contribute to existing scholarship by providing a more concerted and robust analysis of this polemic. In addition, and as repeated throughout this study, the critical ‘writing machine’ does not constitute a homogenous entity which offers collective and unanimous opinion on these issues. By adopting a historical reception studies approach, as seen in the works of Klinger and Egan, this allowed for more extensive investigation of the similarities and inconsistencies between different sections of the critical press, and reflection on the potential reasons behind such variation. The ‘agenda-setting’ functions of the critical ‘writing machine’ were thus provided close scrutiny by examining a selection of film reviews and articles chosen from across a range of national, regional and local print media. Given the intention to locate this research within a ten year period, since 2001 and the notable increase of fantasy film production worldwide,<sup>535</sup> this study also considered developments and shifts in critical discourse over time, as well as at specific ‘given moments’ in cultural history. Although this approach may not explain why certain discourses surrounding some fantasy films prevailed over others, it does allow for a more concerted analysis of the many ‘meanings and associations’<sup>536</sup> prescribed to fantasy films by different discursive sites associated with the critical ‘writing machine’.

What this study finds is that critical assessments of the films’ ‘Britishness’ are determined by a complex range of factors, which are often less dependent on the actual film under review and more aligned with the sensibilities of the individual commentator or newspaper. This critical response was most apparent in press coverage of *V for Vendetta*. In this example, the political allegiance of the host newspaper presented the most prominent feature that influenced how the film was assessed. In the conservative press, the film was perceived as glorifying violence and terrorism which mobilised a critical assault on the incumbent left-wing Labour government in power at this time. Criticism of *V for Vendetta* was situated from a highly defensive position, where the dystopian

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<sup>535</sup> Butler, *Fantasy Cinema: Impossible Worlds on Screen*, p.5

<sup>536</sup> Egan, *Trash or Treasure?*, p.9.

projection of a decaying and totalitarian Britain was considered a distortion of national values as observed from an outsiders' perspective. However, as illustrated by *The Guardian*, such response was not just confined to the more conservative newspapers. As seen in Bradshaw's negative appraisal of the film, *V for Vendetta* received perhaps less criticism for displaying acts of extreme violence yet equal disdain for offering an American view of 'Britishness'. This repeated criticism of *V for Vendetta* corresponds with its dominant status as a big budget, spectacular blockbuster with a high profile international presence. The issues of foreign intervention and 'control' that Higson outlines in his assessment of the 'inward investment' film are therefore provided agency within such discourse. What this critical reaction towards *V for Vendetta* reveals is a defensive response of national representation or 'Britishness' which is enthused with anti-American and, more specifically, anti-Hollywood sentiment. As demonstrated, the appeal of British fantasy fundamentally lies in its direct contrast to Hollywood cinema or the output of Disney studios. Distinctions of 'quality' and 'taste' formed a central motif of this discourse and informed how the mainstream press responded to certain issues, including the perceived threat of American intervention and 'control' over British cultural products through intense commercialisation. In this context, *V for Vendetta* failed to command sympathetic critical engagement with the 'qualities' associated with 'Britishness', because it was considered to represent the more negative attributes associated with the Hollywood blockbuster movie.

In contrast, other fantasy films with similar, international co-production status, including *The Philosopher's Stone*, *The Golden Compass* and *Inkheart*, were appropriated as 'British' because they attended to certain 'criteria'. This set of 'criteria' resonates with the central ideas and themes identified in the initial stages of research. Another potential route planned for this thesis was to conduct an industrial analysis to assess the impact and influence of fantasy film specifically within the context of British film production. This approach might have answered some of the subsequent questions generated by the findings for this study, such as what contributing factors prompt film-



makers to locate fantasy films in Britain or create film adaptations from British fantasy texts? What issues do international and domestic production companies face in this negotiation process? How does industry practice, including the guidelines and criteria set out in the 'Cultural Test', influence decision-making in this area? These present interesting and valid questions which fall beyond the remit of this particular study but could provide further research potential. For example, another study could investigate how and why fantasy films produced and located within Britain, or sourced from British material, continue to be so prominent in mainstream culture. Or, analyse the associated extrinsic benefits for the domestic media and cultural industries. What is very clear is that British fantasy continues to influence. At this moment of writing, the final film adaptation of J.R.R Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, is due for a major Christmas 2014 release, whilst the continued popularity of the HBO television series *Game of Thrones* also provides testament to the current prevalence of British accents, characters and locations on screen.<sup>537</sup> What such issues and questions reinforce is the need to reconcile existing critical approaches towards fantasy and 'Britishness', particularly in the wake of continued globalisation and the continued influence on domestic film and, on a wider scale, television production. The decision to utilise a historical reception studies approach for this research was determined by the presence of dominant discourse which effectively abandons certain fantasy films as merely 'manifestations of global trends', as opposed to relevant or compelling examples of British culture.<sup>538</sup> The question of *why* formed the initial basis for this study and influenced the eventual direction of research.

The measure of 'Britishness' applied towards the fantasy films selected for this study goes beyond a consideration of production values

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<sup>537</sup> *Game of Thrones* is partly filmed on location in Northern Ireland. In an article for the *Belfast Telegraph*, the programme was praised for generating tourism and investment, bringing in '£43m' for the local area, see Noel McAdam, *Belfast Telegraph*, 16/05/2012 <Nexis UK, accessed 20/10/2014> See also the BBC <[www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17554816](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17554816)> and *The Guardian* for articles on the British appeal of the series <[www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2013/mar/24/game-of-thrones-realistic-history](http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2013/mar/24/game-of-thrones-realistic-history)> Accessed online 20/10/2014

<sup>538</sup> Leggott, *Contemporary British Cinema: From Heritage to Horror*, p.9.

alone. As demonstrated, it also included how the critical press responded to the films perceived associations with British literature, national heritage, location and ‘place’, and domestic star presence. In analysing the sources, it would appear that critics and commentators engaged more with fantasy films which showcased at least some of these qualities. *Inkheart* and *Dean Spanley* provide pertinent examples of this critical response. Whilst both films pertained to at least some level of international presence and studio influence, because they met certain British ‘criteria’ this resulted in a preponderance of highly positive reviews. The most prominent example of this response is demonstrated in *The Observer* review from December 2008, which described *Inkheart* and *Dean Spanley* as ‘British’, showcasing ‘some of our finest actors’, ‘literate scripts’ and fantastical narratives which avoided ‘constantly alluding to popular Hollywood films’.<sup>539</sup> What such critical discourse provides is a distinct ‘display of taste’, identifying British features associated with each film as important signifiers of ‘quality’.<sup>540</sup> This represents a repeated and prevailing theme identified across the majority of sources examined as follows. Firstly, there is a tendency to promote the films’ ‘Britishness’ as superior to American fantasy film production. Such distinction certainly does not present a new approach, but instead reflects the perceived contrast between Hollywood and British cinema which continues to persist in modern critical circles; a perception that extends well beyond the 1940’s ‘quality’ film. As a result, the appeal of many fantasy films can be attributed to specific ‘criteria’ connected to where and how the film was made. This extensive list of features includes the faithful adaptation from British literature, the presence of British cast (for example, ‘national treasures’ Emma Thompson in *Nanny McPhee* and Helen Mirren in *Inkheart*) and the romanticised evocation of period and ‘place’.

Secondly, this response also reinforces the importance of such ‘criteria’ as perceived by the critical ‘writing machine’. The articles and reviews function as a form of ‘consumer guidance’,<sup>541</sup> emphasising the

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<sup>539</sup> French, “A Fine Pair of Christmas Miracles”, *The Observer*, 14/12/2008

<sup>540</sup> McArthur, “British Film Reviewing: A Complaint”, p.81.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*

films' British appeal with the intention of provoking engaged reader interest. By analysing a wider selection of critical material beyond the confines of the film review, this study found examples of cinematic writing which discussed at length the importance of British involvement and representation. What this critical response reveals is a prevailing tendency to maintain and promote national values and interests. Whilst this was most predominant in the national newspapers, the regional and local press also displayed a commitment towards publicising certain features of the films which they considered relevant for their communities and readerships. Local interest in *The Golden Compass* was generated by factors intrinsically connected with location and the film's high profile presence in Oxford. In a similar approach, both *Stardust* and *Malice in Wonderland* received positive reception from the local press, which enthused about the showcasing of Norfolk heritage and countryside on the big screen and actively encouraged local residents to get involved. By charting critical discourse across a wide selection of source material, this study determines that the 'Britishness' attributed to fantasy films can be found across different sections of the national, regional and local mainstream press. The reasons for this are influenced not only by concerns of the national press, which provided a promotion and defence of 'Britishness' more generally, but can be traced in regional and local newspaper coverage which actively endorsed the potential extrinsic benefits associated with domestic film production. However, as seen in the adverse criticism levelled against *V for Vendetta*, the presence of British talent, locations and literary heritage alone may not always secure critical appreciation or acclaim. The various 'criteria', applied by the critical 'writing machine', are therefore also influenced by other factors which pertain towards ideas of genre, aesthetics and British cinema.

### **The Ownership of British Fantasy**

What this study has also demonstrated is that critical assessments of 'Britishness' were reinforced by a potent sense of nostalgia. In part, this tendency was influenced by cinematic connections with British fantasy literature, which formed a prominent feature of this discourse as discussed. Most of the films selected for this research constituted

adaptations from British fantasy novels, with the exception of *Inkheart* (which was still based on a popular fantasy book), *Franklyn* and *Looking for Eric*. The ‘close and dynamic relationship’<sup>542</sup> between the British fantasy novel and cinema was provided exhaustive attention across the British mainstream press, with many critics and commentators contemplating the potential reasons for the notable upsurge in successful British fantasy adaptations. For example, in December 2001, *The Independent* announced that the ‘recent renaissance’ of British fantasy could be seen ‘all around, from the huge billboards advertising the *Harry Potter* film to the fact that every other person on the train appears to be deep in their copy of *Lord of the Rings*’.<sup>543</sup> Whilst the extensive media attention directed towards high profile fantasy adaptations such as *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* may have dominated newspaper coverage around this time, by tracking publications over a ten year period, it is clear that this heightened level of critical response continued to reverberate well after 2001. Crucially, it would appear that *The Philosopher’s Stone* and subsequent *Harry Potter* films also formed the template for assessing future cinematic adaptations from British fantasy literature, particularly films aimed at children and the family audience.

What this evidence demonstrates is that critics appeared more enthusiastic to engage with fantasy films which met specific *Potter*-related ‘criteria’, such as a nostalgic embracement of national heritage and a commitment to ‘literate scripts’ with serious and moral narrative themes. Critical appreciation of such features could be seen in the reception of later fantasy films *Inkheart*, *Dean Spanley* and *The Golden Compass*, where the film’s location and period informed critical associations with the nostalgic, romanticised and even subjective past. The moral undertones associated with the importance of good behaviour, as seen in *Five Children and It* and *Nanny McPhee*, was not only commented on but discussed at length in a diatribe on the ‘state’ of modern society. Fantasy films that attended to these particular features were considered to be endorsing old-fashioned values which not only

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<sup>542</sup> Higson, *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s*, p.101.

<sup>543</sup> Gavannandra Hodge, “Once Upon a Time”, *Independent on Sunday*, 09/12/2001 <Nexis UK, accessed 11/09/2014>

reinforced nostalgic sentiment attached to the films for adults, but also embraced a strong moral code. In examples where films failed to achieve this ‘criteria’, press response was either more mixed or focused on other features. What this critical discourse would suggest is a decidedly conservative approach towards British fantasy, which may have been informed by the original novels but was certainly emphasised in press coverage of the film adaptations. This evocation of ‘Britishness’ was entrenched within inherent understandings of national tradition and history. This was also witnessed in press response to fantasy films located in contemporary Britain, such as *The Philosopher’s Stone* and *Inkheart*, which were both contextualised within the nostalgic past.

This evidence may help to explain why fantasy films such as *V for Vendetta* and *Malice in Wonderland* received such a negative appraisal in the British mainstream press. Certainly, both films were considered unsympathetic adaptations (or re-works) of the original novels. In addition, the re-location of narratives to reflect, or provide political and social commentary on, contemporary Britain was also deemed as wholly ill-conceived. However, such critical assessments demonstrate not only how subjective fidelity can affect critical reaction to a given film adaptation, but also the problems that can potentially arise when the serious intention of the fantasy narrative is considered compromised. As demonstrated throughout this study, critical negotiations were consistently determined by the film’s perceived commitment to portraying ‘real world’ concerns. Even in the fantasy realms of children’s films *The Philosopher’s Stone* and *Five Children and It*, critics responded most fervently to the ‘realist’ aspects of the narratives, such as the personal tragedy of the orphan boy Harry or the devastating impact experienced by British families during World War I. This critical response is perhaps surprising, given the accepted assertion that ‘mere fantasy’ is always considered in a secondary and inferior context. However, this study contests such arguments, as the sources provide evidence of critical engagement with serious themes, intentions and allegorical subtexts identified within the fantasy worlds depicted on screen. Significantly, this response was not found in press coverage of

the BBC's 'Big Read', which might suggest that fantasy novels do not always command the same level of critical appreciation when compared directly against more 'realist' texts. However, it is perhaps more plausible that this conflicting discourse resonates with the assertion by Jancovich, that the print media presents a public site of 'struggle' which consistently pertains to 'different interests and preoccupations', dependent on the intended audience or readership.<sup>544</sup> As a result, intense criticism directed towards the 'Big Read' survey may also represent a press attack on the BBC as a public-funded institution, as opposed to a more concerted effort to deride the popularity of fantasy texts.

This argument is provided validation when compared against other sources such as film reviews and related articles, where this dissent and criticism is subdued or completely absent. This variable tendency is clearly evident when analysing extracts taken from the *Daily Mail*, which criticised 'meaningless' fantasy adaptations in response to the 'Big Read' and yet praised films including *The Philosopher's Stone* in associated reviews and articles. However, this conflicting response does not necessarily undermine the findings determined in this study, and instead reinforces the need to examine a wider selection of critical material outside the immediacy of the individual film review, in order to establish similarities and inconsistencies in how the critical 'writing machine' operates. The 'interests and preoccupations' of the 'cinematic writer' can thus be assessed in terms of when, where and for whom the article or review is intended, and also how such factors can influence the overall reception of a given fantasy text. By conducting a more extensive analysis of journalism practice across a variety of sources and, crucially, within the *same* publication, this study provides evidence to confirm the prevailing discourse captured at any 'given moment'. In doing so, this study reveals a repeated tendency for critics to provide more positive and engaged assessments of fantasy films which displayed a commitment to 'real world' concerns. This discourse is so significant because it

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<sup>544</sup> Jancovich, "Genre and the Audience: Genre Classifications and Cultural Distinctions in the Mediation of *The Silence of the Lambs*", p.155.

demonstrates how the critical establishment considers British fantasy *should* function: as a serious reflection on reality.

When applied to the adult-orientated fantasy worlds of *V for Vendetta* or *Malice in Wonderland*, the perceived abandonment of ‘realist’ and serious subtexts in favour of spectacle was considered in a distinctly negative light. Whilst this is not to suggest that special effects were deemed to be unrequired (indeed, they were considered as standard practice in relation to films which engaged with fantastical imagery) the sources display a deep distrust of films which were considered too dependent on visual spectacle. This discourse was most apparent in critical response towards films which appeared to ‘fall between categories’ of fantasy and realism. The assessments of *Malice in Wonderland*, *Franklyn*, *Dean Spanley* and *Looking for Eric* provide compelling evidence of how the critical press attended to films which departed from ‘everyday “realistic” expectations’<sup>545</sup> through the employment of a fantastical premise. *Franklyn* and *Malice in Wonderland* were considered too ‘complex’, ‘conceptual’ and ‘infuriating’ because they located characters in the ‘real world’ of contemporary London within a secondary, fantasised space. The main issue for critics revolved around this displacement and over-reliance on visual design to compensate for the absence of credible ‘realist’ drama. In response to *Looking for Eric*, criticism levelled against the film was underpinned by a sense of hesitancy that a film, connected to a well-established tradition of ‘social realist’ British cinema, employed a fantastical premise. For most critics, the serious narrative intentions of the film were undermined by the emphatic, fantasised presence of Eric Cantona. Despite some fervent discussion of Cantona’s high profile appearance, this application of fantasy was ultimately considered as an unsympathetic addition which failed to work successfully against the otherwise ‘authentic’ and ‘naturalistic’ *mise-en-scène*. This response was, perhaps inevitably, compounded by the presence of Loach as director. The encroachment of fantasy in *Looking for Eric* was seen as a new and surprising aesthetic approach for a British director best known

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<sup>545</sup> Barr, “*Straw Dogs, A Clockwork Orange* and the Critics”, p.21.

for ‘gritty’ social realism. In light of this evidence, it would be interesting to conduct a comparative analysis of critical response towards the recent Richard Curtis film *About Time* (2013), which provides a similar directorial leap into science fiction fantasy; a genre not typically associated with his standard output.

This critical response therefore raises important issues relating to genre expectations and labelling practices executed by the British mainstream press. The general uneasiness towards films with undetermined or unclear generic boundaries provides testament towards this tentative approach. Whilst some critics may have been sympathetic towards certain innovative aspects of such films, the main concern surrounded how the general cinema audience would respond. This discourse provides a reflection on newspaper readerships as much as a general interest in public awareness and appreciation of the given films. Apprehension and uncertainty about how to label films which embraced generic hybridity, such as *Looking for Eric* and *Franklyn*, resulted in a tendency to utilise extensive metaphor (‘a chaotic kick about’), comparison (‘the British *Blade Runner*’) and elusive terms (‘social magic realism’) to describe the films. Films that ‘fall between categories’ of fantasy and realism thus tended to ‘suffer critically’, not necessarily because they are considered to be terrible films per se but more as a consequence of undetermined generic identity. The ‘categorisation’ process outlined by Altman and Neale is clearly disrupted by films which were considered as perplexing, confusing, complex and obscure because they confounded critical expectations and established norms. However, despite concerns around the potential for wider appeal and box office success, the national identity of such films was not questioned principally because they were still considered as examples of British cinema.

### **The Ownership of British Fantasy Film?**

What this all comes back to are questions concerning the characteristics of British fantasy film. By charting critical discourse across the British mainstream press over a sustained period of time, this study has demonstrated how British fantasy is provided meaning as a national



cultural product. Whilst the ‘close and dynamic’ relationship between British fantasy literature and film perhaps provides the most clear connection with British culture, this sentiment can be found in critical response towards other types of films which also displayed fantastical tropes. There are specific attributes, repeated throughout this study, which locate the selected fantasy films for this study as ‘British’. This critical discourse aligns the films with the ‘euphemisms’ Moor describes in his assessment of British cinema: ‘understated’, ‘true’, ‘restrained, un-Hollywood: a set of qualities which echo ideas about national character’.<sup>546</sup> Fantasy films which display such attributes through the embracement of serious themes, and also commit to a ‘restrained approach’ in the depiction of imaginary worlds and visual spectacle, commanded the most positive attention, interest and engagement. For critics, this separated such films from the Americanised fantasy of Hollywood or Disney, and evoked ‘qualities’ or ‘criteria’ routinely associated with British film production. What is so interesting is that this tendency is found not only in press response to the fairy tale or secondary worlds more typically associated with children’s fantasy, but can also be identified in assessments of films where the fantasy on display is significantly more obtuse, such as *Looking for Eric* and *Dean Spanley*.

The intention of this research was to reconcile existing scholarship on fantasy genre and national cinema by examining the operations and workings of the critical ‘writing machine’ within a contemporary context. By adopting a historical reception studies approach, this allowed for a more concerted analysis of how critical discourse functions in relation to established arguments surrounding issues of genre, aesthetics and British film production. What this study has found is a compelling disconnect between theoretical assertions and critical evidence concerning the acknowledged position of fantasy within British cinema. Given that the key arguments relating to the critical ‘writing machine’ date back well over twenty years, it is perhaps not surprising that attitudes may have shifted over this period. However, this study would put forward the assertion that critical approaches towards British fantasy have also shifted

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<sup>546</sup> Moor, Powell & Pressburger: *A Cinema of Magic Spaces*, p.5.

during this time, with a more pronounced sense of ownership towards a genre and mode of visual narrative which is deeply rooted in our national psyche and cultural heritage.

This may be a result of the recent upsurge in popular and successful adaptations from British fantasy literature which have incited vast interest on a global scale. It may also be representative of current trends in domestic film production which are more inclined to adopt new techniques and integrate fantasy into traditional aesthetic forms. This research alone can only begin to speculate on the potential factors which have prompted the apparent shifts in cinematic output on a national scale. However, this study can tell us how the critical 'writing machine' responds to cultural fluctuations over time and, in doing so, provides compelling evidence to substantiate the prominent existence of fantasy within contemporary British cinema. As a result, this prevailing discourse would appear to be 'writing' national cinema into 'film cultural memory' as an institution that not only includes, but also actively embraces, the recent and continued upsurge of British fantasy in film. This study would further suggest that if recent trends continue to transpire, we may witness more concerted efforts by the British critical press to claim national ownership of fantasy films. This critical tendency both to maintain and perpetuate British values and identity may become yet more acute when considered against the backdrop of continued cultural globalisation.

## Appendix A

### Cultural Test Guidelines

In order to be certified as a British film the BFI must be satisfied that the film passes the Cultural Test. The main Cultural Test is set out in paragraph 4A of Schedule 1 (as amended by the Films (Definition of “British Film”) (No. 2) Order 2006). A film will pass the Cultural Test if it is awarded 16 points out of a possible 31 points.

#### **Section A - Cultural Content**

- Films set in the UK (max 4 points)
- Lead characters British citizens or residents (max 4 points)
- Films based on British subject matter or underlying material (max 4 points)
- Original dialogue recorded mainly in English language (max 4 points)

#### **Section B – Cultural Contribution (max 4 points awarded for whole section)**

- Cultural Creativity
- Cultural Heritage
- Cultural Diversity and Representation

#### **Section C – Cultural Hubs (max 3 points awarded for whole section)**

- Principal photography / visual effects / special effects carried out in the UK
- Music recording / post production

#### **Section D – Cultural Practitioners (max 8 points awarded for whole section)**

- Nationality of Director
- Nationality of Scriptwriter
- Nationality of Producer
- Nationality of Composer
- Nationality of Lead Actors
- Qualifying Majority of Cast
- Qualifying Majority of Crew
- Qualifying Key Staff

This is an abridged version of the production values required to officially certify as a British film. The BFI website provides a complete version of the Cultural Test:

[www.bfi.org.uk/film-industry/british-certification-tax-relief/cultural-test-film](http://www.bfi.org.uk/film-industry/british-certification-tax-relief/cultural-test-film)

## Appendix B

### UK Certified Films Categorised as Fantasy Genre by Year (including Director, Country of Origin and Production Details)

Title	Director	Country of Origin	Production Companies	UK Certified
<b>Back to the Secret Garden (2001)</b>	Michael Tuchner	UK/USA/Germany	Baselberg International Hallmark Entertainment Rosemont Productions	Y
<b>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (2001)</b>	Chris Columbus	UK/USA	Warner Bros., Heyday Films 1492 Films	Y
<b>An Angel For May (2002)</b>	Harley Cokeliss	UK	Barzo Productions, CFTVF, Gentian Productions, Spice Factory, Yorkshire Media	Y
<b>Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (2002)</b>	Chris Columbus	UK/USA	Warner Bros., Heyday Films 1492 Films	Y
<b>Peter Pan (2003)</b>	P.J Hogan	UK/USA/Australia	Universal Pictures, Columbia, Revolution Studios, Red Wagon Entertainment	Y
<b>Five Children and It (2004)</b>	John Stephenson	UK/France/USA	Sandfairy, Capitol Films, Endgame Ent. Isle of Man Film, Jim Henson Co., UKFC	Y
<b>Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (2004)</b>	Alfonso Cuarón	UK/USA	Warner Bros., Heyday Films 1492 Films	Y
<b>If Only (2004)</b>	Gil Junger	UK/USA	Intermedia Films, Outlaw Productions, Love Spell Entertainment	Y
<b>Tooth (2004)</b>	Edouard Nammour	UK	Archangel Filmworks, Redbus Pictures	Y
<b>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (2005)</b>	Tim Burton	UK/USA	Theobald Film, The Zanuck Company, Village Roadshow Pictures	Y

<b>Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2005)</b>	Mike Newell	UK/USA	Warner Bros., Heyday Films	Y
<b>The Brothers Grimm (2005)</b>	Terry Gilliam	UK/Czech/USA	Grimm Productions Ltd. UK, Reforma Films (Czech), Dimension Films USA	Y
<b>Nanny McPhee (2005)</b>	Kirk Jones	UK	Working Titles Films, 3 Strange Angels, Universal Studios	Y
<b>Time of Her Life (2005)</b>	Steven M. Smith	UK	Greenway Entertainment Ltd. UK	Y
<b>Mirrormask (2005)</b>	Dave McKean	UK	Jim Henson Productions	Y
<b>The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes (2005)</b>	Stephen Quay	UK/Germany/ France	Arte, Koninck Studios, Lumen Films	Y
<b>V for Vendetta (2005)</b>	James McTeigue	UK/USA/Germany	Warner Bros., Funfte Babelsberg Film GMBH (Germany)	Y
<b>GamerZ (2005)</b>	Robbie Fraser	UK	Pure Magic Films	Y
<b>Dungeons and Dragons: Wrath of the Dragon God (2005)</b>	Gerry Lively	UK/Lithuania	Skyline Films UK, Ramunas Skikas Lietuvos Kino Studija	Y
<b>Silence Becomes You (2005)</b>	Stephanie Sinclair	UK/Lithuania	IMS LLP UK, Uab Baltijos Filmu Grupe Lithuania	Y
<b>Puritan (2005)</b>	Hadi Hajaig	UK	Parliament Films Plc UK	Y
<b>Mee-Shee: The Water Giant (2005)</b>	John Henderson	UK/Germany	MBP (Germany), Ogoogo Productions	Y
<b>Miss Potter (2006)</b>	Chris Noonan	UK/USA	Hopping Mad, David Kirschner Productions, Grosvenor Park UK	Y
<b>The Thief Lord (2006)</b>	Richard Claus	UK/Germany/ Luxembourg	Delux Productions, Comet Film, Fern Gully Films Ltd.	Y
<b>Perfect Creature (2006)</b>	Glen Standring	UK/New Zealand	Roc Media, Sensible Films, Spice Factory	Y
<b>The Golden Compass (2007)</b>	Chris Weitz	UK/USA	Depth of Field, New Line Cinema	Y

<b>The Good Night (2007)</b>	Jake Paltrow	UK/Germany	Inferno Distribution	Y
<b>Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix (2007)</b>	David Yates	UK/USA	Warner Bros., Heyday Films	Y
<b>Kapital (2007)</b>	Gregory Hall	UK	Prodigal Productions, Olive Tree Theatre	Y
<b>Wishbaby (2007)</b>	Stephen Parsons	UK	Bubblehead Productions UK	Y
<b>The Midnight Drives (2007)</b>	Mark Jenkin	UK	O-Region Ltd. UK	Y
<b>Highlander: The Source (2007)</b>	Brett Leonard	UK/Europe	Mandala Productions UK, Lietuvos Kino Studija (Lithuania)	Y
<b>Stardust (2007)</b>	Matthew Vaughn	UK/USA	Marv Films UK, Di Bonaventura USA, Ingenious Film Partners (UK)	Y
<b>The Broken (2008)</b>	Sean Ellis	UK/France	Left Turn Films UK, Gaumont SA	Y
<b>City of Ember (2008)</b>	Gil Kenan	UK/USA	Pipework Productions UK, Walden Media USA, Playtone Prod. USA	Y
<b>The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian (2008)</b>	Andrew Adamson	UK/USA	Toastie Ltd. UK, Walden Media USA, Walt Disney	Y
<b>The Colour of Magic (TV Movie) (2008)</b>	Vadim Jean	UK	Mob Film Company TV Ltd. UK	Y
<b>Franklyn (2008)</b>	Gerald McMorrow	UK	Recorded Picture Company UK	Y
<b>Inkheart (2008)</b>	Iain Softley	UK/USA/Germany	New Line Cinema, Internationale Filmproduktion Blackbird Dritte	Y
<b>In Your Dreams (2008)</b>	Gary Sinyor	UK	Magnet Films UK	Y
<b>My Talks with Dean Spanley (2008)</b>	Toa Fraser	UK/New Zealand	Atlantic Film UK, General Film Corp. NZ,	Y
<b>The Secret of Moonacre (2008)</b>	Gabor Csupo	UK/Hungary/ France	Spice Factory UK, Euro Films Hungary, Davis Films Production France	Y
<b>Ditching (2009)</b>	Stephen Hackett	UK	Factotum Ltd. UK	Y
<b>Dorian Gray (2009)</b>	Oliver Parker	UK	Fragile Films Ltd. UK	Y

<b>From Time to Time (2009)</b>	Julian Fellowes	UK	Fragile Films Ltd. UK, Ealing Studios	Y
<b>Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince (2009)</b>	David Yates	UK/USA	Warner Bros., Heyday Films	Y
<b>Heartless (2009)</b>	Philip Ridley	UK	Crossday Productions Ltd.UK, CinemaNX, Cinema 2 UK	Y
<b>Invisible Eyes (2009)</b>	Olivier Cohen	UK	HiDe Films UK	Y
<b>Hellboy 2: The Golden Army (2008)</b>	Guillermo Del Toro	UK/USA	BPRD Ltd. UK, Dark Horse Entertainment US, Lawrence Gordon Productions	Y
<b>The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus (2009)</b>	Terry Gilliam	UK/Canada	Imaginarium Productions UK Parnassus Production Inc., Canada Poo Poo Pictures Productions Ltd UK	Y
<b>Temptation (2009)</b>	Catherine Taylor	UK	Hicks/Jaggi Ltd. UK, Liquid Noise Films UK	Y
<b>Looking for Eric (2009)</b>	Ken Loach	UK/Belgium/ France/Italy/Spain	Sixteen Films Ltd. UK, Les Films Du Fleuve Belgium Why Not Productions France, BIM Italy	Y
<b>Malice in Wonderland (2010)</b>	Simon Fellows	UK	Future Films Ltd., 2B Pictures UK, Pierce Williams Entertainment USA	Y
<b>The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader (2010)</b>	Michael Apted	UK/USA	Purple Sail Ltd. UK, Walden Media USA	Y
<b>Clash of the Titans (2010)</b>	Louis Leterrier	UK/USA	Legendary Pictures USA, Thunder Road Pictures USA	Y
<b>Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part I (2010)</b>	David Yates	UK/USA	Warner Bros., Heyday Films	Y
<b>Hereafter (2010)</b>	Clint Eastwood	UK/USA	Dombey Street Productions Ltd. UK, Malpasos Productions USA	Y

<b>Gulliver's Travels (2010)</b>	Rob Letterman	UK/USA	Electric Dynamite USA, Fox UK Productions Ltd.	Y
<b>Lovelorn (2010)</b>	Becky Preston	UK	Tread Softly Productions UK	Y
<b>Nanny McPhee and the Big Bang (2010)</b>	Susanna White	UK/USA	Working Title Films Ltd. UK	Y
<b>Crab Island (2011)</b>	Robbie Moffat	UK	Palm Tree Entertainment Ltd. UK	Y
<b>Gnomeo &amp; Juliet (2011)</b>	Kelly Ashbury	UK/USA	Rocket Pictures Ltd. UK	Y
<b>Gun of the Black Sun (2011)</b>	Jeff Burr	UK	Max Productions UK, Silver Bullet UK	Y
<b>The Great Ghost Rescue (2011)</b>	Yann Samuell	UK	The Good Film Company Ltd. UK	Y
<b>Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part II (2011)</b>	David Yates	UK/USA	Warner Bros., Heyday Films	Y
<b>Your Highness (2011)</b>	David Gordon Green	UK/USA	Muldiss Darton Productions Ltd. UK, Scott Stuber Productions USA	Y



## Appendix C

### UK Certified Films Listed by Genre on Wikipedia, IMDB and British Council (British Films Directory)

Title	Wikipedia	IMDB	British Council
<b>An Angel For May</b>	Not Listed	Drama/Family/Fantasy	Children's/Drama
<b>Back to the Secret Garden</b>	Family	Adventure/Family/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Comedy/Family/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>City of Ember</b>	Sci-Fi/Fantasy	Adventure/Family/Fantasy/Sci-Fi	Not Listed
<b>Clash of the Titans</b>	Action Adventure, Fantasy	Action/Adventure/Family	Not Listed
<b>Crab Island</b>	Not Listed	Fantasy	Drama
<b>Ditching</b>	Not Listed	Drama/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>Dorian Gray</b>	Drama	Drama/Fantasy/Thriller	Horror/Fantasy/Sci-Fi
<b>Dungeons and Dragons: Wrath of the Dragon God</b>	Fantasy	Action/Adventure/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>Five Children and It</b>	Fantasy/Children's	Adventure/Family/Fantasy	Children's/Drama
<b>Franklyn</b>	Not Listed	Drama/Fantasy/Sci-Fi	Not Listed
<b>From Time to Time</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Drama/Fantasy	Children's/Drama
<b>GamerZ</b>	Not Listed	Comedy/Fantasy	Horror/Fantasy/Sci-Fi
<b>Gnomeo &amp; Juliet</b>	Animated Fantasy	Animation	Animation/Children's
<b>Gulliver's Travels</b>	Fantasy Comedy	Adventure/Comedy/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>Gun of the Black Sun</b>	Not Listed	Fantasy	Horror/Fantasy
<b>Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Family/Fantasy	Children's/Drama
<b>Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part I</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Drama/Fantasy	Children's/Drama
<b>Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part II</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Drama/Fantasy	Children's/Drama
<b>Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Family/Fantasy	Children's Drama

<b>Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Family/Fantasy	Children's/Drama
<b>Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Family/Fantasy	Children's Drama
<b>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Family/Fantasy	Children's/Drama
<b>Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Family/Fantasy	Children's/Drama
<b>Heartless</b>	Fantasy	Drama/Fantasy/Horror	Not Listed
<b>Hellboy 2: The Golden Army</b>	Supernatural	Action/Adventure/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>Hereafter</b>	Drama/Fantasy	Drama/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>Highlander: The Source</b>	Sci-Fi	Action/Adventure/Fantasy	Horror/Fantasy/Sci-Fi
<b>If Only</b>	Drama	Comedy/Drama/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>In Your Dreams</b>	Romance/Comedy	Comedy/Fantasy/Romance	Not Listed
<b>Inkheart</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Family/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>Invisible Eyes</b>	Not Listed	Drama/Fantasy/Horror	Horror/Fantasy/Sci-Fi
<b>Kapital</b>	Not Listed	Drama/Fantasy/Horror	Not Listed
<b>Looking for Eric</b>	Drama	Comedy/Drama/Fantasy	Drama
<b>Lovelorn</b>	Not Listed	Drama/Fantasy/Romance	Not Listed
<b>Malice in Wonderland</b>	Fantasy	Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>Mee-Shee: The Water Giant</b>	Family	Adventure/Family/Fantasy	Children's/Drama
<b>Mirormask</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Drama/Family/Fantasy	Horror/Fantasy/Sci-Fi
<b>Miss Potter</b>	Biopic	Biography/Drama/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>My Talks with Dean Spanley</b>	Comedy/Drama	Comedy/Drama/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>Nanny McPhee</b>	Comedy/Family	Comedy/Family/Fantasy	Children's Drama
<b>Nanny McPhee and the Big Bang</b>	Fantasy	Comedy/Family/Fantasy	Children's/Drama
<b>Perfect Creature</b>	Horror/Thriller	Action/Drama/Fantasy	Horror/Fantasy/Sci-Fi

<b>Peter Pan</b>	Family	Adventure/Family/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>Puritan</b>	Not Listed	Drama/Fantasy	Drama
<b>Silence Becomes You</b>	Thriller	Drama/Fantasy/Romance	Action/Thriller
<b>Stardust</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Comedy/Family/Fantasy/Romance	Children's Drama
<b>Temptation</b>	Not Listed	Fantasy/Horror/Thriller	Horror/Fantasy/Sci-Fi
<b>The Broken</b>	Horror	Drama/Fantasy/Horror	Horror/Fantasy/Sci-Fi
<b>The Brothers Grimm</b>	Adventure Fantasy	Action/Adventure/Comedy/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian</b>	Fantasy	Action/Adventure/Family/Fantasy	Children's Drama
<b>The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader</b>	Family/Fantasy	Adventure/Family/Fantasy	Children's/Drama
<b>The Colour of Magic (TV Movie)</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Comedy/Family/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>The Golden Compass</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Family/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>The Good Night</b>	Romance/Comedy	Comedy/Drama/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>The Great Ghost Rescue</b>	Not Listed	Family/Fantasy/Horror	Horror/Fantasy
<b>The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>The Midnight Drives</b>	Comedy/Drama	Drama/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes</b>	Fantasy	Drama/Fantasy	Horror/Fantasy/Sci-Fi
<b>The Secret of Moonacre</b>	Adventure Fantasy	Adventure/Family/Fantasy	Children's/Drama
<b>The Thief Lord</b>	Adventure	Adventure/Family/Fantasy	Children's/Drama
<b>Time of Her Life</b>	Not Listed	Drama/Fantasy	Not Listed
<b>Tooth</b>	Not Listed	Family/Fantasy	Children's/Drama
<b>V for Vendetta</b>	Fantasy/Thriller	Action/Sci-Fi/Thriller	Not Listed
<b>Wishbaby</b>	Not Listed	Horror (savage fairy tale)	Horror/Fantasy/Sci-Fi
<b>Your Highness</b>	Fantasy	Adventure/Comedy/Fantasy	Not Listed

## Filmography

*28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, UK, 2002)

*A Matter of Life and Death* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, UK, 1946)

*About Time* (Richard Curtis, UK, 2013)

*Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, UK/USA, 2005)

*Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Benh Zeitlin, USA, 2012)

*Bedtime Stories* (Adam Shankman, USA, 2008)

*Billy Liar* (John Schlesinger, UK, 1963)

*Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, UK/USA, 1982)

*Brazil* (Terry Gilliam, UK, 1985)

*Constantine* (Francis Lawrence, USA, 2005)

*Control* (Anton Corbijn, UK/USA, 2007)

*Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, USA, 2001)

*Five Children and It* (John Stephenson, UK/France/USA, 2004)

*Four Christmases* (Seth Gordon, USA, 2008)

*Franklyn* (Gerald McMorrow, UK, 2008)

*Fred Claus* (David Dobkin, USA, 2007)

*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Chris Columbus, UK/USA, 2001)

*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (Chris Columbus, UK/USA, 2002)

*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Alfonso Cuarón, UK/USA, 2004)

*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (Mike Newell, UK/USA, 2005)

*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (David Yates, UK/USA, 2007)

*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (David Yates, UK/USA, 2009)

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part I* (David Yates, UK/USA, 2010)

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part II* (David Yates, UK/USA, 2011)

*Inkheart* (Iain Softley, UK/USA/Germany, 2008)

*It's A Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, USA, 1946)

*Kes* (Kenneth Loach, UK, 1969)

*Kind Hearts and Coronets* (Robert Hamer, UK, 1949)

*Labyrinth* (Jim Henson, UK/USA, 1986)

*Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Guy Ritchie, UK, 1998)

*Looking for Eric* (Ken Loach, UK/France/Italy/Belgium/Spain, 2009)

*Malice in Wonderland* (Simon Fellows, UK, 2009)

*Mary Poppins* (Robert Stephenson, USA, 1964)

*My Talks with Dean Spanley* (Toa Fraser, UK/New Zealand, 2008)

*Nanny McPhee* (Kirk Jones, UK, 2005)

*Pan's Labyrinth* (Guillermo del Toro, Spain/Mexico/USA, 2006)

*Play It Again, Sam* (Woody Allen, USA, 1972)

*Riff Raff* (Ken Loach, UK, 1991)

*Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright, UK/USA, 2004)

*Sin City* (Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, USA, 2005)

*Snatch* (Guy Ritchie, UK/USA, 2000)

*Star Wars* (George Lucas, USA, 1977)

*Stardust* (Matthew Vaughn, UK/USA, 2007)

*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Andrew Adamson, USA/New Zealand, 2005)

*The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian* (Andrew Adamson, UK/USA, 2008)

*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (Michael Apted, UK/USA, 2010)

*The Dark Crystal* (Jim Henson and Frank Oz, UK/USA, 1982)

*The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Scott Derrickson, USA, 2008)

*The Golden Compass* (Chris Weitz, UK/USA, 2007)

*The Halfway House* (Basil Dearden, UK, 1944)

*The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies* (Peter Jackson, New Zealand/USA, 2014)

*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Peter Jackson, New Zealand/USA, 2001)

*The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Peter Jackson, New Zealand/USA, 2002)

*The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (Peter Jackson, New Zealand/USA, 2003)

*The Matrix* (Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski, USA, 1999)

*The Matrix Revolutions* (Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski, USA, 2003)

*The Queen* (Stephen Frears, UK/USA/France, 2006)

*The Red Shoes* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, UK, 1948)

*They Came to a City* (Basil Dearden, UK, 1944)

*Time Bandits* (Terry Gilliam, UK, 1981)

*Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, UK, 1996)

*V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue, UK/USA/Germany, 2005)

*Watchmen* (Zack Snyder, USA, 2009)

## **Teleography**

*Five Children and It* (BBC, UK, 09/01/1991 – 13/02/1991)

*Game of Thrones* (HBO, USA, 2011-)

*Moondial* (BBC, UK, 10/02/1988 – 16/03/1988)

*The Box of Delights* (BBC, UK, 21/11/1984 - 24/12/1984)

*The Chronicles of Narnia* (BBC, UK, 13/11/1988 – 23/12/1990)

*The Golden Vision* (The Wednesday Play, BBC, UK, 17/04/1968)

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