

Title	Scrutinising the rainbow: fantastic space in The Wizard of Oz
Authors	Sergeant, Alexander
Publication date	2011
Original Citation	Sergeant, A. (2011) 'Scrutinising the rainbow: fantastic space in The Wizard of Oz', <i>Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media</i> , 2 (Winter 2011). https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.2.01
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue%202/HTML/ArticleSergeant.html - https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.2.01
Rights	© 2011, the Author(s)
Download date	2024-04-26 19:12:02
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/681

Scrutinising the Rainbow: Fantastic Space in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939)

Alexander Sergeant, King's College London

Abstract: *The Wizard of Oz* is not only an iconic film but an iconic fantasy film. An unwillingness to describe it as such within film studies points to a long history of the fantasy genre's critical neglect. Dissecting the intrinsically cinematic apparatus of space, this article will seek to demonstrate how *The Wizard of Oz* functions as a fantasy film. Specifically, it will scrutinise how the film attempts to elicit a positive and reassuring encounter with a sense of the magical that seems tied to the genre's unique aesthetic pleasures. As the film demarcates a mimetic sense of reality, Kansas, from another magical space wherein the fantasy elements of the narrative takes place, Oz, its sense of space hesitates between a sense of the real and the unreal in a manner similar to that originally described in Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic*. *The Wizard of Oz* would seem to operate a similarly fantastic sense of space, constructing a relationship between the two realms that oscillates between the virtues of both as it celebrates the values of the homely and the otherworldly, the familiar and the new in order that it might mitigate its potential traumas and showcase its joys.

The Wizard of Oz (1939), perhaps the most watched example of classical Hollywood cinema, is a fantasy film. It was produced by MGM as a response to Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), the studio keen to profit from the anticipated demand for similar pictures, and was subsequently "vigorously marketed" as a film full of the same type of fanciful iconography—lavish worlds full of strange creatures—that populated the Disney feature (Maland 243-244). Upon its release, Frank Nugent described the film in the *New York Times* as "a fairy-book tale" in "a fairy-book style" and *Time* magazine declared that *The Wizard of Oz* should "settle an old Hollywood controversy: whether fantasy can be presented on screen". In 2008, the film was ranked number one in the American Film Institute's list of the ten greatest fantasy films of all time and, as recently as 2010, it was the highest ranking fantasy film in a similar list produced by the British newspaper *The Guardian*. Yet, the fact that the film is often considered against a specific set of aesthetic concerns relating to a fantasy style of filmmaking seems worth emphasising, given a consistent trend in its critical analysis to avoid describing it as such. *The Wizard of Oz* has been analysed as a meditation on Aristotelian virtues, as a celebration of Kantian humanism, as a lesbian fantasy and as a demonstration of Baudrillard's symbolic exchange.¹ In terms of genre, the film has occasionally been examined as a musical, as well as a road movie by Pamela Robertson within her essay "Home and Away: Friends of Dorothy on the Road in Oz" (1997), a categorisation that seems to suggest that the film has more in common with a film like *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) than it does with *Alice in Wonderland* (2010).² All these classifications have their own validity; genre is, after all, perhaps best described by Steve Neale as a "multi-dimensional phenomenon" of audience expectations, industrial marketing and the film texts themselves, and thus it is perfectly possible for a film to be classified according to a multitude of different genres (1-2). For many, *The Wizard of Oz* is a musical, to others it may be a road movie, and yet, for many others still it is a fantasy

film: perhaps *the* fantasy film. By ignoring this part of its identity, a key aspect of the film's appeal has consistently been overlooked by the scholarship.

In an attempt to address this oversight, this article will analyse *The Wizard of Oz* specifically as a fantasy film. It will interrogate the set of aesthetic specifications associated with this unique genre and scrutinise the communication of its pleasures through cinema's audiovisual plane. Performing this function largely through an analysis of the film's use of space, it will compare and contrast the presentation of the magical land of Oz with the relative reality of Kansas to expose a somewhat hesitant relationship between the two realms—a relationship that seems to form the basis for *The Wizard of Oz*'s successful fulfilment of its generic contract. By focusing so intently on Kansas as a place of return, yet investing so much in Oz's transcendence, this dual spatial focus allows the film to present a reassuring encounter with its magical delight. The film's space floats ethereally between the two worlds in a similar manner to the uncertain relationship between the real and the unreal articulated within Tzvetan Todorov's seminal study of *The Fantastic* (1973). By utilising Todorov's original framework, but expanding his largely generic considerations into a theoretical understanding of the relationship between fantasy viewer and fantasy text, this article will suggest a new way of understanding the fantasy appeal of *The Wizard of Oz* not within simplistic terms such as escapism or wish-fulfilment but as a complex, hesitant process between the real and the unreal. In doing so, it will implicitly speculate upon the reasons as to why the film has so successfully ensured its place in cinema's pantheon.

Defining Fantasy

It is extremely difficult to pinpoint a precise definition of exactly what constitutes a fantasy film, a task not helped by the fact that so few academic studies currently exist on the subject.³ Perhaps in recognition of the phenomenal successes of modern franchises such as *Harry Potter* (2001-2011) and *Lord of the Rings* (2001-03), a handful of recent publications, many of which reflect the daunting sense of imprecision that surrounds the current understanding of the term, have begun to forge a critical identity for this long-neglected form of filmmaking. In an attempt to engage with this problem, David Butler's *Fantasy Cinema* (2009) reviews the significant contributions towards the study of fantasy literature made by individuals such as J.R.R. Tolkien and Rosemary Jackson (1-42). Finding little consensus of opinion within these works, Butler argues for fantasy to be thought of as an "impulse" recurrent in a variety of forms of filmmaking (41). Similarly, James Walters's *Fantasy Film* (2011) argues that the fantasy genre has an "intrinsic tendency to avoid absolute classification" (1), and should instead be thought of as a broad type of cinematic engagement that is "just as likely to emerge in a crime thriller about an escaped convict as it is in a story about a mythical Kingdom" (2). These arguments undoubtedly carry some weight; a key aspect of fantasy seems indeed to be its ability to embrace a lack of certainty and fixity. Any attempt to define such pleasures too rigidly will invariably lead to an inorganically doctrinal approach to what is clearly a rather malleable and organic generic practice. One must allow fantasy to be what it is: a type of storytelling that displays a distinct lack of typical iconographies or narrative tropes. However, to abandon a generic understanding entirely is to abandon any attempt at a precise theoretical understanding of a specific type of filmmaking, which is recognised as such by producers, journalists and, perhaps most crucially, viewers. Fantasy fans, whatever they might be, watch a canonical text such as *The Wizard of Oz* in order to obtain fantasy pleasures—pleasures tied to a unique type of aesthetic relationship

that exists just as potently as it does within other broad genres such as comedy or, indeed, the musical.

Katherine Fowkes's *The Fantasy Film* (2010) is one such pioneering text that attempts at defining the genre as a collection of films that involve a "fundamental break with our sense of reality" based on a series of "ontological ruptures" (2). According to Fowkes, the fantasy genre's uniqueness lies in its ability to separate itself from a sense of mimesis by utilising narratives and iconographies that rupture a representational relationship with reality and establish something new. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the idea of an ontological rupture seems to be crystallised in one famous sequence: Dorothy, startled by the impact of the tornado, cautiously steps out of her house to find herself in a strange location where everything is suddenly different. It is a rupture that occurs largely through a break in space, moving almost instantaneously from a known, representational world of Kansas to a place where everything is different, a place over the rainbow.

This notion of the ontological rupture is compelling, as Fowkes attempts to separate fantasy cinema from other anti-realist forms of filmmaking. However, what is perhaps left unarticulated within her definition is the lack of trauma found within these mimetic breaks. As the ghosts, ghouls and monsters of the horror genre break through the windows of their victims' houses, they not only smash the glass but smash reality too, rupturing it violently to travel to another, rather frightening alternate realm. Yet, Dorothy's rupture as she enters Oz seems strangely pleasant. Perhaps one should or would be afraid of talking scarecrows, animated tin men and witches—even good witches in pink dresses; these things represent something altogether alien, but in the fantasy film they are much less traumatic and altogether positive. Instead of the idea of a rupture, it is useful to turn to another recent study, namely Alec Worley's *Empires of Imagination* (2005), who ties fantasy's unique appeal to another word: magic.

Magic. This is a key word in the definition of fantasy...Magic fuels fantasy, manifesting as miracles, mysterious forces or inexplicable events, none of which can be ascribed to the laws of rationality, nature or science. Magic in fantasy films is ultimately unexplainable (10)...the fantasy film genre is a branch of fantastical cinema that never rationalizes the impossible and generally seeks to reconcile us with a more positive state of being (12).

Worley's notion of magic seems to address a fundamental characteristic of the fantasy genre and, indeed, *The Wizard of Oz* itself. Oz is never suggested as a far-off, undiscovered territory that scientists could map, as it would be in science fiction, but is instead a magical land that resists such logical explanations. However, this land is not perceived as threatening to either Dorothy or the audience exposed to it, separating it also from the fear-ridden imagery of horror. There are things to be afraid of in Oz, the Wicked Witch being the supreme example, but the land itself is not fearful for its otherworldly nature alone. On the contrary, its otherness is joyful. It is perhaps this positive encounter with a sense of magic that seems to best represent the unique aesthetic response of the fantasy viewer.

Fantasy as Fantastic Hesitancy

This suggests that the genre has a strange hesitancy at the core of its appeal. Instead of simply destroying reality, fantasy only ever really tweaks at its fixities as it attempts to delight rather than astonish, celebrate rather than shock. In fantasy films such as *Mary Poppins* (1964), the rupturing elements take place within a largely mimetic reality and the source of Worley's sense of magic can be assigned specifically to a central character. The magical possibilities of the film are limited, containing the specific implausible circumstances rather than totally abandoning the rules of the known world. *The Wizard of Oz*'s spatial rupture can be seen to be equally hesitant. The magical world of Oz is set in contrast with the mimetic realm of Kansas and the film uses various visual tropes to firmly establish this distinction. Most obviously, Kansas is shot in sepia, straddling various tones of grey, whilst Oz exists in vibrant Technicolor. In addition to this device, the general presentation of space in both realms contrasts significantly. Kansas is sparse and desolate: the introductory shot of the film displays a long road framed by empty fields and utilises a static camera to give a sense of loneliness to the frame. As the solitary figure of Dorothy travels further away, she seems to strip the frame of all movement and life, and this sense of moribund emptiness continues throughout. In this world, the sites of action are few and far between as the editing patterns keep the spatial relationships between the locations ambiguous. When Dorothy runs away from home, a brief montage sequence fades between various shots of roads and scenery without a sense of temporality or distance. It seems precisely because Miss Gulch can move so efficiently through this world on her cumbersome bicycle that she possesses that strange, otherworldly presence that Dorothy later associates with witchcraft.

In contrast, the realm of Oz is lively and cluttered. Upon Dorothy's arrival, vast numbers of Munchkins emerge from their hiding places to fill the site with action on multiple levels of vision, filling the frame with activity for as far as one cares to gaze. As Dorothy travels through the woods beyond, full of potential fellow travellers, she quickly assembles a group of companions who continue on to reach the Emerald City. As its large green gates swing open, a briskly paced tracking shot glimpses briefly at a seemingly endless sea of activity. The camera travels further in, managing to merely hint at the vast array of magnificent and magical workings, displaying a vast assortment of horses of different colours, strange indoor woods, pools and alien businesses that populate this packed city. Its eclectic inhabitants are all shot with a tight, cluttered framing style to emphasise a lack of coherence and a sense of multiplicity. The Witch's castle is packed to the brim with flying monkeys and singing soldiers, which is why it is so intimidating to the Cowardly Lion, and the woods surrounding it are seemingly full of "spooks". There is no empty space in Oz; everything is colourful, significant and vibrant. Oz is magical and otherworldly whilst Kansas is reality, the film's visuals highlighting the difference.

In setting up this visual dichotomy, *The Wizard of Oz* proceeds to use this contrasting relationship to further establish the identities of each world. Oz ultimately needs Kansas. The former's magic is so firmly established because it is offset against the banality of the latter, the Technicolor dazzling precisely because it is preceded, and indeed followed, by black and white (coloured in a sepia tone) images. Kansas may be barely focused upon in terms of visuals but, despite its lack of depiction, it shapes and influences everything on screen. Without Kansas there would be no Dorothy, no protagonist to generate the narrative and introduce the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion, there would be no

representational figure to gawp at the magic displayed throughout. When Glinda informs Dorothy at the end of her journey that she could have gone back to Kansas at any point she wanted, that her time in Oz has only ever been fleeting and destined to end, the audience seems invited very briefly to posit this relationship between the two worlds. Although slightly aggravated, Dorothy seems instantly appeased when told that she has needed her journey through Oz to shape her into the person required to use the ruby slippers. The fantasy viewer, in turn, has needed the presence of Kansas to delight in all that it is not.

The spatial focus of the film is therefore caught in an ethereal duality, unfixed and oscillating between the dullness of the worldly and the trauma of the otherworldly much like the strange conflict suggested at the heart of fantasy's reassuring encounters. As both realms can equally consume our thoughts, it is unclear which to place the greater importance upon. There may be no place like home, but there is certainly no place like Oz; that is precisely what is magical about it. Thus, the film hesitates between the two realms within its spatial focus, a hesitation intrinsically tied to its function as a fantasy film. In his study of the Fantastic, Tzvetan Todorov articulates a theory that perhaps illuminates the function behind this hesitation, as he puts forth an understanding of a text's ability to rupture a sense of reality that seems to speak of Oz's spatial curiosities:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of imagination—and laws of the world remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us... *The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty*. 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. (25 emphasis added)

Todorov's analysis is ultimately attempting to articulate a type of genre, a form of storytelling that dramatises the uncertainty between the real and the unreal he proposes, typified in the gothic writings of E.T.A Hoffmann and Edgar Allan Poe, and eventually limits these proposed notions of the fantastic, the uncanny and the marvellous to texts which dramatise such solutions within their narratives.

The use of Todorov's theory within film studies has also predominately favoured this generic approach. Butler's *Fantasy Cinema* rejects Todorov's uncertain notion of the fantastic as a type of storytelling "at odds with dominant filmmaking traditions", finding it of limited use to an understanding of fantasy (26). Instead, the study of the cinefantastic has been devoted almost exclusively to the study of horror in works such as Mark Nash's "Vampyr and the Fantastic" (1976), Linda Badley's *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic* (1995) and, most recently, Bliss Lua Lim's *Translating Time* (2009). However, the highlighted passage in which Todorov sets out his definition of the fantastic does not actually perform this generic limitation. Instead, what it seems to be describing is less a category of narrative and more an attempt to theorise the response of a reader provoked by the supernatural. Indeed, throughout his study, this implicit theoretical consideration remains, as

Todorov frequently deviates from his self-declared attempts to define a genre to instead consider his categories of the uncanny, the marvellous and the fantastic as aesthetic reactions provoked within a reader's consideration of the ontological implications of a narrative's inclusion of the supernatural.⁴ It is possible to utilise this notion of the fantastic to theorise a more precise understanding of the function of a hesitant reaction to the fantasy fan's delight in rupturing magic present within a film text such as *The Wizard of Oz*.

As Dorothy steps out of her house into Oz and the camera follows close behind, the receptive fantasy viewer seems to be presented with the same two choices described within Todorov's initial framework, both of which would seem to solve the narrative dilemma on screen with traumatic implications. If Oz is real, it belongs to the realm of the marvellous, and one must therefore accept that such things as witches and wizards are also real. In this outcome, the images on screen would either seem to expose viewers to a daunting new horizon of possibility, as they struggled to define their understanding of a world around them previously dominated by rationality, or else would be rejected as an overtly implausible occurrence without relevance or consequence. If Dorothy has instead fallen into delusion, the film is presenting an uncanny event. At this realisation, these vibrant Technicolor images are stripped of their potency, becoming the ghostly visualisations of a child, without body and without life and, perhaps, with rather chilling consequences for the fantasy fans as they are forced to watch Dorothy struggle with her own sanity. However, crucially, the fantastic hesitancy described by Todorov does not ask us to choose between these two conclusions. Instead, the sensation "occupies the duration of this uncertainty" (25). It encourages it, it prolongs it, it values the instability and the oscillation. In this receptive mode, the impossible events can be witnessed as both existing and not existing, floating between reality and beyond reality, between savage truth and a fearful lack of truth. This understanding of the fantastic as an aesthetic relationship between receptive viewer and text solves the crisis of ontology that the supernatural occurrence presents in the most joyous way possible. Rather than fearing its vagueness and its lack of fixity, it becomes the very quality which gives fantasy access to its celebratory mode of being.

Fantastic Space: Avoiding the Uncanny

The Wizard of Oz can be seen to replicate this joyous hesitation through its space, which also wavers precariously between its all too real reality, Kansas, and its lack thereof in Oz. As Glinda states to Dorothy, we are able to return to Kansas at any point if we so wish but it is perhaps slightly more fun to follow the path of the yellow brick road to see what further delights it contains. Oz's otherworldliness becomes gentle, becomes positive, creating a reassuring sense of the magical intrinsically tied to the duality of the film's spatial realms. Neither realm dominates, neither controls, both hesitantly avoid one another, and yet are held in a delicate and ethereal compromise. By utilising various visual tropes that avoid the traumatic conclusions of the uncanny and the marvellous and that prolong its hesitant vibrancy, *The Wizard of Oz* occupies a sense of fantastic space.



All eyes are on Dorothy in the cluttered, ego-centric space of Oz

One such way in which the film achieves this sensibility is through an overt feeling of subjectivity. Although Oz seems packed with all manner and assortment of magical creature and location, it only really has one concern: Dorothy. She is very much the centre of everyone's attention. Upon her arrival, she is heralded as the saviour of the Munchkins, greeted enthusiastically by various Lollipop Guilds and Lullaby Leagues, and entertained on a village square that seems custom-designed solely for that purpose. She is sent on her way along a road that starts precisely where she is standing and ends precisely where she needs to get to. She arrives at a crossroads and contemplates which way to go when, suddenly, an unknown voice off-screen gives her advice on the matter. The character of the Scarecrow is introduced, appearing in a field that was previously empty not because of some magical justification but because he had not been noticed by the protagonist, and was thus not part of the film's visual landscape. The newly formed duo merrily continues onwards without any sense of trepidation as to where the other paths on this crossroads might lead. It is as if, whatever way they choose, Oz's space would simply modulate to fit their desires. The Emerald City can only be seen when Dorothy reaches it and, even then, the iconic shot of the vast green towers is filtered through an establishing shot of wonder in the face of the little girl and her companions. As she allows the viewers access to this menagerie of wonder, her presence serves to solve the many tensions throughout Oz's space. She frees a Tin Man from a rusted paralysis that has lasted a year, unmasks its ruler as a man pretending to be a wizard and melts the Wicked Witch of the West with a bucket placed very helpfully beside her.

This visual device of personal space avoids an encounter with the uncanny. The narrative may be an uncanny experience for the character, forcing Dorothy to grasp with her own consciousness, but not for the more detached stance of the audience, because it is ultimately her dream, her world, her space.⁵ Indeed, this aspect of the film is highlighted in many of its psychoanalytic readings, as the film has consistently been interpreted as a dramatisation of various elements of Dorothy's psyche. Bonnie Freidman's analysis describes *The Wizard of Oz* as a female coming-of-age story of enforced domesticity, as Dorothy confronts a horrific vision of feminine power in the Wicked Witch and thus embraces her own enforced passivity (41-59). Harvey Greenberg views the film instead as a "metaphor for the psychological journey every adolescent must make" (14), as the film's transcendent realm

recreates the inevitable separation from the childhood home and rejection of the parental figure. These readings differ in individual interpretation but they all reflect the subjective quality of the film's imagery. The film, indeed, is packed with quasi-Freudian imagery that positions Oz as a realm designed solely around its protagonist, becoming not an exclusively external realm of wonder but a realm Dorothy utilises for her own perceptive gain. This is witnessed most acutely in the famous scene in which Dorothy, trapped in the gyre of the hurricane, witnesses her antagonist Mrs. Gulch transform into her dreamed alter ego of the Wicked Witch of the West, a moment that assigns an authorship of the image to Dorothy's own psyche. The film may not quite depict an overt dreamscape—Oz seems to contain too much order and external wonder for it to be a purely subjective realm—but it certainly uses various tropes to promote such a reading. Its space leans towards the personal, relegating the potential universalism of its fantasy and yet avoiding its uncanny potentials as its space hesitates away from the uncanny to the realm of the fantastic.

Fantastic Space: Avoiding the Marvellous

It is not just Dorothy's physical presence that seems to dominate Oz but also her desires. Most crucially, it is not a desire to be over the rainbow that powers her fantasy quest but, instead, a desire to return from it. Despite the film's joy in strange visual concoctions, *The Wizard of Oz* is a very conservative narrative. It is a story invested in home, in its virtues and in returning to it. This strange relationship between the film's visual and thematic considerations is described in many of its analyses as an antagonistic one. Salman Rushdie's largely affectionate discussion of the film describes Kansas, with some indignation, as a depressing place where "everything is grey as far as the eye can see ... And *this* is the home that 'there's no place like'? *This* is the lost Eden that we are asked to prefer?" (16-17). Kenneth Von Gunden's otherwise complimentary celebration of the film admits that the conclusion disappoints, that "we're meant to see that it was all a dream, not a real adventure, and that Dorothy is better off back in plain, cruel Kansas—where, presumably, Miss Gulch waits again to take away Toto" (228). Elizabeth Bronfen's work on the film even suggests that this unresolved dichotomy explains the very reason for the film's enduring popularity, as viewers struggling with its thematic denouement re-watch the film to "regulate its ideological message" (74).

When considering the film's presentation of Kansas, with its empty space and grey visuals, its conclusion that "there's no place like home" seems to be the most implausible notion that the fantasy viewer has to encounter. Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* (1974), a philosophical inquiry into the nature of homeliness, states that at the heart of the institution of home lies a spatial relationship established by the mind in which imaginative constructs are forged to comfort oneself with "the illusion of protection" in familial environments and, as such, "all really inhabited space bears the essence of home" (5). Throughout the whole opening section of *The Wizard of Oz*, Gale Farm is peculiarly devoid of any sense of this protection or inhabitation. The camera only glimpses into the interior of Dorothy's house twice: once in a scene where Miss Gulch enters to take Toto away and another when Dorothy enters the house to be knocked on the head by the force of the tornado. Kansas is a world where Dorothy's presence intrudes on an inhospitable working environment. As she rushes back to the farm panic-stricken, wanting desperately to tell her Auntie Em about the threat posed to Toto by Mrs. Gulch, she finds her guardians too busy to talk to her. Instead, they reprimand her for daring to take up their time with such trivial concerns. Dorothy then tries to

alleviate her worries by talking to the farmhands, who in turn cannot stop working to make conversation. Dorothy's very presence invades and disrupts, causing Hunk to hit himself on the thumb with a hammer and sending Zeke into blind terror as Dorothy falls into the pigsty whilst playing on the fence. This incident ends with Auntie Em shooing Dorothy away, telling her to find a place where she will not get into any trouble. As she turns disbelievingly to Toto to ask him if he thinks there is such a place, launching mournfully into the "Over the Rainbow" musical number, it is shown acutely that it is precisely Bachelard's sense of protected space that Dorothy lacks.



This empty Kansas is devoid of any spatial quality associated with the homely articulated within Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*

This rather negative portrayal of Kansas, and Dorothy's subsequent obsession with finding her way home throughout her journey in Oz, can perhaps find a purpose when considered as another crucial device in the film's fantastic spatial hesitancy. Because of the manner in which Kansas is presented in the opening sequences of the narrative, the film becomes not a pursuit to return to some ideal state but, instead, a journey to find one. It becomes a film that desires for a home as much as it desires to be away from one. As the film oscillates between Oz and Kansas in terms of space, it also thematically oscillates between the virtues of magic and the virtues of the homely, moving its spatial focus away from solely embracing the transcending potentials of its magical realm and the potential marvellous astonishment Todorov's analysis alludes to. As the narrative travels from Kansas to Oz, its spatial focus can never fully embrace this alternative realm due to this thematic pursuit. Dorothy arrives as a child searching for a home and finds herself in a world that, despite its various pleasures, is intrinsically incapable of serving as this protective environment. Oz is a not lived-in world. It is not a realm where we can "comfort ourselves by re-living memories of protection" (6), as Bachelard states; its delights, on the contrary, lie precisely in newness. It is perhaps through this newness that Dorothy finds herself yearning for a sense of the familiar.

Ultimately, it is not her house that pulls Dorothy back to Kansas—after all, she has brought that with her—but, instead, her capacity for memory and, specifically, her memories

of her Auntie Em, an attachment first witnessed in her encounter with Professor Marvel before she even arrives in Oz. Oz cannot invest in memory, the Scarecrow lacks a brain in which to store such trinkets and the Tin Man a heart to generate them in the first place. Faced with this lack, Dorothy's guilty memories of her maternal bond with Auntie Em become the driving force for her desire to return to Kansas, finding a virtue in her former realm by contrasting it with the space she now inhabits. Similarly, as Kansas remains off-screen, it is the memory of such a realm invoked continuously throughout Dorothy's plight that prevents the film from engaging with the marvellous potentials of its narrative. At the moment of supreme anguish, when Dorothy is locked in the Witch's castle, an image of her aunt manifests itself on a globe. Dorothy is hit with the realisation that she is indeed small and meek, as she described herself earlier to the Wizard, helpless in a dangerous world of threat. She needs this intrinsic sense of protective space in order to survive, most acutely now as the sand trickles away from the Witch's deathly hourglass, and thus encapsulates all notions of safety and security into this image of Auntie Em, the vision appearing as a beacon of stability in the muddled and dangerous visuals of the castle. This fantasy of Auntie Em, a fantasy born out of memory, infuses Kansas with the sense of homeliness it has sorely lacked. Using the otherness of Oz, Dorothy comforts herself with Bachelard's illusions of protection and transitions Kansas from house to home. At the film's denouement, she awakes lying in her bedroom surrounded by various companions and protectors, a scene noted by its marked difference in presentation. Now, she is nurtured by her Aunt and Uncle, becomes the centre of all activity and the figure of Mrs. Gulch, set against the figure of the Wicked Witch, perhaps does not seem so bad after all. Similarly, against the comparison of Oz, Kansas can at last be considered familial.

Just as Oz needs Kansas to be so supremely magical, so too has Kansas needed Oz to be infused with the qualities of home. Through these overlapping thematic considerations, the film can be seen to further maintain its oscillating spatial focus and thus better establish its sense of the fantastic. Home is not just a place of comfort or shelter for Bachelard. It is also a crucial site for the imagination as, by allowing a protective sense of space, the home allows its dweller a realm to dream safely. As Bachelard states, "if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (6). It is perhaps these notions of the home environment that strike most potently at its relationship with the fantastic joys embedded in *The Wizard of Oz*. By focusing so intently on the institution of home, the film avoids Todorov's marvellous by emphasising a sense of the temporary. The fantasy viewer is invited to see Oz not as an abandonment of the rules of reality in favour of a daunting new future but, instead, as a temporary suspension from which the film consistently suggests an inevitable return. The emphasis on home helps to infuse the fantasy with a sense of mortality that gives it vibrancy, allowing a safe and reassuring abandonment of reality within the safe hesitant world of fantastic space.



The fantastic sense of space that prevails throughout the film is given perhaps its most acute distillation in this famous image of Dorothy hesitantly looking out on Oz for the first time from the confines and security of her house.

The joys of the fantasy genre so abundant in *The Wizard of Oz* are fixated upon a rather precarious duality. It is a genre that somehow seeks to present strange, otherworldly iconographies without leaving a comforting sense of the everyday world fully behind. Its aesthetic joys oscillate between the potentially shocking and the potentially banal, carving up an in-between status to revel in that lack of fixity and lack of precision. It is precisely these qualities that make the genre's appeal so hard to define. In this article, I have proposed a way of understanding these contradictions and curiosities by theorising this appeal not as a simple transcendence from the known to the unknown but, instead, as a hesitant relationship: a relationship articulated within Tzvetan Todorov's theorisation of the fantastic. By considering the fantastic as an aesthetic response rather than as a generic category, and by scrutinising *The Wizard of Oz's* unfixed and somewhat ethereal spatial relationships, I have argued that it is indeed this quality of fantastic space that has allowed the film to become such a successful contribution to the fantasy genre. Oz's character-centred and separated realms avoid the uncanny potentials of its narrative by eliminating a sense that the film threatens the security of reality. Its conservative narrative, concerned with a return to home and preservation of the status quo, avoids the marvellous by grounding its transcendence with an acute sense of the temporal and by infusing its magic land with the purpose of better understanding its reality. The magical Land of Oz is a clearly constructed realm within a film, a film about a little girl's dream and, yet, its receptive viewers have partially inhabited that space for themselves and thus cannot dismiss it quite so easily. They have not perhaps placed two feet on the ground outside the house but, instead, they remain, as Dorothy is in that famous shot, stuck in the black and white of Kansas yet staring out onto the lavish Technicolor.⁶ At the end of the film, the viewer's position is perhaps best represented by Uncle Henry who, when asked by Dorothy if they believe her, smiles and says: "of course we do". It is obvious that this is not true and that he is simply humouring his niece; but he seems to say it with a cheerful enough smile that at least portrays affection for the idea. Although we cannot accept Oz as reality, we can wistfully entertain the notion and that, in itself, gives it some sense of existence. *The Wizard of Oz* occupies fantastic space and, as such, there's just no place like it.

Notes

¹ Examples of scholarship surrounding *The Wizard of Oz* include, but are by no means limited to: Luke Dick, “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”; Corey McCall and Randall E. Auxier, “The Virtues of *The Wizard of Oz*”; Alexander Doty, “‘My Beautiful Wickedness’: *The Wizard of Oz* as Lesbian Fantasy”; William Pawlett & Meena Dhanda, “The Shared Destiny of the Radically Other: A Reading of *The Wizard of Oz*”.

² Jane Feuer’s *Hollywood Musical*, 67-71, contains a brief discussion of *The Wizard of Oz* as part of its wider considerations of the dream world within the musical. However, similar studies often relegate their discussions of the film to the occasional cross-reference, which perhaps reflects a difficulty in categorising the film exclusively as a musical given the lack of songs in the final third of its narrative and its refusal to fit with the vaudevillian-based spectacle abundant in its contemporaries.

³ Despite the fact that cinema is littered with works that, like *The Wizard of Oz*, base their aesthetic identities around a fanciful sense of the otherworldly, the fantasy film genre is not discussed in pivotal genre studies such as Rick Altman’s *Film/Genre*, Steve Neale’s *Genre and Hollywood* or Barry Keith Grant’s *Film Genre Reader III*.

⁴ Whilst acknowledging that the fantastic hesitation he proposes is usually represented by a character within the text, Todorov is at pains to point out throughout his study that “the first condition of the fantastic” (31) is indeed the hesitation of the reader, a hesitation he explicitly states need not be represented directly within the text itself.

⁵ In *Alternative Worlds in Hollywood Cinema*, James Walters’s analysis of the film highlights this very characteristic, arguing that the film’s visuals ultimately project Dorothy’s point of view and thus involve “an intimacy that can never be enjoyed in real life” (56).

⁶ The analysis of the door in this shot as metaphor for the screen is also articulated in Ina Rae Hark’s “Moving, ‘Home-leaving’, and the Problematic Girl Protagonist of *The Wizard of Oz*”, an account which views the whole journey narrative of the film as a metaphor for the movie-going experience (25-26).

Works Cited

The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert. Dir. Stephan Elliot. Polygram Entertainment. 1994. DVD.

Alice in Wonderland. Dir. Tim Burton. Walt Disney. 2010. DVD.

Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print.

“AFI’s 10 Top 10”. *AFI*. n.d. Web. 21st July 2011.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1974. Print.

- Badley, Linda. *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic*. London: Greenwood Press, 1995. Print.
- Bronfen, Elizabeth. "Home—There's No Place Like It: The Wizard of Oz". *Home in Hollywood: The Imaginary Geography of Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. Print.
- "Cinema: The New Pictures: Aug. 21, 1939". *Time*. n.d. Web. 13th July 2011.
- Butler, David. *Fantasy Cinema: Impossible Worlds on Screen*. London: Wallflower Press, 2009. Print.
- Dick, Luke. "Somewhere Over the Rainbow". *The Wizard of Oz and Philosophy: Wicked Wisdom of the West*. Eds. Randall E. Auxier & Philip S. Seng. Chicago: Open Court, 2008. 3-18. Print.
- Doty, Alexander. "'My Beautiful Wickedness': *The Wizard of Oz* as Lesbian Fantasy". *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*. London: Routledge, 2000. 47-78. Print.
- Freidman, Bonnie. "Relinquishing Oz: Every Girl's Anti-Adventure". *The Movies: Texts, Receptions, Audiences*. Eds. Laurence Goldstein & Ira Konigsberg. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996. 41-59. Print.
- Fowkes, Katherine A. *The Fantasy Film*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. Print.
- Greenberg, Harvey K. "The Wizard of Oz—Little Girl Lost—And Found". *The Movies on Your Mind: Film Classics on the Couch, From Fellini to Frankstein*. New York: Saturday Review Press, 1975. 13-32. Print.
- Harry Potter*. Dir. Chris Columbus, Alfonso Cuarón, Mike Newell, David Yates. Warner Bros. 2001-2011. DVD.
- Feuer, Jane. *The Hollywood Musical*. Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1993. Print.
- Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London: Methuen & Co., 1981. Print.
- Keith Grant, Barry. *Film Genre Reader III*. Austin, TX; University of Texas Press, 2003. Print.
- The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*. Dir. Peter Jackson. New Line Cinema. 2001-03. DVD.
- Lim, Bliss Cua. *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic and Temporal Critique*. London: Duke University Press, 2009. Print.
- Maland, Charles. "Movies and American Culture in the *Annus Mirabilis*". *American Cinema*

- of the 1930s*. Ed. Ina Rae Hark. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007. 227-251. Print.
- Mary Poppins*. Dir. Robert Stevenson. Walt Disney. 1964. DVD.
- McCall, Corey, and Auxier, Randall E. "The Virtues of *The Wizard of Oz*". *The Wizard of Oz and Philosophy: Wicked Wisdom of the West*. Eds. Randall E. Auxier & Philip S. Seng. Chicago: Open Court, 2008. 19-32. Print.
- Nash, Mark. "Vampyr and the Fantastic". *Screen* 17.3. (1976). 26-67. Print.
- Neale, Steve. *Genre and Hollywood*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Nugent, Frank. "'The Screen in Review: 'The Wizard of Oz'". *New York Times*. n.d. Web. 13th July 2011.
- Pawlett, William, & Dhanda, Meena. "The Shared Destiny of the Radically Other: A Reading of *The Wizard of Oz*". *Film-Philosophy* 14.2 (2010). 113-131. Web. 25th March 2011.
- Rae Hark, Ina. "Moviegoing, 'Home-leaving', and the Problematic Girl Protagonist of The Wizard of Oz" in *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*. Eds. Frances Gatewood and Murray Pomerance. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2002. 25-38. Print.
- Robertson, Pamela. "Home and Away: Friends of Dorothy on the Road in Oz" in *The Road Movie Book*. Eds. Steve Cohan & Ina Rae Hark. London: Routledge, 1997. 271-286. Print.
- Rushdie, Salman. *The Wizard of Oz*. London: BFI Publishing, 1992. Print.
- Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Dir. David Hand. Walt Disney. 1937. DVD.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973. Print.
- Tolkien, J.R.R.. "On Fairy Stories" in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983. 109-157. Print
- "The 25 Best Sci-Fi and Fantasy Films of All Time". *The Guardian*. 21st July 2011. Web. 21st February 2011.
- Von Gunden, Kenneth. *Flights of Fancy: The Great Fantasy Films*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc Publishers, 1989. Print.
- Walters, James. *Alternative Worlds in Hollywood Cinema*. Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2008. Print.

Walters, James. *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Berg, 2011. Print.

The Wizard of Oz. Dir. Victor Fleming. MGM. 1939. DVD.

The Wizard of Oz and Philosophy: Wicked Wisdom of the West. Eds. Randall E. Auxier & Philip S. Seng. Chicago: Open Court, 2008. Print.

Worley, Alec. *Empires of Imagination: A Critical Survey of Fantasy Cinema from Georges Méliès to The Lord of the Rings*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2005. Print.

Suggested Citation

Sergeant, Alexander. "Scrutinising the Rainbow: Fantastic Space in *The Wizard of Oz*". *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 2 (Winter 2011). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

Alexander Sergeant is a PhD candidate at King's College London, currently researching a thesis on the Hollywood fantasy genre, which seeks to theorise the aesthetic appeal and functioning of an overlooked form of film-making throughout its varied history (research funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council). He has given various conference papers on the subject throughout the UK and Ireland, and is currently working on a number of forthcoming articles for publication. His broader research interests are in Hollywood cinema, film theory, film philosophy and psychoanalysis.