Wonderlands, slumberlands & plunderlands: Fantasy in the animated film

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'Wonderlands, Slumberlands, and Plunderlands: Considering the Animated Fantasy'

Defining the Territory

In his essay, ‘Definitions of Territories’ novelist and critic, Italo Calvino, traces the antecedents of ‘Fantasy’ literature. Firstly, he examines the French academy’s notion of the fantastique, mainly rooted in the cathartic experiences of gothic horror; secondly, in the fantastico of the Italians, who in an almost diametrically opposed definition, objectively saw worlds based on alternative logics outside the everyday; and thirdly, in the English embrace of Renaissance forms and the Modernist desire to create progressive models of expression. (Calvino 1987:71-72) In this latter instance, in English literary codes, the most satisfying pleasure of ‘Fantasy’ was not a matter of ‘believing’ in the monstrous or supernatural or ‘explaining’ characters and cultures outside known forms or contexts, but ‘in the unraveling of a logic with rules or points of departure or solutions that keep some surprises up their sleeves’. (Calvino 1987:72) This notion of fantasy as quasi-puzzle – and best exemplified in Lewis Carroll’s texts, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865) and
Through the Looking Glass (1871) – essentially rendered ‘fantasy’ in a particular way. Such texts have an intellectual credibility, in simultaneously embracing the ‘wonder’ embedded in primitive myths and fables; the symbolic undercurrents of the ‘unconscious’ (but resisting the conscious construction of allegory); but most significantly, using ‘play, irony, the winking eye, and [meditating] on the hidden desires, and nightmares of contemporary man’. (Calvino 1984:73)

For Calvino, Carroll’s texts, fuelled as much by logic and mathematics, as Romantic creative practice, and nods to ironic wit, became touchstones for a new ‘philosophy’ in literature, worthy of the ‘lofthest moments of speculation’. (Calvino 1984:47). It is this, then, that prompts my own enquiry, as I wish to use Carroll’s work, now more than 150 years in the public sphere, and still a key reference point in Western cultural logic, as a method by which to link ‘fantasy’ with the terms and conditions of animated texts. As will become clear, Carroll’s approach, which both draws from, and summarises other traditions of ‘fantasy’, while also speaking to a self-conscious and intellectually engaged riff on ideas and concepts, provides a model by which animated fantasy may be readily defined and understood. This still seems especially necessary for two reasons. First, there remains a skepticism or confusion about the nature of the ‘Fantasy’ film, too often disregarded in the flight to address the horror or science fiction film; second, because even when the ‘Fantasy’ film is discussed, it still ignores or demotes animation as one of its chief facilitators. In David Butler’s exemplary short study of Fantasy Cinema, written in 2009, for example, he offers a useful corrective to the absences and shortfalls in Film Studies in addressing Fantasy cinema (Butler 2009:12-15), and promises an engagement with the ‘how’ as well as the ‘why’ of making such films. As such his comments about Disney’s fairytale features (Butler 2009:50-52), Ray Harryhausen’s ‘Arabian Nights’ films (Butler 2009:68-70), and references to Miyazaki’s Princess Mononoke, Ocelot’s Azur and Asmar and the CGI in the Lord of the Rings trilogy are welcome, but each largely falls back into ideological critique, rather than identifying what the animation is and does. This is at its most disappointing ironically in a chapter dedicated to the impact of
technique and application in Fantasy film (Butler 2009:77-95), when for all of the pleasing reference to Harryhausen’s ‘dynamation’, there is the selection of Jonathan Miller’s 1966 version of Alice in Wonderland as a model of using editing / montage as a model of world building and the disruption of materialist filmic / social norms to present ‘wonderland’. I wish to offer the view that looking at animated versions of Alice in Wonderland would both have helped to define animation as a form in the construction of fantasy, and arguably, its intrinsic place in defining this model of cinema.

In this kind of film, fantasy essentially functions as a mechanism by which degrees of imaginative invention enable a distanciation from, or transformation of, the known material world, and its commonly perceived or factually determined parameters. These degrees of imaginative re-invention may be as simple and straightforward as a one-line gag or visual pun, or as complex and extensive as the creation of a completely alternative world. Fantasy, then, can be highly localized and personal, or universal and abstract, but nearly always can be recognized as a model of wish fulfillment, projection, or alternative thinking that challenges an established state of being or existence. It is important not to place this view of ‘fantasy’ in opposition to ‘reality, however, since reality is a highly subjective thing. As surrealist film-maker, Luis Bunuel has noted,

> Our imagination and our dreams are forever invading our memories, and since we are all apt to believe in the reality of our fantasies, we end up transforming our lies into truths. Of course, fantasy and reality are equally personal, and equally felt, so their confusion is a matter of only relative importance. (Bunuel 1984:5)

Rather than trying to disaggregate fantasy from reality, then, it is useful to note that in any one context, there are normally codes and conventions, rules and regulations, and determining principles that speak to the material environment. As such, though there may be differences in perception about these things, the dominant understanding of a context makes these differences
subordinate to shared criteria and assumption. Fantasy, in whatever register or model, effectively temporarily re-defines, revises and re-positions the orthodox and normatively agreed ‘world’, placing it into rhetorical relief – what bio-culturalist, Torben Grodal terms, a ‘salient deviation from everyday experience’ (Grodal 2009:103). From the perspective of this analysis this is especially important, as I wish to argue that the rhetorical condition of animation as a form, directly aligns it with the condition of fantasy, promoting ‘Fantasy’ as incremental interrogations of both the physical and material context, and interventions in revealing and challenging embedded social and cultural norms.

Crucially, ‘fantasy’ almost inherently accepts that it cannot change material reality, but can imaginatively re-invent it to make comment about it, or suggest other ways of being. Creative practitioners of all kinds, then, essentially take the natural but relative states of consciousness Bunuel alludes to – imagination, dream, memory etc – and determine a construct of ‘fantasy’ that self-consciously speaks to a human condition beyond the actual and mutually accepted. To be ‘down the rabbit hole’ or ‘through the looking glass’ is an acknowledgement of this transition into a fantasy state; a shift of perception into an altered world, a fundamental re-configuration of what has gone before. These phrases – referring of course, to Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass - are but an everyday acknowledgement of Carroll’s texts as key reflections on this psychological and emotional transition, but also, the way in which such shifts in consciousness – as noted by Calvino - are often embodied in the idea of accessing a new and different ‘territory’. This is usually a strange ‘land’, somehow different from, yet still intrinsically related to, the orthodoxies of a previous physical environment. In this spirit, I wish to look at the ‘wonderlands’, ‘slumberlands’ and ‘plunderlands’ of animated ‘worlds’ using Carroll’s work as a point of departure, thus also defining animation’s particular condition for ‘fantasy’.

**Animated Fantasy and Magic**

All ‘fantasy’ narratives are essentially hypothetical, and
sometimes counterintuitive, but as Grodal notes, ‘the fantastic world us rarely one in which all causality is absent; rather it is a more unstable world in which normal causality can break down and new magical laws emerge’. (Grodal 2009:104) Fowkes confirms, ‘as a trope of fantasy, magic stands in for causality – its rejection of realistic causality is precisely its point’. (Fowkes 2010:4) I wish to argue here, though, that ‘magical laws’ are essentially the staple of animation, simply because the non-literal, non-objective, non-conditional status of most animation practice inherently places the material world and its functional and utilitarian conditions into relief, rendering the perception of such a world unstable. This instability or surreality takes on the epithet of the ‘magical’ simply because it advances the idea that cause and effect may be fluid and unpredictable; at its most extreme, arbitrary and inchoate. Thereafter, such a world becomes unknowable and mysterious; lost to the common knowledge or gaze. As Davies reminds us, though, ‘Magic is far more than a venerable collection of practices. We need to understand it as a language, a theory, a belief, an action, a creative expression, an experience and a cognitive tool’. (Davies 2012:113) Bound up with religion, science, folklore, psychology, art and entertainment, magic is inherently present as an animistic agent in the space between the supernatural and the material, itself a potentially ritualistic and rhetorical act: ‘it is the combination of utterance and performance that, once enacted, engenders a change of state. Magic is done when the operator declares it will be done – at least if the performance has been conducted correctly’. (Davies 2012:21) This points to an insistence that underpinning what might be viewed as the spectacle of difference are alternative expressions and explanations – a specialist knowledge that reveals the ‘trick’ behind the ‘smoke and mirrors’.

Underpinning the ‘magical’ in animated fantasy, then, are the specific and specialist narrative and technical ‘laws’ played out through animation as a form. In a fascinating, but from my own perspective, revealing oversight, Grodal bequeaths this condition to all Fantasy cinema, failing to acknowledge the particularity of animation in this achievement. For example,
Fantasy films like *Fantasia* (Dir: Various, US, 1940) also delight in the metamorphosis of form – for example, speeding up the slow processes of animal or plant growth and transferring them to other features of the world. These accelerated transformations make the world less stable; objects may suddenly morph into something quite different. Fantasy films may also create synthetic associations between sight and sound: for example, deep tones may be linked with the motion of large animals such as rhinos, high tones with small animals...

(Grodal 2009:99)

‘Metamorphosis’ and specific kinds of ‘sound illusionism’ are part of the intrinsic vocabulary of the animated form; a form that can either enunciate itself purely as animation in a traditional or experimental style (ie cel animation, cut-outs, 2D or 3D stop motion, clay, sand, object manipulation, CGI etc), or as a hyper-realistic form in digital visual effects. Animation essentially *facilitates* fantasy because its normative conditions *enable* ‘magic’ (on all the terms cited by Davies above). There remains much irony – exemplified in Grodal’s analysis – that this in some senses remains ‘invisible’. The very fact of ‘naturalising’ the conditions and outcomes of ‘magic’ or ‘fantasy’ as a new representational ‘reality’ in film, essentially hides the ‘laws’ that deliver it. This is not a new phenomenon, of course, and ultimately proved to be a fundamental imperative in helping to define animation on theoretical terms, especially after what might be termed the ‘digital shift’. In an oft quoted summation Lev Manovich noted that cinema had come full circle: ‘Digital cinema is a particular case of animation that uses live-action footage as one of its many elements...Born from animation, cinema pushed animation to its periphery, only in the end to become one particular case of animation’. (Manovich 2001:302)

**Animated Fantasy and the Plasmatic**

Much earlier, though, Russian film-maker and theorist, Sergei Eisenstein, sought to theorize animation through marking out the
distinctiveness of the animated form in the modernizing practice of the Disney studio, noting ‘Disney has become on the screen what in the world of books in the ‘seventies (1870s) was Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll’. (Leyda (ed) 1988:11) Noting both the anthropomorphic tendencies in the work, and its ‘attractions’ [explored in Tom Gunning’s seminal ideas on the appeal of early cinema – See Gunning (1986)], Eisenstein especially acknowledges ‘a rejection of once-and-forever allotted form, freedoms from ossification, the ability to dynamically assume as any form’. (Leyda (ed) 1988:21) Calling this property, ‘plasmaticness’, Eisenstein speculates that this is attractive because it offers the viewer the idea of being anything they want to be in the face of ‘mercilessly standardized and mechanically measured existence’. (Leyda (ed) 1988:21) Crudely, the very movement embedded and embodied in the animated form offers the possibility of ‘fantasy’ in the face of the ideologically regulative and industrially oppressive. Eisenstein was, of course, couching his remarks as a not-so-veiled critique of industrial modernism in the USA, and in a spirit of seeking out ‘revolutionary’ practices in the arts and culture. Disney’s innovation and its claims to ‘art’ were soon sidelined in a similar way to how animation had been marginalized in the early years of cinema. This time though, through the destructive machinations of the 1941 Disney strike (which effectively meant Disney himself, and his supposedly ‘Taylorist’ studio practices, cast him in a negative light), but more significantly, through the success of the studio in effectively defining Disney as animation per se. In the same way as for many years, the history of animation was synonymous with the history of Disney and the American Animated cartoon, Disney’s success effectively rendered other animation practices, in other techniques, other forms, and in other countries, invisible.

In the public eye, and indeed, in the business and communications sectors, Disney defined the aesthetics, tone and authority of animation. In other nations and cultures, in which animation related more specifically to other art forms and antecedents, Disney simply became ‘the state of the art’, and colonized the form largely as an entertainment medium,
appealing in its apparent innocence, amusing scenarios and sentimental tone. Equally, such success was predicated on appealing to ‘children of all ages’, and as such, seemed to limit the nature of what animation as Eisenstein had perceived it – as an inherently radical form – could do and be. This much he acknowledged in his disdain for Disney’s turn to quasi-realism in *Bambi* (Dir: David Hand, US, 1942): ‘I am especially distressed by…its failure, its absolute non-musicality of landscape and color…In Disney’s previous works…[he] forced the self-contained objective representational form to behave as a non-material volitional play of free lines and surfaces…*Bambi* is the very opposite. (Leyda (ed) 1988:98-99) More importantly, this consolidation of a classical Disney aesthetic, necessitated new kinds of theory and practice in animation, that effectively re-presented its qualities and distinctiveness, in a wider claim to represent different models of ‘fantasy’ attuned to its capabilities.

Though animation had been used in public information and commercial contexts right from its earliest beginnings – Arthur Melbourne Cooper animating matches for Bryant & May in the late 1890s in the UK, for example – it took a concerted polemical effort by Hungarian émigré, John Halas, in Europe, in the post-war period to convince both the film industry, and more widely, business, the commercial sector and educational authorities, that animation had distinctive qualities that could facilitate a fresh representational approach to communicating knowledge and ideas, as well as selling goods and services. Moreover, Halas, an animator, graphic designer and producer, and head of the Halas & Batchelor animation studio (1940-1995), also claimed that the very same form was also ‘art’ of a different kind, more suited to affiliation with Modernist graphic design practices and the work of the avant garde. In ‘Management’ magazine, published in 1951, Halas suggested that animation was characterized by,

- Symbolization of objects and human beings
- Picturing the invisible
- Penetration
- Selection, exaggeration and transformation
- Showing the past and predicting the future
- Controlling speed and time. (cited in Halas & Wells 2006:160)

Halas’ informal theory of animation served to articulate the ‘laws’ by which animation might be both understood, but also applied – a seemingly necessary act of deconstruction that suggested that indeed, anything that could be imagined could be represented visually. This was not just ‘surreal’, ‘magical’ or ‘fantastical’ – all of which might exist in Eisenstein’s celebration of the protean capabilities in animation, for instance – but also a solution; animation, like Carrollian literary fantasy, as a quasi-puzzle presented and resolved.

*Animated Alice: Halas Applied*

The ‘symbolisation of objects and human beings’ can both work to simplify and clarify an idea – emojis, traffic signs, flags, emblems etc – or suggest more abstract meanings and concepts – Humpty Dumpty, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, a pack of playing cards presented as soldiers, or a visual pun like the ever diminishing ‘mouse’s tale / tail’ (Carroll 1966:49). The depiction of a moving arrow can suggest the direction of an ‘invisible’ force like the wind, while sound waves can be visualized in pulsing lines, and other aspects of the natural world not visible to the naked eye can be made apparent – for example, a Cheshire cat’s vanishing ‘quite slowly. Beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone’. (Carroll 1966:90) Interestingly, as Fairhurst has pointed out:

Carroll enjoyed experimenting with new ways of capturing life’s irresistible onward force. In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, he ensured that Tenniel’s illustration of the grinning Cheshire Cat disappearing from view would be printed in exactly the same place as the previous illustration that showed it fully present, so that by turning the page back and forth a reader could make it materialize or dematerialize like a conjuring trick, It is only a small step from this to the dozens of ‘moving
pictures’, such as Walt Disney’s popular 1951 cartoon, *Alice in Wonderland*, which would later bring the episode alive for a new generation of viewers. (Fairhurst 2015:21-22)

Carroll’s ‘flip book’, again presented as ‘magic’ does indeed anticipate animation, but it is Halas’ concept of ‘penetration’ that is perhaps the most useful here, though, in helping to articulate how animation both facilitates both ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’. Animation has the capacity to ‘penetrate’ interior states, on the one hand, simplifying and amplifying the depiction, for example, of the arteries, muscles and bones in the body under the skin, the workings of an engine or motor, or the microscopic components in a strand of an insect’s hair. On the other, depicting the conditions of consciousness – (Alice’s) dream, memory, processes of thought, solipsism, the unconscious, rationale beyond reason, the non-logical. The former illustrates known yet obscured and not necessarily easily understood concepts and processes; the latter reveals the pictorial states of inner-life, conceived outside the normative principles of narrative and orthodox ideation. The tension between the two is, in essence, the core focus of animation and all Carrollian literary fantasy.

Halas’ notion of ‘selection’ is concerned with foregrounding a certain image as the embodiment of a concept, most often revealed through exaggeration or through transformative processes by which its properties and perspectives were made more apparent. This, again, might work simply as a visual pun in which flamingos become croquet mallets and rolled-up hedgehogs serve as croquet balls. (Carroll 1966:110) All these elements can be further contextualized in a variety of time frames from the long past to the far future, for example, depicting currently extant flora and fauna, and thereafter projecting their form ahead many years, re-imagining their identity as a consequence of changing environmental conditions. Or indeed, as the transformed conditions of a particular space in which a giant girl’s tears later becomes the very lake in which her diminished smaller self nearly drowns. (Carroll 1966: 39) The speed and timing with which this might be presented can also be varied – a thousand years might be truncated to mere
minutes, a split-second extended indefinitely. Fairhurst notes that this is also the condition of literary fiction—‘an event that would take a fraction of a second in real time can be drawn out for paragraphs and pages, while experiences that might take years to accumulate can be compressed in a single crisp sentence’ (Fairhurst 2015:49)—but also, that the preoccupation with time was a core aspect of Carroll’s stories (the ‘Magic Watch’ in *Sylvie and Bruno*, for example), and fantasy in general. (Fairhurst 2015:48-49) At any point, then the animator or the fantasy fiction writer, can intervene further to accelerate or slow down how this is depicted. Perhaps, this might be a little girl, tumbling down a rabbit hole, who ‘fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time, as she went down to look about her’ (Carroll 1966:24-27) or after imbibing a bottle which says ‘Drink Me’, ‘shutting people up like a telescope’ (Carroll 1966:29) so she was only ten inches high, or growing many feet taller after eating a piece of mushroom, when taking advice from a hookah-smoking caterpillar. (Carroll 1966: 72-73)

Halas’ terms do much to stress the distinctiveness of animation, and crucially, the level of control the animator has in determining the nature of the ‘world’ being created. They directly echo the machinations of Carroll’s protean worlds and liminal spaces. In my own work I have additionally stressed the importance of sound in the animation vocabulary; animation’s capacity to prompt the maximum of suggestion in the minimum of imagery; the complex role of anthropomorphism; and most significantly, how the creation of motion itself necessarily carries with it narrative and conceptual purpose, simply because animation is intrinsically artificial, and nothing moves unless it is made to. (see Wells 1998, 2007, 2009) There is none of the meaningful ‘leakage’, for example, that is possible in the still presence of an actor, or in the recording of an actual environment in a shot. Every action in animation has to be motivated, and in being motivated suggests an idea or a story motif. Every choice, therefore, is about the extent of the distance the representational image wishes to travel from ‘naturalism’ in movement and behavior, or from the ‘realist’ codes and conventions that have been adopted by more literal art, design and illustration in depicting the material world. The degree of
‘fantasy’ remains in direct proportion to the ways in which the concrete and known gives way to the imaginative and propositional. It was this that also underpinned the creation of Carroll’s ‘wonderland’, especially when coupled with Tenniel’s illustrations: ‘opening Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland meant opening oneself up to a newly integrated reading experience: no longer was an illustrated book merely text plus pictures; it was text times pictures’. (Fairhurst 2015:144)

**Animated Fantasy and Fairie**

*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* remains one of the most widely read stories in the English language, and is a regular cultural touchstone. It embodies a broad reference point representing some sort of ‘alternative’ universe that nevertheless remains a pertinent commentary on a range of social experiences, political agendas, and personal ‘mindsets’. At the time when I was preparing this discussion, for example, former leader of the Labour Party and ex UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, remarked that new Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn’s hard left Socialist outlook and the ‘Corbynmania’ that attended it, were ‘Alice in Wonderland’ politics, and that Corbyn lived in a ‘parallel reality’.¹ Only a day later, political cartoonist, Ben Jennings, depicted Blair as a highly threatening Cheshire Cat, imploring a diminutive Alice, in a ‘Jez We Can’ red dress, to ‘Come to your senses – Don’t vote for Corbyn’. She answers, ‘Why won’t you disappear?’, a satirical jibe at Blair’s late career interventions in international politics.² Fantasy here is used very directly as a point of metaphorical access to the nature of political debates, but also used pejoratively as unrealistic and naïve.

Crucially, ‘Fantasy’ understood as a quasi-puzzle resists notions that it can be characterized as naïve when naivety is seen as synonymous with innocence. Nevertheless, such innocence toys

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with the notion that the naïve can possess tacit understanding of a world un-encrusted with tired, clichéd or predictable meanings. Equally, such ‘fantasy’ presents the world as it might be seen afresh through child-like eyes still exploring and experiencing its initially alien terms and conditions. Alice’s ‘dream’ remains correspondent to this idea, and directly informs Carroll’s own conception of ‘consciousness’ and some of the versions of Alice in Wonderland when produced in animation or directly deploying it. Carroll himself had defined and refined his own conception of this phenomena in his ‘three states of consciousness’; remarks made in the preface of his text, Sylvie and Bruno Concluded, and usefully summarized by Cardena and Winkelman:

Carroll’s three-layer taxonomy comprised the ordinary state, which precludes the admission of the fantastic, the liminal ‘eerie state’ in which there is consciousness of both quotidian reality and the otherworldly, and the ‘trance’ state in which only the extraordinary is perceived. (Cardena & Winkelman 2011:278n)

While this operates helpfully in defining Carroll’s outlook in relation to what Carroll himself, calls a ‘psychical state’, and indeed, speaks to broad critical trends in identifying Alice in Wonderland as ripe for psychoanalytic readings, it actually omits, how Carroll identified these perspectives in relation to key ‘British’, ‘literary’ and ‘cultural’ touchstones, namely in relation to the faerie tradition. Carroll suggests, humankind experiences,

a) The ordinary state, with no consciousness of the presence of Fairies.
b) The ‘eerie’ state, in which, while conscious of actual surroundings, he is also conscious of the presence of Fairies.
c) A form of ‘trance’, in which while unconscious of actual surroundings and apparently asleep he (ie his immaterial essence), migrates to other scenes in the actual world, or Fairyland, and is conscious of the presence of Fairies.
I have written elsewhere about the tradition of *Fairie*, throughout the history of British animation as being key in understanding modes of British Fantasy. (see Zipes et al (eds) 2015:48-63) The conditions of British *fairie* also help to clarify and extend Carroll’s perspectives, and enable a broader understanding of how fantasy functions in animation *per se*. Lewis Spence has defined such *fairie*, suggesting it is at the ‘very roots of human belief and primitive methods of reasoning’ (Spence 1946:vii), adding ‘By means of this art, or power, the fairies were able to transform places and objects that they assumed a totally different appearance from that which they naturally possessed’. (Spence 1946:18). Ultimately, he defines the ‘fairies’ with the following characteristics:

1. that they are the spirits of the human dead; 2. that they are elementary spirits – that is, spirits of nature, the genii of mountain, flood and forest: 3. that belief in them is due to reminiscences of former peoples or aboriginal races which have been thrust into the more distant and less hospitable parts of a country by the superior weight of an invading stock. (Spence 1946:53)

At the heart of these conditions then are some important aspects of the relationship between the perception of the orthodox world (the ‘ordinary’), the dream or nightmare world (the ‘trance’) and the half-world, simultaneously conscious and unconscious (‘the eerie’), and its connection to the *Fairie* spirit of primal memory, the past, and the pantheistic. Spence adds,

> By means of this art, or power, the fairies were able to transform places and objects that they assumed a totally different appearance from that which they naturally possessed. What might appear to the night-bound wayfarer as a lordly castle or a magnificent palace, was found in the light of morning, to be a noisome ditch or a barren rock. Or in the twinkling of an eye, the whole fairy scene might vanish, giving place to moor or wilderness. (Spence 1946:18)

Again, the notion of transformation in relation to context or landscape is fundamental to the nature of fantasy, in that it is necessary in some way
to be transported or transubstanciated in order that the conditions of fantasy are immediately recognized as such, and prompt what Grodal has noted as the opportunity for ‘agency’ (Grodal 2009:107). This is not then, the real, material, seemingly unchangeable, uniformly predictable, conservatively oppressive world where the individual can make little substantial impact or effect, but a new land in which the redeeming liberation of fantasy permits the individual instrumental access and affect. It remains to properly explore how animation readily facilitates such fantasy, and may be seen through the wonderlands, slumberlands, and plunderlands of the animated film. Slumberlands are correspondent to the oneiric terms of Carroll’s ‘trance’ state; plunderlands to the state of ‘eerie’, in that they absorb and foreground other reference points in the material world; and wonderlands are the sutured worlds that constitute an ordinary state of consciousness determined by its own consistent logic, however outwardly unusual or unorthodox the imagery that may represent it.

**A Conclusion: Wonderlands, Slumberlands, Plunderlands**

Walt Disney was an admirer of Lewis Carroll’s work, long wishing to make an animated feature of the *Alice* texts, hinting at his intentions in the title card of *Pinocchio* (Dir: Ben Sharpsteen & Hamilton Luske, USA, 1940), where a copy of *Alice in Wonderland* stands in the background. He foregrounded his own affinity with the *Alice* texts by creating the ‘Alice’ comedies in the 1920s, in which a live action ‘Alice’ participated in a cartoon world. This once more echoes Fairhurst’s observation that such was the veracity of Alice in the original story, that this was as ‘brilliantly jarring as it would be to see Jane Eyre wandering around Toonland’. (Fairhurst 2015:150) Though the first cartoon, *Alice’s Wonderland* (Dir: Walt Disney, USA, 1923) includes a ‘falling’ sequence, the films become a combination series in which situations in the material world interfaces with animated vignettes in which Alice features, and there is little correspondence to Carroll’s texts in anything but the presence of some animal characters. Disney clearly wished to at least preserve the ‘eerie’ state of consciousness in his intended feature, where the everyday world was ultimately juxtaposed with its faerie state. An initial draft for such a story was written by Aldous Huxley:

Huxley’s story had Carroll and Alice misunderstood and persecuted by the adults around them – Alice by her nightmarish governess, Carroll by his fellow churchmen and academics. Ellen Terry, the actress was to be sympathetic to both of them, and Queen
Victoria was to act as deux ex machina, validating Carroll through her enthusiasm for his book. (Barrier 1999:392)

The comparative structural similarity to, commercial failure of, and critical controversy about, Disney’s combination feature, *Song of the South* (Dir: Harve Foster & Wilfred Jackson, USA, 1946) essentially shelved the project. When finally made, the film becomes a fully animated narrative, which for all its visual invention, becomes a ‘wonderland’ echoing Carroll’s ordinary state of consciousness. This is simply because it structures its narrative as a ‘chase’ cartoon, selectively re-positioning Carroll’s episodic vignettes and their iconic characters as elements in a story in which Alice essentially ‘chases’ the white rabbit. Her ‘wonderland’ is clearly sealed off from the world above ground, and the ‘fantasy’ is wholly diluted by Disney’s intervention in which Alice is very sad that she cannot return home, scolding herself for ignoring and disobeying her governess – an echo of the Victorian schoolroom rather than Carroll’s determined resistance to such moralizing. Ultimately, though, the core structuring agency of making the film a musical, renders the episodic surreality of the vignettes a similar commonplace to the emergence of songs in the traditional musical. Thus, the visual imagery of the Mad Hatter’s tea party, with the popular ‘Happy Un-Birthday’ song; ‘The Walrus and the Carpenter’ sequence; Alice conversing with the flowers on a ‘Golden Afternoon’; and the Tulgey Wood finale (actually sourced in the ‘Jabberwocky’ poem), are both typical ‘cartoon’ sequences and the expected ‘out-of-narrative’ invention of the musical. Though clearly the stuff of fantasy, this operates much more within the purview of Hollywood genre, and not British literary ‘faerie’.

In many senses, Disney defined this approach himself in his television series, *Disneyland* when introducing the cartoon, *Thru the Mirror* (Dir: David Hand, USA, 1936) and describing the anthropomorphism in the objects portrayed as ‘the plausible impossible’. Mickey Mouse falls asleep and his ‘dream’ figure passes through a mirror into a world of opposites, where he shrinks when eating a walnut, and ultimately dances with a pair of gloves and a pack of cards. Simply by giving objects and environment the veneer of a human personality the material world is magically conjured as a fantasy world, and crucially, ‘character is all on the outside’ (Fairhurst 2015:149). This parallel’s Carroll’s characters by showing their presence and intervention while never letting them declare a clear and believable psychological motivation. Rather, such motivation

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if it exists, is something more obscure, absent, or self-reflexively guided only by an invisible authorial intervention. Any notion of ‘a real person’ (both physical or as an embodiment of consciousness) is replaced by the a caricature of external emotive signifiers. Though this self-evidently becomes a ‘fantasy’ world, it is maintained and sustained by an inner logic that renders it as ‘impossible’ but made ‘plausible’ by the consistent depiction of the recognizable ‘humanity’ of observed and known performance traits.

Like the Disney version, Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland* (Dir: Tim Burton, USA/UK, 2010) is essentially a compendium of the most iconic visual aspects of both books pertinent to animated set-pieces and visual effects, which again echoes Carroll’s ‘ordinary’ state of consciousness, unaware of its own relationship to ‘faerie’. Linda Wolverton, the screenwriter of Burton’s film, and also, Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* (Dir: Kirk Wise & Gary Trousdale, USA, 1991), essentially creates a female-centred battle narrative, using Carroll’s chess motif, played out between the Red and the White Queen, in which the villainous or monstrous (the knave, the jubjub bird, the jabberwock) line up behind the Red Queen (‘Off with his head !!’) and the virtuous or crowd pleasing (Alice, the Cheshire cat, the caterpillar, here named Absolem, and the Mad Hatter, actually conceived as a ‘love interest’, played by Johnny Depp) are on the side of the White Queen. This imposition of a highly specific narrative motivates the characters to a significant extent, and configures ‘wonderland’ as a ‘fantasy’ world, but with a clearly delineated and recognizable moral, ethical and classical purpose. Even Burton’s references to Ray Harryhausen’s animated mythical creatures in *Jason and the Argonauts* (Dir: Don Chaffey, USA, 1963) in the final fight sequence between Alice and the Jabberwock do not subvert the logical tenor of the fantasy. It is also a fantasy which is subjugated further to the ‘bookends’ of the narrative in which a ‘real world’ Alice is redeemed by rejecting the oppressive codes and conventions of the Victorian epoch (familial subordination, class-bound structures of arranged marriage, limited career opportunity and choice, a lack of personal identity and independence, etc). Consequently, this ideologically laden version loses its surreality in its aspirations to allegory, and once more shows no awareness of faerie.

Jan Svankmajer’s *Alice* (Dir: Jan Svankmajer, Cz, 1988), in resisting such coherence, both in the characters and the environment creates Carroll’s ‘trance’ state, foregrounding Alice’s self-narration as a mode of fantasy. This is a world made strange by constantly exploring the tension between the animate and inanimate, the white rabbit, for example,
initially made material through taxidermy, and made alive by Alice’s dream-like dramatization. This ‘slumberland’ has none of the comforts of a dream, but more of the violence, sudden changes, and sense of dread in a nightmare. Though Alice endures the stresses and challenges of her wonderland, she is largely rehearsing her anxiety about the material world she lives in. If Disney makes the plausible impossible through the imposition of facial signifiers on objects, Svankmajer merely trusts the essence of the object to narrate itself through his stop-motion interventions. Such fantasy recognizes the presence of ‘faerie’ by acknowledging the life imbued and embodied in the objects that seem to directly interact with Alice. Again, their motivations are absent or obscure, but objects as various as a rake, a bucket, a drawer, insects, vermin, and skeletal creatures all render Alice’s journey one of struggle and confusion – arguably the condition of childhood itself.

Arguably, if Disney and Burton make their films for children, Svankmajer makes his about them. If Disney and Burton use ‘fantasy’ to re-assure and explain the puzzle, Svankmajer offers no solution, but reveals the essential puzzle of experience as the very reality of fantasy, per se. For each ‘wonderland’ of escapist clarity there is a ‘slumberland’ or a ‘plunderland’ drawing attention to the diversity of conscious and material reality, or the expanded universe of the pre-conscious and unconscious. Fantasy animation, then, alters the logic of expression to expose the exigencies of human existence, while foregrounding its own conditions of creative intervention. Perhaps, then, a pertinent answer to Alice’s question, ‘Who in the world am I ?, Ah that’s the great puzzle’. (Carroll 1966:36) [6036]

Bibliography


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