6-15-1977

Wizards—Dismal Warm-up for LOTR Film

Glen GoodKnight
Wizards—Dismal Warm-up for LOTR Film

Additional Keywords
Wizards. Dir. Ralph Bakshi.
As was reported in the February, 1977, issue of Mythprint, Ralph Bakshi is going to make two animated motion pictures based on The Lord of the Rings. It is well-known that Bakshi produced his animated Wizards as a warm-up to test his talents and ability to approach LotR. With this in mind, I went to see the film to see what Bakshi could do, with an open mind, not having seen any of his work before.

I was appalled. The animation, especially that of the characters, is too crude to handle the subtlety of Tolkien's various personalities. Bakshi repeats the same frames from a battle scene used in the beginning of the film to describe past wars, again in the final battle. This is artistically unforgivable. Another short-cut is used when the camera pans still drawings while narration proceeds. There are some scenes that initially do seem impressive, but are over-used. They are achieved by taking scenes from old movies of charging horsemen, turning the images into black silhouette and projecting them on backgrounds of swirling vivid colors, with additional horns and bat wings painted on the figures. Some have raved about his solid backgrounds, but are they really his? The background of vast, towering walls appear to be identical to that which was printed in The World of Fantasy Calendar 1976 as the centerfold entitled "Castle Gormenghast" by Ian Miller. I presume Mr. Bakshi has made the proper arrangements with Peacock Press and/or Ian Miller. The futuristic soldiers who ride two-legged beasts are highly similar to that of the fan artist Vaughn Bode. It is said that if you barrow from one man you are a thief, but if you barrow from a thousand men you are a scholar. Bakshi's lack of true originality and artistic indebtedness to others has him sadly falling between the two.

The film has the vaguest element that could be called a plot. There are a number of thematic barrowings from Tolkien: a giant spider, the castle of the bad guy falling apart at the climax, etc. The climax is a betrayal of any true moral vision. The film is clogged with cloying cuteness, and is similar to an insipid Rankin and Bass production, made for a PG audience. Bakshi impresses me as a person who in his own mind envisioned a great story, pervaded with deep meaning, but is so out of touch with what he actually produced, that he has not realized how far short he has fallen from his own puny vision. It is this unawareness that makes me quail in fear when I think what he might do to The Lord of the Rings.

I doubt Bakshi has the kind of background which would give him the necessary discipline to keep his own lack of aesthetics from interfering in producing a LotR film. He was interviewed on CBS's 60 Minutes several months ago his favorite past-time is to spend his lunch hour playing pinball machine at a hot dog stand on seamy Hollywood Blvd. in Hollywood. This is a far different environment from that in which Tolkien created The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings: Oxford, with all its spires, culture, quiet dignity, history, education, and ideals. I have seen both.

No, if anyone is to make a LotR film, it is not Ralph Bakshi. It would be refreshing if 20th Century Fox, who is backing Bakshi, would go beyond the hope of monetary return (which appears to be the only real force propelling this ersatz venture) and put aesthetics first, at least and especially for Tolkien's classic. Perhaps something can be done if enough people speak up before it is too late. For, using Wizards as a basis of judgement, if Bakshi gets to use LotR this way, it will be as disastrous as Gollum getting and using the Ring.

— Glen H. GoodKnight