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The Procrustean Bed of Film Animation

Editor's Opening

The Procrustean Bed of Film Adaptation

Certain strong and long felt feelings on the adaptation of books— especially fantasy books— to film have arisen to mind again. They arose after seeing the reruns of the Rankin and Bass' The Hobbit and The Return of the King on cable, and Dune in the theatres.

I am reminded of the Bed of Procrustes from ancient Greek legend. Procrustes had an unusual way of accommodating overnight guests. If they were too short, he would see that his servants sufficiently stretched them to fit. If they were too long, his servants would cut off a sufficient length of their feet. Thus the famous bed of Procrustes has become perhaps the most graphic analogy of altering things as they are to fit a specific situation.

Short stories are excellent material for feature length motion pictures, or to put it another way, motion pictures are an excellent medium for short stories. Favorite examples come to mind: Juliet of the Spirits, King of Hearts, and It's a Wonderful Life. In print, these would be short story length. There are other stories, being somewhat episodic in nature, that can make relatively successful transitions to film, leaving out certain dispensable segments. The Wizard of Oz comes quickly to mind as a well known example. But then there are those films which must delete or highly compress indispensable material to fit the Procrustean Bed of 90 to 140 minutes that are the given of feature length films. Dune is an example of this. It has been over fifteen years since I read the book, nevertheless I could follow the plot of the film— something some critics had a hard time doing. After reading so many negative reviews, I was pleasantly surprised that the film wasn't nearly as bad as I was expecting. Still, it certainly didn't and couldn't do justice to the book given its certain allotment of minutes and funds. The ending I found disappointingly abrupt. I am not a purist about Herbert's Dune, but I wouldn't blame those who are contending that it would have been better if the film hadn't been made.

Our old friends, Rankin and Bass, deserve criticism from another angle for their productions of The Hobbit and The Return of the King. Condensation— yes; deletion— yes; but also the inclusion of new material either to make a bridge over the deletions or to stir up hokey feelings in the audience that cannot be justified from Tolkien's written words. I am more than enough of a purist about Tolkien to rue the compressions and deletions, and deplore the unwarranted insertions. Accepting the givens of film making, the former is aesthetically regrettable enough, but the latter is strongly objectionable. It is one thing to compress, but another to compress so much that you have to fill up the time by the inclusion of a song from the All Time Top 40 Hits: "Where There's a Whip, There's a Way," which the orca sing as they march through Mordor. There is also the scene, when at the near end, Gandalf looks out at the audience and suggests that perhaps some of us have hobbit blood. It is hardly fustian, based on his Letters, to think Tolkien would not have approved of this liberty in the way it was done.

Perhaps even more objectionable, because its

intent was far more serious than Rankin and Bass, is that of Ralph Bakshi's production of The Lord of the Rings. After seeing the very disappointing Bakshi production of Wizards, I predicted a disaster of his then forthcoming The Lord of the Rings. I received some flak for this criticism, but now it is well known that the vast majority of Tolkien admirers did indeed not like the movie. To be charitable to Bakshi, how could the film do justice given the procrustean limitation of the film's length, even allowing that it ended at the Ride of the Rohirrim? That was the least of its faults. No, more than the compressions and deletions, it is the emphasis, the stress of interpretation, of the rest of the material that is amiss. What does Bakshi emphasize? The numinous, the enchantment, the wonder of Middle-earth? No, it is fighting and battle scenes that preoccupy him. Of course these are vital ingredients in Tolkien, but he keeps them in balance with so many other elements; Bakshi does not.

What is the answer to these vexing problems of film adaptation? Let us imagine the year is 2000. The BBC has produced 33 episodes of 90 minutes each of The Lord of the Rings, with the use of unlimited funds and latest technology, with strict content supervision by Christopher Tolkien.... Leaving these improbable pipe dreams aside, it is the perceptive reader curled up with a good book, letting the author directly and sub-creatively interact with the sympathetic imagination which is the best production. It is an amusing diversion to compare film to book, besmearing faults and berating intentions, compared to the primary pleasure of actually reading and rereading.



In the last issue I mentioned my intention of submitting a financial framework, which I shared with you, at the then forthcoming budget meeting of the Society's Council of Stewards. Between the time of the last issue and that meeting, the completed financial figures for the Society in 1984 were made available. The situation was not the best, to say the least. The Society needs to walk a very fine line to avoid serious financial problems and maintain basic services. In light of the sobering present state of affairs, I felt it was necessary to give direct attention to the current situation, even though a long-range improved financial framework is very much needed. The Society appears to be going in the right direction, with the Stewards taking a more careful look at income in relation to expenses, and discussing various ideas for new sources of income. I urge you to let me know your ideas for new income and how the Society might generate income that will be effective in a relatively short term and will not require a large outlay of funds to initiate the proposal.

A definite decision was made to reserve benefactor contributions in a special fund to be used exclusively for advertising, promotion and improvement of Mythlore. This was very much needed, since advertising which is sorely needed, has been very limited for over two years. Now benefactors will be assured their contributions will be used directly for these purposes, instead of being mixed with general funds, against my objections, as was done up to now.