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The geek shall inherit the Earth

by Sandy Starr

'I'm so honoured and relieved that the Academy and the members of the Academy that have supported us have seen past the trolls and the wizards and the hobbits in recognising fantasy this year.'

So said film director Peter Jackson, after winning the best picture award at this year's Oscars - just one of an impressive 11 statuettes bestowed upon *The Return of the King*, the final installment in the *Lord of the Rings*. The trilogy has certainly earned its plaudits; its marathon New Zealand shoot distilled over 1000 pages of JRR Tolkien's dense prose into more than nine hours of epic entertainment. It was a gamble that could have sunk the studio New Line, if the films hadn't proved successful.

But, as Jackson's acceptance speech suggests, the fact that these films did prove successful represents a new degree of respectability for the fantasy genre, along with the science fiction and superhero genres.

Take comics. Outside of a fairly hermetic subculture, comic books used to be dismissed as children's fare. But comic books ranging from Marvel Comics' superhero pantheon (*Blade*, *X-Men*, *Spider-Man*, *Hulk*, *Daredevil*) to underground titles (*Ghost World*, *American Splendour*) have recently been adapted for the big screen, with *Hellboy*, *The Punisher* and a new take on the *Batman* mythos soon to follow.

As for science fiction, the *Matrix* sequels may have left audiences feeling underwhelmed, but the forthcoming final installment in the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy is guaranteed to cause a splash. On the small screen, while the hugely popular *Star Trek* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* have dwindled to the subdued spin-offs *Enterprise* and *Angel*, genre fare such as the teen Superman show *Smallville* remains a staple of TV schedules. And Britain's greatest ever science fiction series, *Doctor Who*, is set to return in 2005.

Elsewhere, business is booming at Britain's leading chain of science fiction/comic bookshops, Forbidden Planet, which recently opened an enormous new flagship store on Shaftesbury Avenue in London. The runaway success of DVDs, which are fast making videotapes redundant, has allowed films and TV shows to be presented in their original aspect ratios, with high-resolution sound and picture, and with an exhaustive wealth of supplementary material for the dedicated fan - documentaries, commentaries, isolated scores and storyboards.

In short, there has never been a better time to be an anorak - a word that now has affectionate, rather than pejorative, connotations. The word 'geek' has also lost its stigma, having been promoted from a noun to verb, as in to 'geek out'. If you want to *insult* somebody today for being obsessive about fantasy or sci-fi, you have to resort to calling them a 'nerd', which in polite society has become almost tantamount to using a racist slur.

As something of an anorak/geek/nerd myself, I must confess to deriving pleasure from our move to the mainstream. The breadth and depth of cult material now available on DVD, including entire runs of old TV shows packaged in lavish box sets, makes it an easy and pleasant prospect to avoid sunlight for days on end. People didn't jeer (much) when they heard that I was attending last year's fortieth anniversary *Doctor Who* convention, Panopticon. And it is difficult to convey the joy of seeing big-budget film adaptations of the comics you grew up reading, so faithful to the source material that they even get the *sounds* exactly right (the 'snikt' of Wolverine's claws and the 'bamf' of Nightcrawler's teleportation in the *X-Men* movies, for example).

But enjoyable though it is, even an incorrigible geek such as myself has to confess that the mainstreaming of geekdom is far from a healthy phenomenon.

The criticism traditionally heaped upon science fiction and fantasy - that they are infantile and escapist genres - has always been fairly risible. There is no reason why science fiction, fantasy, and yes, even comic books, cannot be used in an ambitious way to explore the human condition, just as all fiction can. Science fiction and fantasy often provide a fascinating insight into the concerns of the times in which they are produced, from the progressive aspirations of the US science fiction writers of the 1950s, to JRR Tolkien's Catholic morality in *The Lord of the Rings* (1).

But the criticism

of science fiction and fantasy *fans* - that we are infantile and escapist *people*, and socially inept to boot - sadly has a little more truth to it. Of course, there are many pastimes that people pursue obsessively, and it may seem a little unfair to stick the boot into sci-fi geeks rather than car fanatics, opera buffs or stamp collectors. But of all the hobbies and interests out there, being preoccupied with the details of otherworldly settings and characters, at the expense of being engaged with the world you actually inhabit, does bespeak a certain retreat from society into the safety of one's imagination.

The Japanese phenomenon of *hikikomori* - where teenagers lock themselves in their bedrooms and shut themselves off from the outside world, refusing to emerge - may be an extreme example of what happens when people lose the will to confront reality. But there is a potential danger of this happening, to a greater or lesser extent, to anyone who obsessively inhabits imaginary worlds.

As long as science fiction and fantasy fandom remained a fairly marginal subculture, then while certain fans may have pursued their passion to an unhealthy degree, the existence of the subculture was harmless. But when society as a whole starts to become obsessed with the otherworldly, then society as a whole threatens to go *hikikomori* - to become more interested in whiling away its time dreaming, than in

addressing the real problems that confront it.

The emergence of the internet has done much to legitimise this kind of withdrawal from the world. Once, the majority of people - even those with their nose permanently stuck in a book - were obliged, by practical necessity if nothing else, to risk venturing into the outside world every now and then. Now, this socialising experience is no longer necessarily the norm. Thanks to the internet, marginal obsessions can be indulged in at unlimited length, with like-minded people around the world.

Rather than being integrated into society by being forced to take people as they come, the internet allows you to preselect whom you choose to fraternise with, based upon whether or not they share your specific interests. And if you dislike or disagree with someone you encounter in this faceless environment, then rather than go through the process of being forced to account for your worldview, you can simply retreat from confrontation. Such an environment breeds individuation and solipsism.

But the internet cannot bear the blame for our tendency to retreat from reality - it is merely a communications medium, after all, reflecting broader social trends. Nor should we blame the *Lord of the Rings* films, or any other cultural product, for taking us down this path. After all, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is terrifically entertaining, and there's no shame in enjoying it. Nor am I apologetic about the fact that I will be attending another *Doctor Who* convention (Invasion 4) in two weeks' time, and a *Blake's 7* convention (Star One) after that.

No, the broader reason why mainstream society has become more disposed to immerse itself in fantasy is because of a general cultural stagnation that exists today. At a time when we feel less certain of our ability to impact on the world around us, we tend to retreat into fantasy worlds instead. One consequence of this is that we are increasingly more comfortable contemplating the ins and outs of life in Tolkien's Middle-Earth, than we are confronting the ins and outs of life on Earth proper. As Hollywood serves up ever more lavish fantasy spectacles for us to marvel at, the society that lies outside of the cinema and the comic shop stagnates.

This is a state of affairs that not only speaks ill of society, but actually demeans science fiction and fantasy as well, by putting them in the impossible position of having to provide us with the answers to life, the universe and everything. Fiction in these genres can be a terrific tool for exploring ideas, but it cannot satisfy the human urge to find meaning in life and to aspire to a better world. That can only come through confronting the questions that we face in the here and now.

If the geek shall inherit the Earth, then the Earth shall be the poorer for it. Both society as a whole, and science fiction/fantasy, would benefit if the latter were put back in its proper place - that is, as a satisfying diversion, rather than as life's *raison d'être*.

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(1) See [A Tolkien fan talks](#), by Sandy Starr



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