

# IF HERMES MADE A FILM

By Christine Carmines

Copyright 1984 Christine Carmines

In recent years movies have exploited magickal themes, attempting to borrow success from the STAR WARS episodes. Since reels of celluloid falsely smother the market in magick's name, some clarification is needed. What the Inquisition did to silence magickians now seems matched by Hollywood's attempts to humiliate them.

Actual magick isn't whining heroes, crinkled wizards or smooth-skinned warriors. It doesn't attract fluffy-eyed damsels to strange planets or lure eccentric anthropologists into forgotten pits. Magick is more than myth; but critics and producers never mention that trifle.

Fortunately something extraordinary simmers beneath this graceless flash. It is sophisticated, unpretentious and obvious (if you look). The yet unheralded *magickal movie* has infiltrated cinema.

Because that idea is novel, some definitions need preface the examples. Also as this is an introductory piece, all films fitting my description aren't included. The list was designed so you could discover magickal movies yourself and spot the fakes easily.

Now, to be technical — just what is a magickal movie? To be one the piece requires four elements which function inter-dependently. The presence of only a few, while interesting, isn't magickal. The four are:

1. A strong center character who undergoes an internal transformation in the course of the story.
2. That transformation causes the character to be more individual and independent yet wholly functional within their environment.
3. Thus, the transformation molds them into magickal students and;
4. The creative use of symbols, formulae, or shamanic mythologies as visual tools to foreshadow, prompt or rein force that internal change.

Those symbolic features may be present in the film's real or dream-time but they must interlock with the other three parts. Simple primal or pagan decoration won't make a magickal film. However, personal transformation unrelated to becoming alchemically functional (eg. willfully integrating one's drives, visions, comprehensions and life style into one's biosphere) is equally unmagickal. A magickal student is always one who by experiential training (formally or informally) learns to become a fully integrated individual. Basic psychological or religious turnabouts aren't sufficient. They are never inclusive enough.

Thai magickal movies have a strong central character develops from the emphasis magickal training places on individuals. However, as the examples show, magickal movies can also have several central characters. Their transformations are vital, as we don't live in a magickal society. Alchemical exercises aren't taught in grade school; and integrating one's Elements sounds dangerously erotic to the novice. Expecting people to act in rhythm with themselves and their environments is a feat reserved for yogis. Thus if it happens in the development of a non-mystic, it's not only transformative — it's unique. Neither Scarlett O'Hara nor Mr. Roberts ever had such adventures.

The final requirement is regularly used in non-magickal films. The distinction then is not if mythic elements are present but, whether they are used to cue, foreshadow or prompt the central transformation. Myth and legend remain the most effective creative doorways by which audiences pass into magickal reality (eg. Dreamtime). Additionally, they serve another function.

Their presence subtly allows both character and audience to peek into silently remembered mysteries. By working with pre-Christian perspectives cinema becomes a bardic wizard, orchestrating the transformation of viewer and protagonist alike. Yet so far magickal moviemakers only tease with the power in that premise. None, for lack of intent, knowledge or daring fully utilize it.

This article is written to spotlight that area and introduce its vast creative potential in film story-telling. But let's be clear, magickal movies are not just another genre. Any genre can be used to make them, instead, they are strongly emotive and almost instinctively magnetic for neglected reasons residing in their source.

The magickal movie has ancient subconscious roots and practically infinite ways of expressing itself. Consequently, even classic examples remain forever fresh. Their nature is to transform and make whole, not to preach, insist or even end on the proverbial high note. Magickal movies seduce you into thought, but never beat you with their cleverness. Primarily they are adventures where your awareness is paramount and playfulness essential. So with that in mind, let's proceed to the films.

## **THE WIZARD OF OZ** (Fleming, 1939)

Dorothy (Garland) experiences each pure Element while recognizing their parts in herself. Those Elements are symbolized in the Ozland characters of: the lion (Fire), the scarecrow (Air) and the tin man (Water). Toto, her constant companion, is Earth — a condensation of the other three. Her desire to return home is a metaphor for becoming alchemically complete. To get home, or attain Earth. Dorothy must first recognize and accept her Elemental parts. They naturally join her on her journey to the Emerald City. Toto's constant presence keeps both her and the audience from forgetting what she seeks. Her suggestive mantra: "There's no place like home" is a cipher meaning there's nothing more natural than being whole. Dorothy has discovered the goal of the magician.

## **ZARDOZ** (Boorman, 1973)

This is a sophisticated interpretation of Dorothy's tale. Now the mantra is: 'Let me die again'. As morbid as that sounds, it's not. The world of ZARDOZ is divided into an isolated educated class that never ages and an illiterate barbaric class where rape is an entertainment. Both fragments are alchemically lacking and completely removed from the rhythm that spawned them (alchemical Earth).

The Exterminator (Connery) uses knowledge to triumph in this world replete with examples that divorce theory from practice, living from dying and Element from Element. He returns the cycles and interjects knowledge into superstition. In this example the

protagonist is a catalyst for the integration of his world (which is the actual lead character). Celtic, Kabbalistic and color symbolism intriguingly support the film. Incident ally, the vortex of separation crumbles when magick develops.

## **PERFORMANCE** (Roeg, 1970)

Performance is a sacred word in magick; it is the physical expression of alchemical wholeness. In PERFORMANCE Turner (Jagger) is a wonderfully bankrupt alchemist lounging in his "lovely basement" decorated in the decaying dreams of his notorious past. Turner needs to perform again to activate. But this time only a magickal performance will do. He discovers that, does it, and transforms.

Having turned, Turner integrates his Elements, walks onto a sunny street and steps into a white Rolls. The closing scenes record his activation, transformation and survival. However, many have problems with this "weird" film. It neither explains itself nor exempts you from its illusion. Like all magickal movies it requires you to discover, learn and play.

## **WALKABOUT** (Roeg, 1971)

Though usually a solitary journey, two lost European children join one aboriginal boy on his walkabout. While travelling together they learn their power, their source and their magick come from the land about them. By that discovery their cultural differences become superficial. What they realize pre-dates cultural distinctions; its essence produces their coherence, transcending time or place.

Some 40,000 years ago aboriginals became isolated on the Australian continent. They thereby missed the dualist perspectives that swept through Europe and Asia. By not inheriting that separatism aboriginal beliefs remain closer to magickal perspectives than the views trumpeted in more sophisticated societies. Their myths of Dreamtime and the walkabout illustrate that point.

Before Dreamtime the world was a flat, barren plain. Underneath that arid wasteland was everything — the Spirit Ancestors. In Dreamtime they emerged from their underworld abode to go walking about. On their first walkabout they formed the geographic features and created all the fauna, fish, plants and people native to Australia. These Spirit Ancestors, in human form were the gods, heroes and totem animals of the Dreamtime.

The present-day aboriginal child goes on a walkabout to re-trace his particular Spirit Ancestor's activities in Dreamtime. By re-tracing their steps the aboriginal becomes one with both who he was in Dreamtime (his Spirit Ancestor), and his creation — the land about. After the walkabout he and that land will be forever linked. They become interchangeable essences of the Dreaming (eg. an unbreakable link between contemporary aboriginals and their Dreamtime selves).

The walkout is thus analogous to the Native American vision quest. It gives identity; while the vision quest supplies purpose. As the children discovered, the walkabout brings one home again.

### **2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (Kubrick, 1968)**

This entry is interesting for four reasons. It is a commercial piece wherein Dave (the lead) undergoes a vast spiritual/physical transformation clearly designed with audience participation in mind. Space exploration and technology uniquely take the place of the questing and its lessons, while retaining the latter's force. Vividly elegant archetypal images are employed that creatively encode specific Tarot trumps (eg. Fool, Hermit, Sun). And ironically neither director nor writer intended to make a magickal movie. Importantly, since magickal movies deal with concerns that have held fascination for at least 50,000 years, their appearance mandates no special planning. If magick is a natural phenomenon, creatively accessible, then any truly creative person can authentically express it. One need not intend to express magick in a movie. When one comes too close to the essence of things, magick cannot be avoided.

2001 records the transformation of Dave into the Star Baby, clearly the next stage in his evolution. In Tarot imagery Dave serves functionally as the Fool, and the Star Baby is a creative Sun trump. That baby floats in the cavity of the universe. The Egyptian goddess Nuit, symbolized as space, is that cavity. For magickians the Child of the Sun represents the Fool as wholly integrated. The Sun begins his third quest: to become the universe or, transit from doing to being. Dave, by his transformation, evolves into that third quest. Previously we had seen him as an old man, Tarot's Hermit, completing the cycle and embodying the wisdom that transmutes into the Sun.

### **THE LAST WAVE (Weir, 1977)**

This centers on a dedicated young lawyer (Chamberlain) who treats his world like a clear-cut law book. Into his convenient normalcy drift elements that don't quite fit. Since they are incomprehensible, the lawyer disregards them until he is forced to defend a group of city aboriginals accused of murder. The circumstances of the case cause him to face the unusual pieces in his past and what they represent for his future.

He comes to terms with the fullness of his life, accepts his own sensitivity and drowns as a result. Despite the black comedy, or viscious comment on white culture's inability to deal with things magickal, it is only by integrating his disparate worlds that the refuse can be cleared from his life. Appropriately a closing scene shows him crawling from a sewage outlet before the wave hits.

Clearly the film shows that magickal movies needn't end optimistically, propagandize certain psychological types, or credit particular film-making dogmas to do their work. Further, since magickal phenomena work into everyday life, they are valid experiences that needn't be stereotyped for effect.

### **THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY (Weir, 1983)**

Here is a jewel, with character and substance, once you dive beneath its gloss. Weir has used exquisite symbols in the shadow puppets to convey deep magickal concepts, dealt with contemporary urban magick, debuted the *wizard of the world* characterization and created two interlocking lead characters: Billy Kwan (Hunt) and Guy Hamilton (Gibson) whose transformations taught and touched us.

In Billy's discussion of the shadow play, light and dark aren't fearsome specters; they're variables in life's rhythm. Such a pagan idea is uniquely illustrated by the puppets. Their presence demonstrated it isn't necessary to re-tell Arthurian legends or rely upon symbols from Western culture to convey magickal points. Bards can be creative and cross-cultural too. As Billy might say: If only our eyes and hearts are open'...

Kwan was cinema's first true wizard Of the world. Even though magick consolidated long ago in agrarian societies, it still hasn't addressed the pressures of urbanization. City magickians maintain a magickal world view, adjust to industrial life, remain aware, participate, and yet are denied academic or monastic cover. They aren't white-washed heroic gurus. Like Billy, intensely human, they're often fragile dwarves struggling against the pain of living in a divided world.

Billy was charmingly flawed, achingly wise and determined to live his beliefs with integrity. He was the movie's Tower who, like Turner would transform. He became Guy who, because of Kwan, reconciled his own Moon card to also transform. Jilly, the film's Star trump, served as their window and hope. Together their story was a tender gift for first world magickians who must live all their years dangerously.

### **THE SEVENTH SEAL (Bergman, 1956)**

A returning Crusader and Death play games of life and chess on a wind-swept beach in the Middle Ages. The knight is detached from the chaos of plague-ridden Europe. He plays against Daath with an arrogant confidence, oblivious to the significance of the other's maneuvers. Removed yet still doing battle, he becomes involved and environmentally active as the film progresses. Simultaneous to his showings of concern, the audience becomes concerned and involved in the story.

The film combines Christian and magickal symbols. Death is portrayed elegantly. It is dignified - not a horror to war against but, a fact of living. Evil is similarly viewed. One doesn't fight, feed or fear its conspirings. Eventually the knight turns from a removed warrior into an involved participant, gracefully accepting his dying as part of the life he's involved in. To arrive at that rhythm he becomes attentive, learning to use the Element he lacks (Water).

### **MAD MAX & ROAD WARRIOR (Miller, 1980 and 1981)**

If I were to pick proto-typical magickal movies, these would probably win. Interlocking with devastating symbolic precision, they chronicle the initiation of an underworld apprentice (Max) followed by his fuller transformation into a Spirit Ancestor of the Road. To fully appreciate their

richness, familiarity with shamanic concepts, the election of an apprentice, the aboriginal legends of Dreamtime and the meaning of being a magickal warrior help. Though some argue movies shouldn't expect audiences to either think or learn, magickal movies (like these) do.

Both are packed with shamanic symbolism, magickal imagery, Tarot archetypes and mythic references. To do them justice requires a chapter of their own (as is true of the others). However, sane elaboration is possible.

Max (Gibson) is a polite young man with a passion for monster masks, fast cars and lonely roads. Using classic examples of election in futuristic circumstances, he is repeatedly called - to his magick, his identity, his road. Caught up in social expectations and personal fears he interprets those messages as signs of advancing lunacy. They are ignored until severe tragedies seize his attention.

Max undergoes a brutal initiation that utterly transforms him. He becomes a blue crystalline hawk - the tangible manifestation of an - underworld overseer. That underworld is the shamanic abode of Spirit Ancestors. It is neither hell nor a void of shadow. MAD MAX concludes when he consolidates his Elements, accepts his calling and emerges as a warrior of sacred space.

In magick the sacred is a rhythmic integration of all the alchemical Elements; it is Nature. As the goal of magickians is to integrate their own Elements, their task becomes a metaphor for becoming sacred or, existing naturally. When Max accepts his calling, he also accepts that goal.

ROAD WARRIOR infuses aboriginal understandings into that formula. Max is the road; his identification with that road becomes his walkabout. Thereafter his purpose is to cleanse his sacred space, thereby integrating himself. Throughout the film his actions are directed towards that end. At the conclusion he remains on the road, for to do otherwise would be sacrilege. He is now a magickian, a warrior, a guardian.

Magickal warriors, obviously magickians, are also their society's guardians of the sacred. Their calling is harsh; their work is vital and their lives are struggles. They are the midwives of magickal paradigms or, like Max, the Spirit Ancestors of a new world.

The examples which follow are not magickal movies, despite their seeming so on first glance. Knowing why I don't consider them such further clarifies my point.

### **The STAR WARS Trilogy (Lucas, Kershner, Marquand 1977, 1980, 1983)**

Despite its shortcomings this saga is a marvelous vision-book for the serious study of magick and pseudo-magick. However judging from the third installment, action and effects - not magick - were its mainstays. That is precisely how STAR WARS betrayed its beginnings.

Luke Skywalker underwent a transformation; he became a hero. Yet heroes aren't magickians just as myth isn't magick. Lucas added a strong mythic baseline but, by not comprehending the richness behind that

myth, he was left no option but to trivialize.

The hero's journey is only a small role played by the archetypal Fool in his quest through life. That quest deeply concerns magickal students and is the true basis of magickal films. To equate the hero with the Fool, and want his adventures to express equal richness, is to equate a rain forest to an orange seed.

The problem with *STAR WARS* is that the magickal underpinnings were unrealized by its story-teller.

And while its true the film-makers need not intend to make magickal films to do so, it is also true that magick can only be taken so far before the takers must know what they're doing. Note the special genius of George Miller and Peter Weir in that regard.

### ***LIGHT YEARS AWAY (Tanner, 1982)***

Like Lucas Tanner cracked the door and fumbled. Here began a gorgeous film about seeking a wizard in the Scottish highlands. Then it rudely shifted to vivify two misconceptions about magick.

First, magick isn't learned through bizarre happenings that produce superior understandings. Outsiders assume apprentices learn catchphrases or have electrifying experiences allowing them to 'magickally' put it all together. Magick isn't grasped by mind-ripping experiences nor is it learned from books. Those help but only spice a long training process. It takes time to consolidate the materials developed in apprenticeship. Thus, students must be apprenticed to life.

My second objection concerns the trite way Tanner characterizes his wizard. Suddenly the eccentric gezzar becomes a raving loony, flapping his arms about in bloody long underwear. Why do most directors insist wizards are either old, incompetent or nuts? Is there such a thing as class-action slander?

### ***BEAUTY AND THE BEAST (Cocteau, 1946)***

This is a beautiful, haunting version of the fairy tale. Despite the presence of so many magickal techniques, the film loses its possibilities in social stereotyping. If the focus were on Beauty's transformation, rather than the Beast's, this could be magickal.

While this movie is filled with magickal glitter, there are no transformations of an alchemical nature. The Beast becomes a beautiful young man and Beauty gets her Prince. But neither become fuller human beings.

### ***THE MAGUS (Green, 1968)***

Nicholas<sup>1</sup> (Caine's) adventures are elaborately manipulated by external forces. Conscious (Quinn) is a magickian whose work starts Nicholas on the Fool's quest (eg. realizing he's a human in illusion's game of reality).

While that realization is psychologically healthy, no consideration is given to Nicholas' internal transformations based on the magick he encounters. His future choices are foreshadowed in a Tarot reading, but the meanings supplied are intentionally false and it's doubtful the audience saw through them. This is an interesting look at

the value of play and perception in the development of magickal candidates. However, it isn't clear or committed enough to be a truly magickal movie.

### ***THE WICKER MAN (Hardy, 1973)***

This movie, like the next, is more a political plea for magick than a magickal film. It presents magickal belief as an holistic phenomenon that maintains the social/psychological health of an isolated community. Yet it also shows how easily belief can degrade into superstition. That happenstance occurs when the community's people start believing in their myths, rather than in the substance behind those myths.

A responsible and skillfully symbolic tale, *THE WICKER MAN* simultaneously cautions and celebrates magickians.

### ***EXCALIBUR (Doorman, 1981)***

Here is an unpretentious telling of the King Arthur legend wherein the focus is on Merlin (at last!). It uniquely shows magick as an essential substance -both molding and transcending time. It lyrically evokes the paradigm magickal movies have made their heart.

Given those legitimate and approximate examples, by using the criteria of the magickal movie a new cinematic ordering principle can be distilled from the apparent chaos. Thereby the bardic tradition is itself updated, and magickal story-tellers can resume their rightful significance. Lastly, given the existence of true magickal movies more film-makers might learn magick, and more magickians might make films. In that way the sacred space of story-telling, film and magick are best alloyed – and thus made thrice greater.

