

The Politics of Fear: Analysing the Discourse of "Otherness" in Children's Fantasy Films through the Harry Potter Series



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Abstract:

The present paper investigates the representation of the other in fantastic movies that are addressed to children, and explores the ways in which these movies can shape children's understanding of the world. Drawing on a Schmittian approach, along with theories of fantasy and ideology, the study provides a critical analysis of the Harry Potter movie series made after 9/11 attacks; especially the opening *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*. In particular, the study focuses on the use of visual effects to create a persuasive representation of terror and the role of the antagonist in reinforcing a binary worldview. The study reveals that fantastic narratives can both serve as a therapeutic tool for young people and children and as a political instrument that can subtly reinforce a Manichean view of the world by reducing complex political issues into simple narratives of "good" versus "evil". The research findings reckon the potential role of fantasy in serving dominant political discourse while condemning others.

Keywords: ideology; fantasy; discourse; enemy; the west.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many scholars agreed upon the idea that the cinematic industry ministers the dominant ideology. Indeed, those who hold the narrative, hold power. Being a powerful cinematic industry, Hollywood is undoubtedly the one which manipulates the narrative and crafts it to serve the dominant discourse. Pierre Conesa captures this dynamic by stating "Hollywood holds

a unique and undeniable ideological power; it is a political medium " (*Hollywar*, 2018, p. 8). He highlights the unparalleled influence of the institution as a not only a cultural but also a political force. In democratic societies this influence operates implicitly, as Noam Chomsky observes "Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state" (*Media Control*, 1997, p.10) a stark comparison that highlights the equally controlling effects of what democracies call "soft power" on collective consciousness. In this context hollywood normalises dominant ideologies, making them universally acceptable. Echoing these ideas, Leon Trosky described cinema as "the best instrument for propaganda" (Trotsky, 1986, p. 33). These views collectively shed light on how Hollywood uses visual power to craft persuasive narrative able to determine the dominant discourse.

Articulating this differently, cinema helps spread values such as individualism and democracy but most pre-eminently, it serves to deepen the gap between what is good and what is considered as evil in the name of universality. Since the Cold War, cinema has become the spokesman of universal peace and humanity. Undeniably, this is what people in power claim; yet other scholars defend the view that cinema is rather the spokesman of capitalistic self-centred "white" supremacist. It goes without saying that cinematography or the history of cinema has been showing us how in every decade Hollywood studios tend to rewrite historical events. Hence, cinema has become an (inter)national narrative whose purpose is to create a sort of collective memory to a large audience to polish some shameful passages of history. One would observe; however, in the field of Cultural Studies, little attempts have been investigated to explore the global impact of this (un)real world of cinema, especially on children.

In fact, cinema has become an instructor; a teacher of history, human sciences, and life in general that can build one's identity. It has a significant impact as it can reach a large audience throughout the world; eventually reaching different cultures. Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in the Harry Potter series and its political dimension. This paper; therefore, discusses the case of JK Rowling's Harry Potter movies released after the 9/11 event and strives to demonstrate how one of the most significant contemporary issues of political turmoil is represented and taught to children through fantasy. In light of this, how does the fantastic saga articulate political ideologies and solidify a dichotomous worldview through its portray of the enemy?

To understand the antagonist of the saga, this modest research attempts to apply the schmittian approach of the "enemy". It must be admitted that the choice of analysing movies and not novels is intentional. In fact, the changes that occurred in the movies, the absence of some crucial details, and the visual effects are not trivial. On the contrary, they are essential in demonstrating the view that even a fantasy movie addressed to children can be political. Surprisingly, despite the amount of literature that has been published, Harry Potter is seldom studied and it

is unclear to what extent it can represent the dominant discourse which promotes a binary vision of the world.

2. Beyond Castles and Spells: Teaching Political Discourse in Children's Fantasy:

Having grown up with an over-exposition of fantastic tales, castles, and magical stories, one's research has always been oriented towards science fiction and fantasy, with an attempt to connect it with the social context. This daily exposition can have tremendous impact in our personal development and would lead us to undertake a pivotal direction towards our cultural and political view once becoming an adult. Trying to figure out political events or to justify political decisions by reading or watching fantasy may appear as a bad pleasantry. However, to give importance to what used to be considered as "garbage" or "low" culture is to understand the significance of popular culture, a global culture which takes into account people's experience on a particular cultural phenomenon.

On the importance of childhood's fairy tales, the German poet Schiller says: "deeper meaning resides in the fairy tales told to me in my childhood than in the truth that is taught by life" (Bettelheim, 2010, p. 15). This quote suggests that there is more meaning from the imaginary of fantasy than from the literal teaching of everyday life. Fairy tales have the ability to teach children moral values through fantastic metaphorical means better than the "truth taught by life". Such a hypothesis begs the question: what is easier for a child than to understand the reality through unreality? Within this context, Nikolajeva is of the opinion that "fantasy should provide a moral and spiritual guidance" (Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 60); in other terms, fantasy provides a moral education and a cultural heritage transmitted through generations. Besides, the adult's lack of imagination and his logical reasoning might deprive him from understanding a child's need for magic and fairy tales. In a similar thought Bettelheim believes that:

Realistic explanations are usually incomprehensible to children, because they lack the abstract understanding required to make sense of them. While giving a scientifically correct answer makes adults think they have clarified things for the child, such explanations leave the young child confused, overpowered, and intellectually defeated" (Bettelheim, 2010, p. 66)

Children tend to not understand real life issues and experiences; such as traumatic events if they are explained in a straightforward, realistic manner. They need visual aids, or metaphors to illustrate the target issue. In response, fantasy can teach children complex or abstract ideas and allow them to develop a certain emotional intelligence. In a sense, fantasy offers a way to connect with the human experience as it appeals to one's emotions. It allows the child to explore complex themes such as loss, terror, and the nature of good and evil and helps him or her to understand traumatic events.

Indeed, fantasy can be therapeutic for children who experienced trauma and

loss, as it provides a way for them to understand what happened, and at the same time maintain a safe distance from what causes their anxiety as everything is set in an imaginary universe. This imaginary universe becomes a secondary belief which helps them to grasp and accept more easily what they have been through or what they have seen. Hence, one can conclude how significant is the use of magic for children to explore inner emotions and understand human experiences. This idea is well-illustrated in the next section, as we shall see how the theme of terror is tackled in the child fantasy of Harry Potter and how the Warner Bros Company depicts its antagonist, Lord Voldemort.

To understand the role of the antagonist, we shall use Karl Schmitt's approach. The political philosopher is well-known for his concept of the « enemy ». According to him, the enemy should not be perceived as an antagonist morally evil, but as a necessary part in defining political identity of a given community. Indeed, the existence of an enemy is necessary in creating unity and equilibrium in any group. This dynamic of differentiation is vital in maintaining political order as it allows to build international relations. While, the complete destruction of the enemy would be a threat to collective identity and political stability leading to political disproportion. This idea opposes "universalists" perspective. They reject the idea of the necessity of an enemy to maintain balance. For them, there cannot be two ideologies, on the contrary, humanity should have the same values and principles and to do so, the enemy should not exist as it would disturb political dynamic and world balance.

This reflection is vividly expressed in the Harry Potter narrative. The selected corpus which includes scenes from *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* (2009) directed by David Yates, weaves the themes of fear, good vs evil, making it an ideal case study for examining the concept of the "enemy". focusing on the development of the antagonist "Lord Voldemort" as well as its portrayal of terror and political conflict. For this research, priority was given to scenes that visually depict fear and terror, and symbolise the act of violence picturing the helplessness of ordinary people that mirror the reaction of real act of terrorism. In this respect, this paper investigates how children's fantasy narratives can engage with complex political discourses.

3. The Other in Harry Potter: Lord Voldemort as a Reflection of Contemporary Enemy:

Expecto Patronum, Expelliarmus, Lumos; these magical spells became part of our vocabulary. Indeed, a whole generation has been raised by the tumultuous adventure of the Harry Potter Saga; a series of 7 books written between 1997 and 2007 by the British author J.K Rowling. Her fantastic world of wizards brought back a long-lost interest in reading and has created a worldwide cultural phenomenon. Undoubtedly, the success of the Potter series could not escape from the claws of Hollywood industry which seized the opportunity by adapting the book into movies from 2001 to 2009 becoming, hence, a Warner Bros Production. Indeed, the movie

went through some changes in order to fit the standards of such powerful institution which would be discussed later.

The movie depicts several aspects of British culture, but its portrayal is superficial, and underneath the "Britishness" lays a universalized American identity with beliefs that reflect a Puritan American doctrine. Terror is a significant theme in Rowling's books; this theme was accentuated by Hollywood after the event of 9/11. In this context, Lev Grossman argues: "The kids who grew up on Harry Potter are the kids who grew up with the pervasive threat of terrorism, and it's inevitable that on some level they will make connection between the two." (Grossman, 2005). The specter of the horror started to rise in the fourth Harry Potter movie; the saga became darker in the aftermath of 9/11 not only in its thematic but also technical aspect in terms of colors, and sounds, as the scholar Pheasant Kelly wrote "the franchise becomes increasingly visually and thematically convergent with the event of 9/11 and the aftermath." (Hartman-Warren, 2016, p. 212). The Battle of Hogwarts has become a metaphor to the War on Terror and Harry Potter mirrors contemporary politics.

As mentioned above, when the fourth Potter movie was released, it was a time marked by a significant shift in global politics and a heightened sense of anxiety and insecurity. The last Potter movies reflect this context through the depiction of the antagonist Lord Voldemort who seeks domination and terrorizes the wizarding world through fear and violence. In fact, one may observe similarities between Voldemort's tactics and those of extremists' groups, among them, the surprise attack in "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire" at the beginning of the movie. The attack was unpredictable; radicals were undistinguishable from the rest of the wizards which makes it difficult to identify them. The scene corresponds to a real bombing attack; reminding the audience of the 9/11 attack as it induces fear, trauma, and loss. In parallel, Voldemort's main strategy is to spread fear within the community by using violence in order to establish control. He creates a network of radicals composed of Death Eaters. This non-state source of violence is characterized by its puritan ideology; the Dark Lord hires only pure blood- people whose lineage is supposedly composed of wizards only. In his quest for an ideal 'pure' society, he promotes the superiority of pure-blood wizards over half-blood and Muggle-born, and destroys those who do not adhere to their ideology. Similar to the characteristic of the "Islamic State" post 9/11, which seeks to create a pure fanatic Islamic world. This latter, has engendered hate towards the Muslim community and a state of panic among societies where everyone can be suspected of being a threat. Besides, with the ratification of the Patriotic Act 45 days after the attack on the twin towers, the government was allowed to track every movement of every American citizen. From monitoring emails and phone calls to collecting bank and credit card recordings, every innocent citizen was turned to be a legal suspect.

In order to establish an atmosphere of threat and optimize a state of paranoia, a dark mark is displayed in the sky which represents a skull with a serpent coming through his mouth to announce murdering (see figure N°1). This dark mark is a symbol used by Lord Voldemort and his followers to show allegiance to the Dark Lord. Moreover, it is a weapon of intimidation which strikes fear to those who oppose him, it does not harm physically but create a psychological mess and “removes all physical violence and places it in a scarier realm; the mind” (Strimel, 2004, p. 40) creating; henceforth, an emotive impact on the psyche of the characters and the viewers as well. The Lord of Darkness uses a propagandist method of psychological violence on the community to increase the level of fear and create an atmosphere of paranoia and trauma, a tactic already used by our contemporary media

Figure N°1: Close up of the Dark mark in Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince (01:44).



Source: Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince (2007)

As far as the formal context is concerned, some scenes may appear familiar. Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince, for instance, draws our attention to the visual experience of the 9/11; the attack of the London Bridge by the Death Eater flying and hitting quickly from every side, forming a cloud of dust is a cruel reminder to the audience of the trauma lived by American and European citizens. In fact, the opening of the sixth Potter movie started with a dramatic scene in which we could see working people looking up from their window or their office something coming rapidly from the cloudy grey sky; a powerful scene which projects us to the few moments before the first airplane attack of one of the twin towers in 9/11. (see figure N°2) It was followed by a surprise attack in London Bridge, which was completely destroyed and swallowed by the water. In order to make the scene more realistic and darker; the American production used Aerial shot. A bird-eye view was taken from a high camera angle in order to provide a wider perspective of the place. (see figure N°3) It is particularly useful for showing landscapes or battlefield to create a sense of grandeur or to show the magnitude of a situation. In this scene the camera shot has added more intensity to the situation, making the audience (re)living the 9/11 attack while being in their seats.

Figure N°2: eye level camera of people in Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince (01:30)



Source: Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince (2007)

Figure N°3: Bird eye view of Dearth Eaters in London in Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince (02:50)



Source: Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince (2007)

In addition, it was observed that in H.P and the Deathly hallow Part 1, the long shots of landscapes led to “a gothic industrial appearance symbolizes anxieties to post 9/11 providing rhetoric to a post-apocalyptic imagery” (Hartman-Warren, 2016, p. 220). The visual landscapes of ruined cities and the empty places are a metaphor to the consequence of political violence that would lead to a “primitive existence” (Hartman-Warren, 2016, p. 220). The antagonist and his partisans accept this perpetual state of war until they defeat Lord Voldemort. (Hartman-Warren, 2016, p. 221). Hence, we can understand that people are ready to sacrifice also their civil liberties for their own good; a reference to the above-mentioned Patriotic Act, a law which has deprived American people from their basic rights and established an Orwellian state control for “their own good”. Again, the movie –and not the book- is a parallel to the context of the War on terror and the state of paranoia; as

Bethany Barret argues in her book "The politics of Harry Potter" that in both worlds, violation of principles is justified by claiming safety and security (Barratt, 2012). In the same vein the scholar Pheasant-Kelly argues: "Films made after 2001 display an inflection of their new millennial contexts not always apparent in the written texts, in particular in their reference to 9/11 and terrorism." (Hartman-Warren, 2016, p. 212), and Harry Potter movies are no exception to the rule; the visual effects and the small yet significant omitted details draw the audience attention to what the American conglomeration wants to show and not to show.

Accordingly, the late Harry Potter movies depict the impact of violent extremism on society and how it can divide communities, instill fear and erode civil liberties. As Bethany Barret argues "Those who have grown up with Harry Potter have grown up in a magical world that is no less political than our own." (Barratt, 2012, pp. 1-2). The world of Harry Potter is divided between good and evil; as the narrative describes the good characters as brave, loyal and generous, whereas evil characters are depicted as cruel, selfish, and abusive. A dichotomy already seen in our own world, for instance, during the Cold war there were communists, whom used to be called the Evil Empire, and Westerners. The constant presence of this eternal duality of good and evil and who will eventually win the battle represents the conflicting ideologies of our world. In fact, Politics has always been divided between left and right, orient and occident, between good and evil and people found themselves choosing one side. This choice would determine who they are and the principles they stand for, a philosophy that can be illustrated in the very first H.P movie, when Dumbledore said to Harry: "It is our choices, Harry that show who we truly are, for more than our abilities".

By choosing one side, we establish our identity and to whom we belong and eventually decide who is not part of us, who is the other or our opposite, our enemy and feel allowed marginalizing and dehumanizing the other as it represents a threat to our beliefs and values. As Brittany Barrett plainly explains it in her conclusion:

The danger of this sort of thinking—casting one side as "good" and the other as "evil"—is that when we conceive of our enemy as evil (and therefore, less human than we are), we can justify stripping them of the basic rights we should all be accorded simply by virtue of our humanity conclusion. (Barrat, 2012, p. 159)

In other words, everything is permitted to demolish those who do not adhere to our beliefs, reducing the other to an alien whose sole purpose is to destroy, control, and impose his ideology using violence. In the same fashion, movies reinforce the idea that our enemy or the other cannot be seen as equal as we are and must be eradicated; his opponents are ready to fight and sacrifice themselves if they feel that they may lose their values and beliefs. Ultimately, the enemy is dehumanised with no alternative for redemption or negotiation; he is what he is, his destiny is determined by his choice of being different. Brittany Barrette, however, refutes this point of view which suggests that the enemy is equal to the notion of evil that must be defeated. She adds in her conclusion:

In addition, most conceptions of "evil" do not include the possibility of change or salvation. So, a war of good versus evil is much less likely to have a negotiable, compromised solution possible than a war over a material resource or even a policy position. There may be a way to share a piece of territory, or a way to find a point between two policy positions—but most political leaders do not want to be seen as compromising with evil." (Barratt, 2012, p. 159)

This view is supported by Carl Schmitt, a German political philosopher who is best known for his concept of the "enemy". The theorist believes that the concept of the enemy should not be seen as inherently destructive. The enemy is rather a necessary part of political identity. In other words, the existence of a common enemy is what creates a sense of collective identity to a given community; its complete destruction would establish disequilibrium in international relation. Yet, it is worth mentioning that Schmitt's ideas have been controversial; many theorists disagreed with his ideas and consider them as violent and aggressive.

Given the fact that the use of Schmittian approach in Harry Potter movies would be inadequate or challenging, his conceptual framework allows a deeper insight into the understanding of Harry Potter's antagonist Lord Voldemort. Undoubtedly, the world of Harry Potter presents a different vision of politics opposite to Schmitt's belief. While this latter believed that the presence of an opposition is what makes our identity, Potter philosophy is inclined with those who believe in universality and harmony not opposition. Opposition, duality, having a different vision is wrong and dangerous; one must cooperate and merge with the other; otherwise, he or she represents a threat and has to be eradicated.

As it has hitherto been mentioned earlier in this article, the choice of studying movies instead of books is intentional. Indeed, in order to understand the origins of Voldemort cruelty, one has to go back to his past. Voldemort was born to a witch mother and a Muggle father. As the written text revealed Merope Gaunt, his mother, used a love potion on his father, Tom Riddle, in order to make him fall in love with her. This ultimately led to the conception of our antagonist. His birth highlights the tragic consequences of the use of magic for personal gain; he is the product of a manipulative and dishonest relationship. Furthermore, Voldemort's father, eventually, abandons his mother and unborn child once the effects of the potion wear off. His mother died shortly after giving birth to him and he was raised in an orphanage and later at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft, where he showed early signs of being manipulative, and lacking of empathy. Overtime, Voldemort became increasingly interested in the study of dark magic and began to seek power and immortality at any cost. His thirst for revenge led him to commit murders; killing his own family who abandoned him, his soul was, therefore, fragmented and his cruelty was reflected into his physical appearance.

While the story of the birth of the Dark Lord and his childhood is an important part of the Harry Potter series; as the reader gets more details at his early life and

the circumstances that led to his descent into darkness, these significant aspects were not mentioned in the film adaptations. On screen Voldemort is an unambiguous character who was born evil. His depravity and insensitiveness are shown in one of the scenes when he was still a child and his actions throughout the story are undeniably cruel and vicious. The Warner Bros company preferred to reinforce his status of pure evil, without creating any room for sympathy or empathy on the part of the audience, they tend to focus more on the battle between Harry and Voldemort. In other words, their intention was to reduce the complexity of the characters by displaying the simple and traditional view of good and evil. They reduce the concept of being evil to a matter of choice, this principle is embodied in the character of the antagonist who makes the choice to embrace dark magic and use his power to harm others.

Applied on the Harry Potter' character Lord Voldemort, the conceptual work of Schmitt may appear inadequate, yet, his work is a key theoretical source as it provides us more insight about the conception of the other in Harry Potter in particular and the Hollywood industry in general. In fact, his theory, which is based on the construction of political group identity, suggests that one requires the existence of the other to identify as a self. One needs to admit and recognise the other rather than destroying him. His destruction would mean the denial of his past and his values; and no alternative for redemption; it would show our intolerance towards someone different from us. This extremist thinking which reflects a neo-liberal point of view is no less different than the one neo-liberal themselves are fighting for; extremists who seek conformism and puritan ideology.

From a Schmittian point of view, Lord Voldemort represents exactly what a contemporary enemy is in the lens of the West, someone born evil that has chosen to embrace darkness, and cannot be understood. To the mind of the audience, it creates the idea that those who are different from us may represent a threat, a danger to our community and our principles. The enemy is always evil and cannot be exonerated for his beliefs or actions regardless on his motivations or backstory. Therefore, in order not to justify his actions or feel a small empathy towards him, finding an answer to Lord Voldemort past was omitted by the Warner Bros Company, making him fully responsible for his own choice, and this particular idea aligns with neo-liberal doctrine. Voldemort is the other who historically speaking can be represented as the pagan, the catholic, the Native American, the immigrant, the fascist, the communist, the Muslim, or the orient in general. Wars and genocide have always been the radical answer for those who do not adhere, those who show resistance, and those who are culturally, religiously and ideologically different. This particularity of destroying the other is well reflected on screen. Cinema is rhetoric, a mirror of our own realities; it displays contemporary politics as Harry Potter, a movie generally addressed to children, displays contemporary discourse on political violence. This is how we explain politics to a child; through magic. To put it simply, there are good and bad people, bad people cannot be good people; they can only

be punished or eradicated.

The fantastic form is; henceforth, used as a metaphor for reality. When discussing terror to a child as mentioned earlier, it is better to use magic than exposing real facts as it minimises trauma. The film becomes a therapy to children as it allows them to understand more by themselves what terror is. However, this young audience would eventually cast themselves in one side –good or evil- and consider the question who is from one's side and who is not. They would make the analogy between the good characters and the good citizens versus the bad characters and the bad citizens and probably grow up with this binary vision which is completely false as it denies the complexity of the human nature reducing him to be trapped between two sides. As Bettelheim declared "Fairy tales leave to the child fantasizing whether and how to apply to himself, what the story reveals about life and human nature." (Bettelheim, 2010, p. 64). In other terms, fantasy, or movies in general teach us, guide us, and can construct our own identity since our childhood. In brief, we become what we watch more than what we read or what we live.

4. Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge the impact of cinema, especially on children and how it can convey particular ideologies, shape their perception over the world, and build their identity. The aim of the present research was to investigate the issue of insurgency and how the enemy is represented in cinema, more exactly in fantastic movies addressed to children through discourse analysis. To do so, we had first to understand how children can perceive reality through fantasy and the way it shapes their understanding of good and evil. We came up with the conclusion that fantastic narrative can be a therapy; as it allows them to (re)explore any particular event in an imaginary universe. This section helped us to understand how significant fantastic tales are, making children explore the theme of loss and terror. As an example, the following section critically examined the Harry Potter movies made after the 9/11 and provided an in-depth analysis on the theme of terror using both, formal and social context. Indeed, the paper argued that the visual effects and storytelling techniques employed in the movies can be persuasive in projecting its audience to the context of terror, while the representation of the antagonist Lord Voldemort as the enemy, drawing from Schmittian approach, further reinforced the binary worldview.

Overall, the present paper highlights the importance of investigating the dominant discourse and ideological messages that are implicitly imbued in popular media, especially those targeted towards a young category as they can implement universal beliefs and principles. It also sheds light on the impact of children's understanding of complex political issues. Presumably, it can be assumed that although the Harry Potter series and its film adaptations offer a fascinating narrative, it is also essential to recognize the reduction of its antagonist to an unambiguous character and the simple binary vision provided of good and evil can

perpetuate certain political ideologies and representation of the other.

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