

The Reality of Fantasy: Visual Effects as Fantasmatic Supplement in *Game of Thrones* (2011-)

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The success of HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011–) [*GoT*] is due, in no small part, to its *realism*.¹ In the context of the fantasy genre, this might seem a contradictory – even paradoxical – proposition, given a common understanding that “realism” and “fantasy” should be diametrically opposed (as in Kathryn Hume’s fantasy/mimesis divide):² and this already begins to indicate the fundamental propositions of this chapter regarding psychoanalysis and the constitution of “reality”. In what follows, I will seek to interrogate such oppositions by focusing on the widespread use of practical and digital effects in *GoT* in order to establish a conceptual rapport between the fantasy genre and the psychoanalytic theory of fantasy. My aim is thus to examine the role of computer-generated imagery in the creation of contemporary fantasy film and television in terms of the Lacanian notion of the necessary role of fantasy in our relation to the world. As such, I will observe the terminological specificity that Stephen Prince, for example, emphasizes of distinguishing “special” [SFX] from “visual” [VFX] effects – with the former designating practical effects produced on set before the camera and the latter post-production manipulation of the image (whether optical or digital) – because such a distinction, while not always straightforward, does have an important bearing on the theoretical framework I am attempting to build. Indeed, Prince notes that, initially at least, “special effects” were “special” because the “joins were visible,” while VFX are now seamlessly integrated into film at every level: a point to which I will return throughout.³

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My focus will thus be on a composite or synthetic realism suggested by the ontology of the image in *GoT*. On the one hand, this would be distinct from Lev Manovich’s notion of “synthetic realism,” which accounts only for the computer-generated image itself.⁴ What I investigate here is an effect brought about by the *synthesis* of two elements: specifically, live-action photography and computer animation. On the other, it would also be distinct from Jean-Louis Baudry’s “impression of reality,” which conceptualized the cinematic apparatus itself as a machine producing a perceptual reality for the spectator, independent or irrespective of the particular film text.⁵ Here it is the particular image presented by *GoT* that I suggest is at stake. This chapter will examine the fundamental relation between fantasy and animation, not only in the series but also in our understanding of both psychoanalysis and visual culture more broadly. Elements of VFX (such as digital matte painting) might not obviously be categorized as “animation” where, as Paul Wells notes, this is largely understood as the “artificial creation of the illusion of movement.”⁶ However, where Wells nuances this through Norman McLaren’s famous term, “movements that are drawn,” we could nonetheless see the motionless mattes as a *drawn* element of the moving image; and further, what is certainly at stake in my investigation is the digital compositing of “real” actors and sets with computer-generated – which is indeed to say drawn, *animated* – creatures, vessels and armies in the depiction of the violent struggle for the Iron Throne. In fact, as Michele Pierson emphasizes, it might be necessary to draw a further distinction between the computer-*generated* and the computer-*animated* in this context: a distinction that can be further elaborated through the Lacanian approach to fantasy and animation I present below.⁷

While there are numerous approaches to, and definitions of, special/visual effects – such as Dan North’s emphasis on the role of performance and the “synthespian” in *Performing Illusions* or Lisa Purse’s investigation of the connotative possibilities of CGI for

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narrative in *Digital Imaging in Popular Cinema* – the framework established by Dan North in collaboration with Bob Rehak and Michael Duffy in *Special Effects* is of particular value here as it allows me to delineate precisely what this chapter will and will not be about.⁸ In their introduction to the collection, they posit a number of categories for organizing the reception, consumption, analysis and evaluation of effects: in terms of aesthetic/formal specificity; in terms of reception/spectatorship, where effects are understood in relation to viewer knowledge, belief and connoisseurship; and in ontological/philosophical terms, regarding the truth-claims of the medium.⁹ They further suggest that the “life cycle” of effects can be understood in three stages: construction (production), appearance (diegesis), and discursive (appreciation), and finally insist that “special effects” (which, in their terminology, include both SFX and VFX) comprise of a “blurred and layered composite consisting of the effect ‘itself’, a paratextual halo, and the structure of comprehension in the spectator’s mind.”¹⁰ The idea of the “composite” and the paratext will certainly be important for this chapter, and my study will indeed take into account both the formal and spectatorial aspects of the use of VFX in *GoT*. The series is a particularly “effects-heavy” example of contemporary television, presenting a fantasy world that could only be brought to screen through computer animation; it thus serves as an ideal site of investigation both for this collection and for my chapter in particular. As a theoretical engagement with effects, my analysis will also bear upon ontological/philosophical questions; however, I do not intend to present a “psychoanalysis” of structures of comprehension, and will not be dwelling on the “truth claim” of the moving image, such as it is. Instead, I offer a reappraisal of current neo-Lacanian film theory in order to explore the relation between reality, fantasy and VFX in *GoT* from a psychoanalytic perspective.

The Realism of Fantasy

Both the popular and critical reception of *GoT* seem to envelope the series in a paratextual discourse on “realism,” which is articulated in relation to two, interconnected areas. First, and originating in George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* saga, is a subversion of certain nineteenth-century, neo-medieval tropes that are presented as being both simplistic and common to the fantasy genre, and then, by extension, the introduction of a degree of *social realism* to the narrative. Second, the supposed verisimilitude of the staging and imaging of fantasy provided specifically by the television production of *GoT*.¹¹ Martin’s stated aim is a vision of the *social* reality of feudal life stricken by war and tyranny, which can be seen – for example – in the extended passages on Brienne of Tarth that examine the toll of political and armed conflict on the populous of Westeros.¹² This might be seen as a sort of “fantastic social realism,” understood as broadly distinct from “magical realism” whereby fantastic elements are introduced into everyday life: here, a fantastic world is itself rendered quotidian.

A second consistently highlighted aspect of the “realism” of *GoT* relates to the supposed verisimilitude of its depiction of (neo-)medieval warfare *and* the apparently convincing portrayal of dragons, mammoths and giants in motion. For example, Ben Child compares “The Battle of the Bastards” (s06e09) to the “realistic rendition of historic Native American fighting techniques” in *The Revenant* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2015) and the “realistic representation of the horrors of the second world war battlefield” in *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998).¹³ This discourse of “realism” is echoed, too, by the program makers themselves, who suggest that the battle is grounded in both historical and physical reality: for instance, director Miguel Sapochnik cites the Battle of Canae and the Macedonian phalanx as inspirations for the tactics of the Bolton army, and references the horse battles of Kurosawa’s *Ran* (Akira Kurosawa, 1985) because, “it was all real – no CGI or digital replication.”¹⁴ This led to the striking image of Jon Snow facing down the Bolton cavalry

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charge, of which showrunner David Benioff notes, “Part of the reason that’s such a great shot is that it’s all real”. Similarly, Kit Harrington observes, “We’re a bit annoyed because everyone is going to think that it was CGI, but it wasn’t!”¹⁵ There is, then, repeated emphasis on the referential *realism* involved, on how much *really takes place* before the camera during production.

Nonetheless, just as the celebrated “realism” of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), for example, was in fact a *synthetic* image famously dependent on numerous complex optical processes, so too is the visual “realism” of *GoT* entirely predicated upon post-production CGI. As VFX producer Steve Kullback observes, “You’ve got things happening that you can’t shoot in any real way. You’ve got a giant punching out a horse!”¹⁶ The giant – a digitally-scaled-up actor – can thus be said to constitute a version of what Kristen Whissel calls an *emblem*, here of the interplay between reality and fantasy that I am seeking to investigate in this chapter: a blend of photography and CGI, impossibly convincing, an imaginary creature presented in a quotidian way.¹⁷ *GoT* thus offers a composite image of photographed elements and post-production CGI to produce a “realistic” fantasy world. Indeed, producer Frank Doelger is quite clear about both his team’s ambitions and how they are achieved in post-production: “We’re approaching visual effects in a very specific way. We want visual effects to be as real as possible. Yes, there are fantasy elements, but what we’re trying to do is make the fantastical as real as possible.”¹⁸ Here, we can see how this very specific paratextual discourse of “realism” surrounding the series is based on what North refers to as the “performance of ‘photographicness.’”¹⁹ The VFX in *GoT* are discursively presented as offering a high degree of what Prince calls “perceptual realism:” as images corresponding to our “audiovisual experience of three-dimensional space,” organizing “the display of light, colour, texture, movement, and sound in ways to correspond with the viewer’s own understanding of these phenomena in daily life.”²⁰ This is to what the makers

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of *GoT* refer when they discuss “photorealistic” effects: the production of images that have no reference in the material world but are nonetheless perceived as if they did and have been photographed as such. Moreover, “realism” is always – as Bazin reminded us – a series of choices and aesthetic conventions, and what interests me here is the psychoanalytic-philosophical significance of this idea of the *proximity* of the VFX image to “daily life” by which we are encouraged to understand the “realism” of a fantasy such as *GoT*. I suggest that the most effective way to do this is to consider the *psychoanalytic* function of “fantasy,” particularly as it has so far been theorised in relation to the screen.

Fantasy, Four Ways

The most compelling account of psychoanalytic fantasy and film, then, comes from Todd McGowan, who, in his book *The Real Gaze*, offers a four part typology of cinema – as desire, fantasy, integration and intersection – which will serve as the point of departure for my own investigation.²¹ In brief: the cinema of desire is articulated around *absence*; it concerns what we do not see. As McGowan notes, of course, the typical narrative arouses desire by producing gaps in knowledge (the plot/story distinction). However, when he suggests that, “To experience the cinema of desire is to experience what one doesn’t have,” McGowan theorizes something rather different.²² The erotics of cinema here – which is to say, how it produces desire – comes from the way in which the cinema of desire offers something resistant to meaning; McGowan suggests that, “in addition to concealing something [...] a narrative also conceals nothing, an emptiness that no empirical object can fill.” This irreducible element – constitutive of the Lacanian conception of desire – is, for McGowan, typically found in the ambiguity of European art cinema, in films that offer no straightforward closure or easy satisfaction. The cinema of desire “allows us to experience

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lack and absence as fundamental’’: and one need only think of the obscure cinema of Resnais or Antonioni here to grasp McGowan’s thesis.²³

This is in contrast, then, to the cinema of fantasy, which is articulated around plenitude or excess. In Lacanian terms, fantasy “relieves the subject from the burden of lack” and thus stabilizes desire, but the cinema of fantasy is not simply the *inverse* of the cinema of desire, offering that easy closure which is denied by art cinema. Instead, the cinema of fantasy is characterised by *showing too much*; it exposes the excess, revealing the (unconscious) fantasies that subtend and distort social relations. For McGowan, the films of Stanley Kubrick and Spike Lee effectively reveal this hidden enjoyment, thus airing our “dirty secrets” in public. In *Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964), for instance, we see the fantasmatic underside of symbolic authority as it shows how authority figures “get off” on the exercise of power. Lee, then, extends such libidinal investment to *all subjects* in *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989), where racist fantasies are shown to stain every social relation.²⁴

The latter two categories in McGowan’s typology involve different modes of relation *between* desire and fantasy in the cinema, and are thus potentially more effective but in very different ways. The cinema of intersection, for McGowan, comprises films that maintain a separation between the realms of fantasy and desire, “in order to reveal what occurs when they collide.” David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986) is a particularly clear case: the shadowy, threatening urban spaces of downtown Lumberton constituting the inconsistent world of desire, and the seemingly idyllic suburbia constituting the abundant world of fantasy. The “intersection” occurs when Dorothy intrudes into Jeffrey’s home life: her naked body a traumatic disruption of both the visual field and the Oedipal family/romantic structure, thus offering an encounter with unbearable enjoyment (or “jouissance”).²⁵ While it is in *this* mode of cinema that McGowan is particularly interested, it is not the main focus of my chapter.

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Nor – despite this being a collection *on fantasy* – is it on the “cinema of fantasy” per se;

instead, I examine the particular relation between psychoanalytic desire and fantasy

articulated in the cinema of *integration* and how *this* relates to the fantasy genre, even at the level of the ontology of the image itself.

The Integration Image

The cinema of integration, for McGowan, comprises films that offer a fantasmatic solution to the impasses of desire. Interestingly, it is that landmark fantasy film, *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), which serves as McGowan’s privileged example here: with Kansas as the dissatisfactory world of desire, Oz the fantasy of fulfillment, and the film’s conclusion – where the characters of Oz and Kansas coincide – the point at which a traumatic encounter is averted as desire is intermixed with the fantasmatic element. McGowan also turns to key figures in contemporary mainstream cinema as proponents of such fantasmatic solutions: as for example, death or psychosis are impossibly overcome in Ron Howard’s *Cocoon* (1985) and *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), and in Steven Spielberg’s films a once-compromised father figure regains his symbolic authority, with Chief Brody in *Jaws* (1975) serving as the archetype. Such fantasmatic integration provides “relief from desire:” moving us from an insecure to a protected world.²⁶

While I take up this idea of the combination of desire and fantasy in a psychoanalytic context, I suggest different possibilities for film theory from those put forward by McGowan. I (re)turn to the fantasy genre, then, for its vivid examples of VFX in contemporary filmmaking which thus allow us to conceive of an *image* of “integration” in a different way. This, I suggest, can most clearly be seen in the proliferation of “DVD extras” documentaries and awards show-reels that examine the sophisticated techniques and hundreds of work-hours

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put into producing such imagery. Indeed, approaching VFX through such production paratexts is already an integral part of effects studies: as North, Rehak and Duffy observe, “The field of special-effects is almost impossible to separate from these paratextual networks.”²⁷ They are a primary point of disclosure for information on how VFX are produced and play an active role in shaping our understanding of the film-text, giving us crucial insights into the construction of the image.

McGowan briefly mentions the fantasy genre – and J.R.R. Tolkien in particular – as he introduces the psychoanalytic notion of fantasy, noting “some resemblance” between them as “imaginary scenario[s]” that allow us to glimpse something otherwise inaccessible, but this is neither especially enlightening nor a point to which McGowan returns.²⁸ It is my contention, however, that bringing fantasy – and *GoT* in particular – into dialogue with psychoanalysis can reveal more about both how the genre is animated and how it relates to the psychic domain (the *animus* itself). In order to do this, it is worth examining the production of the Battle of Castle Black for “The Watchers on the Wall” (s04e09), which – as showrunner D.B. Weiss explains – “involves a much heavier visual-effects component ‘cause of the giant and the mammoths and the Wall.”²⁹ In doing so, I will draw upon the short documentary, *Behind the Battle for the Wall* (D.B. Weiss, 2014), and other paratextual materials which offer key production details: particularly in terms of the extensive VFX production to create the scenes beyond the Wall, including *the biggest green screen the North has ever seen*. My method here is not simply to take these practitioners at their word in order to analyse *GoT* in terms of that slippery notion of realism; instead, I take them *à la lettre*, as Lacan might say, in order to analyse the *discourse* of realism that surrounds the images and how this relates both to their ontology and to a psychoanalytic understanding of reality.

Where McGowan discusses the cinema of integration, it is largely in terms of *narrative*: Howard and Spielberg’s films are *stories* of such integration of fantasy and desire,

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with the formal qualities simply driving these narrative logics. While McGowan *does* emphasise the formal difference between Oz and Kansas in terms of Technicolor versus sepia, where he finally turns in a more sustained way to integration at a formal level, it is the editing techniques of D.W. Griffith that he highlights: a particular arrangement of narrative units to create suspense and thus forever hold out the possibility of fantasmatic conclusion.³⁰ What McGowan does not consider, then, is the possibility of identifying a form of integration at the level of *the ontology of the image itself*, and this is what we see in the use of VFX in the fantasy genre. In short, my thesis here is that the pro-filmic space constitutes a realm of *desire*, while the digital world of VFX constitutes a realm of *fantasy* in the Lacanian sense; and that the production of *GoT* thus demonstrates the integration of desire and fantasy in the creation of a fantasy genre image.

To consider the pro-filmic world as *desire*, we could first refer to Peter Jackson's comments on the expanding use of CGI in *The Hobbit* films (Peter Jackson, 2012-14), which has replaced practical sets and architectural miniatures (as had been the case for *The Lord of the Rings* [2001-3]). He explains, "You're limited to what you can do with a miniature because [...] the detail doesn't hold up too well. [This time] it's all done with CGI [...]. I can do things that I never could have dreamt of doing [before]."³¹ This is the key point: the pro-filmic space and practical effects (SFX) in general are subject to *limitations*, constraints of budget, time, scale, safety, and so on. As Kullback explains: "What we ultimately decided on was that we'd have more flexibility and a better look if we did it CG. But we wanted to have as much of it be in-camera and photographed as possible."³² We can therefore see that, despite the production team's aim to achieve as much as possible with *SFX*, they realized that, when attempting to depict a giant riding a mammoth for *GoT*, a pure practical effect would be *unsatisfactory*; it required something more and thus reliance on photographing material reality became a case of "not showing enough." In one sense, this could be a way of

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interpreting Lacan’s declaration that, “desire is the essence of reality,” that desire and reality are related in a seamless texture, being one and the same fabric: the Subject is constituted by desire and it structures her universe as one founded on *lack*.³³ Indeed, we could even say that this aspect of the production of *GoT* becomes an experience (or an image) *of* lack: this being rendered in the visual field by the looming green screens in every shot. They constitute an *absence* in the image, characteristic of the world of desire, that can (or even must) then be *filled in* by something else: as VFX Supervisor, Joe Bauer asked, when producing a live-action stunt featuring computer-animated beasts, “How do you keep extras from running through it? How do you keep a space open in a big action scene to insert the missing creature?”³⁴

The missing element in this instance is CGI: the giant is shot separately – riding a fur-covered motion base – and digitally scaled-up. The mammoth he rides is entirely computer-animated, and these elements are added into the on-location footage to create a digitally-composited image: “so that when you put it all together, you’ve got a giant riding a mammoth and charging at the ice wall” (see Figs. 5.1-5.3).³⁵



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Fig. 5.1: Desire: The actor on a motion base (with the green screen plate added to on-location footage).

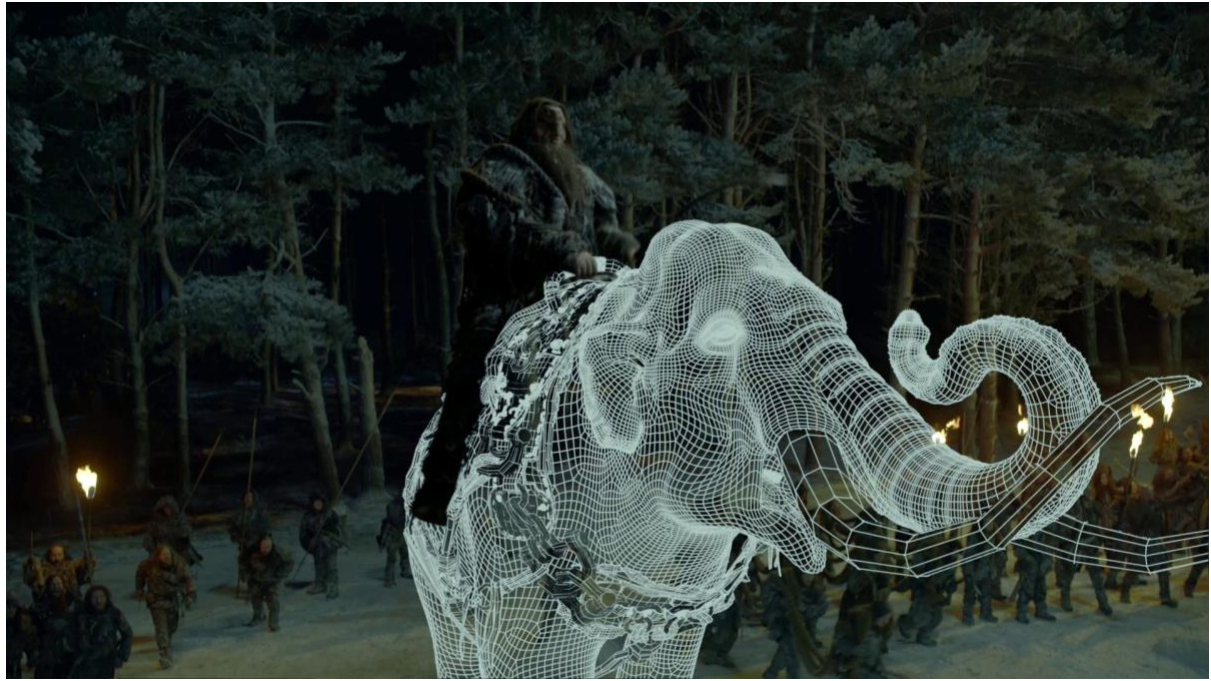


Fig. 5.2: Fantasy: adding the wireframe for the computer-animated mammoth.



Fig. 5.3: Integration: the completed image.

This integrated image is thus a fantasy (genre/image) that could not have been achieved otherwise. As Kullback put it, CGI offers *more flexibility and a better look*; it constitutes an abundance even an excess of image. Of course, just like every other aspect of production, VFX departments *are* subject to budget limitations but in terms of the *possibilities* available, computer animation *qua* animation is – as Wells observes – “unlimited in its potential.”³⁶ CGI is thus, in every sense of the word, a realm of *fantasy*: as that which makes the impossible possible, an abundance or excess that *fills in the blank space*, the lack in the image. Bringing these elements together – live-action and computer animation – can thus be considered a form of *integration* at the level of the ontology of the image (see Fig. 5.3). Here we might observe the specificity of computer-*animated* (as opposed to the generality of computer-*generated*) imagery that Pierson emphasizes: the elements photographed on set (whether, in fact, on celluloid or digital) are the limited world of *desire*, and the computer-*animated* elements of the image (drawn by an artist with a computer) added in post-production through digital manipulation are abundant *fantasy*: their digital composition offering a *formal-ontological* corollary of McGowan’s more narratological theorization of integration.

What is particularly striking is the proximity between McGowan’s lexicon and the descriptive language of both VFX practitioners and theorists. For instance, Whissel rejects the seemingly widespread opposition of “effects spectacle” to story, to argue that “digital effects are deployed with greater integration into and involvement with narrative, plot, setting and development of character psychology.”³⁷ Prince echoes this, insisting that film fans “want the effects to be integrated into a story that is well told” and, moreover, repeatedly refers throughout his study to the “integration” of both traditional and digital means of

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producing effects.³⁸ For instance, he notes that the invention of Photoshop “facilitated the integration of matte paintings with dynamic, 3D landscapes” and, crucially, comments on the combination of live-action and post-production imagery in the 1990s.³⁹ He states, “Digital effects were created in the computer and then were scanned to film to be integrated with existing sequences;” and he observes that 3D films tend to be “entirely CG or involve a substantial amount of digital visual effects integrated with live-action footage.”⁴⁰ The creators of *GoT* conceptualize their approach to VFX in similar terms: for instance, VFX Supervisor Rainer Gombos explains that, in creating the Battle of the Blackwater, “The plan is that we’re working with a lot of [practical] effects for the medium and close shots on the explosion. [...] And then, because we’re doing this in front of the green screen, it allows us to add our CG explosion in the background and integrate it in the whole destruction of the fleet.”⁴¹ Bauer similarly describes filming the real wolves (who are digitally scaled up to become the program’s enormous “direwolves”) against green screen: “Then we integrate or ‘marry in’ the image of the wolf onto the shot, matching the light of the original day to keep it looking consistent.”⁴² The construction of the fantasy world of *GoT* thus offers an image of integration whereby the realms of desire and fantasy are brought together: VFX and live-action working in unison to provide a seamless visual experience.

The Fantasmatic Supplement

VFX provide the function of what, in a Lacanian context, is called the “fantasmatic supplement:” the necessary support of everyday reality. Following Matthew Flisfeder’s observation, we can see from Lacan’s four discourses that the “normal” structure of experience – what Lacan calls the master’s discourse – shows that the Symbolic order ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$) is supported by the order of fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$):

$$\frac{S_1}{\$} \rightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$$

Our “reality,” the diagram suggests, requires a fantasmatic element in order to function.⁴³ To recall McGowan’s comments on Kubrick and Lee, at every level are our interactions sustained by a dimension of fantasy: it is, for instance, what transforms the sexual act, what Slavoj Žižek calls the “raw reality of copulation,” into the myriad experiences of human sexuality.⁴⁴ However, the psychoanalytic fantasy is not “another realm” into which we escape, but an ever-present part of experience. As Lacan states, “everything we are allowed to approach by way of reality remains rooted in fantasy.”⁴⁵ This distinction between “reality” and “fantasy” is one that has exercised numerous critics, as in Tzvetan Todorov’s *laws of the world* and *laws unknown to us* of the fantastic, for example, but what both the ontology of the image in *GoT* here and psychoanalysis in general insist upon is that there can be no absolute divide between the two (or between desire and fantasy and the “reality” of either). They are always imbricated together as they constitute our experience of the world. As Žižek notes, “fantasy is on the side of reality: it is, as Lacan once said, the support that gives consistency to what we call ‘reality.’”⁴⁶ Fantasy thus regulates our reality by bringing coherence to the confusing, inconsistent multitude of existence.

Integration – of both the filmic and psychological orders – is a smoothing-over of this distinction and it thus evokes the typical psychoanalytic Subject’s condition, which is to say *neurosis*. The neurotic supplements her desire with fantasy in order to make the incoherence of the world bearable. So when these realms are brought together, the resultant effect is what we recognise as everyday experience. Therefore, in the digital composites of *GoT*, we are presented with an aesthetic approximation of the fully psychoanalytic experience of “reality:” the fantasy world of digital giants and White Walkers supplementing the quotidian existence of Belfast and Kit Harrington in order to present a coherent vision of the world. It is in *this*

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sense, then, that fantasy can be considered a “supplement:” not in terms of some extraneous enhancement, added to that which is already complete; but in terms of *suppleō*, of supplying what is lacking, compensating for inadequacies, or making good a deficiency.⁴⁷

Interestingly, this psychoanalytic insight can be expanded to compare with the place of VFX themselves in Film Studies. Where a number critics have argued for an understanding of effects as *central to* rather than at the periphery of filmmaking practice, I equally insist here on the centrality of fantasy to our understanding of reality. North, Rehak and Duffy are right to insist upon a nuanced understanding of the definition of “effects” that might otherwise “‘trick’ the investigative eye into accepting a stark division between ‘special’ effects and the rest of cinema, neglecting important features of a complicated mix of process, practice and perception.”⁴⁸ Designating effects as “special,” they insist, might lead us to conclude that there is a normative body of filmmaking practices that would exclude effects as extrinsic rather than intrinsic aspects of the image. Similarly, Prince states emphatically that, “Cinema has never existed without visual effects,” and where he implores us “to see visual effects as a core modality of cinema rather than as a peripheral one that supplements the filming of live action,” he is interpreting “supplement” in the first sense I outlined above, rather than as *suppleō*.⁴⁹ When I describe VFX as the “fantasmatic supplement,” this is in the manner that *GoT* reveals to us: the live-action footage is constitutively *lacking* and can only be completed – realized as fantasy image – through the contribution of CGI.⁵⁰

Reality Decomposed

Cinema as such relies upon – and has always relied upon – manipulation of the image at some level so that, in the same way that Lacanian psychoanalysis insists we should approach

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reality through fantasy, equally should we approach film through effects. Otherwise, said: just as reality includes fantasy, so too does cinema include effects. However, the Lacanian implications here are much more radical. Even while such critics rightly acknowledge that the supposed division between realism (understood as proximity to reality) and illusion in cinema – that (de)famed Lumière/Méliès dichotomy – is on these grounds itself illusory, they still rely upon a hard dichotomy that opposes reality and illusion as such. For example, cinema simply moves here – apparently contra Bazin – from the side of reality to the side of illusion: in North’s own study, he insists that we have tended to focus on the camera’s ability to capture life as it is, rather than cinema’s capacity to make the unreal seem actual.⁵¹

However, these options remain two sides of the same coin. The theorists of cinematic effects are ultimately bound within what we might characterize as a Platonic discourse: either of straightforward mimesis, that cinema merely imitates reality, or at the very least that cinema/illusion remains *opposed* to reality. For instance, where North asserts an interestingly “spectacular dialectic” between pro-filmic and VFX elements, “characterised not by the absolute undetectability of the mechanisms behind it, but by the interdependence of those elements,” he nonetheless concludes that: “film has developed a code of practice for addressing the audience with reassurances that what they are seeing is not real, but an illusion.”⁵² The possibility of a more nuanced “interplay” is thus collapsed into a strict division of reality/fantasy.

Lacanian psychoanalysis conceptualizes fantasy as being “on the side of reality,” which is to say that it offers the necessary support of experience. But in a final turn, interpreting Lacan together with the fantasy image in *GoT*, we must conclude, in fact, that *reality is on the side of fantasy*: not in some quasi-New Age sense that “life is but a dream;” rather, in the specific sense that what we experience as our reality already includes the fantasmatic element and – even more crucially – that it is *through fantasy* that we gain access

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to reality at all. Indeed, Lacan states: “Reality is constituted only by fantasy,”⁵³ which we also see in *GoT* where the fantasy image puts the realms of “desire” and “fantasy,” “reality” and “illusion,” pro-filmic space and VFX, *on the same surface* in order to create our spectatorial experience. The point here is not wholly to *conflate* fantasy and reality, to reduce one to the other, or to take fantasy *as* reality (which would be the mark of psychosis); it is to witness both working *together* that creates the effect of reality.

The “proof” of this, as it were, would be to *remove* the fantasmatic element: from life and from the image. Eradicating fantasy would not entail a return to reality but an eradication of reality itself, as Žižek explains: “when the phantasmatic frame disintegrates, the subject undergoes a ‘loss of reality’ and starts to perceive reality as an ‘unreal’ nightmarish universe with no firm ontological foundation”.⁵⁴ This can be visualized with reference to *GoT*: suspending fantasy (i.e. VFX) would mean losing the entire world. We would no longer have Daenerys riding her dragons, but Emilia Clarke on a green saddle; we would no longer have the Wall, but a field in Country Antrim. It is therefore this integration – the synthetic or composite realism of *GoT* – that constitutes what a properly *psychoanalytic realism* (which is to say, an audiovisual approximation of the way in which Lacan conceptualizes the Subject’s experience of reality).

The Reality of Fantasy

Martin claims of his own approach to the genre that, “the general process for doing fantasy, is you have to root it in reality,”⁵⁵ which seems to mean, first and foremost, *social reality*. But this is also borne out at the visual level in *GoT*, where the dragon design is informed by studies of lions, eagles, komodo dragons, etc.: as Bauer explains, “There is something about the fact that we have all absorbed a little from things we have seen, nature shows and such,

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that helps lend the dragons more realism.”⁵⁶ It also conforms to North’s observation – regarding ILM’s dinosaur designs for *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), which were based on archaeological and zoological data – that, “By aligning the animation with scientific study and real-life observation, it is able to gain credibility as perceptually realistic.”⁵⁷ As I have argued throughout this chapter, *GoT* is thus clearly a fantasy grounded in a notion of “reality,” and this does seem to be a productive way forward for effects-driven filmmaking (compare for example, the popular reception of the “excessive” effects in the recent *Jurassic World* [Colin Trevorrow, 2015] with that of *Mad Max: Fury Road* [George Miller, 2015]).⁵⁸

However, regarding Martin’s assertion, it is the *inverse* which is more important from a Lacanian perspective: in order to “do” reality, *you have to ground it in fantasy*. Therefore, it is neither a case of turning to a pure documentary aesthetic of “realism” – because this would remove the necessarily supplemental dimension – nor is it a case of going “all the way” into the fantasmatic, the psychoanalytic name for which might be *nightmare*. Rather, it is only in the synthetic, composite image of *GoT* that we achieve a properly *psychoanalytic realism*. At a point that might seem furthest away from experience, then, in the fantasy genre, are we in fact closest to experience. And it is this which allows me to suggest that, in the end, *there is more reality in fantasy* than in other, so-called “realist” modes of expression. Moreover, what this Lacanian insight into *GoT* allows us to realise is that the fantasy/animation pairing at the center of this collection is thus not only necessary but mutually constitutive: as the realm of pure plenitude, computer animation is – ontologically speaking – fundamentally *the realm of fantasy* itself.

Notes

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¹ This is borne out in the popular press, for example, by an unlikely headline such as “Game of Thrones is Realistic and Historically Accurate Say Experts” in the *International Business Times*. Moreover, this is affirmed by critics such as Elio M Garcia and Linda Antonsson, who observe that Martin’s “gritty realism” has won “legions of fans” (“Foreword,” in *Game of Thrones and Philosophy*, ed. Henry Jacoby [Hoboken: Wiley, 2012], x).

² Cf. Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (London: Methuen), 1984.

³ Stephen Prince, *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema: The Seduction of Reality* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2012), 3-4.

⁴ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 168.

⁵ Jean-Louis Baudry, “The Apparatus,” *Camera Obscura* 1, no. 1 (1976): 107.

⁶ Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* (London: Routledge, 2013), 10 and 14.

⁷ Michele Pierson, *Special Effects: Still in Search of Wonder* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), 53.

⁸ Dan North, *Performing Illusions: Cinema, Special Effects and the Virtual Actor* (London: Wallflower, 2008); Lisa Purse, *Digital Imaging in Popular Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013).

⁹ Dan North, Bob Rehak & Michael Duffy, “Introduction,” in *Special Effects: New Histories, Theories, Contexts*, ed. North, Rehak & Duffy (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 6-7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹ On this first point, see: Shiloh Carroll, “Rewriting the Fantasy Archetype: George R. R. Martin, Neomedievalist Fantasy, and the Quest for Realism,” in *Fantasy and Science Fiction Medievalisms: From Isaac Asimov to A Game of Thrones*, ed. Helen Young (Amherst: Cambria, 2015), 59-76.

¹² See: John Hodgman, "George R. R. Martin, Author of "A Song of Ice and Fire" Series:

Interview on The Sound of Young America," accessed June 19, 2016,

<http://www.maximumfun.org/sound-young-america/george-r-r-martin-author-song-ice-and-fire-series-interview-sound-young-america#transcript>.

¹³ Ben Child, "From *Game of Thrones* to *The Revenant*: the best battle scenes of all time,"

The Guardian, June 21, 2016, accessed August 1, 2016,

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jun/21/game-of-thrones-the-revenant-best-battle-scenes-all-time>.

By what standard Child judges this "realism" of Native American fighting techniques is not wholly clear; it should be noted, however, that *Saving Private Ryan* certainly bears far closer resemblance to other mediated images of war than any "reality" of warfare itself. See: Debra Ramsay, *American Media and the Memory of World War II* (London: Routledge, 2015), 141.

¹⁴ James Hibberd, "*Game of Thrones*: Battle of the Bastards director speaks out," accessed

August 1, 2016, <http://www.ew.com/article/2016/06/19/game-thrones-battle-director>.

¹⁵ "Anatomy of A Scene: The Battle of Winterfell (HBO)," accessed August 1, 2016,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B93k4uhpf7g>.

¹⁶ "The Battle of Winterfell."

¹⁷ See: Whissel's discussion of the way in which certain VFX tropes or "emblems" thematise relevant narrative concerns in sci-fi and fantasy films: *Spectacular Digital Effects: CGI and Contemporary Cinema* (Durham: Duke UP, 2014).

¹⁸ Frank Doelger, "Making *Game of Thrones*," *Game of Thrones: Season One*, directed by Alan Taylor (USA/UK, Warner Home Video Ltd, 2012).

¹⁹ North, *Performing Illusions*, 12.

²⁰ Stephen Prince, "True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory," *Film Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (1996): 36.

²¹ There is a question of medium specificity here, in that I am relating film theory to a TV series. However, my focus – the use of VFX in *GoT* – is an area where, at the level of production, such a distinction is arguably negligible: many of the practitioners addressed in this chapter move freely between both media and utilize the same methods across their work.

²² Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 71.

²³ *Ibid.*, 74, 77.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 81, 19.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 163-4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 156-7, 135.

²⁷ North, Rehak & Duffy, “Introduction,” 8.

²⁸ McGowan, *Real*, 23.

²⁹ D.B. Weiss, “Behind the Battle for the Wall,” *Game of Thrones: Season Four*, DVD, directed by D.B. Weiss (USA/UK: Warner Home Video Ltd., 2014).

³⁰ McGowan, *Real*, 151.

³¹ See: Christina Radish, “Comic-Con: Martin Freeman, Sir Ian McKellen, Andy Serkis and Peter Jackson Talk THE HOBBIT, the Possibility of Three Films, 48fps, 3D, SHERLOCK, More,” accessed, 19 June, 2016, <http://collider.com/peter-jackson-martin-freeman-the-hobbit-interview/>.

³² “Behind the Battle for the Wall.”

³³ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XIV: La Logique du fantasme, 1966-67* (unpublished typescript). Session of 16 November, 1966.

³⁴ “Behind the Battle for the Wall.”

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 14.

³⁷ Whissel, *Spectacular*, 5.

³⁸ Prince, *Digital Visual Effects*, 166.

³⁹ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 204.

⁴¹ Rainer Gombos, "Creating the Battle of Black Water Bay," *Game of Thrones: Season Two*, DVD, directed by Alan Taylor (USA/UK: Warner Home Video Ltd., 2012).

⁴² CA Taylor, *Inside HBO's Game of Thrones Seasons 3 & 4* (London: Chronicle, 2014), 43.

⁴³ See: Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2007), 69; and Matthew Flisfeder, *The Symbolic, The Sublime and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2012), 76.

⁴⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (London: Verso, 2006), 12.

⁴⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), 95.

⁴⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 44.

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, of course, reflects on this ambiguity of the supplement, as that which "adds only to replace", etc., in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: JHUP, 1976), 145.

⁴⁸ North, Rehak & Duffy, "Introduction", 2.

⁴⁹ Prince, *Digital*, 221-222.

⁵⁰ Cf. Prince here on the "radically incomplete" image (*Digital*, 155-6).

⁵¹ North, *Performing Illusions*, 21.

⁵² Ibid., 2, 13.

⁵³ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XXV: Le Moment de conclure, 1977-78* (unpublished typescript). Session of 20 December, 1977.

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⁵⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), 51.

⁵⁵ “George R. R. Martin Interview.”

⁵⁶ Taylor, *Inside*, 169.

⁵⁷ North, *Performing*, 22.

⁵⁸ E.g., Kristen Thompson, “The waning thrills of CGI,” accessed 19 June, 2016,

<http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2015/05/24/the-waning-thrills-of-cgi/>.