

The Magic of Media and Culture

Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Angelique Nairn

In his book *The History of Magic* (2020), Chris Gosden contends that magic is a product of human connection with the universe, offering answers to questions of meaning and reality, and surviving for centuries because of its capacity for constant renewal. Furthermore, magic has been, and continues to be, tied to the activities and beliefs of a myriad of cultural groups, guiding their understandings of, for example, transcendence, transformation, and transactions – cultural, social, political, or otherwise. Yet, despite magic accounting for any extraordinary occurrence, both good and bad, this notion has often garnered a negative reputation in examples such as fairy tales, as well as fantasy novels, films, and television series, where it often intersects with notions of evil, greed, and corruption. Of course, magic is not limited to the mythic, supernatural, scholarly, and philosophical, and equally captures the talents of illusionists and magicians with their misdirection and ability to challenge peoples' perceptions and common sense.

Indeed, multifaceted notions of magic permeate media and culture, depicting and shaping world views for a vast array of individuals and groups. In this respect, magic functions as “a critical category” that “distinguishes things, practices of ways of thinking from others” (Otto and Stausberg 1). Forms of magic are represented across popular narratives, from film to television, comics, animation, and beyond. Within this dichotomies of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ often occupy a central position, as do intersections with the supernatural. Magic is central to storytelling belonging to the fantasy genre, as iconographies connected to witches, wizards, and sorcery interweave to form complex representations, often connected to gender, race, and ethnicity. Magic is, to some extent, a matter of ritual practice, and depictions of magic in media and culture have the ability to take this idea as reflecting matters connected to religion and mysticism, as well as memory, history, and heritage. One would be hard-pressed, arguably, to forget the connection that ideas of ‘magic’ hold to social, cultural, and anthropological understandings of ‘witchcraft’, as often painful historical recollections emerge in the process. Magic can also be interpreted, metaphorically speaking, as a channel for discussing matters connected to technology, performance, and entertainment, as well as ecological representations that reflect anxieties and hopes connected to the environment.

It is against this backdrop that this issue of M/C aims to consider the place that ‘magic’ occupies in our contemporary moment. Our aim is to explore how recent media offerings shape our understandings of magic, conjuring, and the supernatural, as well as social and cultural depictions of the everyday. From illusionism to spells, from artistic representation to techno-social incarnations, from fantasy television to forms of animation, magic is an idea that mutates and transforms according to time and context. And while a universal and “unanimously agreed” (Otto and Stausberg 1) definition of what magic ‘is’, ontologically and epistemologically speaking, may be difficult to produce, this concept’s versatility makes it a powerful representational device.

The issue opens with our feature article, ‘The Power of Chaos: Exploring Magic, Gender, and Agency in Netflix’s *The Witcher*’, contributing editors Angelique Nairn and Lorna Piatti-Farnell provide an analysis of magic and sorcery in connection to the character arc of Yennefer in the popular series. Built on a critical framework that engages with historical echoes and complex media representations, the argument in this article explores how

Yennefer's pursuit of magic both maintains and challenges gender stereotypes, particularly as they pertain to sorceresses and witches.

The next of the articles begins with 'Conjuring up a King: The Use of Magic and Ritual in the Coronation of King Charles III'. Here, authors Lisa J Hackett and Jo Coghlan analyse the coronation ceremony of King Charles III as founded in socio-historic practices that seemingly draw from 'magic' and ritual to inform the legitimisation of the British monarchy. Notions of ritual, spell, and representation also inform the following five articles in the issue. The article "'You Know There's No 'It' Right? 'It' Was Just Us": Magic as a Tool for Audience empathy in *Yellowjackets*', authored by Alexander H. Beare and Amy Brierley-Bearé, provides a textual analysis of online fan discourse in order to investigate the role of magic in the television show *Yellowjackets* and as a channel to explore the experience of grief and trauma. In "I love every part of you": Curse as Disability in Disney's *The Owl House*, Chloe Rattray and Katie Ellis discuss how the idea of magic is used in the titular animated series as a 'narrative prosthesis' in order to explore themes of inclusion and belonging connected to the representation of disability.

The next article, 'Magic and Spells in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003)', authored by Louise Child, focuses on how the television series offers a number of tropes that resonate with several anthropological examples of magical practice, reflect upon relationships between spirituality, power and gender, both personally and politically. The complex nature of spells as part of a representational cultural framework is also explored by Brennan Thomas in the article 'The Transformative Magic of Education in Walt Disney's *The Sword in the Stone*', where the discussion explores how the animated film defines magic not as 'nebulous spells or hexes', but by interpreting it as a facilitation of societal advancement and transformative powers for the educated mind. The animated medium is also the focus of the André Vasques Vital and Mariza Pinheiro Bezerra's article, entitled 'Climate Change as Dark Magic in *Miraculous: Tales of Ladybug & Cat Noir* Animation'; here, the analyses surveys how 'black magic' serves as a means to bring about climate change, but the messages of the animation also as a cautionary tale anthropocentrism, nature, power relations.

The next five articles in this issue explore magic in terms of artistic expression. In 'Magic and Metamodernism', author Shaun Wilson considers magic in relation to metamodern theory, and uncovers the nature of magical power: a critical component of a metamodern affect in contemporary art. The understanding of visual art 'as magic' is also at the heart of Sue Beyer's article, entitled 'Metamodern Spell Casting: The Blockchain as a Conceptual Medium for Contemporary Visual Artists'; the article considers Non-Fungible Token (a cryptographic digital asset) as a form of Metamodern spell casting, and a magical instruction that transforms an object/s or idea into something else.

In 'Music as Magic: Breaking and Recasting the Spell of Live Music in Naarm/Melbourne' by authors Shelley Brunt, Mike Callander, Sebastian Diaz-Gasca, Tami Gadir, Ian Rogers, and Catherine Strong argue that the idea of magic can be used to make sense of music's intangibility, as well as the mystery of creative music-making and the transformative effects on audiences' music culture. In particular, the article explores how the negative effects of the pandemic lockdowns on music in Naarm/Melbourne uncover pre-existing challenges in music work and break the "magic spell" associated with the craft overall.

The final three articles in the issue explore the broad idea of ‘magic and technology’ in art, media, and culture. In ‘Art is Magic: the conjuring and mediated deception of Janet Cardiff and George Miller’, authors Alex Davies and Alexandra Crosby. [TO BE ADDED]

Magic performances and techniques are at the centre of Sasa Miletic’s article, ‘Just an Illusion? The Politics of the Magic Trick’; here, the author suggests that the structure of the magic trick –from the classic sleight of hand up to levitation in front of a live TV audience – can be useful in understanding politics and ideologies, and how (in turn) the critique of ideology can help to rehabilitate the notion of “illusion”. Socio-political approaches to technologies and persuasion also inform the final article in the issue, entitled ‘ChatGPT Isn’t Magic: The Hype and Hypocrisy of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) Rhetoric’. Authors Tama Leaver and Suzanne Srdarov explore the combination of AI technologies and media hype meaning generative AI can be perceived due to their impenetrability, and survey how generative AI was deployed across the first six months of 2023 as either utopian or dystopian, but never trivial.

While different in topic, approach, and – often – disciplinary focus, the articles in this issue all share a thread in exploring multidimensional interpretations of ‘magic’ in media and culture. Together, they provide a comprehensive view on the hold that magic maintains on our imaginations, mixing the historical, the metaphorical, and the socio-political in one influential representational package.

References

Godsend, Chris. 2020. *The History of Magic: From Alchemy to Witchcraft, from the Ice Age to the Present*. London: Penguin.

Otto, Bernd-Christian, and Michael Stausberg. “General Introduction”. *Defining Magic: A Reader*. Eds. Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg. London: Routledge. 1-19.

Author Biographies

Lorna Piatti-Farnell, Auckland University of Technology

Lorna Piatti-Farnell, PhD, is Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at Auckland University of Technology, where she is also Director of the Popular Culture Research Centre. In addition, she is an adjunct professor at Curtin University (Australia) and a research fellow at Falmouth University (UK). She serves as the President of the Gothic Association of New Zealand and Australia (GANZA) and the Coordinator of the Australasian Horror Studies Network. Her research interests lie at the intersection of film, popular media, and cultural history, and include a focus on corporeality, horror, technology, bio-ethics, eco-environmental studies, consumer culture, superheroes, and the Gothic. She has published widely in these areas, including volumes such as *Consuming Gothic: Food and Horror in Film* (Palgrave 2017), *Gothic Afterlives: Reincarnations of Horror in Film and Popular Media* (editor, Lexington 2019), and *The Superhero Multiverse: Readapting Popular Icons in Twenty-first-century Film and Popular Media* (editor, Lexington 2021). Prof. Piatti-Farnell is sole editor of the *Routledge Advances in Popular Culture* book series, as well as co-editor (together with Prof. Carl Sederholm) of the ‘Horror Studies’ series for Lexington Books.

E-mail: lorna.piatt-farnell@aut.ac.nz

ORCID: 0000-0001-9879-5726

Angelique Nairn, Auckland University of Technology

Dr Angelique Nairn is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication Studies (SCS). As a graduate of the Bachelor of Communication Studies, she went on to complete a BCS Honours (first class) and her PhD all at Auckland University of Technology. Angelique has been involved in a myriad of research projects that have hinged on organisational communication, identity construction, rhetoric, and/or the creative industries. She is also interested in popular culture and particularly the representation of women, creative people and morality as they appear on screen. Her recent work has explored issues of racism, sexism, and technological determinism.