

After Magic

*Moves beyond Super-Nature
from Batman to Shakespeare*

by

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'Sacrifice is the price of a good trick'

Borden — The Prestige

[I might be wrong]

Spoiler Alert

The plots of the following books and films are discussed in some depth in these pages - please be aware that the text may therefore contain spoilers. Familiarity with these works may be helpful, but is in no way essential.

The Tempest - William Shakespeare

The Tragedy of Macbeth - William Shakespeare

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows - JK Rowling

Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell - Susannah Clarke

The Amazing Spiderman - directed by Marc Webb

Watchmen - written by Alan Moore, illustrated by Dave Gibbons

The Dark Knight Rises - directed by Christopher Nolan

The Prestige - directed by Christopher Nolan

American Splendor - directed by Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini

The Usual Suspects - directed by Bryan Singer

(If you haven't yet finished *The Bible*, just to forewarn you: the hero dies near the end.)

Prologue

Magic is everywhere. Despite the best efforts of the Enlightenment and the pursuit of the scientific method to investigate our universe, stories about magic and fascination with magic have not only persisted, but blossomed. The most popular single volume fiction book of the past century, bar none, is the story of a hobbit and his adventures with wizards and a magical ring. The most popular book series has been that concerning a young wizard called Harry Potter. Not far behind is C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

This is not a defence of the literary merit - or otherwise - of the fantasy genre, simply a statement of its deep roots in the popular imagination, roots that have grown and spread ever since stories have been told. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf* are fantasy tales, and the ancient Greek fables of gods and fantastical journeys provide some of the surest foundations of all Western story-telling, direct ancestors of our modern-day superheroes like Superman and Batman.

Magic, fantasy and religion have been the narrative backdrop for all of human history, and, perhaps surprisingly in the world of the Higgs Boson and the fully decoded human genome, there seems to be no sign of waning interest in them - and yet belief in magic, *real* belief in forces beyond the material world around us, has collapsed in the past 100 years.

What are we to make of this? Most people no longer 'believe' in magic or even follow an orthodox religion and yet magical stories and superhero films abound. Is this simply nostalgia for a time when we did believe, or something else?

As these enduring magical stories plot out something of what it means to engage with the supernatural they also plot out how this supernatural engagement has affected the journey human beings have taken as we have come to understand both our world and our relationships with one another. My contention here is that the most long-lasting of these tales - the ones that go beyond familiarity and into archetype - all share a common strand as they come to fulfilment: they all contain a move *beyond* super-nature, a *renunciation* of magic in favour of something greater. It is by these stories that we will be helped in our natural next stage of human development: to navigate our way in the world 'after magic.'

That we work out how to make this move is terribly important. As I write, the top stories of the day contain more revelations about widespread sexual abuse in parts of the church, news of arrests of religious fundamentalists wanting to wreak havoc through campaigns of terror, large media corporations having hacked into people's phones and paid off policemen to gain material for tabloid stories, and the bizarre tale of a t-shirt for sale on *Amazon* with the slogan 'Keep Calm and Keep Raping,' which was apparently created and sold entirely without human invention by a computer algorithm.

What unites these stories are the problems that we face when we are involved in large institutions or interacting with large networks. These systems present large demands on us, and can, as we see in the examples above, lead to actions by 'normal' people that are lacking basic human empathy or kindness. Yet this problem is magnified massively when applied to the religious domain because of the theoretically *infinite* demand that a god can place on believers.

Dostoyevsky famously pronounced that ‘if God does not exist, everything becomes permissible.’ Modern thinkers have turned this on its head and seen that this infinite demand of the existence of a transcendent God can - and has been - used as a way of justifying inhuman behaviour, giving divine assent to violence and the bloody exercise of power. Dostoyevsky's formulation is thus inverted by recent philosophers to something like ‘with God everything is justifiable.’

There are hard truths here. The pressures of work, the demand of a capitalist society for us to create profits at all costs, the dogmas of religious truth and the ecstasies of religious experience – all of these demands, from the ‘very large’ to the ‘infinite’ can lead us quickly into behaviour that looks very like delusion or madness, and is certainly less than graceful or kind. Yet we continue to live under these various demands either because we like security and cannot see any other way or simply because we find them addictive and tempting. They offer us meaning, purpose, power and wealth.

I am convinced that in our love of power and influence we have ignored the subtle move that many stories take in renouncing magic at their conclusions. My argument in this book is that we need to listen to them. This may sound like a strange idea. Aren't these just good stories? Sure, they hold our attention and make us think, but shouldn't we be turning to more serious sources to fund our thinking on such serious issues?

It's my strong belief that some of our greatest thinkers, philosophers and theologians are our great writers, film-makers and dramatists - yet they are also the least tapped and most ignored. We are foolish to underestimate the power of their vision and the richness of their teaching. The great artists – in whichever form or genre – are without

exception those who best interrogate the human condition. Philosophers and theologians do the same work but come at the problem head-on, often resulting in sore heads and bloodied noses. Instead, as the great poet Emily Dickinson wrote:

*Tell all the truth but tell it slant,
Success in circuit lies,
Too bright for our infirm delight
The truth's superb surprise;*

The job of the artist is no more than to tell the truth, but at a slant - and it to these 'slanted' sources that these pages very deliberately turn, partly to inspire others to begin to see the great mass of serious and insightful thinking that lies beyond academic tomes.

What follows is a journey through the work of artists like Shakespeare and Christopher Nolan in the hope that we can explore something of what they have unearthed of our humanity, and thereby uncover a faithful re-reading of Christianity that follows their moves 'beyond super-nature' to something far, far greater. Beyond the religious domain, I want to propose that such a reading of Christianity will present not only a move beyond the problems of the infinite demands of an actually-existing god, but a way of dealing with the 'very large' demands placed on us by the 'big other' systems of capitalism, politics and technology that we have to interact with too. The hope is that by immersing ourselves in these stories, and accepting this radical re-reading of the Christian narrative as a model of life 'after magic,' our humanity will be restored and our addiction to power and violence broken.

But we have ground yet to cover before reaching that place; we must begin at the beginning, some 400 years ago in London, with news of a storm, and a ship feared lost at sea.