

FANTASTICAL WORLDS AND FUTURES AT THE WORLD'S EDGE: A HISTORY OF NEW ZEALAND SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

by
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CHAPTER 6: FILM AND TELEVISION AFTER THE RING

FILM

Just how does one follow a trilogy that has won seventeen academy awards and achieved box office returns of nearly two billion dollars? By 2005 there was a world-wide audience hungry for something else of the same type and quality as *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Worldwide, the film and television industry had realised that the audience was there, but even so it would not be until January 2006 before serious plans were drawn up to produce the blockbuster *Game of Thrones* series for television, and negotiations for the rights to *The Hobbit* were proceeding slowly. Nevertheless, it was now a lot easier to get producers interested in a fantasy screenplay, and if the person doing the pitching was Peter Jackson, it was easier still to get a result. A very large and accomplished film industry was now resident in New Zealand in the wake of the *Ring* trilogy, and the trilogy had established that fantasy could make truly serious money.



King Kong (2005): It would be fair to say that there was a general hunger among audiences for anything on the scale of *The Lord of the Rings* movies after *The Return of the King* was released late in 2004. The *King Kong* story was an excellent choice. It was known to be popular with audiences from earlier versions, and it had the formidable and proven team of Jackson, Walsh and Boyens writing the screenplay. Shot in New Zealand, the 1930s world was created with the same attention to detail that had been lavished on Middle Earth, and starred Jack Black, Naomi Watts and Adrien Brody.

With the world in the grip of the Great Depression, the movie maker Carl Denham sets off for Indonesia aboard a tramp steamer with a film crew and his actors in search of a spectacular backdrop for his current production. He finds it on Skull Island, which features not only dinosaurs but a dinosaur-sized gorilla, Kong. Kong soon abducts the leading lady, Ann Darrow. Denham sets out with Ann's love interest, Jack Driscoll to rescue her. Kong is subdued, shackled and shipped to New York to be the centrepiece of what is almost a vaudeville show, but he breaks free and takes on humanity in general and New York in particular.

King Kong received three Oscars among its 43 awards and 101 nominations, and although it cost twice as much as any of the *Ring* films, it earned more than double the cost of production at the box office. In spite of all this the three hour epic rated only 7.2 with IMDB voters.



Event 16 (2006): *Event 16* was released in 2006, and features what is quite possibly the first time-travelling cat in a science fiction film. Garage inventor Matt has let his relationship with his girlfriend Paige slide while he tries to perfect his time travel machine. When the machine finally does fire up, the first time traveller is an 1893 alley cat. It requires concentration, as it involves quite a complex time travel chase involving police and secret agents, and an 1890s murderer on the loose in Twenty-First Century Wellington. The plotting was probably a bit too complex for its own good, and viewer response varied from 10 stars to 1 star on IMDB - averaging at 4.7. The most outstanding feature of the work is the use of computer graphics to produce quite sophisticated effects. It was written and directed by Derek Pearson, and runs for 72 minutes.



Perfect Creature (2007): This steampunk film takes place in an alternative history colonial New Zealand, where various Victorian-era technologies have been perfected, such as high tech. steam power and lighter than air flight. A caste of vampire priests maintains a sense of moral serenity, and congregations donate blood in return for the protection and guidance of the 'Brothers.' There are problems, however. No female vampire has been born since the caste appeared three centuries earlier, and no male vampires have been born for seventy years. A rogue Brother, Edgar, tries to infect the general population with a virus that will create more vampires, attempting this by dripping his own blood into the water supply. By the finale, the first female vampire has been born, the perfect creature. Written by Glen Standring, *Perfect Creature* cost \$20 million to produce, but box office returns were disappointing and it rated just 5.5 on IMDB. It did win two New Zealand Film and TV Awards, however, for Production Design in Film, and Achievement in Costume Design in Film. Glen Standring received a nomination for Best Screenplay in Film.



Black Sheep: (2007): A mutant lamb escapes from a laboratory working outside the regulatory guidelines for genetic experiments, resulting in entire herds of sheep becoming dangerous predators. Young Henry has a phobia about sheep after a prank played on him by his older brother, Angus, fifteen years earlier. When he returns home to sell the farm to Angus, he receives a very unpleasant surprise. Angus has perfected a technique for turning sheep into walking piranha-like things whose bite turns humans into ferocious sheep/human chimeras. Animal activists Grant and Experience release an infected lamb while trying to expose Angus, and Grant is bitten. The lamb proceeds to infect an entire flock of sheep.

Henry now teams up with his friend Tucker to shoot infected sheep, and they find the body of a mutilated farmer. Elsewhere on the farm, Grant bites Angus and runs away. Tucker is the next to be bitten, then Tucker, Henry and Experience flee to Angus's laboratory. Here the infected Tucker is imprisoned by a scientist for study. She manages to turn Tucker and Angus back into humans, but is then eaten by the infected flock - which also eat some businessmen who have arrived for a presentation by Angus about his experiments. Angus

now grows into an enormous sheep monster, but his intelligence drops to about sheep level, and Henry is able to control him with the help of a sheepdog. Eventually the cure is administered to the surviving were-sheep-humans and the infected sheep are killed in a bonfire fueled by sheep flatus. By now the sheepdog is bleating, so apparently the outbreak has not been entirely contained.

Black Sheep was the first feature directed by Jonathan King, who went on to direct the 2009 feature, *Under the Mountain*. The film was financed from South Korea, and premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2006, then released six months later in New Zealand. Overall it did remarkably well for a science fiction/horror/splatter mashup, grossing \$4.9 million at the box office. It also screened at over twenty international film festivals, and won multiple awards. The numerous special effects were supplied by Weta Workshop.

Critically, the reactions were mixed. Rotten Tomatoes give it 63%, but *Time Out London* reviewed it as “a treat for horror comedy fans” while it was declared “full of what might be called shear terror” in *The Guardian's* review. *Black Sheep* won the Golden Raven at the 2007 Brussels International Festival of Fantasy Film, the Audience Award and the Special Jury Prize at Gerardmer Film Festival in 2007, and Best Dramatic Presentation at the 2008 Sir Julius Vogel Awards.

Vostok Station (2009): In this short film, the sole survivor of a cataclysmic event that is never explained wanders alone in a polar landscape full of beached container ships. The general mood puts one in mind of J. G. Ballard's novels, where the plots are acted out against the abandoned trappings of an everyday life that has ceased to exist. *Vostok Station* was directed by Dylan Pharazyn and shot with Mount Ruapehu's landscape standing in for Antarctica. *Vostok Station* was selected for the Sundance Festival, where it received a nomination for a New Frontier award, and showed at Spain's Valladolid International Film Festival and London's onedotzero.



Under the Mountain (2009): Maurice Gee's classic novel about aliens lurking under Auckland had been in print almost continually in the decades since its publication when this film version was released. It had been produced as a successful television series in the 1980s, and the film again has the teenagers Theo and Rachel discover shapeshifter aliens under the extinct volcanoes of Auckland. *Under the Mountain* was directed by Jonathan King, who had established himself with *Black Sheep*, and included Sam Neill as Mr Jones. In spite of winning three New Zealand

Film and TV awards, and a Sir Julius Vogel Award for Best Dramatic Presentation - Long Form, the film did poorly at the box office and was unpopular with IMDB voters.

The Lovely Bones (2009): Based on a novel by American author Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones* was directed by Peter Jackson, with a screenplay by himself, Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens. A teenage girl, Susie, has been murdered, and she watches from the afterlife as her family copes very badly with her disappearance. Several other girls are with her in the afterlife, and her brother and sister can sense her presence, along with a psychic

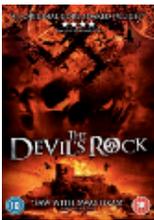


girl, Ruth. Susie frantically tries to tell them that their neighbour, George Harvey, is the serial killer who murdered her, and is now taking an interest in her sister. Suzie manages to communicate with her sister Lindsey, and George is exposed as the serial killer. He flees, and two years later he dies, seemingly by accident, while trying to lure another victim into his car. Produced for the quite substantial budget of \$65 million, the film grossed over \$93 million worldwide at the box office. It won ten awards, and among its 46 nominations was an Oscar nomination for Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role.



The Vintner's Luck (2009): This film was adapted from the multi-award winning 1998 fantasy novel of the same name by Elizabeth Knox. Niki Caro and Joan Scheckel were the scriptwriters, and the film was directed by Caro. *The Vintner's Luck* is set in Nineteenth Century France, and traces the relationship between the winemaker Sorbran and the fallen angel Xas as Sorbran tries to create the perfect vintage. Although it was nominated for six New Zealand Film and Television Awards, winning three, the 8.5 million euro film did not share the book's success. Distribution problems

led to a very poor box office return, and the critical reaction was cool.



Devil's Rock (2011): *Devil's Rock* is a supernatural war film set on the Channel Islands in 1944 on the eve of D-Day. It was directed by Paul Campion and was written by Campion, Paul Finch and Brett Ihaka. The film received mixed reviews from critics, with Tony Lee in *Black Static* saying "Although it's a Kiwi production, *Devil's Rock* feels like more worthy successor to the Hammer Film Productions studio ethos than actual new Hammer-label product such as *The Resident*."

Nine years after the last of *The Lord of the Rings* films screened came *The Hobbit* trilogy. Although box office takings were quadruple the cost of production, and while the films won awards, none of the Academy Award nominations turned into wins. The reasons are not readily apparent, but they are important. Audience tastes and expectations had moved on in the intervening decade, some of the humor was a little too scatological for Tolkien fans, much screentime was devoted to spectacular but improbable action scenes, and quite a lot of the content was not written by Tolkien. Nevertheless, they were still very fine productions and highly successful financially.

The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey (2012): *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* had two problems to overcome. The original book was shorter than any of the three books of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and it was the most anticipated film of 2012 worldwide. Thus, it was inevitable that the plot would be stretched fairly thin to cover three epic-length films.



The first film takes the story from Bilbo's meeting with Gandalf the Wizard in his front garden, through meeting the dwarves, agreeing to help them take back their ancestral home, their adventures on their journey,

rescue by the giant eagles, and finally catching sight of the dwarves' home, the lonely mountain, in the distance. By now Bilbo has met Gollum, and stolen what turns out to be the Ring of Power.

The screenplay was by the same team of Peter Jackson, Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens that wrote *The Lord of the Rings* screenplays, with a credit to Mexico's Guillermo Del Toro for his contribution during development. Many actors from the Ring trilogy had roles, most notably Ian McKellen as Gandalf, but Martin Freeman made his Middle Earth debut with a brilliant interpretation of Bilbo Baggins.

The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey cost nearly twice as much as *The Fellowship of the Ring* to produce, but out-performed it at the box office, grossing \$1,017 million worldwide. New Zealand fans awarded it Best Professional Production/Publication and Best Dramatic Presentation in their Sir Julius Vogel awards, and overall it won ten awards out of 75 nominations. It had only two Oscar nominations, and perhaps this was only to be expected. While *The Hobbit* is an endearing book, *The Lord of the Rings* is truly awesome. With this in mind, it becomes clear that *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* was an outstanding success for what it was.



The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug (2013): This, the second of *The Hobbit* films, pretty much covers the second half of Tolkien's book. It is visually spectacular and fast paced, and its reception was quite similar to that given to the first of *The Hobbit* films. It returned \$958 million from a cost of production of \$225 million, had three Oscar nominations, and won eighteen awards out of 90 nominations.

The plot follows Bilbo and the dwarves as they fight their way through the forest, escape the spiders and elves, negotiate the politics of Laketown, and finally reach the Lonely Mountain and find a way in. Bilbo is sent ahead as the contract burglar, and is confronted by the enormous dragon, Smaug. The dwarves try to drown Smaug in molten gold, but he survives and is understandably angry. As the film closes, Smaug has broken out of the labyrinth beneath the mountain and is flying toward Laketown.

Actors from from the *Ring* trilogy such as Christopher Lee and Cate Blanchett return, but Stephen Fry is introduced as the Master of Laketown and Benedict Cumberbatch provides the voice of Smaug. As in the previous film, some of the action scenes are drawn out a little longer than was probably necessary, and more slapstick comedy was included than was seen in the *Ring* trilogy. On the other hand, none of the backers could argue with more than four times their investment returned.



The Hobbit: The Battle of Five Armies (2014): The last of the three films from Tolkien's first Middle Earth book film opens with only a few pages of his original text of *The Hobbit* remaining. Thus, most of the content of the film attempts to fill in what might plausibly have happened, but there was not much more to the film than the battle. Smaug is killed in the first few minutes, although Laketown is annihilated first. Astride a pig,

Billy Connolly makes a memorable entrance at the head of one of the armies, Thorin, is driven to the point of madness by his desire for the Arkenstone, and there are several high profile deaths during the battle. As in Tolkien's book, Bilbo returns to the Shire and settles down to a life of comfortable prosperity - and extraordinary good health, thanks to the Ring of Power that now resides in his waistcoat pocket.

Writing on behalf of Tolkien could easily have become a disaster, but the film managed to tie off the six film series satisfactorily. Costing \$250 million to produce this was the most expensive of the films, but it returned \$956 million at the box office, and so was by no means a financial failure. The producers of most films would be pleased with an Oscar nomination, seven other awards and 54 nominations, but inevitably people remembered that *The Return of the King* won eleven Oscars, so this otherwise successful treatment of a difficult plot was always going to look a little underpowered.



Eternity (2013): The relatively short but still feature length *Eternity* was shot in New Zealand and Hong Kong, with post-production also in Hong Kong. Detective Richard Manning (Elliot Travers) is transported into a virtual-reality computer game and tasked with solving a seemingly implausible murder. The more Richard investigates, the more complex the case becomes. As he tries to solve the murder, he battles a mind-degrading virus that threatens to get free into the real world. The New Zealand scenes display an empty, green, expansive, clean-aired world that by then no

longer exists, while the sensory explosion of the Hong Kong streetscape presents the polluted world of the future. The film was produced on a very small budget of \$100,000, but it received New Zealand Film and TV Award nominations, for Best Supporting Actress and Best Self-Funded Film.

2014 was a big year for New Zealand fantasy in the cinema. The last of the *Hobbit* films was released, a feature length adaptation of what was arguably New Zealand's first work of science fiction, the 1872 *Erewhon*, was released, but it was the comic horror/fantasy *What We Do In The Shadows* which showed that New Zealand imagination and innovation were alive and well, and heading into new frontiers.

What We Do In The Shadows (2014): Written and directed by Jemaine Clement and Taika Waititi, and starring them with Cori Gonzalez-Macuer, the film follows a crew making a documentary about a group of centuries-old vampires, Viago, Deacon, Vladislav and Petyr living in modern suburbia, trying to reconcile nostalgia for the past with realities like paying the rent and shopping. As a cult movie it was a big success, winning 26 awards, rating 7.7 on IMDB, and grossing four times the \$1.6 million cost of production. In a major reversal of conventions, this New Zealand production was picked up in America and turned into a television series set in Staten Island. *What We Do In The Shadows* won the Sir Julius Vogel Award for best Dramatic presentation, edging out *The Hobbit: The Battle of Five Armies*.





Turbo Kid (2015): Set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland, this is the story of a boy (the Kid) who takes on the armour and weapon of Turbo Rider, a dead warrior, to rescue his friend Apple. After being forced to fight in a gladiatorial arena, they escape, but when Apple is shot, we learn that she is a robot. In the fighting and adventures that follow, we see robots “killed” then reactivated, humans resurrected as robots, and yet more humans revealed as robots. Eventually the evil Zeus, a corporate robot that killed the Kid’s family, is blown up, but not before Apple is well and truly destroyed. The film ends with the Kid riding off to explore the Wasteland. *Turbo Kid* is one of the ever-popular wish fulfillment stories about a child stepping into the role of a superhero and triumphing. It premiered at the Sundance Festival in January 2015 and was released eight months later. IMDB awarded it 6.7. Rotten Tomatoes gave it 7.1, and Dread Central give it five stars and called it “Funny, gory, hugely enjoyable.”

Z for Zachariah (2015): Set in the US but shot in New Zealand, this is a post-nuclear apocalypse film about a handful of survivors returning subsistence level of civilization. Ann nurses Loomis back to health after he washes in contaminated water, and together they strive to turn Ann's farm into a going concern. Caleb then joins them, and a type of love triangle of sexual and religious tensions develops. Ann and Caleb have a sexual encounter, which Loomis takes badly. There are hints that Loomis might have caused the accident in which Caleb is killed, but this leads to Ann and Loomis settling into a stable relationship. By the end they have established hydroelectricity on the farm and set up a tiny church. The story of sex, religion and violence in the post-apocalyptic setting did not go down well with audiences, with the film returning roughly a twentieth of its \$7.5 million cost of production and scoring 6.0 on IMDB.

This Giant Papier Mache Boulder is Actually Really Heavy (2016): Low budget science fiction films are common enough, but this film about a low budget universe is more of a rarity. Three friends are dropped into the parallel universe of a 1950s-style science fiction movie, complete with cheap props, and the quest is to find their way home. Although it has parallels with the film *Galaxy Quest*, it did not achieve anything like the same level of success and attracted several scathing viewer reviews. It did win three awards, however, including a Sir Julius Vogel for Best Dramatic Presentation.



The Changeover (2017): Based on a story by the much-loved New Zealand author and winner of the Carnegie Medal, Margaret Mahy, this film adaption failed to live up to audience expectations. Set in Christchurch, it follows sixteen year old Laura's battle with an evil spirit to save her four year old brother. Although it won two awards, the New Zealand Cinematographers Gold Award, and a Sir Julius Vogel for Best Dramatic Presentation, the screenplay was a mixture of good but disjointed material and box office earnings were disappointing.

Mortal Engines (2018): Based on the book of the same name by Philip Reeve, *Mortal Engines* was directed by Christian Rivers from a script by Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens and Peter Jackson. The film is set in a post-apocalyptic world where entire cities have been



mounted on wheels and motorised, and practice municipal Darwinism. The film was a box office disappointment, and the film review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes's critical consensus reads: “*Mortal Engines* has no shortage of eye-catching special effects, but lacks enough high-octane narrative fuel to give this futuristic fantasy sufficient cinematic combustion.”

Mega Time Squad (2018): At the other end of the budget scale is *Mega Time Squad* by Tim van Dammen, who was the director and writer of this film. John (Anton Tennet) is a small-town criminal with a big-time dream: to abscond from Thames to Paeroa with his boss's sister. Robbery gone wrong and a mysterious Chinese bracelet derail his plans, and he finds that going back to the future has a price. The film also starred Jonathan Brugh as the villain. *Mega Time Squad* was selected for the Fantasia festival in Montreal in 2018.

TELEVISION

The New Tomorrow (2005): *The New Tomorrow* was a sequel to Cloud 9 Productions' *The Tribe*. *The New Tomorrow* ran for one season of 26 episodes and was commissioned by Australia's Seven Network. The developers were again Raymond Thompson and Harry Duffin. The show was aimed for a younger audience than *The Tribe*, but its main fans were the people who had grown up with the original show. While *The Tribe* focuses on those living in the city, *The New Tomorrow* focuses on those living in the countryside and forest. There are three tribes: The Ants, The Barbs and The Privileged.



Maddigan's Quest (2006): Based on a concept by Margaret Mahy and shot in Auckland, this thirteen part science fiction series premiered in January 2006. After an apocalyptic event known as the Great Chaos, a travelling group known as the Fantasia sets out on a quest to find parts for their solar converter. They are joined by two boys from the future who reveal that the stakes behind the Fantasia's quest are a lot higher than they realise. The Fantasia visit various cities and towns, eventually securing their converter in Newton. While battling feral gangs, monsters and even disease, the members of the group never suspect that they might be betrayed from within before they can complete their quest. The series was well received, winning two bronze medals at the New York Festival, and a New Zealand Screen Award for Victoria Kelly for Achievement in Original Music. It also won the Sir Julius Vogel Award for Best Dramatic Presentation - Long Form.

The Killian Curse (2006 -2008): *The Killian Curse* is a New Zealand kidult fantasy-horror, directed by Thomas Robins and Wayne Vinton, and starring Nick Blake and local child actors. *The Killian Curse* tells 21 stories of the children from Room 21, who must each face a curse placed on them by Charles Killian. Killian wants revenge on the people who caused his death shortly after founding the school in 1906. He needs to capture eleven souls to rise from the dead. There were two series of seven episodes.



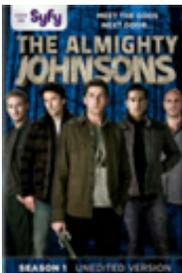
This Is Not My Life (2010): This series uses the loss of identity theme most famously featured in the *Bourne* series of movies. The lead, Alex Ross, awakes on what should be a very ordinary morning in a prosperous, middle class, near future setting - except that he does not know his wife and children, and has no memory of who he is. Gradually clues are dropped, indicating that his past is not what he is being told by those around him. He begins looking for a way to reclaim his former life, whatever it might be. The pilot rated 7.9 on IMDB, won three New Zealand Film and TV Awards, and tied for the Sir Julius Vogel Award for

Best Dramatic Presentation.



Kaitangata Twitch (2010): In this thirteen part television series of Margaret Mahy's original book, we are introduced to the little island of Kaitangata, which has had a very dark past in pre-European times. Since then it has developed something that resembles life. Generally it slumbers, but every fifty years wakes up (twitches), and the last time that happened a girl vanished. Now the teenage Meredith realises that it is becoming active again, and that it may be possible to appease the island before another victim is taken. Meredith sees a girl on the island and discovers that she is

Shelly Gentry, who went missing fifty years earlier. Meredith eventually deduces how to appease the island. The series was very well received, scoring 8.2 with IMDB voters, winning a New Zealand Film and TV Award for Best Sound Design in General Television, and tying for a Sir Julius Vogel Award for Best Dramatic Presentation.



The Almighty Johnsons (2011 - 2013): *Mirror, Mirror* had the heir to the Russian imperial throne alive and well in New Zealand, but *The Almighty Johnsons* went somewhat further, with four New Zealand brothers who are the reincarnations of Norse Gods. Their superpowers are somewhat limited, which sets up a lot of scope for comedy, and this was appreciated by viewers who gave it a rating of 8.2 on IMDB. The episode *The End Of The World As We Know It* achieved an astonishing 9.1. The four brothers interact with Maori gods as they try to treat

Twenty First century New Zealand as Asgard, all the while modernising their lifestyles. It ran for three seasons of twelve episodes each, and won the Sir Julius Vogel Award for Best Dramatic Presentation in 2012 and 2014.

AFK (2015): *AFK* was initially a web-series made by a group of media enthusiasts, and was later picked up for screening by Television New Zealand. *AFK* is about a group of online computer gamers who get sucked into the game as their in-game characters. Show ran for one season of twelve episodes, and had surprisingly high production values, given the self-funded nature of the show.



Ash vs The Evil Dead (2016 - 2018): Renaissance Pictures returned to television with *Ash vs The Evil Dead*, a continuation of the *Evil Dead* film trilogy, with Bruce Campbell returning in the role of Ash Williams.

The series is notable for the casting of Lucy Lawless as an immortal who wrote the Necronomicon. It ran for three seasons of ten episodes.

The Cul de Sac (2017 - 2019): *The Cul de Sac* is a young adult drama financed by Greenstone TV and produced by Tina McLaren. So far three seasons of six episodes each of *The Cul de Sac* have been shown on New Zealand television. The basic plot of the show is that children wake to a world with no phones and no internet, and all the adults have mysteriously vanished. Rose (Greta Gregory) finds her father's diary, which details the testing of a new energy source – the Prometheus device – that may solve the world's energy problems. Instead what is unleashed is a repeating wave of storm energy that may disembody people. The borrowings from *The Quiet Earth* are hard to ignore, but the series is nevertheless entertaining.



Wellington Paranormal (2018 - 2019): The scenario of this successful television series is similar to the 1990s US series, *The X-Files*, but it is structured like the long running police reality show *Cops*, even down to the half hour episode length. Twelve episodes have been produced so far, with an IMDB average of 7.5, but peaking at 8.1 with *A Normal Night*, and 7.8 for *Things That Do The Bump In The Night*. The latter involves a house haunted by retro 1970s ghosts whose parties draw noise complaints.

Officers Minogue, O'Leary and Maaka also investigate zombies, werewolves, aliens (who put a cow in a tree) and demonic possession. *Wellington Paranormal* won the 2019 Sir Julius Vogel for Best Dramatic presentation. The second season had a Christmas special episode, and in 2020 a commercial-length special about social distancing was released as part of new Zealand's campaign against the COVID-19 pandemic.

NOT QUITE NEW ZEALAND FILM AND TELEVISION

With the New Zealand landscape proving to be highly cinematic and the success of the *Lord of the Rings* films proving that world-class infrastructure and talent were present in the country, several productions were filmed in New Zealand but were not written or produced by locally based production companies. Others merely made use of New Zealand expertise. Put another way, participation in overseas film productions by New Zealand companies does not make a New Zealand film. For example, Weta Workshop, Weta Digital and even the New Zealand Government have credits for James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), but by no stretch of the imagination can this be called New Zealand science fiction



Legend of the Seeker (2008 - 2010): Renaissance Pictures returned to television with *Legend of the Seeker*, which is based on the Terry Goodkind novels *Wizards First Rule* and *Stone of Tears* the first two books in his *Sword of Truth* series. *Legend of the Seeker* ran for two seasons of 22 episodes each. The screenwriters were based in Los Angeles. Westland is separated from The Midlands by a magical boundary, created to prevent any magic entering Westland. On the other side of The Midlands is D'Hara, ruled by Darken Rahl. The first series begins after the

invasion of The Midlands by Darken Rahl (Craig Parker). A Confessor, Kahlen Amnell (Bridget Regan), ventures into Westland in search of a wizard and the Seeker, who has been prophesied to defeat Rahl. Kahlen finds the wizard Zorander (Bruce Spence) and the Seeker, a young man named Richard Cypher (Craig Horner), who is forced to accept the destiny he never knew about.



District 9 (2009): This is more of a film with the help of New Zealand expertise, rather than a New Zealand film. It is included to illustrate how New Zealand expertise and resources were reaching out beyond New Zealand by the end of the first decade of the Twenty-First Century. Peter Jackson was the producer, and it was made as a WingNut Films production in association with Tristar Pictures and Block / Hanson. The aliens were designed by Weta Workshop, and Weta Digital designed the two and a half kilometer diameter mothership and shuttle craft. *District 9* was the first feature length movie by the South African born director, Neill Blomkamp, who co-wrote it with his wife Terri Tatchell. The settings were in South Africa, where it was shot. Financial backing came from America, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand, and the Canadian composer Clinton Shorter provided the music.

The story begins in 1982, when an enormous starship appears over Johannesburg, South Africa, then hovers there for three months. When humans cut into the ship, they discover a ship's company of rather scruffy alien workers abandoned by their leaders. They are taken to the surface and housed in District 9, but by 2010 it has become a dilapidated slum. *District 9* had its conceptual origins in South Africa's apartheid era, and draws a parallel with the real world District Six in Cape Town. Themes of racism and xenophobia are extended to speciesism, and another theme is government use of multi-national corporations to get unpopular or controversial tasks performed.

The gross earnings of the film were US\$210.0 million, seven times the cost of production. It was reviewed in the *New York Observer* as “the most exciting science fiction movie to come along in ages; definitely the most thrilling film of the summer”; while it was described in *Entertainment Weekly* as “madly original, cheekily political (and) altogether exciting ...” *District 9* won the SFWA's Bradbury Award for the screenwriting, and received four Academy Award nominations, seven British Academy Film Award nominations, a Golden Globe nomination and a Hugo Award nomination. It won thirty awards out of 114 nominations, and was named as one of the top ten independent films for 2009 by the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures.



The Shannara Chronicles (2016 - 2017): *The Shannara Chronicles* is an American fantasy series filmed created by Alfred Gough and Miles Millar and filmed in Auckland film studios and various locations around New Zealand. It was based on the *Sword of Shannara* trilogy by Terry Brooks, and lasted two seasons of ten episodes each. Season One follows the general storylines set out in *The Elfstones of Shannara* and opens as demons start to return after being banished from this world by a tree called the Ellcrys. Wil (Austin Butler), Amberle (Poppy Drayton) and Eretria

(Ivana Baquero) must go on a quest to protect the Ellerys from dying, which would allow the banished demons back into the Four Lands. John Rhys-Davies was cast as the king of the elves, having settled in New Zealand after the *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy was completed.

As the third decade of the Twenty First Century begins, science fiction, fantasy and horror are an established and substantial part of the New Zealand film and television industry. While some shows have proved disappointing, *What We Do In The Shadows*, *The Almighty Johnsons*, *Wellington Paranormal* and *The Hobbit* films demonstrated that there is more to modern New Zealand television and cinema than *The Lord of the Rings*. Given the right screenplay and director, New Zealand's film crews and production companies can be trusted to produce innovative and high-quality works into the future.