

FICTIVE REALISM – RAY HARRYHAUSEN'S MODEL MAKING



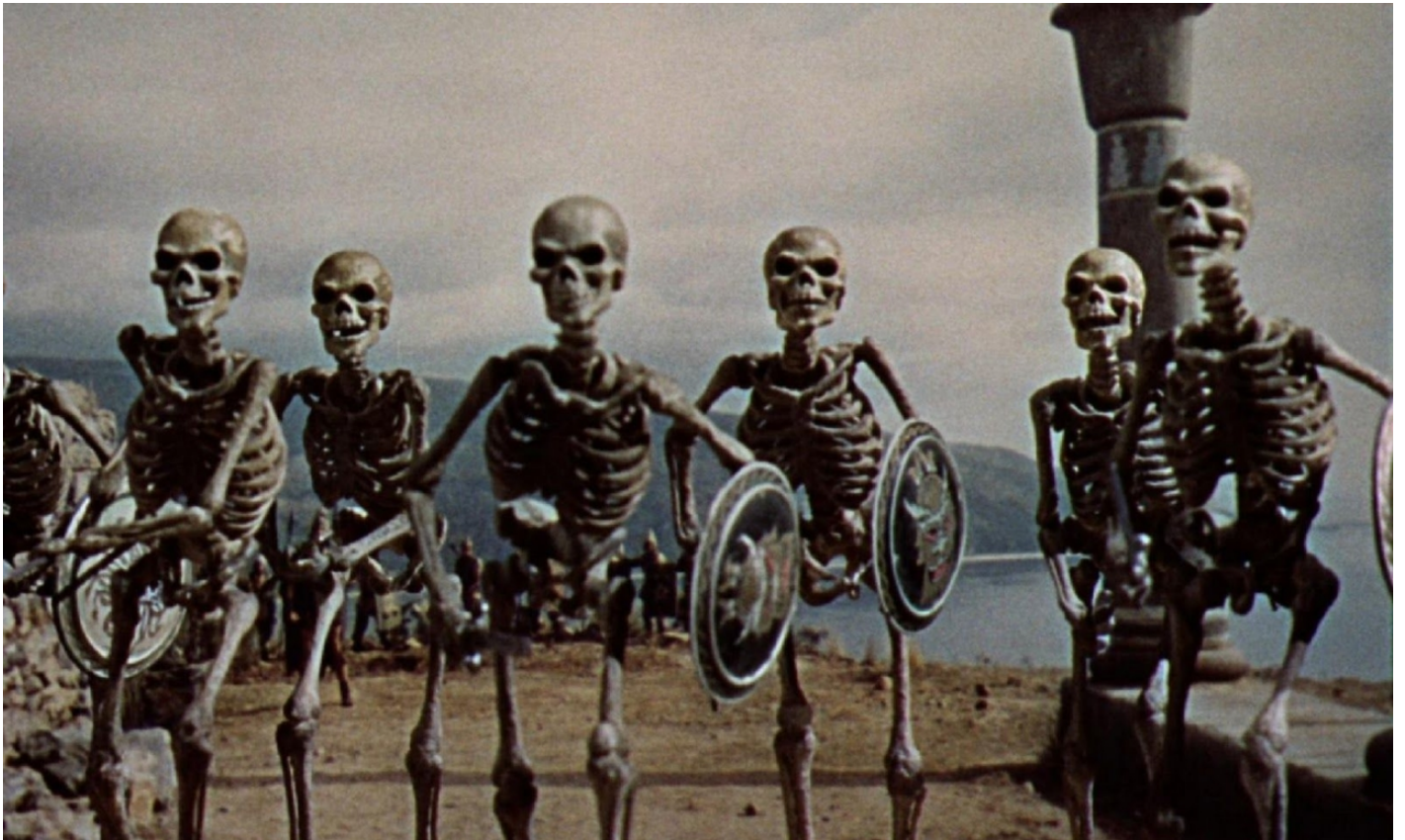
There's an exhibition of the stop-motion animation of Ray Harryhausen running at Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art – [\[Link\]](#). I vividly remember first seeing his magical movies in the 60s and 70s. The infamous fighting skeletons in *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963); Pegasus the winged horse in *Clash of the Titans* (1981). Paul Noble sent me a book about him a few years back – part of our conversation around world building and the fantastical. Mike Pearson and I have written much about reenactment and performative presence. And most recently Gary Devore and I have been exploring the crucial role of conjecture and the imagination in archaeology and history writing.



Harryhausen's movies are not great works of art. The plots, dialogue and acting were often wooden. Why then is he rightly considered so influential and inspiring?

Because his models are so much more than special effects. They breathe presence and attest to our constant remaking of lifeworld. How does this work? Here are some lessons for those of us who would wish to reconstruct, remodel the past into a better future (see Futures Literacy – [\[Link\]](#)).

Computer generated imagery (CGI) can be remarkably photo-realistic, blending seamlessly with the way photographs capture the appearance of things. Stop motion animated models are not like this. They never quite blend in; and this is actually the source of their energy to evoke, I think.



CGI is the product of a quite different design process and mode of production. Here we might contrast naturalism and realism. Naturalism is the reproduction of the way the world appears superficially. Photography is good at naturalism, as is CGI. For many this is the objective of CGI and photo work, to reproduce the appearance of things.

We might use the concept of realism to refer to features of lifeworld that exceed appearance, relating perhaps to structure, or causation, to our relationships with experience. The rhetorical purposes of naturalism and realism are different. Naturalism says – here is the way things appear. Realism says – here is how things work, maybe, depending upon your interest.

Harryhausen's stop motion animated models belong to worlds of fantasy. There is no attempt to deny this. One might say that their realism is about the power of narrative; they augment the ways one might imagine stories by offering versions of characters that do not occur naturally in everyday experience, like fighting skeletons or flying horses.

The realism of stop motion animated models is also that they acknowledge their mode of production. In CGI the objective is often to have the imagery fabricated by the

computer blend in so one doesn't notice where the fabrication begins or ends. The rhetorical purpose of CGI is to fool, to deceive. Harryhausen's models don't look "real". More precisely, they don't look "natural". No one need be fooled. One admires the craft in their making. Trickster Harryhausen gets us to admire his skill and artistry.

In contrast, CGI can tend to an experience of alienation. The hand of the maker is occluded, *by design*. We don't see, are not meant to see the connection between the CGI artist/engineer and the image on the screen. A gap, a fault or error in the naturalism (perhaps the fur of a creature doesn't quite look as naturalistic as it might), might induce an experience of what gets called the "uncanny valley". CGI figures can look creepy in their slight "imperfection". Such a gap actually adds to the appeal of stop motion animation.

(Nick Park's Wallace and Grommit series comes to mind here. Why would one ever want their world to be naturalistic? One is instead drawn into the extraordinary skills of trickster Park and his Aardman team through the medium and acknowledgement of how it works [Link].)

Ironically perhaps, when watching Harryhausen's models, we suspend any final belief in illusion. We don't commit to the fantasy's naturalism, and don't have to. The models invite one to believe and at the same time be aware of their fabrication. This is a kind of synchronicity [Link]. They are real and fantastical at the same time: both/and, interrupting the illusion while acknowledging it.

The models *perform*. They don't naturalistically represent. One appreciates how Harryhausen made an armature (actually, his father took on this task), fleshed it out in latex, and ran the stop motion process, moving the model little by little, this way and that, building up the performance, and guided by his concept drawings and a storyboard rather than any precisely computed motion algorithm. Model performance is improvised.

And material. The modeled materials metamorphose, seem to come to a kind of fantastical life. Life is breathed into raw matter, metal skeleton, latex flesh, glass eyes. Prometheus moulds humankind out of clay.

If one appreciates this vitality, character, call it authenticity of the performing models, one might extend the argument and insights into realism and naturalism with

a concept of selective fidelity. Hi fidelity naturalism is not necessarily as persuasive as low resolution performance. The most real and engaging may well be what doesn't quite fit, where fidelity to the way we experience the world is partial, and we are drawn into the gaps to complete the world, the illusion. Such rhetoric affirms our agency and complicity, thereby adding to the sense of realism.

There's something allegorical in this dreamlike quality of the animated models, their belonging to a kind of *traumwerk* within which we create worlds that bridge self and fantasy.

Here's what I wrote recently about allegory as ontology:

There is a strong case to be made that allegory not only refers to ways of handling our experience of things, but also is an aspect of the way things are, their ontology.

With multiple aspects, incomplete, fragments, ruins, pointing to indeterminate, ever displaced and ever put off completion: this is the way things are.

Concepts of entropy and negentropy (negative entropy) point to the energy dynamics of our lifeworld, that, in the face of eternal transience, perpetual effort, the energy investment of negative entropy is needed to maintain things in constant re-creation. Hence the figurative emblem which one might find so apposite in modern times, the allegorical force of the face that is both skull and angel, death and

redemption/rebirth [Link].

There can be no knowledge of such a world if we conceive of knowledge as a kind of description or display of the way things are. The quest for knowledge can deliver no full conclusive destination or possession because things flow, are dynamic, in constant creation and passing away, passing in and out of being. Any insight, understanding is always provisional.

Again, this is a performative model of coming to know the world, as we engage and act.

[Link]

