

COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE – MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

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**Bearing the Ring: The Audience and Consumers of *The Lord of the Rings***

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## COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE – MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

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**Introduction**

What is it about a particular cultural text that makes it, over many other texts, iconic in its scale of adoption? Few popular culture products have the stamina to continue growing in popularity beyond an initial publicity blitz. When one comes along that catches the potential audiences' lasting attention, a small miracle occurs. The commodity swells in girth into a juggernaut of popular culture, reverberating across identity politics and understandings of the relationship between individuals, communities, and texts. For how is one to account for the rapidly changing public tastes? While no mercy may be shown to one passing fad, others manage to dazzle within the public sphere. These texts

reach beyond their limited origins and primary author to become modern day mythologies. Within them, truths and allegories can be found, regardless of how they are colored by fantastic elements. In fact, the more “otherworldly” the text, the greater is its potential symbolism and possible interpretation. Audiences see some manifestation of their own lives reflected and as a result desire to interact with it.

Anyone can see the evidence of *The Lord of the Rings*’ popularity and that it has become more than the sum of its parts. However, without looking at how the parts interact with one another, the movement remains veiled in disembodied intrigue. It is the academic’s duty to unpack the significance of the adoption of a cultural icon adapted on a massive scale and examine how the commodification of that product spans across the postmodern cultural landscape, inviting audiences to determine the degree to which they wish to interact with it.

Over the past century, amidst novels, theater, and radio, motion pictures have become a form of access to popular culture. The experience of audiences evolved from reading the dialogue of silent films to engaging fully in increasingly technical sound and visual effects. This decade has been marked by another evolution of the relationship between potential audiences, fans, and the film. With greater use of the Internet, audiences are able to engage with multiple aspects of not only the film, but the filmmaking process as well. They become active contributors to how a motion picture is selected, filmed, and then promoted, all the while investing time and energy to acquire the heads up on what will appear on the screen as well as behind the scenes. “In the postmodern

consumer culture we can readily 'switch codes,' participating in a simulated experience and then stepping back and examining the techniques whereby the illusion is achieved" (Hannigan: 1998, 69). Access to production notes, directors' interviews, and set designs allows future audiences to feel simultaneously privy to the means of production as well as a degree of tenure over the finished product.

This digital age is one also marked by synergism. Major motion pictures are nothing if not cogs in a greater cinematic experience that includes behind-the-scenes television programs, related publications and special editions, toys, and other such spin-offs that accompany the film. This in turn complements the film industry and studios.

With mounting movie ticket prices and increasingly selective audiences, filmmakers are learning to target storylines that are produced with attracting pre-existing audiences in mind. While film adaptations are nothing new to the film industry, the political economy is changing. It is becoming more common for studios to plan, produce and market an entire franchise even before a single film has been traditionally tested in the marketplace. What makes the current trend different from serials in the past is that they are being preplanned as series of films even before their first release date. The studios are so convinced of potential financial success, whether it be natural or manipulated, that they invest in and produce a number of films to be simultaneously or continuously filmed before they have yet been tested.

I will examine who the contemporary film industries target as well as how they relate to the creation and maintenance of fan communities, who are either familiar with the original text from which the films are adapted or are initially attracted to the films and then cross over to the texts, resulting in even larger fan bases. These communities are essential in insuring a film studio that there are very active audiences that will pay for a ticket in order to judge for themselves how successful the adaptation is. In the process, these fan communities simultaneously become responsible for the creation of mythologies while also taking pleasure in experiencing them, pitting their allegiances towards the mythopoetic against the logic of commodification.

A logical case study to use in this compendium is *The Lord of the Rings*, an assemblage of multiple products and texts adapted from a narrative trilogy written by J.R.R. Tolkien. Since its publication, it has achieved a cultural iconic status within a culture that embraces the gray zone, appealing to audiences in search of a cerebral comic book to those who seek comfort in a reinforcement of the good versus evil trope. Like many other popular culture examples such as *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings* evokes our voluntary response. Audiences, initially attracted because of a nostalgic attraction to an existence within a mythological framework, welcome these products into their lives.

## The Case Study and the Fans

*The Lord of the Rings* epitomizes collaborations between fans, consumption, and cultural production. Ultimately, the political economy of a cinematic spin-off is greatly affected by the reaction of the public to a cultural product. What began for Tolkien as an “exercise in philology” has since become one of the most widely recognized cultural products of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To date, more than 100 million Tolkien books have sold worldwide, translated in 25 languages. In addition, according to patrons of Amazon.com, Britain’s Channel 4, and the Waterstone’s chain bookstore, *The Lord of the Rings* is considered the “Book of the Century” (Zellar: 2001, 23; O’Hehir, Book of the Century: 2001, Online). The books have since been adapted into a variety of other media, including radio shows, plays, and most notably, films, including the New Line cinematic trilogy directed by Peter Jackson.

Pressure has been placed on film adaptors by the sheer number of organizations associated with legions of Tolkien devotees who efficiently utilize fan societies, publications, and Internet communities to communicate about *The Lord of the Rings*. Occasionally, in addition to critically interacting with the material, fans also act as sentinels safeguarding the integrity of their sacred text. Producers of the film adaptations have learned to expect that any deviation from the source material will be confronted with external comments, whether supportive or critical. Due to this close involvement with cinematic adaptations, a dialogue is established between the spectators and filmmakers. “Consciousness

is created through interaction... There is constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others” writes M.M. Bakhtin. “A word, discourse, language or culture undergoes ‘dialogization’ then it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same thing. Undialogized language is authoritative or absolute” (1981: 427). While the filmmakers revise the preexisting text, the audiences consume it and fuse the new product with their previous knowledge of the text. In the process, new significations are developed: “Fandom celebrates not exceptional texts but rather exceptional readings” (Jenkins: 1992, 284). The fans of the text ensure that new meanings will constantly be taken from the text, thereby ensuring its longevity, in viewing the text with new relevance and through passing it down to future generations of readers.

In part, this was an element of Tolkien’s design. One of the reasons why *The Lord of the Rings* has sustained such high popularity is that it was created to be more than the sum of the words on the written pages. Tolkien intended it to be a new mythology for England, replacing that which was erased by hundreds of years of Norman Conquest. He produced the outlines of many cultures that exist within Middle Earth, a rendering of a much younger Europe, which would be fleshed out by those who later acquired the text. As such, when encountering Tolkien’s work, people developed certain understandings about Tolkien’s intended meanings; for instance, while *The Lord of the Rings* is about a hobbit named Frodo who must rid himself of a powerful ring, it is also about the rural

versus the urban and the ultimate corruptibility of power. This may explain its extraordinarily wide appeal that goes beyond escapism.

It strikes a chord, as *The Waste Land* did in the twenties, because its symbols constitute a kind of *exploration* of the real world. We still live under a great oppressive evil; in the west, we identify it with communism; in Russia and China, they identify it with capitalist imperialism; the hydrogen bomb serves as a symbol for both sides. But all imaginative people feel that there are solutions that no politician is far-sighted enough to grasp. (Wilson: 1973, 13)

This story and its themes have since been adopted by many, continually evolving and are thereby not rendered stagnant.

In the case of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, a relationship between the author and the readers of the books is required in order to facilitate an understanding of when and where his stories are to take place. Like many authors, Tolkien depends on the reader's preexisting knowledge of old legends so that he may reinvent these settings.

People in legendary time may look like us. They may even lecture us. Nevertheless, they are simply, wholly apart from us.... Yet the result is less daring than it might be.... For no matter how much Tolkien loves and enjoys fantasy, history absorbs him. (Stimpson: 1969, 11)

Tolkien's creations are exotic, yet not wholly unfamiliar to his audiences; thereby, readers are given permission to roam within Tolkien's created world, while maintaining a foot firmly planted in their regular plane of existence.

[Tolkien] was 'reconstructing', he was harmonizing contradictions in his source-texts, sometimes he was supplying entirely new concepts (like hobbits), but he was also reaching back to an imaginative world which he believed had once really existed, at least in a collective imagination: and for this he had a very great deal of admittedly scattered evidence. (Shippy: 2001, online)

This means that readers must share in the responsibility of bringing life to the words, partaking in the creation of Middle Earth and the peoples within it. Tolkien writes them down, and the readers' resources are used to attach an image to the script thereby appropriate that image with social meaning.

This is a form of myth-making. Roland Barthes explains that because myth is a kind of speech --which can take a variety of forms from writing to photography to cinema—any type of discourse is a kind of myth. "Myth is a system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form" (Barthes: 1982, 93). What Barthes writes becomes highly significant in interpreting the meaning of the visuals within the books and films and interpreting why one adaptation, over any other possibility, was made. According to Barthes, what particular images are chosen to be produced are highly relevant to mythical speech, which concerns the ideology as understood

by the dominant groups of society. In the case of Tolkien's books becoming adapted for film, in order for it to be a true conversion, the same significations of particular images must also be translated onto film.

We are no longer dealing here with a theoretical mode of representation: we are dealing with *this* particular image, which is given for *this* particular signification. Mythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance.... Pictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: like writing, they call for a *lexis*. (Barthes: 1982, 95)

To be mythic, the picture or image must have meaning or ideology, which must be aptly interpreted in order for all to share in the understanding of that meaning. If a picture unsuccessfully encapsulates pre-determined and the generally implicit meaning within the text, it has failed to represent the mythic. As a result, meaning found within the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* must be recreated using cinematic techniques, effectively capturing the essence by reassigning the signification from book to film.

What happens, therefore, when the filmist undertakes the adaptation of a novel, given the inevitable mutation, is that he does not convert the novel at all. What he adapts is a kind of paraphrase

of the novel – the novel viewed as raw material. He looks not to the organic novel, whose language is inseparable from its theme but to characters and incidents which have somehow detached themselves from language and, like the heroes of folk legends, have achieved a mythic life of their own. (Bluestone: 1966, 62).

It is the filmmaker's job, therefore, to provide the physical envisioning of the text. In general, this is not problematic for fans, who are not so concerned with the books being adapted for film as they are concerned with alterations to the general themes. Therefore, how the images/signifiers are filmed affects how and what meaning is conveyed/signified and whether or not it is what the dominant group of readers and Tolkien fans understood the meaning to be. Because the significations are the myths, if adapted accurately, both the film and books will carry the same meaning.

By changing the format of the discourse from book to film, a new type of reading is demanded of the audience. Marshall McLuhan explains how meaning is created through the exchange of ideas. Depending on how the message is delivered and received, the audience's understanding of meaning can change. While the switch in medium from book to film may bear the same significations, the alteration of the medium changes the audience's relationship to the text. In the famous words of McLuhan, "the medium is the message' because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action" (1964: 24). Once the story is transferred onto film, the relationship between the producer and consumer of the text is modified. New filters and

methods of reading/watching the text become necessary. In addition, the medium in which the message is recreated adds additional context to the original text. How it is cinematically recreated determines what information is conveyed to the audience. "Film has the power to store and to convey a great deal of information. In an instant it presents a scene of landscape with figures that would require several pages of prose to describe. In the next instant it repeats, and can go on repeating, this detailed information" (McLuhan: 1964, 252). The audiences must successfully piece together all the visual and audio clues as well as indicators in order to interpret these codes and thereby allow the films to live up to the expectations of both the most impassioned fans as well as the general masses.

The cultural product also borrows from individuals' histories residing in the audiences' private sphere. The themes are then reinforced by collaboration with the collective audience's interpretations. Judith Mayne explains in her essay, "Paradoxes of Spectatorship,"

It is a matter of crucial importance within the context of spectatorship, to the extent that the spectatorship involves a spectator who always brings with her or him a history, and whose experience of spectatorship is determined in part by the ways in which spectatorship is defined outside the movie theater. (1994, 169)

Once meaning is constructed, discussion between many can take place in the public sphere, which exists as an external space maintained for the use of public debate, as well as "rational-critical discourse" which leads to the formation of a

cultural identity outside of the private realm (Calhoun 1993, 279). The result of which is that meaning found from within the text is given its own life force that can reverberate throughout a daily reality. "The cardinal theme of Habermas' s work generally concerns how we make sense in public, especially how we negotiate our differences with one another and decide upon common purposes" (McGuigan: 1996, 21). In his essay, "The Mass Media, Cultural Identity, and the Public Sphere in the Modern World," Nicholas Garnham states that the decisions resulting from debates within the public sphere are arguably:

rooted in a notion of a shared, universal human rationality on the basis of which human agents could, through a process of open, rational debate, reach agreement on the ends and means of politics, defined as the achievement of human emancipation from domination by nature and their fellow humans. (Garnham: 1993, 252)

Garnham's statement presupposes that the world can best be understood through public debate that endows people with the ability to better analyze and compare their social dynamics. The beauty of such public debate is that new meanings are continually contemplated and then reinterpreted bringing with it new understanding and "emancipation." Whereas most reading is a solitary process, performed in private, fans consume texts as part of a community.

Fan culture is about the public display and circulation of meaning production and reading practices. Fans make meanings to communicate with other fans. Without the public display and

circulation of these meanings, fandom would not be fandom.

(Storey: 1996, 128)

Fans of the text are driven to better understand the works as well as seek to further define that part of themselves that is used to decipher greater meaning found within. By continually and actively using their own history as the means to understand the text, neither that part of themselves nor the text is rendered obsolete.

## **The Books**

While much of this success of *The Lord of the Rings* is owed to Tolkien's efficient narrative talents, a much more comprehensive explanation lies in the stories' complex thematic content and its presentation to a public precisely when a youth culture was thirsting for something fantastical to counteract political upheavals. These books succeeded in capturing the public's imagination, though not necessarily as the author intended. In a figurative sense, ownership of the themes in the books was passed down from the original author J.R.R. Tolkien to his devotees, who, in turn, reincorporated them into their own identity politics. New readers found meaning within the text that was specifically relevant to them, regardless of the Tolkien's intent, which was to create a story centered on language and mythology. T.A. Shippey, author of *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* and professor of Old English and medieval literature, writes, "Tolkien

cried out to be heard, and we have still to find out what he was saying. There should be no doubt, though, that he found listeners, and that they found whatever he was saying worth their while" (Shippy: 2001, online). Eventually, Tolkien's books achieved notoriety leading to a fervoured rise in popularity, but it would not occur all at once; a decade would pass since the first of the books original publication 1954.

Despite having overwhelmingly English intended themes and much to Tolkien's mild disturbance, *The Lord of the Rings* did not achieve wide-spread success until paperback editions reached the North American shores, more specifically university campuses in the 1960's. There are many theories regarding why it became so immensely popular. The simplest reason was the free publicity it received because of a publishing war resulting from an American copyright loophole. Ace publishers released a paperback edition without paying royalties to the author. In turn, Tolkien embarked on a campaign to beseech readers to only endorse his authorized edition, released by Ballantine; as the event escalated, fans rallied behind Tolkien in an increasingly organized fashion.

Fans began to learn the languages that Tolkien had created and the first formal Tolkien society was created in 1965, when a Brooklyn fifteen-year-old, named Richard Plotz, saw Elvish graffiti in the subway near Columbia University. The next week someone else added "Bilbo Baggins is probably a fake." The dialogue continued until Plotz advertised "Tolkien club meets at Alma Mater Statue (on the Columbia campus) 2:00, February 5" (Grotta-Kurska: 1976, 132). The meeting evolved into the Tolkien Society of America, which was later

absorbed into the Mythopoeic Society. Similar organizations sprouted up all over the world, but most particularly in North America and the United Kingdom.

In addition, various spin-off publications were printed, from dictionaries of Tolkien's languages to books about the animals found in Middle Earth; Led Zeppelin released songs referencing Middle Earth and the hobbits' adventures; professors began to add *The Lord of the Rings* to their syllabi and many authors began to write biographies about Tolkien, himself, whose ever-increasing popularity began to infringe upon his personal life. Meanwhile, the fantasy genre breathed new life. Authors admittedly borrowed many of Tolkien's ideas, some were formulized as tribute while others were blatant copies that ripped-off everything from characters and narrative to psychedelic cover art. Others began to seek more interaction with the ideas and the material through role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons and battle recreations, such as the Dagorhit Games (Battle Lords Games).

From Leonard Nemoy's cult song, "The Ballad of Bilbo Baggins" to National Lampoon's spoof, *Bored of the Rings*, Tolkien's re-created mythology in many ways epitomized what he had come to distrust about America and its "sanitation, morale-pep, feminism, and mass production" (O'Hehir, Part 2: 2001, Online). What Tolkien, a luddite who refused to drive a car, and a Tory, who believed in monarchies, would have thought of bumper stickers printed with "Frodo Lives" and pins labeled "Gandalf for President" is not difficult to imagine. Nonetheless, Tolkien could have appreciated the life that his text now breathes.

What he wrote became real. People, despite some inherent flakiness, adopted his mythology, which filled a void where one had been missing.

With such ardent support, it is no coincidence that there are more written pages devoted to and about J.R.R. Tolkien than the amount that he, himself, produced throughout his lifetime. A variety of people with different professional backgrounds found some kernel of truth within his texts. Using themselves and their interests as templates, many were inspired to create an insurmountable amount of Tolkien-related products. This renders texts organic, shifting and adapting with the changing audiences; and the audiences kept growing. Clay Harper, Tolkien special projects director of Houghton Mifflin Co., publisher of Tolkien's work in the United States says, "The history from a sales standpoint is not peaks and valleys. It is like steps steadily climbing on. For an almost 50-year-old best seller to ride to the top of the bestseller lists is a bit of a phenomenon" (Rozens: 2002, Online). Once Tolkien's stories are released to the greater audiences and readership, audiences become responsible for making the story real for themselves. As far as those who further contribute to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, their work only breathes life as far as the understanding goes that there are others who will read it. They produce both for themselves and for others.

As the *Lord of the Rings* became increasingly popular, many future fans were initially introduced to the material, not necessarily through Tolkien's books but rather via related texts influenced by Tolkien, whether it is material inspired by Tolkien or more specifically about a certain aspect of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Each author of the new adaptations took from the original their own meaning and values, creating a public forum for discussion. "If we've gotten anything useful from postmodern literary theory... it's the idea that a book always reveals and conceals things that neither the writer nor the reader can control" (O'Hehir, Part 2: 2001, Online). From annotations to compilations to translations, these authors supplement what is already written, basing their writings either directly on Tolkien's or, more indirectly, on other sources related to the original texts. Either way, writers add their own thoughts and revisions to what has already been said. Examples of this are newly written books that extrapolate meaning that may or may not be inherently implied by Tolkien. For instance, Colin Duriez's *Tolkien and the Lord of the Rings* from Azure, an imprint of the British-based Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, explores Duriez's analysis of the spiritual ideas in *The Lord of the Rings*, which Tolkien had rebuked in the past.

By adding to the Tolkien canon, they create their own meaning under the Tolkien brand, using that legitimacy to base their suppositions.

It would seem that Tolkien's work, which reinvented a moribund literary genre and created a new publishing market vaster than the empire of the Dark Lord Sauron himself, supplied something that was missing amid the shifting subjectivities and formal innovations of 20th century fiction, something for which readers were ravenous. (O'Hehir, *Book of the Century*: 2001, Online)

Many of the authors recognize an inherent hazard within this practice, for deviations can ultimately dilute rather than enhance the original texts.

Nonetheless, these authors are compelled to do so. J.E.A. Tyler, author and editor of *The Tolkien Companion*, not only gives meaning to Elvish and Mannish words left not translated by Tolkien, but postulates historical significances as well. Tyler writes in the preface,

I am of course aware of the dangers inherent in such a practice, but I believe I may claim with some justification that nowhere does an entry in this *Companion* conflict with any fact as reported by [Tolkien].... Where three facts are known, it is sometimes easy to deduce a fourth: that is all I have done. And if for my purposes I have attempted to adhere to the literary style of the original ... as closely as possible, then I hope that few will blame me (1976: 10).

Tyler apologizes for this transgression, nonetheless, pursues in taking what Tolkien wrote to the next logical step and then reminds the readers of how much joy was derived in the creation of the *Companion*.

When it comes to a more critical examination of the Tolkien lore, the publishing industry must balance the need to not over saturate the market, thereby maintaining credibility, without alienating those not so efficient in their knowledge of Tolkien lore. Wyn Morris, sales manager at the University Press of Kentucky, states, "We're always treading that fine line between academic and trade" (Rosen: 2001, 20). Nonetheless, small time distributors are finding that books, which might not otherwise be received, are getting some much needed attention because of the atmosphere surrounding the *Lord of the Rings* title.

In fact, the growing fan communities, websites such as [www.theonering.com](http://www.theonering.com), conferences, and conventions resulting from the increased readership preceding the release of the 2001 film, are becoming increasingly targeted by the publishing industry. After all, fans are very much aware of how entrenched *The Lord of The Rings* is in the public sphere.

Tolkien's magnum opus is so deeply ingrained in popular culture, after all, that a great many of today's American academics and journalists probably spent time in eighth grade passing homeroom notes written in Elvish rune-script, and still have those dogeared Ballantine paperbacks, with their hallucinatory mid-1970s cover art (which the author despised), stashed somewhere in the attic.

(O'Hehir, Book of the Century: 2001 Online)

The reputation of the books is so solidified within the literary cannon, that the publishing industry is certain that the new feature films will spark a nostalgic yearning to return to the texts. "A lot of Tolkien fans are rereading the book," said Ballantine associate publisher Kuo-Yu Liang Liang, "and they're actively campaigning for people to reread it." Cliff Broadway, a Los Angeles playwright, actor, and prominent columnist of [www.theonering.net](http://www.theonering.net), refers to the next generation of readers, "No one within American pop culture, the world of Britney Spears and Pokémon, has really ever been exposed to 'Lord of the Rings.' Well, that's about to change, isn't it?" (O'Hehir, Frodo Lives: 2000, Online). The majority of these audiences are encouraged to participate in the creation and consumption of an event atmosphere surrounding the release of a major pop

cultural event, because they lack the devotion to criticize deviancies from what is presupposed to be Tolkien's intent.

It is hoped by the producers that these audiences will seek to further define their relationship to the texts by continually purchasing related merchandise, seeking to base their identity in creative consumption.

The process is encouraged by the so-called ideology of consumerism – the suggestion that the meaning of our lives is to be found in what we consume, rather than in what we produce. Thus, the ideology legitimates and encourages the profit-making concerns of capitalism (a system demanding an ever-increasing consumption of goods). (Story: 1996, 114)

Houghton Mifflin, the publisher of the *Lord of the Rings* books for over sixty years, for example, has created a campaign that not only includes the seventh edition of the movie tie-in version of the books, but also an aggressive marketing endorsement related to the release of the first feature film in 2001. In addition to placing their traditional fare in the marketplace, Houghton Mifflin are also taking advantage of the release of a major motion picture to share in it's publicity in order to sell more of its products, including two adult film tie-in titles--*The Lord of the Rings Official Movie Guide* and *The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring Visual Companion* as well as a 20-minute video created exclusively for Houghton that will include its Tolkien publishing history, interviews with the cast and crew, and behind the scenes segments (Zeller: 2001, 23). This allows consumers to

participate in Tolkien consumption in a variety of ways; the significance is that whereas once films and books remained two separate modes of entertainment, they are now becoming intrinsically linked. It is becoming increasingly difficult for a person to seek one without encountering the marketplace pushing the second.

Consequently the book retailers begin to lose site of to whom they are marketing to. While, in one sense, the fans are responsible for the continual popularity of the books, merchants are beginning to alienate them in order to push the product. Dan Blask, marketing associate with Milwaukee's Harry Schwartz Bookshops, says

'These sorts of saturation campaigns can be dangerous, but I think Tolkien has too sure a place in people's hearts, and Houghton Mifflin is producing classy stuff. It would be pretty difficult to dislodge Tolkien from people's affections.' (Zeller: 2001, 23)

Those who seek to extend the Tolkien dogma are treating fans, who invest a considerable amount of themselves into the enjoyment of the texts, as postmodern consumers who are "unabashed hedonists, living for the thrill of the spectacle without feeling the necessity to relate such fragmented moments to a large direction of progress" (Hannigan 1998: 67). These audiences are very attractive to the general manufacturers of popular culture and authors of the mainstream Tolkien spin-offs. "The 'postmodern consumer' is commonly depicted as elusive: a free soul who darts in and out of arenas of consumption which are fluid and non-totalizing" (Hannigan 1998: 67). Therefore, it is taken for granted that consumers will tire of what is placed in the marketplace, thus

creating a demand for different products. In response, consumers are teased with a variety of product formats from which to choose from. This ultimately is used to define one's identity and individuality by one's consumption.

## The Cinematic Adaptation

While Tolkien's books and the subsequent adapted films both strive to capture the imagination of their audiences, how they approach this goal is intrinsically different. Whereas the reader of a novel gains pleasure by translating words into their own created images, in a film, this responsibility is transferred to the filmmakers, whose goal it is to convince audiences that their interpretations are not only entertaining, but believable and authentic.

Tolkien enthusiasts must adjust their expectations in order to compensate for the change in the medium, from book to film. In the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, Jackson made use of the pre-existing fan bases to a certain extent, relying upon their loyalty to the franchise to sell tickets. However, a director cannot appease all fans, who, within their communities, expect different degrees of literal adaptation. They are fragmented in their expectations and ultimately their desires are only relevant as long as it does not impede in an adaptation's ability to attract larger audiences. While vast amounts of audiences believe that it is the responsibility of filmmakers to produce material that the public wants, this is not completely true. "The reality is that the American public gets programming

that is calculated to attract the 'commodity audience' with limited concern for what most viewers actually desire" (Jenkins: 1992, 30). While fans may be under the impression that their opinion and desires have some effect on the final product, ultimately, what the filmmakers desire is that these same devotees consume what is given to them.

Many program producers are sympathetic to such campaigns and have shrewdly employed them as a base of support in their own power struggles with the network executives. Others, however, have responded to such fan initiatives with contempt, suggesting that fan efforts to protect favorite aspects of fictional texts infringe upon the producer's creative freedom and restrict their ability to negotiate for a larger audience. (Jenkins: 1992, 30)

Ultimately, while fans may hope to have a lasting influence on the commercial production, the decisions are not theirs to make, regardless of how certain they are of their authoritative position. In an interview, Jackson explains that it is impossible to appease all fans. "You can't make a film by committee. We had to make our own decisions. It's not a movie made for fans, but it's a movie made by fans" (Ringmasters: 2001, 65).

While Jackson desired to remain true to the essence of the novel, he also understands that in changing the format of the text from novel to film, he becomes the author of his own vision of the text, a process to which audiences, familiar with many Tolkien spin-offs, would be accustomed. Nonetheless, the

hype surrounding the major release of a production can have a jarring effect on the audience.

The Tolkien fans I spoke with seem reconciled to the idea that the trilogy's involved plotlines will inevitably be truncated and smoothed out for the silver screen. But there is bound to be trauma when their private mythopoetic realm, for so many years the unchallenged province of dreamy girls in granny skirts and bearded grad students, is forcibly dragged under the halogen lights of mass culture. (O'Hehir, Frodo Lives: 2000 Online)

While a popular event atmosphere surrounding the release of a film may result in the product's introduction to a new audience, nonetheless, to audiences previously familiar with *The Lord of the Rings* as well as past failed cinematic adaptations, such as David Lynch's *Dune*, the release invites fear and speculation that *The Lord of the Rings'* aura may be lost amidst commercially motivated alterations to the plot and characters. In general, fans are not so concerned with books being adapted for film, as they are anxious about alterations to the general themes. Jackson and his crew were particularly aware of the fans' potential apprehension and the onslaught of critiques. In order to curb the impending criticism, he strove to prevent mistreatment of the original works by employing those dedicated to preserving the integrity of the text while also appropriately adapting it.

Many of Jackson's film crew were initially uncomfortable with the prospects of bringing the beloved books back to film, following the poorly

received animated film directed in 1978 by Ralph Bakshi, scripted by Tolkien scholar Chris Conkling and fantasy author Peter S. Beagle, who both came to the project with a strong understanding of Tolkien's text. Cinematographer Andrew Lesnie did not think that a successful cinematic version would be possible. It was not until he was exposed to the depth of preparation and planning involved in the preproduction stage that he was assured that the cinematic adaptation had enough of a grand scope to be appropriate. Like Tolkien, Jackson's mission was to recreate an entire world, based on Tolkien's descriptions, previous histories, as well as the creativity and artisanship of the crew's craftspeople. Also recruited to work on the films were crewmembers involved with previous Tolkien projects, including renown Tolkien illustrators turned conceptual artists, Alan Lee and John Howe. They were hired for the film specifically because of their "intimate love of Tolkien's work" and the opportunity to expand upon the format (Journey to Middle-Earth: 2001, 6). Lee continues, "As a conceptual artist, it is quite a mine field treading through Tolkien's world, but you somehow have to trust your own judgment and your own vision. Tolkien's descriptions are so beautiful and poetic, yet he has left plenty of room for us to make out little explorations" (6).

To create the look for the new film, Jackson referred to related art and designs, from edition illustrations to calendar pages, created since the books' publication. Jackson says, in regard to Lee and Howe, "Both of those artists really inspired us, and we were writing the screen-play with their pictures spread out on the floor. They not only captured the flavor of the book, but they also went beyond what we could imagine ourselves" (Magid: 2001, 60). Film artifacts were

created specifically with distinct *Lord of the Rings* cultures in mind. From weaponry, glassware, furniture and costumes, all artifacts were inspired by a real author's imagining of the unreal. The filmmakers reinterpreted the author's words and gave corporal substance to images referred to in the books. Jackson made it an imperative that the film trilogy breathes as much of the original essence of Tolkien's words as possible. Lee continues, "When [Jackson] said he wanted to be as true to the spirit of the books as he could and try to create very, very real landscapes and as believable a world as possible, I knew I was the right person for the job" (Journey to Middle-Earth: 2001, 6). In an interview, Matthew Senreich, editorial director for *Wizard* and *Toy Fare*, magazines catering to comic book fans and toy collectors, said that the visuals helped win over audiences. "Niche fans are very hard to please, but because the film was so well done, things are overlooked because of the stunning work."

While visually evoking images familiar to those who have read the book, filmmakers must be careful not to alienate those new to *The Lord of the Rings*, the majority of their potential audiences. Serious consideration must be taken for those who are unfamiliar with previous versions of the text and the coded signifiers within. This presents a challenge to the screenwriters, who must somehow balance the complexity and richness of what is attractive about the original text with cinematic clarity and appealing visual elements, which do not require a preexisting knowledge of the text in order to understand them.

Mainstream works touching on the fantastic tend to be more individualistic, though they too can draw upon common themes or

tropes. As far as style, genre fantasy tends more toward ... [the] "readerly": that is, such works typically are straightforward narratives in the romantic realist mode of storytelling. (Barron: 1999, 348)

Jackson admits the difficulty in finding a discrete balance between accurately interpreting Tolkien while not excluding those previously unfamiliar with *The Lord of the Rings*, a necessary objective when making a film sanctioned with a budget of over \$150 million. He says

"The book is ... famous for being incredibly dense and detailed and rich, which is why it has such a huge fan following and I've tried to catch the feeling of Tolkien for the people that like the book but simplify it to the extent that you don't have to have read the book to enjoy the film, so, it's a fine line. You cannot please everyone, and I'm sure that we haven't, but you can only ultimately, I think, make the best film that I could." (Fischer, Online).

A story must be told in a manner so that all audience members will walk out of the theatre with a comprehensive understanding of the events and characters within the story.

In doing so, fans become spectators regarded as active participants in the overall cinematic experience, engaging in a dialogue with the filmmakers rather than being passive receptors of commercially produced material. "[The spectators] main task is the construction of a referential 'real' world on the basis of the fragmentary images provided in the film. For this reason it is best to

consider the spectator at the opposite and more or less qualitatively equivalent end of the creative process initiated by the creating artist—hence, the ‘creating spectator’” (Cohen: 1979, 72). Even if not providing creative support during the production of a feature film, audience members are necessary partners in receiving any message or artful interpretation that filmmakers wish to convey. While not all fans were pleased with the changes made to the content of the novels, others were reconciled with their trepidations. Henry Jenkins, author of *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, writes that a successful adaptation can enhance a product.

This modification need not be understood as textual ‘disentigration’ but rather as home improvements that refit prefabricated materials to consumer desires. The text becomes something more than what it was before, not something less.” (Jenkins: 1992, 52)

In the case of the cinematic *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, because Jackson treated the original text with respect, he succeeded.

It turned out that there was no conflict between satisfying Tolkien's fans and catering to everyone else. What Jackson and his collaborators did right was to trust Tolkien, to draw virtually all of their movie straight from the book -- understanding that the same visions that had captivated millions of readers for decades could, if transferred to the screen with respect and imagination, equally well captivate millions of viewers. (Rosenberg: 2002, Online)

Jackson's tone towards the press has been very non-confrontational. He realizes that by alienating the fan-boys and girls, as well as the legions of readers, he stands to undermine their experiences, intimate or not, reading the books. He says,

I felt all the way through that I had the responsibility to make a good movie, first and foremost, and a responsibility to be a Tolkien interpreter second. I thought it would really destroy us if the film attained a reputation of, 'Oh, don't bother seeing it, just read the book.' I thought that would be an absolute disaster. I've made it my mission to inspire you to go out and read the book. (Lewerenz: 2001, D-7)

Instead, he presents his film as a single version possible, among many alternative visions. In this sense, a dialogue can be reestablished, debating notions of what exactly a true interpretation of Tolkien needs to include as well as sparks other discourse concerning what it means to be a fan and consumer of Tolkien material.

### **Cultural Product or Commodity**

*The Lord of the Rings* is a heroic tale motivated by a need to reclaim a space that once existed free of the tangles from the outside world and is now threatened by external corruption and temptations that it was previously oblivious

to. Some would argue that the sanctity of the text has equally come under attack by those motivated by the economic exploitation of the works. However, the question that most needs to be answered is whether or not *The Lord of the Rings*, as a text, can be vulnerable, and if so by whom -- the entrepreneurial marketers or, rather, the ever hungry consumers?

If the question is valid, then is the fan an accomplice of the consumer? A great cynicism is brewing concerning this distinction. In truth there are many different communities that center around *The Lord of the Rings*, with identities that alter between being fans and consumers-- each affected differently by increasingly levels of commercialism. First there are those who are new to the cultural product. Their interaction with it is limited to what is placed in the mainstream marketplace, such as the film and product tie-ins. Secondly, there are communities organized around the product, familiar with the mainstream culture, but also beginning to relate on a more personal level to the release of pop material and the original text. Finally, there are fans of the original books who seek to better identify with Tolkien's vision by delving into companion texts that further their understanding of the mythos. However, this group is not isolated from the affects of pop culture on their organic understanding of the cultural product. In many situations, all three of these groups overlap. For instance, it is possible for a fan interested in a very specific aspect of the product, such as the Elvish songs to also take pleasure in collecting trading cards of the actors in the films.

However, many cultural critics fear that while there is some space available to fans to relate to many levels of popular culture, from products released for a niche market to those created for the masses, this space is shrinking. More specifically, anxiety in the general fan community is growing, concerning the changing emphasis on what a consumer desires to interact with versus the act of selling and consuming. Kalle Lasn writes in *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*,

American culture is no longer created by the people. Our stories, once passed from one generation to the next by parents, neighbors and teachers, are now told by distinct corporations with 'something to sell as well as to tell.' Brands, products, fashions, celebrities, entertainments—the spectacles that surround the production of culture—are our culture now. Our role is mostly to listen and watch—and then, based, on what we have heard and seen, to buy.

(Lasn: 1999, xiii)

One can look at the cultural text as merely an excuse to produce material objects, rather than the other way around. "Value-added entertainment features are seen as necessary in order to attract a new breed of consumer who is hooked on fun" (Hannigan: 1998, 89). Thus, the symbolic meaning of the magical ring, glazed with CGI touch-ups and plastered all over bookstores and movie theaters, is reduced to a marketing ploy used to lure consumers in. Tolkien's emblem promotes commodities as well as serves "as an advertisement for the values and practices of the emerging culture itself" (Gordon: 1998, 11-12). A

culture that, for the most part, feeds off of the by-products of media conglomerations which control the production of everything from the publication of the books to the AOL trial CD-ROMs promoting a feature film.

Mayne explains in her essay, "Paradoxes of Spectatorship," that the spin-offs must be understood as a necessary portion of the greater film-going experience.

The individual film is taken to be a well-functioning instance of the larger effects of the cinematic institution. When other practices are taken into account, like advertising or consumer tie-ins, they are assumed to create a narrative flow every bit as seamless as that of the classical scenario itself. (1994, 171)

Films have gotten too wide in girth and expensive to support themselves on ticket sales alone. Now, not only can the experience range in scope from reading the books to sipping from Burger King's *The Lord of the Rings Goblets of Fire* but it has extended into the cultural arena as well. Readers and audiences can experience more *The Lord of the Rings* action while watching *National Geographic* movie specials on television and visiting special film prop exhibitions at the Casa Loma, a historical estate owned by the City of Toronto and operated by the Kiwanis Club. Joel Stein, columnist for *Time* magazine, writes,

We yearn for mass events, and no one has figured out how to create them better than the movies. The movie business, more than ever, is the blockbuster business—the big money *is* in getting everyone to see your movie in its first week and then feeding them

sequels and T shirts and theme-park rides and bonus-packed DVDS as reminiscence. Because there are a limited number of blockbusters a year, they are the only form of entertainment that still seems special. (2002, 72)

And Stein should know, after all *Time* magazine is only one of the many publications own by media conglomerate giant AOL/Time Warner, producer of many a blockbuster film and its synergetic tie-ins.

Is this [media conglomeration], then, the 'refeudalisation of the public sphere' at the point of production? The robber barons themselves now raid on a much grander scale than in medieval times, organizing neo-feudal relations of production and consumption in the burgeoning cultural and information industries across the globe. (McGuigan: 1996, 93)

With the aid of faster communication and aggressive capitalism, the public sphere is being stretched from the local and national scale to the global scale. This is changing the way films are made.

*The Lord of the Rings* cinematic trilogy is an international venture, in both its production and marketing. The face of Elijah Wood, the actor who plays the protagonist Frodo, is now recognizable to spectators all over the planet. And his image is being used to help market even more products on a global scale.

We are likely to see an ever-larger proportion of the cultural goods and services consumed by the world's population being conceived, produced, and distributed by such multi-national corporations—not

to speak of the consumer goods and their associated advertising that now play such an important role in the creation and maintenance of cultural identities” (Garnham: 1993, 256)

Furthermore, the cultural products that garner ardent fan support are protected under intellectual property law. This, in turn, reduces the extent to which others are able to use the material for their own uses.

The accomplishment of this expropriation of surplus signifying value is effected by intellectual property laws that restrict the right to reproduce these publicly identifiable texts to those who are deemed to ‘own’ them and claim their social meanings under various legal fictions of ownership. (Coombe, *Cultural Life*: 1998, 53)

The fate of *The Lord of the Rings* as well as other such material increasingly rests in the hands of business and its associated rights. However, a certain degree of identity formation remains possible for fans within the paradigm of consumption and collecting.

As the appetite for amassing objects increases within the fan community, other items become available to replenish the waning supply of collectibles, originally cherished for their use-value. Fredric Jameson states in “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”:

What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods... at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an

increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. (1984, 56)

New commodities are constantly turned out, continually feeding consumers' appetites. In order to keep the pace, marketers must race to create new items or fashions to produce. An example of this resides in *The Lord of the Rings* toy production.

For those fans of the film who desire more interaction with the content than watching the film or searching the Internet, Mattel toys is offering the opportunity for fans to physically control the destiny of figurines. Although the film upon which the toys are based is both more violent and grand in scale than that of more traditional toy origins, Mattel is not worried. "It's one thing for a child of 7 or 8 not to be able to read these books, or to have difficulty reading them, but to see a film of the story is a very different scenario," said David Imhoff, New Line Cinema executive vice president for worldwide licensing and merchandising. "It's a very different experience" (Lyman 2001, Online). In the unlikely event that children do not rush out to the toy stores, toy distributors are confident that the figurines will appeal to other markets. "I think it will have a lot more appeal in the collector community, because of the darkness of the movie," said Melody Young, vice president and divisional merchandise manager for Toysrus.com (Lyman 2001, Online). What Young has left out is that the line of toys associated with these films is eclipsing the sales of any other non-Jackson-related merchandise. Says Senreich, "If it's not the current incarnation of *The Lord of the Rings*... no

one wants it. They want *The Lord of the Rings* merchandise based on the “cool” version of the classic.”

However, some fans experience apprehension when it comes to the plastic representations of characters with whom they've grown up with.

To someone who has never been under the spell of Tolkien's books, it's impossible to explain why a harmless toy should seem so disheartening, even sacrilegious. I suppose that for Tolkien enthusiasts his world and its characters have a profoundly mythic seriousness that can only be grossly devalued by translating it into the world of children's playthings. The Nazgûl scared the crap out of me as a child. They are meant to be emissaries of soul-destroying terror; they're not tricked-out vaudeville villains out of Lucas' plastic universe or the World Wrestling Federation. (O'Hehir 2000, Frodo Lives, Online)

Whereas once Tolkien material was used to entertain and enlighten the public, currently much of what is created is used to further interest in the commercial arena rather than the concentrated sector of the fan communities. “This is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings—which may be better and more accurate to call ‘intensities’—are now free-floating and impersonal, and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria” (Jameson: 1984, 64). It is then possible for these “intensities” to be reclaimed by the fan communities, where they can be cleansed of prior commercial meaning and reinterpreted as

cultural forms that assume local meanings in the lifeworlds of those who incorporate them in their daily lives. Circulating widely in contemporary public spheres, they provide symbolic resources for the construction of identity and community, subaltern appropriations, parodic interventions, and counterhegemonic narratives. (Coombe, *Cultural Life*: 1998, 7)

In the act of collecting memorabilia and forming a compilation of items, fans can create their own narratives. This is accomplished by wresting away meaning intended by object manufacturers and replacing it with that constructed within one's individual understanding.

How we arrange what we collect enables us to partially or fully construct an identity. Objects and material thus used can be said to constitute a kind of material language. The narrative they relate depends on what we want them to say to us and/or to others, in which sense the collector herself or himself becomes the center of the collection. (Martin: 1999, 66)

Therefore, collectors, influenced by their identity politics, become chiefly responsible for how value is assigned to a collection as well as how a particular culture's identity will be represented by such a collection. "All such collections embody hierarchies of value, exclusions, rule-governed territories of the self" (Clifford: 1990, 143). It is up to the collector to determine whether the collection contains "what 'deserves' to be kept, remembered, and treasured" (Clifford:

1990, 152). By placing arbitrary value in the items accumulated, one adds new meaning to objects not necessarily anticipated in their production.

The promotion of *The Lord of the Rings* as cultural commodity helps educate consumers in how to engage in capitalism. In due time, they learn that the same characters they grow up with are also commercial reproduced commodities. While fan societies do take part in the consumption of cultural products sold in the marketplace, where the material fails to meet their needs, they create their own works, including homemade art or “fanfics” (fictions created by fans) inspired by the books, but not necessarily sanctioned by what is produced by the official Tolkien marketers.

*The Lord of the Rings'* negotiation between mythology and marketplace has endowed it with longevity. While Tolkien is responsible for bequeathing the books with certain memorable qualities, it is the publishers and filmmakers who are ultimately responsible for giving the books a culturally iconic status by insuring that it is available to the public. It is up to the people to interact. The consequence of a mythology altered by commercially motivated changes is that the public sphere persistently consumes altered and evolved cultural texts. This contributes to a reshaping of fans' identity. They claim a unique ownership of the material. While legally owned by others, the particular, individual relationship between fans and the material, nestling within the recesses of their nostalgia, remains unique to each individual. And within each mind, imagined images and scenarios remain unchallenged by even the strictest commercial interpretations.

## Conclusion

In the end, there are many possible explanations as to why *The Lord of The Rings* resonates within popular culture. While investigations may lead to a better understanding of the media industry and political economics, ultimately the information fails to resonate great enlightenment. However, it is the quest for awareness—the questions rather than the answers— that at last sheds sparks of kindling insight, for specific answers can only reveal so much and that information is susceptible to distortion.

In undergoing research seeking to define the boundaries between audiences and consumers, I come to realize that there are a great many divisions, that at times overlap and become blurred. To the producers of media, both the publishers and filmmakers, everyone is a possible patron in possession of transferable money, and for this reason they must decide whether or not to produce for the masses and risk alienating those who have already invested considerable capital in their subject. On the other hand, when either a fanboy or fangirl or the average Joe or Jane off the street participates in reading a piece of popular culture or attending a blockbuster event, they invest a piece of themselves in the experience. They must come halfway, bringing with them their own imagination and willingness to interact. Ultimately, these audiences are responsible for both creating mythologies while simultaneously receiving them as delivered myths. And lastly, there are the creators of the material, those who

stamp their name on a project and thereby simultaneously ward off stagnation and encourage a text's propagation and evolution.

Without a doubt, *The Lord of the Rings* has made its mark on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries—redefining modern mythology and the hero quest—but also succeeding in establishing a whole new degree of synergism and commodification. New markets are tested and as a result new contexts can be applied to the originals. Through evolving from obscure novels to commercial power, *The Lord of the Rings* proves that each sphere is reliant upon each other; the public and the private challenge one another, giving way for the growth of some of the world's most recognizable characters.

In the concluding chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*, the hobbits return home to a scourged Shire. While they were gone, in the hope of preserving their dear home, the ways of the outside world creeps in, destroying much of what was once held so valuable. The lesson Tolkien leaves us with is that the world also changes what seems the most precious. Whether or not, the change is for the better or the worse, it is inescapable. The same holds true with adaptations and our relationship to them. We may not like them, however, at the very least they remind us that there still is a text to be altered. It is up to us, the consumers and the fans, to decide to what extent we wish endorse the by-products.

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