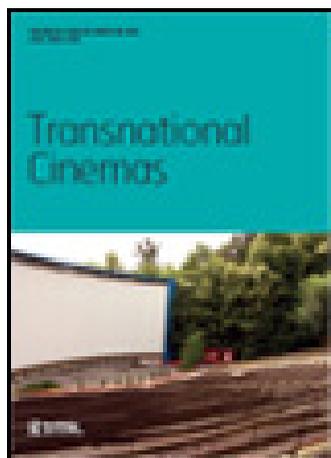


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## An unexpected controversy in Middle-earth: audience encounters with the 'dark side' of transnational film production

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This paper addresses local and global audience understandings of a sequence of events that exposed the play of politics and power underpinning the transnational production of a globalised entertainment product – Peter Jackson's *Hobbit* trilogy (2012–14). More often obscured by processes of commodity sign production, circulation, and desire, the clash and confluence of global and national ambitions became subject to often heated public discussion and debate during the New Zealand *Hobbit* labour dispute and in its aftermath. In this paper, we draw on findings from a large-scale online Q methodology survey of pre-viewers for the first *Hobbit* film to document how differently located audiences made sense of these complex events, their local ramifications, and potentially global implications. We argue that the interests of global capital were able to prevail materially and discursively through the construction and naturalisation of a concordance of interests between Warner Bros. and the neo-liberal New Zealand government. Furthermore, while geographical, political and professional proximity to the context of production provided some respondents with access to alternative discursive understandings, competing forces of fetishistic desire and obfuscation undercut the willingness of most others to seriously contemplate any criticism of the social and material conditions of *The Hobbit*'s production, lest it 'spoil' a longed for consumption and cultural experience.

**Keywords:** film reception; audience research; transnational film production; political economy; commodity fetishism; *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*

### Introduction

Of emerging interest for media scholars is the complexly layered relationship between spaces and contexts of cultural production, related economic practices and audience responses to transnational cinema (Higbee and Lim 2010; Waitjen and Gibson 2007). Reflecting something of a reconciliation between cultural studies and political economy (Grossberg 1995; Kellner 1995), a growing body of work situates the understandings and activities of viewers and fans within a structural-historical perspective acknowledging the material conditions under which cultural texts are produced and consumed (Waitjen and Gibson 2007). For most ordinary consumers, however, insight into the context(s) of production is typically shaped, if not entirely obscured, by processes of commodity sign production, circulation and desire.<sup>1</sup> Yet there are moments in which the material consequences of the contemporary clash and confluence of global and national ambitions become subject to public discussion. In this article, we consider one such moment relating to a festering industrial dispute in the titular heart of Middle-earth.

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Drawing on findings from a large-scale online survey of audience prefigurations, we document how differently-located audiences made sense of events exposing the play of politics and power underpinning the transnational production of globalized entertainment products. We argue that in the case of Peter Jackson's *Hobbit* trilogy (2012–14), the interests of global capital prevailed materially and discursively through the construction and naturalization of a concordance of interests between Warner Bros. and the neo-liberal New Zealand government. Furthermore, while proximity to the context of production provided greater access to alternative discursive understandings, many local respondents were nonetheless swayed by competing forces of fetishistic desire and obfuscation.

### Critical transnationalism and the new era of globalized film production

Higbee and Lim (2010) note the insufficiency of considering cinema deriving from more than one nation from solely prescriptive or descriptive angles, since politics and power are often overemphasized in the former, while neglected in the latter. Instead, they propose a 'critical, discursive stance' that addresses the 'interface between global and local' (10), while remaining alert to the specific configurations of power and knowledge involved in each transnational trajectory. This use of the term 'transnational', then, emphasizes the need for discrimination and particularity when examining instances of cultural production involving personnel, resources, locations, narrative and aesthetic elements from various regions (18). The instances of cultural production of primary interest in this article are transnational filmmaking activities, which increasingly involve 'the global dispersion of production sites; the global dispersion of labouring agents ... and cross-border partnerships, collaborations, and coproductions in terms of financial investment and creative talent' (Chung 2012, 28).

While the origins and operations of personnel and resources on a transnational collaboration may be dispersed and heterogeneous, the nation-state and its borders retain significance as the site of commercial and legal manoeuvres aimed at attracting transnational projects to utilize local production sites and workforces (Gao 2009; Jin 2011; Sassen 2006). Indeed, New Zealand is an archetypal example of a small economy that has sought to maximize its opportunities for international trade while making numerous policy accommodations aimed at encouraging global capital investment in local industry. More specifically, the New Zealand government has sought to position the country as a global hub for digital effects design, and promoted the relative value of the country's scenic attributes and skilled yet comparatively cheap film production workforce (Jones 2008; Thompson 2007). In the process, they have been forced to grapple with the inherent instability of being one of many possible 'nodes' in a transnational film production network where power remains concentrated in the hands of global media conglomerates, who constantly reappraise the relative risks and benefits of particular locations and production facilities (Wasko and Erickson 2008). The case study we examine here thus emerges out of the particular dynamics of competing national versus global interests and related political interactions within the New Zealand filmmaking environment, as understood by a widely dispersed audience for Peter Jackson's 2012 feature film *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. Our findings draw from the first phase of a larger longitudinal project exploring audience responses to *The Hobbit* trilogy. During this initial phase, we conducted an online English-language survey of prefigurative audience opinions prior to the theatrical release of the first film.<sup>2</sup> Our specific focus in this article is on the ways in which differently-located audiences made sense of a controversial

series of events that occurred during the early production period and returned to public prominence immediately prior to the film's release. Along with trying to discern whether geographical and other forms of proximity provided access to alternative discursive understandings that might counter official framings of a series of financial and policy concessions that were made to ensure New Zealand remained the titular home of Middle-earth, we were also interested in another set of questions relating to the nature of audience engagement with transnational film productions. Just as *The Hobbit* trilogy transcends national boundaries in terms of its resourcing, crewing, aesthetics, distribution and income, we hoped to discover whether reactions to these film events similarly exhibit supra-national characteristics. Do worldwide audiences for *The Hobbit* share globalized, deculturalized modes of response, as suggested by Kuipers and de Kloet (2009) in the case of the earlier *Lord of the Rings* trilogy? Or are there significant patterns in the nature of audience reception based on nationality, political affiliation and culture? And to what extent might transnational film production create spaces for unique 'glocalized' interpretations and forms of engagement among audiences?

### **Prefiguring *The Hobbit*: an unexpected controversy**

As Davis et al. (2014) have argued, audiences for *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* encountered this film in possession of a diverse set of discursive resources, and many had formulated expectations, knowledge and opinions in advance of viewing. As in the case of other heavily promoted 'blockbuster' event films (Biltereyst, Mathijs and Meers 2008), audience expectations for the first *Hobbit* film were framed by official marketing efforts to stimulate demand pre-release, and once in theatres to encourage a positive or 'preferred' reception of the film, which we characterize as 'immersive enchantment' in the fictional lifeworld of Middle-earth (Davis et al. 2014). Such efforts reflect conventional blockbuster marketing strategy, which asserts that event films need to develop a formidable and sustained 'public presence' (Mathijs 2006), achieved through an extensive advertising and marketing campaign and by stimulating and leveraging flows of information (Grainge 2008). There is an important distinction within these flows between 'paid' and 'owned' media controlled by marketing teams, and 'earned' media visibility in the form of buzz, chatter and opinion expressed by film critics, fans and casual viewers.<sup>3</sup> While a successful paid campaign may draw audiences to theatres for the opening, 'earned' media coverage is required to attract audiences once the film is playing.

The content and tone of these broader discussions within mainstream news and specialized entertainment news media, on and offline, largely falls outside the control of film producers and publicists. Most notably, the New Zealand '*Hobbit* crisis' (Handel 2013) provided almost daily news fodder locally over the course of several weeks during September–November 2010 and again in the immediate pre- and post-release periods, and much of that coverage was critical of the roles played by Jackson, Warner Bros. and/or the New Zealand government in resolving this employment dispute (see Chapman 2012; Wall 2012). The controversy also attracted over 100 news items within the international press, with headlines such as 'Studio Does Some Sabre Rattling over *The Hobbit*' and '*Hobbit* Hamstrung Australian Union Blamed for Forcing Movie out of NZ' appearing in a range of influential outlets (e.g. *Hollywood Reporter*, 24 October 2010; *The New York Times*, 28 October 2010; *The Toronto Star*, 22 October 2010).

At the time of the original controversy, however, there was considerable public confusion regarding the actions and motivations of those involved in the dispute, which came to light following media reports that members of the local union (Actors Equity, a subsidiary of the Australian-based Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance [MEAA]) had threatened to not work on the production, and to dissuade overseas union-affiliated actors from doing so, until a collective agreement with satisfactory working terms and conditions had been negotiated (Kelly 2011). Declining to negotiate with MEAA on behalf of Actors Equity members, WingNut Films, headed by Sir Peter Jackson,<sup>4</sup> began, in late September, to state publicly that due to the dispute, the production might be closed down or relocated offshore (Cardy and Johnston 2010). These threats aroused strong emotions among fans as well as film workers anxious to secure employment on the *Hobbit* production, culminating in several protest marches on 20 October 2010 in support of Jackson's stance. The next day it was announced that MEAA/Actors Equity had withdrawn their industrial action (*The New Zealand Herald*, 21 October 2010).

However, Jackson and associates continued to state that there was insufficient 'security' in the New Zealand production environment and that Warner Bros. was still contemplating moving the production elsewhere. On 26 October 2010, several executives from Warner Bros. met with local government representatives, including Prime Minister John Key. The following evening, Key announced that, in return for assurances that the production would remain in New Zealand and in exchange for tourism promotional material being included on the *Hobbit* DVDs, Warner Bros. would receive an additional NZ\$34m in tax subsidies.

In itself, this is nothing unusual: many economies offer similar subsidies in a bid to increase their relative attractiveness as production locations for transnational film productions (Wasko and Erickson 2008). Such practices might appear to represent acquiescence to the commercial imperatives of companies such as Warner Bros. Pictures, which describes its business paradigm as one that 'mitigates risk while maximizing productivity and capital' on its website. But they can also be understood as part of a 'strategic' glocalised response to the economic 'realities' of transnational film production, and the increasing price of participation in the global economy (Walker and Tipples 2013). As Gao (2009) notes, nation-states often utilize film policy to achieve various economic, cultural and political objectives. Global capital in turn relies on nation-states to maintain local conditions favourable to capital accumulation and to help navigate the global economy (Wood 2002, as cited in Jin 2011, 665). When those discrete agendas converge to produce a concordance of interests (Habermas 1991), a variety of concessions may be made that the weaker party may perceive as necessary and even beneficial.

However, on 28 October there was a more troubling *policy* accommodation effecting New Zealand employment law. Sidestepping normal processes of public consultation, the government passed the Employment Relations (Film Production Work) Amendment Bill under urgency. This bill redefined local screen workers from employees to contract workers, effectively stripping them of their employment rights (Wilson 2011) and immunising 'the industry against both union-negotiated and legislated protections for workers, both for *The Hobbit* production and for the future' (McAndrew and Risak 2012, 71). The arbitrary amendment of labour laws to prevent local film workers from collectively organizing and enjoying standard legal employment protection is an unprecedented move within the industry internationally (Handel 2013), and reflects the government's commitment to ensuring 'that New Zealand law in this area is settled to give film producers like Warner Bros. the confidence they need to produce their movies in this country' (Prime Minister John Key, as cited in *The New Zealand Herald*, 27

October 2010). It was also consistent with the neo-liberal agenda of the national government, which had previously sought to limit the power of the local trade union movement, liberalize employment law and encourage investment of global capital (Haworth 2011). The *Hobbit* employment law changes thus arguably reflect not so much a fiscal and legislative concession to ‘big business’, as a concordance of interests between global capital and those local interests served by a neo-liberal nation-state.

These developments generated widespread unease among commentators, who questioned what the country ultimately achieved in the negotiations: an enhanced position within the global contest to secure transnational production projects and a downstream economic boost in the form of film-related tourism, or simply the loss of key working conditions for local industry personnel? More critical commentaries slated the perceived concessions to an overseas commercial entity and the weakening of New Zealanders’ right to sovereign governance (see Scherer 2010; Wilson 2011), noting that New Zealand was now ‘the only nation with a non-unionized English-language film industry’ (Handel 2013, 60–61), which has broad implications for regulatory change within nation-states contemplating their own competitive advantage.

Public awareness of this issue was re-ignited in late 2012, the period during which our prefiguration research was conducted, and again in January 2013 when the New Zealand Ombudsman ruled that relevant correspondence between various industry bodies and government ministers could be released (McGee 2013). These documents showed that the relationship between Sir Peter Jackson and partner Fran Walsh, the Screen Production and Development Association (SPADA; representing producers and directors) and various government ministers was one of easy access and support, with the government supplying Jackson with a legal opinion supporting refusal to negotiate with the actors’ union. It also became evident that Jackson’s public statements were sometimes at odds with information circulating among other parties on his side of the dispute. For instance, on 18 October Jackson stated in an email to Tim Hurdle, an advisor in the office of the Minister for Economic Development, that Warner’s threats to relocate had not really been motivated by the union campaign; rather, the concerns were broader, to ‘secure’ the legal status of the local workforce in Warner’s favour, thereby mitigating their financial risk. It also became clear that MEAA called off industrial action on 17 October, but had ceded the right to announce this to Warner Bros., who prevaricated until after the 20 October protest marches (Kelly 2011). These therefore took place under a misapprehension that served to reinforce public and political anxieties about the possible loss of the *Hobbit* production. The resultant lack of clarity about the course of events and uncertainty over the role of high-profile players shadowed public discourse in the lead-up to the film’s release.

These and related concerns also permeated the prefigurative engagements of a long-standing and highly active online fan community, members of which articulated enthusiastic anticipation as well as apprehension, ambivalence and occasionally outright opposition in response to various materials posted on the key *Lord of The Rings*/Tolkien fan website, theonering.net (Thompson 2007). The dominant tone of much fan discussion of the labour issue throughout this period was one of anxiety that New Zealand might lose its status as the ‘obvious’ physical setting for the second Tolkien trilogy, and thus that the *Hobbit* films might lack continuity with Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* movies.

We also note that despite the increasing ease with which local controversies can be disseminated globally within a networked media environment, how these issues were understood beyond New Zealand varied greatly. Here, we document how the pressures

and resulting concessions associated with *The Hobbit* film production were understood and responded to by differently located audience members, themselves possessing varying degrees of attachment to and desire for this particular product of transnational corporate enterprise. We demonstrate that whether viewers had access to, and willingness to apply, critical knowledge of the material conditions under which this cultural text was produced remained highly contingent, being influenced not only by geopolitical factors but also by viewers' political affiliations and their prefigurative desires for a particular kind of consumption experience. Thus, by addressing our critical attention to the factors shaping audience reactions to the New Zealand government's subsidization of *The Hobbit's* production and more controversial amendment of local labour laws, we seek to shed light on public understandings of the complex interactions and renegotiations involved in transnational film productions more generally, while illuminating the ways in which those understandings are refracted through the processes and practices of cinematic desire and consumption.

### Methodology

The data we draw on were gathered through an online survey combining a conventional questionnaire with Q methodology, in which a series of topic-relevant statements of subjective opinion are sorted and ranked according to levels of agreement and disagreement (see Davis and Michelle 2011; Michelle and Davis 2014; Watts and Stenner 2012). A structured Q sample of 38 statements was constructed drawing on a 'cultural trawl' of key themes, opinions and concerns articulated about the film within the public domain. We adopted a broad online recruitment strategy, posting invitations on key fan forums and in a range of relevant Facebook groups, including *Lord of the Rings* fan pages, Tolkien pages, film societies and political parties in several countries, pages relating to other fantasy series, and those devoted to the various stars of the film. Over a period of three weeks in the lead-up to *The Hobbit's* world premiere on 28 November 2012, 1000 usable survey responses were obtained from individuals living in 59 different countries (see Davis et al. 2014 for full details). In what follows, we overview the key findings derived from a factor analysis of respondents' Q-sorts, before concentrating on their qualitative responses to statements and questions specifically relating to the *Hobbit* labour crisis.

### Prefigurative audience engagements: what difference does proximity make?

Our analysis identified five distinct perspectives among pre-release *Hobbit* audiences globally, each reflecting different interests, concerns and opinions (Davis et al. 2014). The largest group, with 514 respondents, consisted of '*LotR film fans*' eagerly anticipating another instalment from a celebrated director and expressing faith in Jackson's ability to bring Tolkien's complex storyworld to life. These respondents expressed a high level of anticipation, with 93.8% considering it 'extremely' or 'very important' to see *The Hobbit*, and they particularly anticipated returning to Middle-earth. Members of this group were the most familiar with the earlier *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, while also having a high level of engagement with Tolkien's novels. Of this group, 19.8% were New Zealanders.

A second group of 182 '*Tolkien aficionados*' were knowledgeable, attentive and eagerly hopeful, but also expressed significant concerns about the fidelity of the novel's film adaptation. Their interest was primarily motivated by their affection for and

knowledge of Tolkien's work. While most were willing to accept some compromises in the book-to-film adaptation, they hoped the 'spirit of the book' would be preserved. While not self-identifying as *Lord of the Rings* fans, they expressed general approval for Jackson's earlier trilogy, and were eager to return to Middle-earth; 89% considered it to be 'extremely' or 'very important' to see *The Hobbit*. Only 12.2% of these respondents were New Zealanders.

A third group of 17 all-female respondents were 'celebrity followers'. This group expressed a gendered variety of prefigurative audience engagement based around celebrity fandom. They eagerly anticipated the performance of one or more of the actors starring in the film, rather than caring about the book per se, or the previous *Lord of the Rings* movies. There was only one New Zealander in this group.

The last two viewpoints contained a higher proportion of New Zealanders, and also expressed significantly more anxious or negative prefigurations of the forthcoming film event. The first group of 36 'anxious investors' were especially concerned about the film's evolving reputation and how it might affect New Zealand's economy by offering employment and increasing film-related tourism. *Anxious investors* were sceptical about the hype surrounding the film, and had 'heard negative comments about *The Hobbit*' but preferred to reserve judgement until personally viewing it. Not surprisingly, given these and other concerns, only 14.7% stated that it was 'extremely' or 'very important' to see the film. Notably, 88.9% of *anxious investors* were New Zealanders.

Finally, 27 'Jackson critics' expressed opposition to aspects of the film's direction and conditions of production; 14 among this group were New Zealanders. Members of this segment expressed disappointment related to the technology-laden aesthetic of Jackson's earlier trilogy, and/or (in the case of the New Zealand respondents) the political role played by Jackson in *The Hobbit* dispute. Only 11.1% of Jackson critics considered it 'extremely' or 'very important' to see the film; 29.6% did not intend to watch it.

While 77.6% of our respondents loaded strongly on just one of the above viewpoints, many others fell somewhere between two or more of the identified perspectives. For instance, many New Zealand respondents were both *LotR film fans* and also *anxious investors* to some degree; however, following Q methodology conventions, mixed or 'cross-loading' respondents are not included in the above figures.

By cross-tabulating these viewpoints with our survey data we discovered several additional areas of correspondence between these viewpoints, national location, social characteristics and respondents' degree of knowledge and concern about the *Hobbit* labour controversy.<sup>5</sup> Of our 1000 respondents, 59.5% indicated that they had heard about *The Hobbit* employment law change and tax subsidy. Geographical proximity clearly mattered, as 78.6% of New Zealand residents were aware of the issue, compared with 52.1% of non-residents.

Clear associations were also evident between responses to *The Hobbit* labour relations/government subsidy issues and the general viewpoints outlined above, with *anxious investors* having the highest level of awareness of the labour law/subsidy issue (91.4%), followed by *Jackson critics* (80%). *Tolkien aficionados* had the lowest level of awareness (52%). Once again, proximity made a distinct difference here, as it was local *Jackson critics* who were the most concerned to hear about Warner's possible exploitation of workers on set, giving this item an average ranking of 7.9 out of 9. This group was also the least likely to agree with statements expressing nationalistic pride in New Zealand's involvement in the production (2.3) or approval of the government subsidy (3.9). *Anxious investors*, the majority of whom were New Zealanders, rated relatively

Table 1. Attitudes towards the NZ labour controversy among pre-viewers who were aware of the controversy and who made qualitative comments about it (N = 531).

	Statements approving of the NZ government's action	Statements disapproving of NZ government's action	Statements expressing ambivalence	Statements claiming insufficient information to form an opinion	Statements expressing neutrality or no impact on orientation towards film	N
G1- (Angry and disappointed Jackson critics)	0.0%	46.2%	0.0%	0.0%	11.5%	= 26
G1 (LotR film fans)	40.7%	4.4%	11.4%	4.8%	35.9%	N = 273
G2 (Tolkien aficionados)	18.1%	22.9%	16.9%	6.0%	32.5%	N = 83
G3 (Celebrity followers)	25.0%	25.0%	12.5%	0.0%	37.5%	= 8
G4 (Anxious investors)	6.7%	46.7%	13.3%	3.3%	23.3%	N = 30
NZ residents	25.5%	23.2%	15.9%	9.5%	28.2%	N = 220
Non-NZ residents	31.1%	9.6%	11.3%	6.8%	36.3%	N = 311

highly for both concern about exploitation (6.5) and nationalistic pride (6.8), and higher still for acceptance of government funding (7.6).

It is thus apparent that proximity to the production locale did sensitize those living in New Zealand to factors relating to the material conditions under which this film was produced. Indeed, New Zealanders' responses to these issues point to the complex discursive terrain that has emerged in the contemporary era of transnational film production as nation-states, labour organizations and individual citizens attempt to define and strategically assert interests that converge and diverge at different points. Table 1 shows patterns of comments made by respondents aware of *The Hobbit* controversy. Nearly half of *Jackson critics* and *anxious investors* made comments disapproving of the New Zealand government's actions in the labour dispute (46.2% and 46.7% respectively). Conversely, a large proportion of *LotR film fans* (40.7%) made comments approving of the government's actions. Non-New Zealand residents also expressed a higher degree of approval of the government's actions than local residents. Furthermore, approximately one-third of *LotR film fans*, *Tolkien aficionados*, *celebrity followers* and non-New Zealand residents commented to the effect that the labour dispute would have no impact on their enjoyment of the film.

The presence within the local public domain of competing understandings of a contested issue also offered our New Zealand respondents access to a variety of discursive resources that could be drawn on to formulate personal and political responses to the *Hobbit* labour controversy. Thus, their responses mirror at the micro-level the same discursive contestations occurring in the wider public and political domains. Hence, while most of the more trenchant critiques of Jackson, Warner Bros. and the New Zealand government came from local residents, many others conversely expressed strong approval of the way the issues were resolved. These answers were often more detailed and emotionally resonant than those of overseas respondents, and drew on similar terms and phrases to those used by local official commentators.

Nonetheless, it is also clear that proximity is not merely geographical, but encompasses 'closeness' in terms of political, economic and other affiliations. Thus, certain occupational groups approved more strongly of the New Zealand government's actions than others: government officials (57.1% approved), tradespersons or small business operators (53.8%), managers or executives (35.3%) and creative artists or media producers (34.1%). Those most frequently making statements disapproving of the government's actions were higher-level professionals (21.1%), middle professionals and public servants (18.4%) and creative artists or media producers (17.1%), indicating polarization among this special interest group. Approval as well as disapproval was positively related to income, with higher earners having stronger opinions one way or the other. But in every case, more individuals expressed approval than disapproval.

Hence, it was not exclusively New Zealanders who expressed concern – positive or negative – about the labour issue; strong views tended to be more common among well-educated middle- or higher-level professionals, regardless of national origin. This demonstrates that while nationality certainly remained an important factor in shaping audience responses to an issue that was to some extent locally specific, other sites of interest and affiliation were also significant – more so, perhaps, in a context where the globalization of major event film production means that similar issues and debates are increasingly dispersed across multiple locations.

In what follows, we analyse respondents' qualitative comments relating to an open-ended question asking: 'To what extent does knowing about the labour laws/tax break impact on your feelings about the *Hobbit* film production?' We illustrate predominant

themes in the responses of those expressing approval of the tax subsidy and law changes, and consider the roles of dominant discursive frames and commodity fetishism in shaping cinematic desire. We then examine the responses of those who expressed ambivalence or concern about the perceived ‘dark sides’ of transnational film production, and demonstrate how such responses were framed by a complex interplay between prefigurative and political orientations, geographical proximity and access to subordinated discourses.

### **The roles of politics, ‘common sense’ and cinematic desire in shaping responses to the *Hobbit* labour controversy**

The majority of both New Zealand residents and overseas respondents who commented either stated that the issue had no impact on their feelings about the film (175), or expressed approval of the handling of *The Hobbit* dispute (160). The majority of expressions of approval came from those identified as *LotR film fans* and were based on a number of grounds, most frequently citing likely economic benefits from the film production remaining in New Zealand (97 respondents). Overseas respondents tended to cite generalized economic benefits, but were more tentative, as seen in comments such as ‘I don’t pretend to be an expert on these sort of laws, but I would assume that the economic boost to the country that this production brings would justify it’ (American man, 21; *LotR film fan*). New Zealand residents, conversely, tended to be more specific: ‘[It] makes me want to see it more. To justify our investment if you will. The tax breaks were more than covered by the GST and PAYE that has been generated by keeping production here’ (New Zealand man, 34; *LotR film fan*). Another suggested, ‘[t]he government needs to encourage more film production in NZ. If that requires flexibility in labour laws and tax breaks, so be it’ (New Zealand woman living in Singapore, 44; *LotR film fan*).

Another distinct group of 62 ‘approvers’ emphatically affirmed the necessity of *The Hobbit* trilogy being filmed in New Zealand to maintain consistency with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, since New Zealand ‘is the original Middle-earth, and I don’t feel that the New Zealand landscape filmed in the *LotR* trilogy could be matched somewhere else in the world’ (New Zealand woman, 15; *LotR film fan*). Another commented, ‘I believe [New Zealand] is the closest thing to Middle-earth that we have on this planet. *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* will have a genuine consistency because of it’ (American woman, 37; *LotR film fan*).

For 31 others, the law changes and tax subsidy gave positive signals about the New Zealand government’s support of the local film industry: ‘It’s great to know that our country feels strongly about these films to the extent of adapting its labour laws to make things fairer for the concern of making a great film production’ (New Zealand woman, 23; *LotR film fan*). This was a view more often expressed by overseas respondents, several of whom lamented the lack of similar support in their own countries. Thus, respondents’ positive evaluations rearticulated terms and concepts used by the New Zealand government in its discursive framing of the law changes as necessary to keep the production local, safeguard employment in the local film industry, boost the economy and inspire tourism (Key 2010; *National Business Review*, 31 October 2010).

The degree to which our New Zealand respondents rearticulated dominant discursive frames is not surprising, since as Barrett (2011) observes, many ‘may have become inured to the demands of globalised capital’. Citing Gould (2006, 38), Barrett (2011) notes widespread acceptance locally that ‘neo-liberal economics is not only inevitable

but is also natural, desirable, generally beneficial and to be admired'. That some overseas respondents drew on the same terms and concepts is unsurprising, since incentives and policy measures aimed at attracting transnational capital investment are now commonplace in many Western countries, where analogous neo-liberal reforms have been made as the admission price for participation in the global economy (Barrett 2011) – although such reforms have not yet stretched to undermining basic employment rights.

Indeed, 29 respondents suggested that the tax subsidies were a pragmatic attempt to capitalize upon the contemporary 'reality' of transnational capital flows. This stance was popular with respondents located outside New Zealand, several of whom noted that their own countries also offered subsidies to attract transnational film productions: 'Tax breaks and backroom deals like this exist all over the world for governments interested in attracting big business' (Canadian woman, 27; *LotR film fan*); and 'I know that tax breaks are a big reason for why filming takes place overseas and on location, and if NZ wants to be a top contender in filming locations, it needs to back this up with economic incentives' (New Zealand woman, 22; *LotR film fan*). Such responses rarely mentioned legal or governmental aspects related to the controversy, nor the specifics of the employment law changes, the handling of which was in fact extraordinary. While this is likely in part due to the lack of immediate connection to localized discursive contestations of the issue, it also reflects the degree to which, for many global citizens, accommodation of the imperatives driving transnational capital flows has become accepted as common sense and incontrovertible, as just 'the way the film industry works' (New Zealand woman, 22; *LotR film fan*).

Other respondents were so concerned that New Zealand should benefit economically from the production that they were supportive of efforts to shut down any union dissent. For 23 predominantly male respondents, including several New Zealanders, the unions were culpable for placing obstacles in the way of the *Hobbit* production. Their comments assume that the threat to shift the production offshore was genuine, and express gleeful satisfaction at the government's handling of the issue: 'Bloody unions stirring things up, they very nearly lost us a film which could only truly be made here. I'm incredibly grateful to the government for taking that step to save it' (New Zealand woman, 22; *LotR film fan*). Evidently, the New Zealand union movement failed to clearly assert an alternative account of the *Hobbit* labour issue within the wider public domain, as Handel (2013) observes.

Also apparent is that many respondents, regardless of national location, intensely desired to see this film and that cinematic desire trumped critical engagement with issues relating to the material conditions under which it was produced. Indeed, it is likely that many fans of the franchise actively avoided thinking deeply about the various controversies surrounding this film production, since doing so might induce an uncomfortable state of cognitive dissonance,<sup>6</sup> potentially undermining their enjoyment of a longed-for entertainment experience. Disengagement from this particular set of issues was evident in the large number of respondents (over 300) who simply reported that knowledge of the issue had no impact at all on their feelings about the film, most offering no further comment. Those who did so often made an explicit distinction between the text as an artistic object and the material conditions of its production, as these examples illustrate: 'It doesn't affect my feelings. I separate the business side of the production from the artistic side, and I'm only really interested in the latter' (Canadian man, 33; *LotR film fan*); 'It does not affect me at all. I just want to watch the movie and have a good time' (Indian man, 20; *LotR film fan*).

Such responses perhaps reflect the degree to which this film series, and the consumption experience it offers, have become fetishized cultural objects for many dedicated fans, inviting the classic Marxist analysis that commodity fetishism obscures awareness of exploitative capitalist labour processes. Indeed, cinematic enchantment today might be said to constitute a secular form of religious experience, the original form of fetishism. In these terms, both the original *Lord of the Rings* film series and *The Hobbit* prequels and the opportunity for immersive enchantment they offer can be seen as constituting highly desirable commodities ascribed with almost magical properties. As Mosco (2009, 131) notes, ‘the commodity not only congeals social relations and hides the struggle over value, but takes on a life and a power of its own, over that of both the producers and consumers’. Many respondents clearly sought to engage with *The Hobbit* as a ‘pure’ commodity, untainted by controversy over the material conditions of its production, and hence actively disavowed any criticism that might complicate their cinematic pleasure.

Along with the numerous press releases that constituted *Hobbit* crisis management, other official prefigurative materials helped to shape public awareness of those material conditions of production by offering seemingly ‘first hand’ insights into the *Hobbit* set. As noted by Mathijs (2005, 456), ‘Film companies have long capitalized on pre-production tales about the circumstances under which films were made, in order to invite a particular reception’ and ‘manage problematic discourses surrounding films’. Regular production video logs fronted by Jackson himself thus provided dedicated followers with particular (and partial) sources of information they could draw on to counter oppositional discourses claiming dissension on the *Hobbit* set, as reflected in the comments of this New Zealand man: ‘From everything I have seen of the production videos etc., the cast and crew of these films seem to enjoy their jobs immensely, and love being part of the production. If they were bothered by the labour laws they certainly don’t show it’ (20; *LotR film fan*). Thus, it appears that along with stimulating interest and enthusiasm, prefigurative ‘paid’ or ‘owned’ media resources may invite preferred understandings of the material conditions of textual production, which enthusiastic pre-viewers may consider authoritative.

### **When politics and pleasure collide: discursive contestation and *The Hobbit* controversy**

For others, particularly our New Zealand respondents, such concerns were less easily set aside, with 70 expressing more ambivalent views, torn between competing understandings of the interests and implications at stake: half of these respondents were New Zealanders. Their ambivalence related to a wide range of issues, but especially prominent was the struggle to reconcile the claimed benefits of the subsidies and employment law changes with critiques voiced by unions and other commentators. Thirty-two of these respondents expressed scepticism of the claimed economic benefits of hosting this transnational film production; for another 32, including several New Zealanders, ambivalence centred on the conflict between their desire to see the production remain local, and their critical understanding of the underlying intent and potential downstream impacts of the government’s policy accommodations. The actions of Warner Bros. were also criticized by 29 respondents, who lamented the perceived bullying of a small nation-state by a global corporate giant. Not surprisingly, apparent violations of employment rights on the *Hobbit* set were of concern especially but not exclusively for local pre-viewers, with 21 citing this as a key source of their ambivalence.

Of more interest here are the responses of the 81 participants who expressed clear disapproval of the way in which these issues were handled. New Zealanders made up a full 62.9% of those expressing disapproval, with the strongest expressions of concern coming from local *Jackson critics* and *anxious investors*, many of whose comments clearly articulated the oppositional discourses most immediately accessible in the local context. There were several targets of criticism, the most common being the New Zealand government, with 32 mainly New Zealand respondents expressing dissatisfaction with the concessions made: ‘It reduces its claim to be a “New Zealand” film. There’s also a strange combination of the government promoting NZ trade, industry and tourism, but at the same time undermining some of the foundations upon which those industries are built’ (New Zealand man, 38; *anxious investor*); and ‘Hate the way the government changed the law [...] NZ’s sovereignty and legal independence means more to me than a selfish short-term goal for our movie industry’ (New Zealand woman, 44; *anxious investor*).

For others, the incident reflected problematic processes associated with multinational capitalism, and 31 specifically directed their criticism towards Warner Bros.: ‘It annoys me that multimillion dollar companies exploit us and reap the rewards for doing so’ (New Zealand woman, 46; *Jackson critic*); ‘I feel the studios (WB) took advantage of the New Zealand government as they knew they needed the *Hobbit* production more than the other way round’ (British man, 25; *Tolkien aficionado*).

Peter Jackson’s role in the dispute was of interest to many New Zealanders in particular, and this issue featured in a large number of comments made in response to specific Q items. While only 18 respondents specifically named Jackson in their response to the labour law/tax subsidy issue, the feelings expressed in these and other comments were often strongly negative: ‘I had already lost interest in Peter Jackson as a director, but I found his behaviour at this time to be bullying and self-important’ (New Zealand woman, 48; *Jackson critic*). One local respondent observed the concordance of interests reflected in the resolution of this conflict, suggesting that ‘Peter Jackson colluded with the government and Warner etc. to disadvantage NZ actors’ (New Zealand woman, 55; *anxious investor*).

Our data thus reflect just how dramatically some New Zealanders’ perceptions of Jackson have changed since the filming of the *Lord of The Rings* trilogy. A decade ago, Jackson was hailed as a cultural, creative and economic hero on various counts: for staying New Zealand based, for profiling Kiwi ingenuity, for ‘rescuing’ the New Zealand film industry, and for raising the country’s international profile (Haworth 2011; Jones 2008; Thompson 2007; Thornley 2006). Indeed, Thornley (2006, 110) suggests that the Jackson of the early 2000s symbolized an idealized antipodean ability to challenge, resist and ‘conquer Hollywood’, as opposed to being incorporated or corrupted by the forces of globalization (Jones 2008). A decade later, Sir Peter Jackson had been thoroughly incorporated into New Zealand’s business and cultural elites alike (Jackson and Court 2010), and evidently enjoyed a close relationship with government ministers (Haworth 2011; Walker and Tipples 2013). For some, this transformation left Jackson compromised.

A further 18 respondents drew primarily on discourses around employment rights when expressing their opposition to the legislative reforms: ‘As a world leader in labour reforms, I don’t think we should bend over and take it from big business’ (British New Zealander, 52; *LotR film fan*); and ‘labour laws should always be the best for the workers and not allow any harm done to them’ (German woman, 21; *LotR film fan*). Significantly, however, a larger number of disapprovers (27) made a clear delineation

between the problematic labour law and tax subsidy issues and the film itself. As these respondents noted, ‘It is regrettable but shouldn’t take away from the achievement of the film itself’ (New Zealand woman, 39; *LotR film fan*); ‘I am disgusted by it but I still want to see the movie. It better be good’ (German New Zealander; 43; *LotR film fan*). Even among some of those who generally disapproved of the events that unfolded, then, commodity desire effectively trumped political considerations.

## Conclusion

This analysis has gleaned unique insight into audience understandings of the play of politics and power surrounding a highly localized but globally resonant production issue, one that has relevance for transnational film projects internationally, since the resolution of the New Zealand *Hobbit* labour dispute has implications for working conditions in other national contexts. The ways in which anticipatory audiences perceived and engaged with a cultural product whose material conditions of production were controversial provides illuminating, if disheartening, insight into the power of commodity desire to override considerations of the social and material conditions of transnational film production, while offering clues as to potential sites of resistance.

Evidently, the globalization of film production enables powerful media conglomerates such as Warner Bros. to exploit the anxieties generated by a highly competitive environment in which there is a global dispersion of technical expertise combined with variability in wage scales, tax regimes and now also employment legislation – any and all of which may factor into location decisions. Indeed, they now matter more than a country’s impressive geographical features, since these can always be digitally rendered by skilled, yet more modestly paid, workers elsewhere. The uncertainties of transnational film production flows create an environment in which national players are encouraged to compete to position themselves as the most attractive sites for production, within an unstable, rapidly changing global marketplace.

Specifically, however, in the New Zealand case, the interests of global capital prevailed both materially and discursively through a process of strategic incorporation into the official discourse of the neo-liberal state as expressive of a concordance of interests with, rather than a forced capitulation to, the demands of a powerful global media conglomerate. This is perhaps akin to the processes that Saskia Sassen (2006) refers to when she describes globalization as occurring through fundamental internal transformations of the state apparatus. The familiarity and persuasive power of this account is reflected in the views of our respondents, many of whom drew upon similar terms and concepts to those used by agents of the state in reframing fiscal as well as policy accommodations as the natural and *necessary* entry fee to secure New Zealand’s participation in a globalized film production economy. As our analysis reveals, these localized discursive patterns were replicated internationally, illustrating the degree to which similar accommodations have become commonplace within most Western capitalist countries. Hence, many comments reflected pragmatic resignation to, and in some cases enthusiastic endorsement of, the so-called economic ‘realities’ of global production regimes in which small economies endeavour to maximize their competitive advantage in an effort to receive promised economic and cultural rewards. While New Zealand has achieved noted success in this respect, successfully capitalizing on its association with the *Lord of The Rings* franchise to establish a globally recognisable ‘brand’ (Thompson 2007), repositioning the local film industry as eternally beholden to winning the global bidding war to secure the production of foreign-owned

CGI-intensive blockbusters clearly has implications for the industry's longer-term sustainability (see Hunt 2013).

While the exchange value associated with Jackson's earlier *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was greatly inflated through its symbolic conflation with New Zealand's national identity and global ambitions (Thompson 2007), in the case of *The Hobbit*, closer geographical proximity to the material and social relations of the films' production, along with access to alternative discursive understandings derived from respondents' existing political affiliations and varying experiences of the film industry, did nonetheless prompt a number of respondents to critically interrogate the potential costs and benefits of New Zealand's involvement in this transnational film production. Indeed, the presence of a distinctive cluster of critical responses to these controversial events is evidence that pre-viewer engagements were not fully determined by the marketing and publicity efforts of the Warner Bros. production entity, instead taking cognizance of both media and online debates around an issue geographically located in New Zealand, but having global resonance. Nonetheless, the salience and immediacy of these issues remained more strongly felt in the New Zealand context, the broader implications of local employment law changes remaining less evident to many international commentators and pre-viewers alike.

To return, finally, to the second set of questions posed in the introduction; we were initially curious whether we would find globalized, deculturalized forms of prefigurative engagement with *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* in the lead-up to its international release. The answer is both yes and no. There was sufficient evidence of specifically New Zealand-based qualities and intensities of response to determine that the increasingly global hegemony of transnational film production does not preclude the emergence of glocalised interpretations and forms of response grounded in geographic and experiential proximity. However, there was also clear evidence that certain dominant understandings were widely dispersed, and prevailed even in those contexts where oppositional voices were most vigorously articulated. Furthermore, regardless of location, the desire for pleasurable immersion in the magical world of Middle-earth appeared to undercut most respondents' willingness to seriously entertain any criticisms of the social and material conditions of the *Hobbit* production, lest such awareness 'spoil' a longed for consumption and cultural experience.

## Notes

1. Following Baudrillard (1988), we take the view that all consumer goods, including cultural products such as films, are objects of economic *and* semiotic exchange. They constitute commodity signs in that both the goods themselves and the practices involved in their consumption convey particular meanings and values that inform and express individuals' understandings of themselves, their social group memberships and their perceptions of the world around them.
2. Prefiguration refers to the body of ideas and understandings circulating around a text *before* it becomes available to consume (Biltreyst and Meers 2006; Gray 2008).
3. The 'paid' and 'owned' pre-release marketing and promotional campaigns associated with *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* are thought to have cost US\$81.5 million (Bray 2012), with a suggested overall production cost of US\$315 million for the first film (Masters 2012).
4. Although Jackson had the roles of director and executive producer on *The Hobbit*, the actors' employer in this industrial dispute was actually Three Foot Seven Ltd.
5. Respondents were asked the following forced-choice question: 'Were you aware that New Zealand adapted its labour laws and gave Warner Bros. a tax break to ensure this film production stayed in New Zealand?' They were then asked the following open-ended question: 'To

what extent does knowing about the labour laws/tax break impact on your feelings about the Hobbit film production?' Further insight into their responses was gleaned from the ranking of three statements in the Q sample: 'I was very concerned to hear about Warner Bros. exploitation of workers on the *Hobbit* set', 'I feel excited and proud when I think about my country's contribution to this major international film production' and 'This film will really help to spur tourism in New Zealand, which is great for the economy. I understand why the government would provide some public support'.

6. According to Festinger's (1962) original definition, cognitive dissonance refers to the uncomfortable psychological state experienced when individuals hold two inherently contradictory ideas or beliefs simultaneously.

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