



Pleasure, disaffection, 'conversion' or rejection? The (limited) role of prefiguration in shaping audience engagement and response

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Abstract

This article examines the extent to which prefigurative 'horizons of expectations' shaped audience engagements with Peter Jackson's 2012 film *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (AU). Whereas previous research often focuses on examining prefigurative materials, discussions and debates themselves, this article draws on audience surveys conducted before and after the film's release to illustrate the impact of prior hopes and expectations on post-viewing responses. While *Hobbit* pre-viewers were often deeply familiar with various prefigurative materials and intertextual resources, AU nonetheless retained the capacity to delight, confound, impress and distress viewers in ways that superseded pre-existing structures of meaning. Thus, while our

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findings illustrate that processes of reception potentially begin prior to and continue beyond initial moments of viewing, they also affirm the need to engage – theoretically and empirically – with the complex specificity and fluidity of actual reception experiences.

Keywords

An Unexpected Journey, audience research, film reception, reception theory, *The Hobbit*, Tolkien

Prefiguration refers to the ideas and understandings that circulate around a text before it becomes available to consume. With big-budget spectacular event films, marketing and promotional hype, media coverage and public commentary convey various impressions of genre, aesthetic style, intended audience and ‘preferred reading’ well in advance of release (Biltereyst and Meers, 2006; Gray, 2008). These activities and related ‘paratexts’ (Gray, 2008: 37) form part of ‘the (discursive) creation of a certain horizon of expectation, the promise of pleasure, spectacle and imagination, the attempt to mediate audiences’ movie experiences, public reception and discourse’ (Biltereyst and Meers, 2006: 72).

While this understanding usefully recognizes that reception is a fluid and dynamic process potentially activated well before actual textual encounters, the broader relevance of prefiguration to individual receptions remains less clear. Our research takes an alternative audience-centred approach and shows that different audience segments have varying degrees of engagement with official and unofficial prefigurative materials (Davis et al., 2014). Such materials may express diverse and even contradictory messages about the text (Michelle et al., 2014), and can potentially attract some viewers while alienating others (Davis et al., 2014). Receptions, we suggest, are shaped by specific constellations of media consumption, personal affiliations, intertextual and paratextual knowledges, hopes and expectations, but always in a dynamic interaction with the primary text. Our research thus suggests that efforts to explain patterns of reception by analysing the encoded meanings and experiences promised by paratextual materials need to be more closely linked to analyses of how actual audiences respond to and engage with the text once fully realized.

Thus, in this article we illustrate how prefigurative ‘horizons of expectations’ (Jauss, 1970) shaped audience engagements with the first film in Jackson’s *Hobbit* trilogy, to what extent, and for whom. We revisit existing understandings of how pre-viewers’ affiliations with particular intertexts and paratexts shape their structures of interpretation, while acknowledging the capacity of actual texts to delight and dismay in ways that exceed and defy viewers’ best and worst prefigurative imaginings. While recognizing the complexity of interactions between texts, audiences, and contexts of reception, our analysis nonetheless assumes that audience receptions are not radically idiosyncratic, but rather shaped by shared subjective modes of response that are amenable to descriptive categorization (Michelle, 2007). We thus seek to trace the predominant relationships between prefigurative structures of meaning and the post-viewing receptions of *Hobbit* viewers who participated in the first two phases of our ongoing research.

The role(s) of prefigurative structures of meaning: insights from theory and research

Elsewhere, we demonstrate that identifiable configurations of media exposure, intertextual and paratextual loyalties and affiliations shaped audience understandings and expectations in advance of the first *Hobbit* film's release (Davis et al., 2014). Here, we shift our focus to examine the body of scholarship addressing the relationship between processes of prefiguration and *post*-viewing receptions.

Film adaptations, sequels and prequels are often extensively prefigured by an array of marketing and promotional materials, media coverage and commentary, and public and fan discussion (see Biltereyst and Meers, 2006), in response to which prospective audience members may develop various expectations, desires, concerns, and opinions (Barker, 2006; Barker and Brooks, 1998; Chin and Gray, 2001). Gray (2008: 33) argues that highly anticipated texts are thus partially 'predecoded before they exist', in the sense that the frames through which they can be understood and the strategies that should be used to interpret them are established well prior to their materialization, creating 'structures of meaning for texts-to-come' (2008: 38). As Gray cautions:

We may in time resist this, by not 'judging the book by its cover' or not 'believing the hype', but first the cover and the hype tell us what to expect, fashion our excitement and/or apprehension, and begin to tell us what a text is all about, calling for our identification with and interpretation of that text before we have even seemingly arrived at the text. (2008: 34)

Receptions of highly anticipated adaptations and sequels are also frequently intertextual, and thus shaped by 'structures of meaning proposed by other texts' (Gray, 2010: 117). Several studies have explored how intertextual connections contribute to and potentially become absorbed within the meaning of such films.¹ To date, however, prefiguration research has typically emphasized examination of intertextual resources and related prefigurative materials, discussions and debates *themselves*; only a handful of studies have attempted to document their relationship to audience members' *post*-viewing responses. In one such study, Rae and Gray (2007) conducted interviews with 15 viewers of comic book films, and found that those who were familiar with the source texts relied upon a wider range of intertextual references than did viewers who were not existing fans, who more often evaluated the text on its own terms. This is a promising line of research, which our project seeks to complement and extend.

When a film is not only an adaptation but also a prequel or sequel, it can be assessed in relation to more than one series of texts simultaneously. Meehan (1991: 47–8) suggests 'this web of cross references creates an intertext into which we fit ourselves, positioning ourselves to construct different readings of the film and positioning the film and its intertext to suit our own particular purposes'. Chin and Gray (2001) further suggest that different viewers may possess a variety of pre-existing affiliations, interests and fandoms relating to celebrities, genres and even directors, and thus their receptions may activate an even wider range of intertextual resources.

Adding further layers of complexity, fans' active and diverse prefigurative engagements, combined with their often detailed knowledge of primary source materials and

other intertexts, mean they may create ‘imagined pre-texts’ (Chin and Gray, 2001) or mental visualizations of a film adaptation or sequel prior to its release (Barker, 2006). As Robert Stam (2005: 14) explains in relation to the novel, we read “‘through” our introjected desires, hopes, and utopias, fashioning as we read our own imaginary mise-en-scène of the novel on the private sound stage of our mind’. The same general point might be made of film. Post-release, these imagined pre-texts may be supported or contradicted by the ‘text-as-fully-realized’, leaving viewers variously affirmed, surprised, enchanted, frustrated or disappointed. Barker (2006), for instance, demonstrates that pre-existing mental images were used as a basis for comparison in viewers’ evaluations of whether *The Lord of the Rings* films successfully visualized key places, scenes and events. He contends that positive comparisons and imagery that helped complete or make more coherent viewers’ imaginings may have increased their sense of personal involvement in the storyworld. However, he does not address what happened when imagery contradicted or undermined viewers’ visualizations. Here, Stam offers useful insight:

When we are confronted with someone else’s phantasy of a novel ... we feel the loss of our own phantasmatic relation to the source text, with the result that the adaptation itself becomes a kind of ‘bad object.’ The clichéd response that ‘I thought the book was better’ in this sense really means that our experience, our phantasy of the book was better than the director’s. (2005: 15)

In such cases, viewers may endeavour to bridge the gap between expectation and reality through various post-viewing strategies, as with *Batman* fans who, through ongoing discussions and repeated viewings, tried to ‘reconcile the conflicting images of the film to the pre-existing model of the characters and settings they already had in their heads’ (Bacon-Smith and Yarbrough, 1991: 111).

Processes of visualization, pre-imagining and post-viewing reconciliation were likely to be especially significant in the case of Jackson’s recent adaptations of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*. For *Hobbit* viewers who were simultaneously fans of Tolkien, the original *Lord of the Rings* (*LotR*) trilogy, and/or Jackson as director, and who were also actively following the production pre-release, various sources of prefigurative expectation and desire presented themselves. Depending on a viewer’s prior interests and affiliations, specific intertexts would likely serve as idealized benchmarks against which the *Hobbit* films would be evaluated and perhaps judged worthy of joining the existing canon. Other research suggests that, for fans, fidelity to whatever they perceive to be the original and authoritative work(s) is crucial in making such determinations. Rae and Gray (2007), for instance, note that comic book fans’ familiarity with original source texts fuelled concerns about possible changes that might be made in the process of cinematic adaptation, while Turnbull (2008: 104) notes that many Australian participants in the *LotR* World Audiences survey grounded their evaluations on the films’ fidelity to the novels. Analysing Irish receptions of comic book films, Burke (2012) also found that for fans, perceived lack of fidelity to source material was crucial. But, as Barker (2006) also notes, textual fidelity can be understood and evaluated in various ways – both in relation to the original work being adapted, and/or in relation to earlier texts in a series. In either case, we suggest, judgements of textual fidelity are at heart evaluations of the *quality* of the adaptation, sequel or prequel in terms of its adherence to particular generic codes and

conventions. That is to say, the text is considered one of a certain *kind*, and therefore needs to be consistent with other text(s) in the same series or genre. Evaluations in this respect may differ, depending on the viewer's own understandings of the defining generic qualities of the series as a whole. For some, fidelity may require adherence to certain stylistic or aesthetic conventions established by an earlier text; for others, the requisite quality may be rather more nebulous and possibly essentialist (Stam, 2005), as with those who hope a film adaptation retains the 'spirit' of the novel, or the 'essence' of the author's work (Egan and Barker, 2008).

For others, the desired effect may be the (re)production of a particular *structure of feeling* (Williams, 1977) associated with a primary intertext. From our preliminary research, *The Hobbit* clearly constituted a beloved childhood novel imbued with deep nostalgic significance by many (Davis et al., 2014). Similarly, the phenomenal *LotR* film experience was significant for many who longed for *The Hobbit* to recreate the same kind of intense excitement. It thus seemed likely that responses to *The Hobbit* would be influenced by whether the viewer was a 'book-firster' or 'film-firster' (Thompson, 2011: 43). However, few reception studies have explored the significance of such distinctions and competing affiliations among audience groups, nor the ways differently endowed viewers read and make sense of film adaptations that are simultaneously sequels or prequels.

Seeking further insight into these complex issues, this article presents findings from two surveys of audiences for *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey (AUJ)* conducted in the immediate pre-and post-viewing periods. We document how pre-viewing expectations, concerns and structures of meaning operated as post-viewing interpretive frames for different audiences, but also seek to complicate this picture by acknowledging moments in which those pre-existing frameworks were challenged, renegotiated and effectively superseded. We demonstrate that, despite being one of the most extensively prefigured and intensely anticipated adaptation-prequels in cinematic history, the first *Hobbit* movie surprised, confounded, impressed and distressed viewers in unanticipated ways as the text-as-fully-realized necessarily displaced the text as pre-imagined. Thus, while our findings show that processes of reception may commence well prior to initial moments of viewing, they simultaneously affirm the need to engage with the complexity and relative indeterminacy of specific audience-text encounters.

Surveying *The Hobbit's* pre- and post-release audiences

In 2012 we designed a longitudinal project examining receptions of *The Hobbit* film trilogy. Our method employs online surveys combining a conventional questionnaire with Q methodology,² in which a series of topic-relevant statements of subjective opinion are sorted and ranked according to levels of agreement and disagreement. For *The Hobbit* pre-viewing survey, a structured Q sample of 38 statements was devised, drawing on a cultural trawl of dominant and marginal themes, opinions, and concerns articulated within the wider discursive field constituted by *LotR* film fans, Tolkien followers, media commentators, and within news items leading up to the first film's release. Invitations containing the survey weblink were posted in key fan forums, especially TheOneRing.net, and a wide range of Facebook groups representing a diverse range of intertextual,

Transformation matrix of pre- vs. post-viewing positions		Post-viewing survey				
		Bored and disillusioned <i>Hobbit</i> critics	Enchanted <i>Hobbit</i> fans	Disappointed Tolkien readers	Critics of technological 'enhancements'	Minor factors/crossloaded/not significant
Pre-viewing survey	<i>LotR</i> film fans N = 160	0	143	3	4	10
	Tolkien aficionados N = 52	1	29	9	4	9
	Celebrity followers N = 5	1	2	0	0	2
	Anxious investors N = 4	1	0	0	0	3
	Jackson critics N = 3	2	0	0	0	1
	Crossloaded/ not significant N = 53	2	35	1	4	11
	<i>Total</i> N = 277	7	209	13	12	36

Figure 1. Transformation matrix illustrating movement from 'pre-viewing' to 'post-viewing' perspectives

professional and political affiliations. Conducted in English, this survey ran for three weeks prior to the first film's November 2012 world premiere, and captured the major prefigurative perspectives of 1000 respondents in 59 countries (Davis et al., 2014).

A similar survey of post-viewing responses to *AUJ* was then carried out in English, French, Spanish, German, Danish, Dutch and Flemish. A structured Q sample of 36 statements was constructed based on a cultural trawl of dominant issues and themes expressed within media coverage and early professional and lay reviews of the film published on

wide range of websites. The same recruitment strategy continued for several months in 2013, attracting 2879 respondents from over 80 countries. In what follows, we present a comparative analysis of the 'before and after' responses of 277 individuals who participated in both English-language surveys, and identify continuities as well as disjunctures in their pre- versus post-viewing perspectives.

These perspectives were identified through factor analysis of participants' Q-sorts by-person, which allowed us to chart the nature and content of all commonly shared viewpoints. We were then able to explore possible relationships between sharing a specific perspective on *AUJ* and sharing particular socio-demographic characteristics, intertextual affiliations, forms of prefigurative engagement and so on. Importantly, the nomenclatures used in our analysis are merely a convenient means of differentiating between viewpoints, and hint at the distinguishing characteristics of complex, multi-dimensional perspectives. It is not possible to document the detailed configurations of each perspective here (but see Davis et al., 2014, for a fuller description of pre-viewing perspectives).

While the categories produced by Q methodology might appear reductionist, reliable creation of categories is necessary for the purposes of analytical generalization and, hence, theory building. Further, the groupings identified here reflect statistically significant distinctions in the expressed perspectives of our respondents, operationalized through their independent actions in preferentially sorting the Q statements. These distinctions are thus naturally occurring rather than imposed, but remain subject to interpretation (see Watts and Stenner, 2012). Our approach responds to recent calls for research that supports theory building and more reliable generalization through the identification of audience *typologies*. Obviously, the categories identified through factor analysis do not capture the full complexity of each respondent's perspective,³ nor necessarily their final views on the topic, since processes of reception may be ongoing and contingent with repeated re-engagement with both the main text and its intertexts. For insight into the complexity and possible ambiguity of individual responses, we draw on our participants' open-ended qualitative comments, which also informed our interpretation of the identified viewpoints.

Using this mixed-methods approach, our research makes a unique empirical contribution to an emerging body of work documenting the transition from pre-viewing anticipation to post-viewing reception (Bacon-Smith and Yarbrough, 1991; Barker and Brooks, 1998; Burke, 2012). Drawing on a comparatively large sample size and using a survey instrument that captures rich qualitative and quantitative data, we are able to glean clearer insights into the associations viewers themselves made between the first *Hobbit* movie and a wide range of intertexts and paratexts. We hope these insights might inform a more nuanced theoretical account of the relationship between prefiguration and modes of reception.

Major pre-viewing perspectives on Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit*

Prior to *AUJ*'s release, the most common perspective identified was shared by *LotR* film fans, who felt intensely loyal to Peter Jackson and expressed faith in his ability to do justice to Tolkien's work. Conversely, *Tolkien aficionados* were generally optimistic, but troubled by possible changes that might be made in adapting a much-loved novel. A smaller number of *celebrity followers* were interested in specific cast members, most

notably Richard Armitage. New Zealanders made up the majority of *anxious investors*, who expressed concern about aspects of the film's local production, mixed with hopefulness and nationalistic pride. Meanwhile, *Jackson critics* were concerned about issues such as textual fidelity and commercialization, and critical of Jackson's high-tech filmmaking style and handling of a local employment issue (Michelle et al., 2014). Seventy-eight percent of our respondents were significantly associated with one of these five viewpoints. Each group possessed different hopes, desires and expectations, and ascribed different degrees of importance to *AUJ*: 15 per cent of *anxious investors* and 11 per cent of *Jackson critics* considered it 'extremely' or 'very' important to view this film, compared with 94 per cent of *LotR film fans* and 89 per cent of *Tolkien aficionados*.

A total of 277 respondents completed both pre- and post-viewing surveys. The transformation matrix in Figure 1 shows the number of respondents associated with each perspective in each period, and indicates the main patterns of movement from pre- to post-viewing. As this illustrates, the majority of respondents were originally identified as *LotR film fans*, with another large group of *Tolkien aficionados*. Given what we knew about the importance of viewing among different audience segments, it seemed likely that *anxious investors* and *Jackson critics* would be less inclined to view the film, and therefore less likely to complete the second survey, as reflected here. For the sake of brevity and coherence, we focus here on transformations occurring within the two major groupings – *LotR film fans* and *Tolkien aficionados* – and the theoretically interesting oppositional post-viewing category, *bored and disillusioned Hobbit critics* (Figure 1).

Confirmation and 'conversion':⁴ the transformation into enchanted Hobbit fans

Factor analysis of our post-viewing survey data revealed four principal viewpoints, the most common being shared by *enchanted Hobbit fans* who greatly enjoyed the film and felt pleasurably (re)immersed in the magical world of Middle-earth. Many were drawn from the large, enthusiastic and sympathetic pre-viewing audience of *LotR film fans*, 89.4 per cent of whom became *enchanted Hobbit fans* post-viewing – illustrating a close alignment between prefigurative expectations and the subsequent viewing experience. However, while united by their appreciation of Jackson's earlier adaptations, this group was internally diverse: For some, *AUJ* presented an opportunity to return to Middle-earth; for others, it offered the chance to re-live the amazing *LotR* phenomenon, or to see Tolkien's literary milestone inspire the imaginations of another generation. While the things *most* looked forward to and the intertextual sources privileged varied considerably, this group's post-viewing responses collectively described a very pleasurable experience of feeling fully engaged and immersed within *AUJ*'s narrative storyworld (Table 1).

Enchanted Hobbit fans commonly articulated the characteristic features of a *transparent* mode of reception, in which there is an acceptance of the text's preferred reading on its own terms (Michelle, 2007). For fiction texts, adoption of the transparent mode is marked by suspension of disbelief, narrative transportation, relating to fictional characters and events as though real, losing awareness of external reality and of time passing,

Table 1. Examples of pre-viewing and post-viewing comments of *LotR* film fans.

Pre-viewing	Post-viewing
I saw <i>The Fellowship of the Ring</i> in theatres when I was 11, and it completely changed my life.... Getting the chance to see a new trilogy based on books about my favourite universe, written by my favourite writer, directed by a director that I love 10 years later is just too much.	<i>The Lord of the Rings</i> movies meant so much to me when they first come out, being transported to that world again was an incredible gift.... It means coming back to a world populated with friends and values that are really important to me. (Italian woman, 22)
<i>The Hobbit</i> was the first book I remember reading as a child and it left a lasting impression on me. I'm excited to see the characters and places on the screen that I've only imagined for 30 years.	There was a great balance of whimsy and enchantment coupled with excitement and danger. I was emotionally invested in Bilbo, Thorin, Gandalf and Balin and their respective stories.... <i>The Hobbit</i> was a wonderful vehicle to take me back to that place I love. (American man, 35)
I feel that it is important that we continue to explore Tolkien in various forms of art and cinema is an excellent medium to introduce him to the masses. That can only be a good thing.	The look on my son's face at times proves it was magical ... mine probably reflected the same.... I am gratified to know that my children can take the same joy from Tolkien's work as I do. (American woman, 41)

and intense emotional engagement and affect. This specific constellation of experiences was reflected in many *enchanted Hobbit fans*' comments: 'I was lost in Middle-earth', 'a spell-binding escape', '[it] went by far too quickly', 'it looked as if I could reach out and actually be in Middle-earth, it was so real', 'I cried at the beauty of it' and 'I felt like I had woken up from a dream when the cinema house lights came on.'

Additional insight can be gleaned from these respondents' comments about their prior expectations, their origin, and whether those expectations were ultimately fulfilled. In addition to having a deep familiarity with the *LotR* film trilogy and often also Tolkien's novels, the expectations of these respondents were shaped by active engagement with *Hobbit* news coverage (70 per cent), the production videos (87 per cent), and Jackson's video-logs (69 per cent). Some explicitly noted how these and other paratextual sources shaped their expectations:

Oh I was extremely hyped up for *The Hobbit* – constantly updating news and fansites, reading the books and magazines that came out the weeks before the movie's release and every expectation of mine was fulfilled. It was a great movie. (American woman, 31)

Before the film came out I had high expectations as I followed *The Hobbit* blogs so I had an idea of how the film was going to look. All my expectations were met, the film was better than I thought could be possible. (New Zealand woman, 18)

Joining this majority group were many of the *Tolkien aficionados* from our prefiguration survey. Given their strong allegiance to the novel, read on average 10 times, *Tolkien aficionados* were likely to be keenly attuned to *AUJ*'s many deviations from Tolkien's

original masterpiece. Thus, we initially conjectured that this group would splinter, with some accepting the film as sufficiently faithful to the novel to adopt the preferred viewing mode of immersive enchantment, while more purist Tolkien fans might regard Jackson's adaptation as failing to convey the 'spirit of the book', leading them to adopt critical mediated or even discursive modes of reception (Davis et al., 2014).

Indeed, more than half (29; 56 per cent) of the *Tolkien aficionados* were successfully 'converted' into *enchanted Hobbit fans* post-viewing. In one salient example, a 45-year-old American Russian woman initially expressed strong reservations about Jackson's ability to successfully adapt her beloved Tolkien's masterpiece:

Pre-viewing: [I]t's a big disappointment to me that Jackson is doing the movies instead of Del Toro.... I did not like his *LotR* trilogy, and think that movies he did after *LotR* were progressively worse.... I'm an avid fan of Tolkien's work, it played a huge part in my life. I was running a Tolkien fan community and invested a lot of expectations into PJ's *LotR*. It failed to meet my expectations but I'm willing to give [*The Hobbit*] another chance. (Russian-American woman, 45)

This respondent's earlier concern about Jackson as a director thus creates the particular 'structure of meaning' through which *The Hobbit* was subsequently evaluated, but far more *positively* so than anticipated. Importantly then, her prefigurative expectations were *disconfirmed* by her encounter with the fully realized text, which clearly differed substantially from her imagined pre-text. For once, Jackson did not disappoint:

Post-viewing: I didn't expect much, not being a fan of Peter Jackson's *LotR* trilogy, but I was blown away by [*The Hobbit*]. My expectations were greatly exceeded.... I fell in love with all the characters.... All characterizations were superb and true to Tolkien.... I immediately bought the songs and couldn't stop listening to them for days.... Magical.... I watched the first movie six times and [I'm] not done yet. Can't wait for the rest. (Russian-American woman, 45)

Significant here is the *degree* of this respondent's enthusiastic endorsement and affective response, expressed in references to the film's magical score and loveable characters, and her desire to re-engage in highly pleasurable viewing – consistent with her adoption of the preferred mode of reception.

Many other *Tolkien aficionados* also adopted the preferred viewing mode, despite initially expressing reservations. For one Ukrainian man, the novel's deep personal and emotional significance had underpinned a central pre-viewing concern about textual fidelity:

Pre-viewing: This book really touched my heart once, it's like the first love memory.... *I want to feel the spirit of the book.*

Post-viewing: To me it was like a window in my most favourite world.... It was like meeting with very old and very good friends, *I felt like I could touch Tolkien's world for real.* And this was amazing. (Ukrainian man, 38; emphasis added)

Expressed here is a sense of heightened realism flowing from the film's visual presentation, which appears to have partially displaced this respondent's pre-viewing structure of interpretation relating to textual fidelity. Similar responses were made by other *Tolkien*

aficionados, who clearly appreciated *AUJ*'s detailed realization of the people and places of Middle-earth, despite some ongoing reservations about diversions from the original novel:

Post-viewing: While I didn't agree with some of the changes and additions ... Middle-earth was still Middle-earth. Hobbiton still had its same charm, Rivendell its same mystery and wonder, the dwarf hall ... literally took my breath away with its majesty, and it was created just PERFECTLY. (Canadian woman, 17)

Thus, these respondents made reference to areas of prior interest or concern *as well as* particular textual features that they found surprising, and unexpectedly engaging. The text-as-fully-realized, then, surpassed the text as prefiguratively constructed or imagined. Among other respondents, however, these unanticipated textual elements provoked rather more critical reactions.

Disrupted pleasures: *bored and disillusioned Hobbit critics*

Significantly, but perhaps not surprisingly given their positive predisposition, relatively few of our existing *LotR film fans* were seriously disappointed by the first *Hobbit* film. But for one young American woman for whom *AUJ* failed to live up to prior expectations, the sense of distress is palpable:

Post-viewing: I was almost shaking while waiting for the movie to start, I was so excited. I did really love a few parts ... but for the most part I was not happy. I was disappointed a lot, and then angry. I almost got up and left a few times.... By the end I just wanted it to be over, and then went to my car and couldn't stop crying. It was nothing like I thought it would be. I knew and completely expected there to be changes. But the obvious computer graphics, constant action scenes, POINTLESS story changes, and just stupid humour ruined *The Hobbit* for me.... And it honestly broke my heart. (American woman, 22; Crossloader)⁵

In total, seven respondents expressed a critical perspective that was, in essence, the *inverse* perspective to that of our *enchanted Hobbit fans* – that of a *bored and disillusioned Hobbit critic*. For one *Tolkien aficionado* who earlier described *The Hobbit* novel as 'favourite comfort food reading', the film was uninspiring and over-long: 'The book is better, the pictures in my head better. Not worth the investment of time and money to go to a cinema' (Finnish man, 50). One *celebrity follower* lamented that she felt no 'emotional connection' to the film, since 'All the running, battle, chasing scenes left little time for character and narrative development' (Canadian woman, 50). One *anxious investor* had earlier hoped the film's success might bring 'a huge influx in tourism like the *LotR* trilogy did for us, added attraction to New Zealand as a film location and more work for Weta Digital' (NZ man, 23). Post-viewing, his concerns relating to the production of an 'American film made with a lot of our money and a tiny bit of our talent' were compounded by an *unexpectedly* disappointing textual feature – Weta Digital's visual effects, which were 'overdone and at times looked bad'.

Existing *Jackson critics* were similarly left bored and disenchanting, but were unsurprised as they had expected to dislike the movie. As one such critic put it, '[E]ven I, whose opinion of PJ borders on contempt, was surprised that he managed to "exceed expectations" as to how low he could, and would, go to make a buck and play with his

CGI [computer-generated imagery]' (American woman, 45). As noted by Gray (2010: 127), Jackson himself has become 'a brand and hence an inter- or paratextual framing device, a matrix of other (inter)texts'. While Jackson's involvement in *The Hobbit* reassured many *LotR film fans* of its likely high quality, *Jackson critics* regarded his brand as tainted by disrespect for the integrity of Tolkien's works: 'PJ is not adapting, he is inventing' (Scottish man, 41); 'in his arrogance, the high school dropout believes he can pick Tolkien's bones and improve his tale' (American woman, 45).

Other initially more favourably pre-disposed *LotR film fans* and *Tolkien aficionados* also appeared unable to suspend disbelief and fully immerse themselves in *The Hobbit* movie, but for reasons related more specifically to textual fidelity and textual aesthetics.

Textual fidelity and *The Hobbit* as a failed adaptation: disappointed Tolkien readers

In total, 13 respondents loaded strongly as *disappointed Tolkien readers* in the post-viewing survey. For three formerly *LotR film fans*, *AUJ* failed both as an adaptation and prequel, with the novel and the *LotR* film trilogy providing dual intertextual reference points in judging *The Hobbit* to be ill-conceived and unfaithful to the original work(s):

Post-viewing: Wherever violence was avoided in the book, it seemed to be relished in the movie. It was untrue to the spirit of the novel in that sense, and I felt it sold its soul to please the unthinking masses.... *The Hobbit* fell short of the standard for storytelling set by *LotR*.... He could have created a far richer and enveloping tale without trying to give every character a 'hero moment'. I feel Tolkien painted heroism differently than it came out in Jackson's roller coaster ride. (South African man, 36)

Such comments reflect the adoption of a critical mediated mode of response focused on generic form (Michelle, 2007). This post-viewing perspective was shared by nine *Tolkien aficionados*, whose original hopes were shattered by the film's numerous diversions from the original *Hobbit* story in tone and emphasis, and its failure to capture the magic and spirit of Tolkien's novel (Table 2).

Evident here is the view that an adaptation/prequel should closely align with the original texts from which it is derived and with which it is continuous as part of a *series*. Hence, *AUJ* is judged as lacking *in relation to* the works that precede it, rather than on its own terms (see Rae and Gray, 2007). Interrogations of textual fidelity were also evident in some Tolkien fans' criticisms of Jackson's earlier *LotR* trilogy (Egan and Barker, 2008; Rae and Gray, 2007; Turnbull, 2008). For *Tolkien aficionados* who adopted this post-viewing perspective, the decision to stretch the film adaptation into a trilogy appeared commercially driven, leading to the introduction of crowd-pleasing material that detracted from Tolkien's original vision. Many of these respondents were deeply disappointed by *AUJ*'s many deviations from the original work, which, although expected, were a bridge too far for those who believed in the 'axiomatic superiority' of Tolkien's novel (Stam, 2005: 4). However, the fact that other *Tolkien aficionados* with essentially very similar concerns were effectively converted to *Hobbit* fandom illustrates

Table 2. Examples of comments from *Disappointed Tolkien* readers.

Pre-viewing	Post-viewing
I feel that Peter Jackson is unlikely to do the book full justice, and will try and make it more Lord-of-the-Ringsey to its cost, amping up special effects, battle scenes etc.... I think I will enjoy <i>The Hobbit</i> film a lot more if I think of it as a thing in itself instead of an adaptation. I expect it to be a poor adaptation. I hope it will be a wonderful movie!	<i>Bloodless video-game battle scenes, lacking in both plausibility and any real sense that the major characters were under threat, were thrown in for no purpose. A bland cookie-cutter villain was added, presumably on the grounds that the book didn't have enough Orcs for our heroes to beat up. Tolkien's book was carefully and skilfully plotted. Peter Jackson's film is not.</i> (New Zealand man, 16)
[The novel's] structure is a perfect introduction for children, going from light-hearted and irreverent at the beginning to epic and serious. I hope that the same feel can be managed in a trilogy.... I hope [the film] takes no notice of anything except the book and the times in which it was written.	<i>In the book the goblin caves were dark spooky tunnels [with] smart but carnivorous goblins. In the film it was a huge (and well lit) open space, with dwarves and slapstick goblins bouncing from one rickety bridge to another just like a computer game. It was ridiculous, and totally different to the book.</i> (New Zealand man, 69)

that individual receptions remain highly contingent, and cannot be 'read off' or assumed on the basis of viewers' prefigurative dispositions.

Critics of technological 'enhancements'

In total, 12 respondents adopted the post-viewing perspective that we have labelled *critics of technological 'enhancements'*, comprising equal numbers of *LotR film fans*, *Tolkien aficionados* and crossloaders. All shared an unanticipated negative reaction to the quality of *AUJ's* CGI visual effects and/or the impact of high frame rate (HFR) projection on the film's visual aesthetic, which these respondents cited as barriers to immersion in the fictional storyworld. As noted by Thompson (2007), the *LotR* films were widely praised by fans and critics alike for their extraordinary attention to detail in realizing the world of Middle-earth, which made them more forgiving of diversions from Tolkien's original plot. Many respondents fully expected *The Hobbit* to live up to similar standards. But while *enchanted Hobbit fans* often praised the heightened sense of realism conveyed by HFR and CGI effects, members of this group considered these same technologies too visible and too obvious, and felt they 'spoiled the romantic illusion' by calling attention to the means through which cinematic magic had been constructed. For *critics of technological 'enhancements'*, *AUJ's* technologies of artifice were not sufficiently transparent, but rather, quite noticeable and occasionally jarring. Several noted a perceptible distinction between actuality footage and special effects, which they felt were not successfully merged on screen:

[The] general decision to shoot in 3D, 48fps and, most importantly, to shoot on as little natural sets as possible has resulted in the very rough transitions between actors on set and [the] digital world around them. (*Tolkien aficionado*; Belarussian man, 26)

Cinema is about escapism and for me it only works if I am watching a grainy film and not some HD [high-definition] computer game.... Azog looked like a computer figure. Some scenes reminded me of *300*. I prefer the graininess of film; otherwise a movie loses its soul. (*LotR film fan*; German woman, 24)

These respondents consequently adopted a mediated mode of reception focused on textual aesthetics (Michelle, 2007). They critically evaluated the nature and quality of the film's aesthetic presentation and visual effects, with the *LotR* trilogy comprising the intertextual reference point and standard against which *AUU* was judged lacking. A more distanced, objective perspective is evident in their disengagement from the fictional story world. In a mediated mode, narrative transportation and immersion in the story world may be precluded because heightened awareness of the text as a constructed media product potentially undermines suspension of disbelief (Michelle, 2007), as reflected in the comments of several respondents:

The CGI in *The Lord of the Rings* films to me seems superior to *The Hobbit's* CGI; even though there is a 10-year difference and advances in technology it just looked clunky and far too fake, which made the believability of the film difficult and was distracting to the storyline. (New Zealand woman, 21)

The illusion that is maintained by the limitations of film stock were not sufficiently compensated for by those who were doing the art direction and the graphics design, letting the film down quite badly. (New Zealand man, 50)

These very particular and generally *unanticipated* technological features of the fully realized text were so obvious and distracting that they made it impossible for these respondents to adopt the preferred transparent viewing mode of immersive enchantment, and hence the text was experienced as less pleasurable. Significantly, most among this group did not express any particular pre-viewing concerns about the film's technological presentation – possibly because HFR was a largely unknown element prior to *AUU*, and many viewers simply assumed the *LotR's* high standards of digital design would be upheld in the prequel.

Conclusion: theorizing the role of prefiguration in shaping modes of reception

Our research complements and extends existing scholarship by drawing on a somewhat larger sample size than previous studies comparing pre- and post-viewing responses. Yet even this was insufficient to glean more than suggestive insights for some of the smaller subgroups identified. Nonetheless, our findings support the general conclusion that the key factor shaping positive receptions of highly anticipated and extensively prefigured texts is the degree of *alignment between* viewers' pre-dispositions and affiliations to particular intertexts, the nature of their imagined pre-texts and psychological investments in them, and the fully realized text *itself*. The value of our research lies in tracing the relative importance of these different elements based on viewers' self-reported

subjective reflections, using a methodological approach specifically designed to identify commonalities and variations in the responses of participants (Michelle and Davis, 2014).

Using this approach, we have demonstrated that prior expectations, shaped by various degrees of engagement with an array of prefigurative materials and intertexts, informed the foci of attention of many respondents, but did not necessarily constrain the nature and tenor of audience engagements post-release. While the vast majority of existing *LotR*'s film fans were successfully assembled in anticipation of experiencing immersive (re) enchantment upon viewing, a small number ultimately rejected this preferred viewing mode, despite having a similarly favourable pre-viewing perspective. Others were less enthralled, if not repelled by prefigurative materials, leading them to lower their expectations. While some more cautious pre-viewers were ultimately recruited to the preferred reception mode, a significant number were not. This was often because *AUJ* failed to live up to prior expectations of genre (for many *Tolkien aficionados* it was a poor adaptation); for others, it related to the film's displeasing visual aesthetic. And while there were far more 'converts' among our sample, dissatisfied viewers may have been less inclined to complete the post-viewing survey. Our subsequent studies suggest a significant group of disenfranchised 'former' *Hobbit*/Jackson fans has emerged.

Despite living up to the hopes and expectations of many, *AUJ* clearly retained the capacity to surprise, amaze, frustrate and disappoint in ways that exceeded viewers' prefigurative expectations and creative imaginings. Respondents cited quite specific features – such as added pieces of delightful dialogue, the enhanced realism or distracting effects of 3D HFR, and the emotional impact of certain scenes – as unanticipated elements that significantly coloured their viewing experience. The potential of these textual elements to encourage or disrupt the preferred reception mode largely depended on how such elements were made sense of by individual viewers themselves. Because of the inherent complexity and specificity of both the text and its reception, the outcome of individual audience–text encounters remained variable and contingent upon factors outside of the film's marketing, fan-based online discussions, and related paratextual and intertextual materials.

Prefiguration might thus be said to play a complex and ambiguous role in shaping modes of reception. It clearly has the *potential* to define and delimit horizons of expectations to varying degrees and to cast particular shadows and spotlights which 'prefigure' the text's preferred reading for receptive audiences; but there are important caveats. First, while Barker et al. (2008) suggest that film viewers almost always engage in anticipatory forethought, this is more likely so of audiences for adaptations and sequels, and less so among non-fans and those watching an original work. Furthermore, even in the case of adaptations and sequels, expectations may be minimal (Bacon-Smith and Yarbrough, 1991) or consciously *minimized* to avoid disappointment (Barker and Brooks, 1998). Second, regardless of the nature of prefigurative materials themselves and the intensity of pre-viewers' hopes, expectations and imaginings, the fully realized text can only ever be partially anticipated, and remains complexly layered and polysemic. Individual reactions thus remains indeterminate until viewing, and may be subject to further revision and refinement with subsequent re-viewings, discussion and debate.

In this article, however, our focus has been on the relationship between prefiguration and reception, and it has not been possible to address the evolution of audience engagement and response. While we are engaged in a longitudinal project mapping audience responses to the *Hobbit* trilogy, our methodology only permits us to take a snapshot of audience responses at a given moment. However, we accept that the contingent and fluid nature of reception, and the capacity of audiences to ‘commute’ between viewing positions (Michelle, 2007), does complicate our analysis. Nonetheless, our research serves as a timely reminder that the outcome of encounters between texts and audiences is not determined by prefigurative discussions or marketing materials, and cannot be predicted from careful studies of pre-viewer expectations or preoccupations with particular intertexts. Our research demonstrates that different audiences have variable degrees of exposure to prefigurative materials and may respond quite differently to them, just as they will respond differently to the fully realized text depending on its alignment with their particular loyalties, affiliations, extra-textual knowledges, hopes and expectations. It thus remains essential to empirically engage with actual – as opposed to implied or theoretical – audiences, and to understand the specific nature of their complex interactions with even the most extensively prefigured texts.

Funding

This research was partly supported by a grant from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Contestable Research Fund, University of Waikato, New Zealand.

Notes

1. See Pearson and Uricchio (1991), Bacon-Smith and Yarbrough (1991), Barker and Brooks (1998), Brooker (2012), Burke (2012), Chin and Gray (2001), Rae and Gray (2007).
2. This ranking process allows each individual to express where their subjective viewpoint ‘fits’ in relation to those of others. Sorts are then factor analysed to locate sets of like-minded respondents, making it possible to systematically identify, describe and compare the variety of viewpoints shared by individuals within a wider public (see Watts and Stenner, 2012).
3. That said, the average rating for a question asking respondents how well they could express their perspective through the ranking exercise was 3.3 out of 4 (4 = almost completely).
4. Our parenthesized use of ‘conversion’ references the derivation of the term ‘fan’, from the term ‘fanatic’, historically used to connote ‘excessive’ passion akin to religious fervor (Jenkins, 1992).
5. This term denotes respondents who loaded significantly on more than one viewpoint.

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