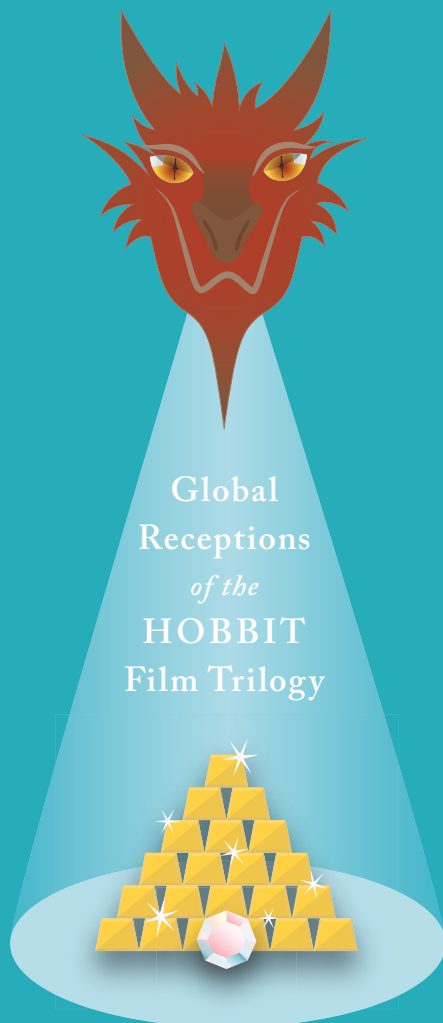


FANS, BLOCKBUSTERISATION,
AND THE TRANSFORMATION
OF CINEMATIC DESIRE



CAROLYN MICHELLE, CHARLES H. DAVIS,
ANN L. HARDY AND CRAIG HIGHT



Fans, Blockbusterisation, and the Transformation of Cinematic Desire

“This book is a truly impressive large-scale longitudinal study of the evolution of audience receptions of the *Hobbit* film trilogy. Based on rich data collected through a mixed method approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods, the book not only offers stimulating insight into the range of different viewpoints on this three-part ‘blockbusterisation’ of Tolkien’s novel but also new and original methodological and theoretical approaches to audience studies. This is an important study which advances audience research significantly.”

—Anne Jerslev, *Professor, Department of Media, Cognition & Communication University of Copenhagen*

“A smart book, adroitly deploying the best traditions of audience, fan and critical media scholarship to explain how the *Hobbit* film trilogy embodied politically significant shifts in global media culture. The authors blend a flair for cultural history with an enviable methodological skill, producing what will surely become a blueprint for many future projects on media industries and audiences, at every level of scholarship.”

—Andy Ruddock, *Senior Lecturer, Communications & Media Studies, Monash University; author of Understanding Audiences: Theories and Methods (2001) Investigating Audiences (2007), Youth and Media (2013)*

Carolyn Michelle · Charles H. Davis
Ann L. Hardy · Craig Hight

Fans, Blockbusterisation, and the Transformation of Cinematic Desire

Global Receptions of the *Hobbit* Film Trilogy

palgrave
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PREFACE

This book is the culmination of an ambitious project that sought to find out what kind of insights and potential applications could emerge within the field of audience studies by adopting an innovative longitudinal methodological approach to studying receptions of Peter Jackson's *Hobbit* trilogy (2012–14). Much of what we have attempted hasn't been done before on this scale, and the complexity of the project only really became apparent soon after we received the first rich accumulation of data in December 2012. Along the way, several new and unexpected issues emerged that warranted further investigation; we have done our best to give service to these. Writing this book has given us the opportunity to gather together our core findings and present these back to those who contributed to them, reflect on what these findings mean in the bigger picture and their possible implications for theoretical understandings of audience reception per se and Hollywood film franchises in particular, and to offer interested readers insight into the methodological design and conduct of a unique project that, we hope, may inspire similar studies in future.

The research that informs this book was the outcome of a collective effort over an extended period, and simply would not have been possible without the generous assistance and contributions of our respective institutions and the people associated with them. We have been extremely fortunate to receive modest funding at critical stages of the project from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences as well as the Research Trust at the University of Waikato, without which we could not have attempted

a longitudinal project, let alone a multilingual study for one important stage of it. We particularly thank Emeritus Prof. Robert Hannah, former Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, for his active support of this project. Our sincere appreciation also goes to the many colleagues and graduate students who contributed in various ways to the success of this endeavour: Kim Schrøder, Christian Kobbernagel, David Mathieu, Cedric Courtois, Tonny Krijnen, Alejandro Fernández, José Javier Sánchez-Aranda, Stan Jones, Geoff Lealand, Darren Elliot, Nadia Gush, Debrin Foxcroft, Sheilah Jacay, Yana Wengel, Luis Cifuentes, Loic Dussart and Victoria Kirk. Many friends and family members have also provided invaluable support and encouragement throughout the course of our research and more recent book writing. Special thanks go to Jillian Smith, Rebecca Fraser and Roberto Saravia.

Last but not least, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to the several thousand survey respondents who gave so generously of their time to offer their comments and insights, often in considerable detail. Some of you have been part of this project from the outset, and many completed more than one survey at different stages. We have been truly humbled by your willingness to participate in our research and have found all of your responses extraordinarily useful in gaining a clearer insight into viewers' diverse reactions to the *Hobbit* film trilogy, both as a blockbuster event-film trilogy and a much-anticipated expansion of the fantastical world of Middle-earth. Each and every one of you has contributed to this book and the analysis it offers; for that, we are tremendously and enduringly grateful.

Hamilton, New Zealand
 Toronto, Canada
 Hamilton, New Zealand
 Newcastle, Australia
 February 2017

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ABBREVIATIONS

AUJ	An Unexpected Journey
BotFA	The Battle of the Five Armies
CGI	Computer-generated Imagery
DoS	The Desolation of Smaug
HFR	High Frame Rate
LotR	The Lord of the Rings
MEAA	Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance
RotK	The Return of the King

ACCENTS, SIGNS, SPECIAL CHARACTERS

Á	Álvarez
Ä	Mälama äina
ä	Hirsjärvi, Häkkinen, Krämer, Välisalo
É	Éowyn, Rérolle
í	García
ö	Jöckel, Döbler, Pölönen, Göllner
ó	López-Sintas
ø	Schrøder
ü	Trültzsch-Wijnen, Wühr

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Returning to Middle-Earth, in Blockbusterised Form

INTRODUCTION

This book traces the nature and evolution of audience receptions of Sir Peter Jackson's blockbuster adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's widely read and much-loved fantasy novel, *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* (1937). Originally written for his children, *The Hobbit* has never been out of print, has been translated into over 40 different languages and has an enduring legacy within the fantasy canon. The *Hobbit* films (2012–14) were initially conceived in 2006 as a cinematic adaptation of that comparatively brief novel; given the remarkable popular, critical and financial success of Jackson's earlier *Lord of the Rings* (*LotR*) trilogy (Jackson 2001, 2002, 2003), anticipation was heightened among those who longed for a repeat of that extraordinary cultural phenomenon. Yet, as many readers will be keenly aware, the return to Middle-earth on screen was not without controversy, and the *Hobbit* films were ultimately less successful than their creators and many fans may have hoped—particularly when measured against Jackson's *LotR*, to which they effectively function as a prequel series.

Undoubtedly, the popular success of the *LotR* trilogy owed much to the enthusiastic and loyal following for Tolkien's novels that had been in existence since the 1960s, including an organised fan community initially based around various Tolkien societies and publications such as *Amon Hen* and *Tolkien Studies*, and later online newsgroups and forums such as alt.fan.tolkien and Theonering.net. This established enthusiasm for Tolkien's wider body of work meant there was a substantial pre-existing

audience for Jackson's three-part cinematic adaptation of *LotR*. Most—although certainly not all—were well pleased with the result. Indeed, it would be difficult to overstate the significance of the *LotR* films and the aura of exceptionality which has grown around them. While not the first cinematic rendering of Tolkien's work—a Rankin/Bass animated television special of *The Hobbit* was released in 1977, followed by Ralph Bakshi's *The Lord of the Rings* animated feature film in 1978—Jackson's film trilogy has been by far the grandest and most widely viewed adaptation to date. A labour of love from a self-declared band of Tolkien fans, the *LotR* films helped revitalise the blockbuster franchise production model in the early 2000s, firmly established the credibility of fantasy as a genre, resuscitated New Zealand's flagging film industry, inspired a host of local film-related tourist ventures and in the process transformed Jackson into a national hero in his homeland.

Clearly, the *Hobbit* production had some extraordinarily large shoes to fill. Whether it succeeded in so doing, however, has been the subject of heated discussion and debate among fans and critics alike. In this book, we argue that the degree of ambivalence evident in *The Hobbit*'s public and private reception illustrates many of the unanticipated and largely unstudied consequences of what we term *blockbusterisation*; a film-industry phenomenon that, ironically, consolidated in the wake of the tremendous success of Jackson's *LotR* film trilogy.

BLOCKBUSTERISATION AND THE HOLLYWOOD FRANCHISE MODEL

We conceptualise blockbusterisation as the set of economic, industrial, creative and commercial strategies and related processes that work to transform a collective cultural property (in this case, a well-established property in the form of Tolkien's novel *The Hobbit*, but potentially any popular book, comic, video game or musical) into a blockbuster event-film. The term 'blockbuster event-film' denotes a genre of films that have extensive production budgets—today often exceeding \$200 million (Owczarski 2015)—allowing for spectacular visual effects, high production value, well-known actors, broad-based appeal, extensive marketing and promotion campaigns and wide international release, all of which helps such films transcend the realms of cinema to become public *experiences* (Biltereyst and Meers 2006). Blockbuster event-films are produced by transnational entertainment conglomerates as part of a specific strategy to minimise commercial risks, maximise profits and counteract

competition from other forms of screen media (Acland 2013; Cucco 2009; Epstein 2006; Langford 2005; Stringer 2003). As home entertainment systems become more visually and aurally impressive, attracting audiences into theatres becomes increasingly difficult. Hollywood blockbuster event-films thus seek to offer ‘must-see’ spectacular experiences that small screens cannot easily duplicate (Stringer 2003). Every major Hollywood studio today annually produces a handful of capital-intensive, technologically innovative, blockbuster ‘tentpole’ event-films intended for international consumption and designed to have very high earning potential, both at the international box office and through sales of ancillary merchandise such as DVDs and Blu-ray, books, video games and so on (Elberse 2013; Jöckel and Döbler 2006; Miller et al. 2005; Stringer 2003).

In order to cater to diverse global audiences, blockbuster event-films are specifically designed to offer a wide range of meanings, pleasures and forms of involvement through the use of multiple storylines, attractive ensemble casts, technologically enhanced visual and auditory effects and generic hybridity (King 2000; Kuipers and de Kloet 2009; Mikos et al. 2008; Wasko 2008). The blockbuster aesthetic emphasises spectacular and often violent action scenes over characterisation and dialogue, simple plots with clear visual differentiation between ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’ and the liberal use of storytelling conventions that can transcend national and cultural differences and thus be intelligible to non-English speaking audiences, which is important if the films are to maximise their global box-office takings (King 2003; Olson 1999; Schauer 2007). Increasingly, studios favour big action blockbusters aimed at international markets to offset lost profits from declining DVD sales and tumbling domestic (US) attendance, particularly in the wake of online streaming video services such as Netflix and Hulu. The huge profits often made by blockbuster event-films have become vital to the industry, helping to compensate for losses associated with the lower-performing, and more often original, films in a studio’s portfolio (Elberse 2013).

As a set of imperatives and processes that work to transform an established collective cultural property into a blockbuster event-film, blockbusterisation is intimately connected to Hollywood’s growing reliance on what is known as the *franchise* model. Particularly over the past decade or so, and again to minimise financial risks, major film studios have come to favour the creation of *serialised* blockbuster adaptations, pre-quels, sequels, reboots and spin-offs from already successful franchises

(Owczarski 2015). A related recent trend is to adapt popular novels into multi-part feature films, both to avoid having to condense material and to maximise a virtually guaranteed financial return from an established fan base as viewers are left hanging for part two—as occurred with *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, earning Warner Bros an extra billion dollars at the box office (Vaughan 2014). Through their extension and expansion of ready-made, proven successful storyworlds, blockbuster franchise adaptations, sequels, prequels and spin-offs benefit from a pre-assembled audience of knowledgeable readers and fans of an established ‘brand’, while also appealing to mainstream audiences (Owczarski 2015; Schauer 2007; Vaughan 2014). Consequently, films that are extensions of known cultural properties are often highly lucrative: 14 of the 20 top grossing films of 2016 were adaptations, prequels, sequels or spin-offs (Box Office Mojo 2017a). The pre-assembled audiences such films address can be carefully cultivated for forthcoming releases in the same series, and provide ready consumer markets for ancillaries such as books and video games as part of broader studio efforts to capitalise on multi-media product lines (Owczarski 2015; Schauer 2007).

These changes in the nature and focus of Hollywood film production since the late 1970s have met with criticism from various quarters on both aesthetic and creative grounds. The more trenchant of critics suggest Hollywood appears to have abandoned ‘high-quality, artistic drama’ focusing on narrative and character development ‘in favour of large-scale, big-budget, action-based, computer-generated, cookie-cutter movies featuring robots, men in capes, and giant scary machines’ (Brynes 2015)—all creatures of fantasy, as are hobbits and dragons. Such films are frequently panned by ‘serious’ critics for transgressing traditional aesthetic values associated with cinema as an art form, and for privileging style and visual spectacle over narrative complexity and in-depth characterisation (King 2003; Wyatt 2010)—two elements that, in the case of adaptations of literary works such as *The Hobbit*, might be presumed to have considerable importance for viewers familiar with the original work. As Schauer (2007, p. 191) notes, blockbusters are widely considered by film scholars and cultural critics to be ‘faceless, escapist, mass produced popular entertainment’ aimed at thrilling young people, and are often dismissed as existing ‘primarily as advertisements for ancillary merchandise.’ However, Lavik (2008), Schauer (2007), Thompson (1999) and others have defended this form of filmmaking, arguing that most franchise blockbusters retain a classical narrative structure, despite also

offering impressive visual effects. Other scholars have understood the blockbuster franchise as a form of ‘transmedia storytelling’ that facilitates ‘world building’ (Jenkins 2006).

Our understanding of *The Hobbit* as a blockbuster franchise borrows from Derek Johnson (2013, p. 6), who theorises franchising as ‘the ongoing industrial negotiation of tensions surrounding cultural production by social agents’, including producers, creative workers and ‘participatory consumers’—commonly known as fans. These networked organisations, groups and individuals must negotiate their interests in a shared cultural resource, within a set of social relations structured by unequal access to power and control over production processes. Johnson (2013, p. 7) argues that media franchises today are ‘constituted by the shared exchange of content resources across multiple industrial sites and contexts of production operating in collaborative but contested ways through networked relation to one another.’ He goes on to suggest that

At each of these industrial sites, media institutions and producers laboring on their behalf have become stakeholders that, even when lacking ownership of a shared property, develop vested interests in its ongoing productive use. Conceived in this manner, the participatory consumers of contemporary social media too might be considered stakeholders, lacking economic claim, but developing a wide range of interests and sometimes even performing labor as part of the economic organization of franchised production.. .. [F]ranchising has situated multiple industrial stakeholders in economic but also creative production relations with one another. *The products and content offered by media franchising, therefore, might be considered as contested grounds of collaborative creativity where networked stakeholders have negotiated the ongoing generation, exchange, and use of shared cultural resources.* (Johnson 2013, p. 7; emphasis added)

In this book, we take the view that Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* constitutes a shared cultural resource that became subject to an intensive process of blockbusterisation in the course of its cinematic adaptation, and that Jackson’s blockbuster franchise adaptation can be understood as the product of a complex interaction between art and commerce that involved multiple industrial and creative stakeholders as well as fans. Furthermore, as we will show, the outcome of that interaction was deeply contested, and indeed rejected in full or in part, by a significant number of fans, who claimed a personal and psychological stake in the processes of translating book to screen. Peter Jackson’s cinematic version

of *The Hobbit*, we suggest, thus serves as a useful exemplar of contemporary processes of blockbusterisation and their potentially controversial and contested outcomes among fans of an established cultural property.

THE CREATION OF A NEW MIDDLE-EARTH BLOCKBUSTER FILM FRANCHISE

As readers will recognise, Jackson's *Hobbit* trilogy clearly satisfies the key criteria of a major Hollywood blockbuster event-film franchise. Much like the *LotR* production, *The Hobbit* was an extremely complex, expensive project that took several years to move from development into concurrent production and subsequent release. While the novel is a simple children's story of a homebody hobbit who discovers his courage and inherent wisdom in the course of an unexpected adventure, the process of translating book to screen presented significant challenges, in no small part because the *Hobbit* movies needed to align with the pre-established narrative and cinematic tone of Jackson's *LotR* films if they were to entice the many fans of these films back into cinemas. Just as Tolkien later amended parts of *The Hobbit* to create greater continuity with the themes and narrative threads of his successor series, the *Hobbit* films would become part of a wider story arc by foregrounding the momentous struggle between good and evil that transpires 60 years later, in Middle-earth terms. Successfully fulfilling these different requirements was never going to be easy.

Written by Guillermo del Toro, Peter Jackson, Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens and initially to be directed by del Toro, the *Hobbit* production was confronted early on by a series of legal challenges from the Tolkien Estate and HarperCollins Publishers, delays arising from financial troubles at MGM and subsequent disruptions and controversies on set. Following del Toro's departure due to scheduling conflicts (Xoanon 2010), newly appointed director Jackson announced on 15 October 2010 that *The Hobbit*, by this time being co-produced by Warner Bros in conjunction with New Line Cinema, would proceed as a two-part 3D film. Then, on 30 July 2012, Jackson announced the production would be expanded into a trilogy by extrapolating from additional materials in Tolkien's unpublished revisions of *The Hobbit*, the appendices to *The Return of the King* and other notes (Riga et al. 2014) along with some entirely new scenes, in order to ease the transition into the darker,

more adult themes of the *LotR*. As we discuss in Chap. 3, while this decision to transform *The Hobbit* into a three-part production was couched by Jackson and others as an opportunity to extend fans' enjoyment of the wider storyworld by telling more of the tale 'of Bilbo Baggins, the Dwarves of Erebor, the rise of the Necromancer, and the Battle of Dol Guldur' (Zakarin 2012), it likely also reflected the studios' awareness of the potential commercial value of enticing existing Tolkien readers and *LotR* fans back into cinemas for not two but *three* successive instalments, thereby maximising revenues with a film trilogy, three DVD/Blu-ray releases and sales of an array of licenced merchandise. Not without good reason, Warners, New Line and MGM were 'equally enthusiastic about bringing fans this expansive tale across three films' (Jackson, as cited in Zakarin 2012, n.p.).

The filmmakers also sought to widen *The Hobbit's* appeal by offering a more complex and multilayered narrative than the original novel, adding a controversial non-canon love story while continuing to explore themes of friendship, loyalty, heroism, sacrifice and the perennial struggle between good and evil. To ensure continuity across the six-film franchise and recreate a similar visual and aural aesthetic for the prequels, several of the same creatives who worked on the art direction, illustration, cinematography, props, visual effects and score for the *LotR* films were recruited to work on the *Hobbit* production, including Alan Lee, John Howe, Richard Taylor of Weta Workshops and Howard Shore. The films also feature an attractive ensemble cast comprising several well-known actors in addition to five reprising their roles from the *LotR* trilogy. Alongside Martin Freeman as Bilbo Baggins, Richard Armitage as Thorin and Benedict Cumberbatch voicing Smaug the dragon, the production welcomed the return of Ian McKellen as Gandalf, Cate Blanchett as Galadriel, Andy Serkis as Gollum, Christopher Lee as Saruman and Orlando Bloom as Legolas. While Gandalf and Gollum do feature in Tolkien's original novel, Galadriel, Saruman and Legolas were written into the *Hobbit* trilogy to provide continuity with Jackson's earlier films.

The *Hobbit* trilogy's production budget was exceptionally large at around US\$750 million (The Numbers 2017), meaning the trilogy cost nearly three times as much to make as *LotR* (Suzanne-Mayer 2016). Part of this inflated cost reflected a significant financial investment in advanced cinematic technologies following Jackson's bold decision to pioneer the use of high frame rate (HFR) 3D projection, which meant

The Hobbit would offer a truly unprecedented theatrical experience. By combining advanced computer graphics imagery (CGI) with stereoscopic 3D shot using 5 K resolution Red Epic cameras and double the usual frame rate to 48 frames per second, Jackson sought to transport viewers back into a Middle-earth more detailed, realistic and lifelike than ever before. On his Facebook page, he explained his decision to use 3D HFR as furthering his creative intent to provide a certain *kind* of viewing experience—one of immersive transportation: ‘As a filmmaker, I try to make my movies immersive. I want to draw the audience out of their seats, and pull them into the adventure’ (Jackson 2012). This unique combination of filming, digital and projection technologies, Jackson believed, would not only help recreate the characters, landscapes and heightened sense of wonder associated with Middle-earth, but also eradicate the cinematic ‘fourth wall’ to greatly enhance viewers’ sense of physical presence within the fictional storyworld.

As a blockbuster event-film franchise, *The Hobbit* enjoyed a very wide international release, with the first film appearing on 4045 screens on its opening weekend in the USA, in addition to 2017 screens across the UK, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands and the Philippines (IMDb, n.d.). Ticket sales likely benefited from *The Hobbit*’s status as a prequel series, meaning it stood to inherit a very large and enthusiastic audience of fans of the earlier *LotR* films, and was also likely to appeal to millions of readers of Tolkien’s collective works. To facilitate the assembly of a large global audience, the release of each film was preceded by extensive marketing and promotion campaigns in major markets (Markowski 2012).

Many fans, as well as mainstream viewers, were thereby effectively primed to see these films: high levels of anticipation for *The Hobbit* were expressed on discussion boards such as Theonering.net, and for 18 months prior to its release, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (AUJ) remained in IMDb MovieMeter’s list of Top 100 movies as measured by users’ search queries. By the time of its December 2012 release, *The Hobbit: AUJ* was the top-rated movie in the IMDb MovieMeter, the trailers had been viewed more than 10 million times, and 1310 other websites were hyperlinked to the official *Hobbit* website (Fiorelli 2012). Various signals thus suggested the prequel series was likely to benefit from what Mikos et al. (2008, p. 115) have termed an ‘assured reception’ among these positively predisposed fans of the wider Middle-earth franchise, who were already familiar with the story and its characters.

Whether the *Hobbit* trilogy would succeed in attracting and more importantly *keeping* this audience, however, was by no means guaranteed. Would it live up to the marketing hype and satisfy elevated fan expectations for a certain kind of experience, a certain kind of film series, particularly when assessed against the high standards of cinematic excellence and emotional resonance achieved in the *LotR* trilogy? *The Hobbit*'s potential audience was, after all, now more diverse than a decade earlier, when readers of the *LotR* novels first encountered Jackson's epic visual realisation of Tolkien's mythical world. It seemed likely that global receptions of *The Hobbit* would be variously shaped both by book readers' familiarity with the original novel and Tolkien's wider oeuvre, *and* by reactions to Jackson's *LotR* films among different segments of the global viewing audience—not all of whom had been satisfied by Jackson's rendering. Our book thus simultaneously addresses the complex relationship between the *Hobbit* film trilogy and what we have termed 'the transformation of cinematic desire.'

We are using 'desire' here in its generally understood sense as relating to what people *want*—what they hope or long for. As we show in Chap. 3, many respondents had formulated certain expectations and wishes for the *Hobbit* films in advance of their release, and were looking forward to seeing particular things realised on screen. Some hoped to see a certain *kind* of adaptation, others to relive a certain *kind* of phenomenon, or enjoy a certain kind of immersive experience. The nature of the focus of viewers' cinematic desires was often contingent on a complex set of prior affiliations, prefigurative activities and personal predilections, and clearly reflected different sets of interests. Audiences for *The Hobbit* did not all wish for the same things, and not all of their desires would be ultimately satisfied by Jackson's fully realised trilogy, leaving some in a quandary: should they modify or limit their expectations and desires to accommodate the likely difference between ideal and reality? As our research demonstrates, cinematic desires were formulated, modified and reasserted in an ongoing interrelationship between prefigurative hopes and expectations and the films *themselves* as they were progressively realised on screen. While some cinematic desires were initially relatively fixed, stable and clearly formulated, others were potentially fluid and mutable as some respondents attempted to reconcile the actual films produced by Jackson and his team with the idealised versions previously imagined and hoped for. The cinematic realisation of collective cultural properties, our

research suggests, inevitably effects a *transformation* of cinematic desire among some, perhaps even many, viewers.

Complicating this process of negotiation between pre-existing affiliations, cinematic desires and the fully realised *Hobbit* films were a diverse array of factors relating to the nature of this production as a Hollywood blockbuster event-film franchise. As we shall illustrate, many of the more widely debated and indeed controversial aspects of the *Hobbit* trilogy's production, narrative and visual aesthetic reflect the influence of wider processes and imperatives of blockbusterisation. This phenomenon clearly has far-reaching implications for the production and reception of mainstream feature films in the contemporary era, as it effectively reshapes what kind of content is offered and in what forms, simultaneously reshaping audience tastes and expectations. As such, studying the *Hobbit* blockbuster franchise and its transnational reception provides a strategic vantage point from which to observe and better understand contemporary processes of transformation by, and resistance to, the capital-intensive commodification of culture.

A TROUBLED ADAPTATION?

To some readers, it may seem odd to be speaking of resistance to commodification, given the evident success of the *Hobbit* films among mainstream audiences and at the international box office. Yet a closer examination of *The Hobbit*'s performance both financially and critically reveals that it fell a long way short of matching the success of the *LotR* trilogy, which earned around \$US2.912 billion in 2001–3 (Box Office Mojo 2017b),¹ not accounting for inflation and without the benefit of today's inflated ticket prices for 3D films. To match that extraordinary success, the *Hobbit* trilogy needed to make an amount in the range of \$US3.8 billion. So, how did it do?

Overall, *The Hobbit* grossed just \$US2.935 billion, suggesting its performance was considerably weaker than that of the *LotR* trilogy. According to Box Office Mojo (2017b), the most successful of the three *Hobbit* films was the first: *AJ* earned US\$1.021 billion in global box office receipts—somewhat less than the *LotR: The Return of the King*'s (*RotK*'s) \$US1.119 billion (a figure unadjusted for ticket price inflation and achieved nearly a decade earlier!). Adjusted gross figures for domestic box-office takings make clearer the extent to which the first and most successful *Hobbit* film failed to match the top-performing film from the

LotR trilogy: *RotK* earned US \$530,689,500 in today's figures; paling in comparison, *AUJ* earned just US\$321,964,900. Clearly, the *Hobbit* films attracted lower attendance in cinemas from the outset: Vaughan (2014, p. 8) suggests that 'In the US, 32.3 million people saw *An Unexpected Journey* at the cinema, almost half as many as saw *The Return of the King*.'

Furthermore, while the *LotR* transcended its core fan base to enjoy mainstream appeal and progressively increased its box office takings over the course of the trilogy, earnings *declined* with each successive *Hobbit* instalment. *The Desolation of Smaug* (*DoS*) did not quite match the first *Hobbit* film's commercial success, grossing just US\$958,366,855 globally. *The Battle of the Five Armies* (*BotFA*) was slightly weaker again, grossing just \$US956,019,788. In most other cases such figures would be regarded as a commercial triumph. But this was *The Hobbit*, no less, and it is clear that rather than expanding its global audience over time on the back of the comparative success of the first film, *The Hobbit* progressively *shed* parts of its audience.

Declining box office receipts, we suggest, is one clear indicator of *The Hobbit*'s rather mixed reception among film critics, fans and the wider viewing public; another useful measure is aggregated audience ratings. Most readers will be aware that Jackson's first Middle-earth trilogy was almost universally acclaimed: average ratings for the *LotR* films were 94% on Rotten Tomatoes, 91.3 on Metacritic, and 'A' on CinemaScore, and all three instalments continue to feature among the top 20 of IMDb's 250 highest rated films (IMDb 2017). The *Hobbit* films, in comparison, feature nowhere on this list. Professional reviews of *AUJ* were lukewarm, with an overall 64% 'Fresh' rating on Rotten Tomatoes, alleviated somewhat by an audience score of 83%. On Metacritic, *AUJ* scored 58 out of 100 from reviewers, with a more positive user rating of 8.1 out of 10. Critics expressed mixed reactions to the film's use of HFR and its hyper-realistic aesthetic, with many also critiquing its extraordinary length, extraneous storylines and rather plodding pace. *DoS* fared somewhat better with critics, scoring 74% from Rotten Tomatoes reviewers and 86% from audiences, while Metacritic reviewers scored it at 66, with an average user rating of 7.8. The 'critics consensus' on Rotten Tomatoes suggested a still mixed, but more positive reception (Rotten Tomatoes, 2017). *BotFA*, in contrast, managed just 60% on the Tomatometer, with an audience rating of 75%, and 59 and 7.0 on Metacritic, making this the *least*

favoured film overall. Critics suggested the final film concluded the trilogy ‘in reasonably rousing fashion, but while the battle scenes are visually striking, the story is more than a little thin.... [It] lacks the human touch and weightiness that made the *Lord of the Rings* films such revered classics’ (Ryan 2014, n.p.).

These and other perceived flaws perhaps help account for *The Hobbit*’s failure to match *LotR*’s stellar performance during award season. Whereas the first trilogy collectively won 17 Oscars from 30 nominations (in addition to more than 770 other awards and nominations), the *Hobbit* trilogy garnered just eight Academy Award nominations, winning a single Oscar in the less prestigious Scientific and Engineering category; the series received around 150 nominations and accolades in total.

Thus, while *The Hobbit* clearly delighted many viewers globally and did moderately well at the box office (although given its inflated production costs, it was clearly much less profitable than *LotR*), it was rather less successful than might have been expected in critical, popular and financial terms, for a complex set of reasons that this book seeks to illuminate. As we shall show, the *Hobbit* film production generated controversy even before the first film’s release, and debate and discontent re-emerged and took on different inflections with each new instalment in the franchise. Whether related to the trilogy’s conditions of production, its ‘cavalier’ handling of Tolkien’s original novel, its hyperrealistic visual aesthetic or stereotypical formulae, most of the major sources of viewer antipathy, we suggest, fundamentally arose from *The Hobbit*’s subjection to the capital-intensive processes and imperatives of blockbusterisation.

In developing this argument, we draw from the results of an unprecedented longitudinal Q methodology study undertaken between 2012 and 2015, in which we charted the nature and evolution of transnational receptions of *The Hobbit* over its cinematic life course. Drawing on detailed qualitative and quantitative data provided by nearly 6500 respondents around the world, we demonstrate that the expansion of Tolkien’s children’s novel into a ‘blockbuster’ film franchise deeply divided audiences and alienated a significant number of otherwise positively predisposed viewers and fans. For certain audience segments, attributes intended to increase the trilogy’s appeal to mainstream moviegoers—including the numerous action sequences, advanced computer-generated visual effects, a decidedly un-Tolkienish love triangle and the expansion of the story over three films—undermined deep engagement with the narrative storyworld. While this book primarily focuses on the

nature and form of global audience receptions of Jackson's *Hobbit* films, it simultaneously offers insight into fans' resistance to the influence of corporate Hollywood on *The Hobbit*'s production and content *as a blockbuster franchise*; an influence which, for a significant and growing minority, undermined the quality and authenticity of this cinematic adaptation of Tolkien's original novel.

WHY STUDY AUDIENCES FOR THE *HOBBIT* BLOCKBUSTER FRANCHISE?

To date, much of the existing scholarship discussing blockbuster franchises examines this phenomenon from the perspectives of political economy, film production or textual aesthetics. With some notable exceptions, film scholarship is predominantly text-centred and often highly speculative about how audiences engage with and make sense of film productions. Where discussed at all, audiences frequently feature as 'ideal' or 'implied' viewers and are assumed to adopt the (singular) preferred spectator *position* encoded into films by their makers, as Barker and Mathijs (2008) have also noted. While exceptions to this trend began to emerge in the early 1980s following the ethnographic turn within media and cultural studies, much of the early research on film audiences was relatively small in scale, reflecting the predominant use of labour-intensive qualitative methods. There remains a lack of in-depth, large-scale research on audience responses to film in general and blockbuster film franchises in particular, and even fewer studies have explored the ways transnational texts are received and understood by differently located audiences (Hirsjarvi et al. 2016). In this book, we follow the lead of Barker and Mathijs (2008) in approaching the question of the blockbuster event-film franchise's status and value from the perspective of *audiences*. However, by drawing on a rather different methodology that recognises the complex and potentially highly variable processes of audience reception over the extended life cycle of a blockbuster franchise, we provide detailed insight into how different viewers, from a diverse range of backgrounds, variously engaged with and made sense of the *Hobbit* trilogy over time.

Understanding how audiences make sense of such productions is important for several reasons. Besides expanding our knowledge of media reception processes and related consumption practices, studying audience reactions to blockbuster franchises offers insight into the cultural as well

as the personal significance of some of the most widely consumed, globally disseminated entertainment products of our time. Such research is also important from an industry perspective, given the degree to which reliance on the franchise model has become embedded within major Hollywood studios—a strategy which seems to rely on audiences’ unwavering enthusiasm for more of the same. Some industry commentators have expressed concerns about the basis of that assumption, and warn of the dangers posed should audience tastes for blockbuster franchises change, or viewer fatigue set in. For instance, CLSA media analyst Vasily Karasyov warns that ‘Hollywood is headed for a cliff’, and suggests the ‘continuously increasing reliance on non-original titles and sequels presents growing risk to film industry profitability’ (Williams 2015, n.p.). Indeed, there are a few troubling signs for the industry following a series of expensive flops—most notably *Ben Hur* (2016), *The BFG* (2016), *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (2016) (Sakoui 2016) and the critically slated *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), which Warner Bros ambitiously conceived as the ‘tentpole’ film in a new DC Justice League film franchise that will extend to 10 films or more (Rose 2016). Studying audience reactions to *The Hobbit* as one example of the blockbuster franchise can potentially reveal much about how viewers are *already* responding to a production strategy that currently dominates contemporary filmmaking, influencing decisions about the kind of content that is seen as viable to invest in, as well as the particular form in which that content gets delivered.

In that sense, then, we regard the *Hobbit* films as exemplars of the blockbuster franchise adaptation *as a form*, and perceive parallels between their conceptualisation and realisation and that of other widely read serialised novels such as *Twilight*, *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, and potentially also the wide assortment of interlocking superhero comic book adaptations that currently flood cinemas. While each of these examples is, in many important respects, unique—and the *Hobbit* trilogy even more so, given the long shadows cast by Tolkien’s extraordinary legacy and Jackson’s *LotR* films—we believe the patterns and trends we have identified in audience receptions of *The Hobbit* are not necessarily particular to this set of films alone. While different in content, they may be similar in *kind* to the reactions observed among viewers of the burgeoning array of serialised cinematic adaptations of other familiar cultural properties. Thus, our intent in studying global audiences for the *Hobbit* trilogy is not merely to document and reflect upon the

specific content of audience reactions to these particular films: we also seek to contribute to theory-building in reception studies by offering critical insights into the nature and form of audience engagement and response itself, both in general and specifically related to this *kind* of entertainment product—the blockbuster franchise adaptation.

CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

The book addresses some of our major findings on a range of topics that we hope will be of interest to lay readers, including film and Tolkien fans, as well as academics. Part of our intention in writing this book was to give other scholars further insight into the research process we developed for this project, both in the interests of being transparent about our methodological assumptions and procedures, and because we hope our research will provide others with an alternative vision of *how* robust and reliable large-scale comparative research on transnational audiences for a serialised media form might be conducted.

Thus, we begin in Chap. 2 by outlining some of the key insights derived from previous studies of audiences for Jackson's earlier Middle-earth films that have informed our research, before highlighting the key questions that prompted our adoption of a longitudinal, cross-cultural approach in our own study of *Hobbit* audiences. Perhaps the key distinguishing feature of our project is its use and extension of Q methodology for large-scale, transnational online research; here, we introduce readers to this methodological approach and what it makes it possible to do, while also offering an overview of the particular understanding of the nature and form of audience reception that informs our conceptualisation and interpretation of key findings.

The following chapter fleshes out the first set of key findings, focusing on the various ways in which receptions of the *Hobbit* trilogy were 'prefigured' by the long shadows of both Tolkien's written works and Jackson's earlier *LotR* trilogy, and an array of marketing and promotions materials, news coverage, discussion and debate. Drawing on data from our online pre-viewing survey, we describe the main shared viewpoints expressed by our respondents before *The Hobbit: AUJ*'s release in cinemas and offer insight into the various prefigurative activities they were engaging in as they anticipated this film experience. Then, to further clarify the orientations and expectations of those who might later participate in our *AUJ* post-viewing surveys, we chart the specific constellations of meaning,

value and affect that our respondents were ascribing to *The Hobbit* in advance of seeing it.

Chapter 4 focuses on a controversy that shaped public discussion and debate around the *Hobbit* production before the first film's release. The extended *Hobbit* union dispute, which threatened to derail the trilogy's New Zealand production and prompted widely criticised reforms to New Zealand labour law, reveals how processes and imperatives of blockbusterisation are currently reshaping transnational film production. Our respondents' reactions to this issue demonstrate how and why a transnational production such as *The Hobbit* can have varying degrees of salience for differently located audiences, while also demonstrating how cinematic desire for fetishised cultural commodities currently trumps consideration of the social conditions under which such commodities are produced.

In Chap. 5, we begin mapping the evolution of audience responses to the *Hobbit* film trilogy over time by describing and interpreting the major post-viewing perspectives that emerged in response to *AUJ*. We also present a unique comparative analysis of the responses of those who took part in *both* pre- and post-viewing *AUJ* surveys, illustrating the complex interaction between prefigurative expectations and audience receptions of the fully realised film. Chapter 6 sees our attention shift to the *Hobbit* sequels, *DoS* and *BotFA*, and identifies the major perspectives that emerged in the wake of each film. Here, we describe and illustrate shared viewpoints among different segments of the global audience for the *Hobbit* sequels, and show that their central preoccupations vary widely. While many respondents expressed deep satisfaction at a highly pleasurable, fully immersive return to Middle-earth, others were becoming increasingly troubled by a number of factors relating to the commercial and creative imperatives shaping *The Hobbit*'s production. These included questions of authorial intent and textual fidelity, the process of adaptation and the limits of creative licence, textual realism and *The Hobbit*'s unusual visual aesthetic, and the perceived intrusion of contemporary gender politics into the second and third *Hobbit* films.

In Chap. 7, we focus on audience reactions to the *Hobbit* trilogy's (then unique) visual aesthetic, produced through the combination of high frame rate stereoscopic 3D projection, extensive reliance on CGI and the use of green screens, and 5 K resolution cameras. While intended by director Peter Jackson to facilitate and intensify viewers' experience of pleasurable re-immersion in Middle-earth, the combination of these

technologies appears to have produced contradictory effects and visual artefacts that some viewers considered jarring and displeasing. As we show, critical reactions to *The Hobbit*'s visual aesthetic had complex origins, being variously informed by individual commitments to a more traditional cinematic aesthetic, appreciation for *LotR*'s 'gritty' realism (achieved through greater use of practical effects), and an apparent clash between the technologies *themselves* which, we suggest, generated a hyperreality paradox that disrupted narrative immersion for a small but significant number of respondents.

From there, we offer deeper insight into the bases of the many variations in audience engagement and response our study has revealed. Chapter 8 addresses the diverse range of meanings ascribed to each of the films that constitute this blockbuster fantasy film franchise. Here, we illustrate and explain *The Hobbit*'s evolving significance for different kinds of fans, casual viewers and critics over the full course of the trilogy, and document, for the first time on a large scale, the progressive transformation of their engagement with and affection for a media product that had been long imagined and deeply desired by many. A dominant evolving sentiment for a significant minority was disappointment with a failed adaptation, and with the missed opportunity to replicate the heady success of the *LotR* film trilogy. Disappointment primarily centred on issues pertaining to the quality of the adaptation, and crystallised around a controversy surrounding the second and third *Hobbit* films: the introduction of a new female character, the Elf guard Tauriel, and a related love triangle. In discussing these and other issues that were especially salient among our respondents, this chapter adds depth and context to our understanding of the factors that led to continued engagement versus progressive disenchantment and disaffection among different groups of *Hobbit* viewers.

In Chap. 9, we explore the relationship between audience reception and important aspects of identity and social location, including gender, age, education and occupation, but also less frequently studied aspects such as political and religious affiliations, and of course fandom. Drawing on a comparison of responses to the post-viewing survey for *AUJ*, which was conducted in seven different languages, as well as our larger data corpus in which we received responses from over 85 countries around the world, this chapter documents a number of culturally and linguistically specific findings and offers an account of the possible basis for differences and similarities in *The Hobbit*'s transnational reception within different interpretive communities.