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Tolkien, our Judge of Peter Jackson:
The Film Adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* (Z, R. Bakshi and P. Jackson)

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NB: It is understood that *The Lord of the Rings* refers to the work by J.R.R. Tolkien, whereas 'The Lord of the Rings' designates the film adaptations. In the case of Peter Jackson, this article (written at the beginning of 2002) is concerned with 'The Fellowship of the Ring'.

Peter Jackson's 'Fellowship of the Ring' is a fair adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, chiefly owing to its visual qualities and to the believable representation of a universe it offers the viewer. It may please both types of audiences: firstly, the readers of Tolkien, because our memories of the book overlap the movie and are superimposed on it, restoring some density to a film which otherwise would seem all too frantic and too 'flat'; it can also please those who are not familiar with Tolkien, and most of all trigger an interest in reading the book, for in the film these viewers are given a glimpse of a rich and believable world. Indeed, a dramatic increase in book sales has been observed since the movie entered the popular mindset, which is undoubtedly one of its chief virtues, so seldom it is that mainstream cinema leads to literature.

This is a film which holds no major misinterpretations – the viewer quickly comes to the realization that 'The Lord of the Rings' is not primarily geared towards children, unlike 'Harry Potter'; that it is no science-fiction; that there is no trace of racism in Tolkien's work, etc. – and a film which, most importantly, paves the way of the newcomer towards the book: could we, prior to its release, have expected the movie to meet such demands, given the high costs and obvious commercial constraints tied to its making?

More simply, could anyone have even considered adapting a book of such importance into an art house movie? We, the public, certainly cannot appreciate the constraints Peter Jackson had to deal with, even though they can be inferred from his public declarations: without the determination of this director (and his close

collaborators'), no doubt the adaptation would have strayed a lot farther from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

Moreover, to enumerate such differences as exist between the movie and the text is probably mistaken: even though some websites, well before the release of the movie, listed the changes found in the script (or what was held as such), one must not forget that a work of film is in essence much more than that; to judge Peter Jackson's movie based on his scriptwriting only would be to show serious disregard for the specificities of cinema. To cite an example drawn from my own experience, working on the dialogues as a consultant for the French dub has not allowed me – even with the images available on numerous websites – to *visualize* the film, because the sole addition of these elements (script + dialogues + screenshots) is a far cry from an edited movie. Surely that is what those viewers have overlooked who went to see the film with (favourable or unfavourable) prejudices, which the first true experience of the movie could not alter.

Before turning specifically to the film by Peter Jackson, I believe it is important to widen the scope of the discussion. One of the issues that frequently turn up is that of the adaptability of *The Lord of the Rings* to the screen. All has been said of this matter, but Tolkien's own opinion has not been sought often enough. Now his *Letters* prove once more to be of special interest, since there emerges a difference between his (nuanced) stance of principle, and his severe (and well-founded) judgment of a project submitted to him in 1957-58.

We are well aware of the importance of the visual element in Tolkien's works: he illustrated them (as publications – *Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien* and *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator*[1] – have reminded us), and 'visualize[d] with great clarity' the landscapes of Middle-earth.[2] It is no wonder, then, that the author, when consulted, looks favourably upon a project he hopes will be better than the BBC adaptation – a failure, in his opinion[3]. He does not show great interest: this reserve, devoid of hostility, constitutes his stance of principle, which may be interpreted merely as a sign that, in his eyes, the literary work comes first, the cinematographic transposition having little to do with this but being potentially 'good for publicity'.[4]

He is however aware of the difficulties entailed ('the risk of vulgarization'[5]) and admits the necessity to *reduce*: 'an *abridgement* by selection with some good picture-work would be pleasant […]'.[6] Here there emerges one of the first criteria to his judgment of an animation film project presented to him by an American producer, Forrest J. Ackerman: the *images* (mountains and deserts) hold his attention because they seem well-suited to his work.[7] This interest in the visual aspect is confirmed a little later on, as

[1] *Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien*, London, HarperCollins, 1992 (revised edition), 112 p.; W.G. Hammond, C. Scull, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator*, London, HarperCollins, 1995, 208 p.
[2] *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: A Selection*, edited by H. Carpenter, London, Allen & Unwin, 1981, p. 280 (abridged as *L*).
[3] '[…] the sillification achieved by the B.B.C.' (letter of May 1957 to Rayner Unwin, *L*, p. 257; cf. pp. 228-9).
[4] Letter of September 1957 to Rayner Unwin (*L*, p. 261).
[5] *L*, p. 257.
[6] *L*, p. 261.
[7] '[…] this Mr Ackerman brought some really astonishingly good pictures (Rackham rather than Disney) and some remarkable colour photographs' (letter of September 1957 to Christopher Tolkien, *L*, p. 261).

Tolkien explains that sets and scenery could constitute the main interest of the screen adaptation that is submitted to him.[8]

Thus, Tolkien is not going to reject *any* adaptation, but one in particular, the 1958 'story-line'; and even where he is most critical of it, he still submits solutions that take heed of the specificities of cinema, pondering ways to convey in images the difficulties of the quest, or proposing to light the scene at Weathertop by using a fire.[9]

For the 1958 story-line proves to be catastrophic; what is known of it comes solely from Tolkien's own description, but that is sufficiently long and precise to inform us on the essential points: names are erroneously transcribed, dialogues are calamitous, the narrative structure is disrupted – episodes are displaced or condensed, the interlacement (intertwining of plots) is ill-treated –, additions (fairy castle, immoderate use of magic) and cuts deface the plot, which moreover comes off as incoherent ; some characters are altered (Gandalf, Bombadil, and the Orcs… endowed with feathers and beaks)…

Amongst all this evidence of infidelity, this confusion, three things stand out: excessive simplification, the undermining of the story's believability – so fundamental as it is to Tolkien – and, in the author's own terms, a 'pull-back towards more conventional "fairy-stories"'.[10] He does not argue against the necessity of selecting scenes: I have already mentioned the possibility of 'abridgement', and further on, Tolkien states anew that a 'reduction or selection of the scenes and events' is necessary; but he clearly differentiates with what he is being given to read, which seems to him like a '*contraction*'[11] or '*compression*'.[12] Evidently irritated and hurt, he does not mince words in his critique of the puerile cartoon project, considering that the important moments are forgotten – Frodo's mission 'has been murdered'[13] – to allow for fight scenes, and the screenwriter (whom, with respect to decency, we will name 'Z', after Tolkien's fashion[14]), according to him, is blatantly guilty of 'extreme silliness and incompetence'.[15]

The purpose of this short reminder is to provide a few indications on what might have been Tolkien's own judgment regarding the subsequent adaptations.

Let us start with a few words on Ralph Bakshi's 1978 effort filming a script written by C. Conkling and P.S. Beagle. A few quick words, though, for most of what has been reproached to Z, unfortunately, can also be found in Bakshi… except that *that* movie has ultimately seen the light of day. One could say, to make a long story short, that Bakshi's 'Lord of the Rings' is somewhat akin to *Bored of the Rings*[16] by Henry N. Beard

[8] Letter (probably from June 1958) to Forrest J. Ackerman (*L*, p. 274).
[9] *L*, p. 274.
[10] *L*, p. 261.
[11] '*Contraction* of this kind is not the same thing as the necessary reduction or selection of the scenes and events that are to be visually represented' (*L*, p. 272).
[12] *L*, p. 261.
[13] '[…] he has made no serious attempt to represent the heart of the tale adequately: the journey of the Ringbearers. The last and most important part of this has, and it is not too strong a word, simply been murdered' (*L*, p. 271).
[14] *L*, p. 270ff.
[15] Letter of April 1958 to Rayner Unwin (*L*, p. 267).
[16] Henry N. Beard and Douglas C. Kennedy, *Bored of the Rings: A Parody of J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*, New York, New American Library, 2001, 160 p.

and Douglas C. Kennedy, the *Lord of the Rings* spoof published in 1969 by Harvard lampoonists… but that, in the case of Bakshi, the parody was unintentional.

The storytelling is incoherent: the director retains disparate elements without linking them together, performs a few too many ill-chosen ellipses, and makes reference to facts not included in the film – in such a scene, Sam evokes the Elves as he does (at the same point) in Tolkien's book, but these have not yet been mentioned in the movie. Relationship between characters are illogical: thus Butterbur, who initially is being critical of Strider, begs him for protection and then returns to criticizing him again, these changes of heart occurring in the space of a few moments. And there is, of course, the moment when the film comes to its sudden and unexpected end at middle course in the book, after the battle at Helm's Deep (III, 7) and before Frodo and Sam make it to Shelob's Lair (IV, 9). Making an animated film out of this story was an audacious and problematic choice, hence the need to avoid childishness with all the more precautions;[17] yet the Orcs are totally ridiculous, the facial expressions silly. Most notable is the sojourn in Lórien, where the screenwriters have felt the need to invent some novel activities, such as the picking of flowers, which seems incongruous to say the least.

Here we see all that Peter Jackson has successfully avoided, and achieved in his 'Fellowship of the Ring'.. In many ways, he follows closely the spirit of *The Lord of the Rings*, if not the letter. So it is with coherence and believability, two essential qualities[18] of the adult 'fairy-story' as outlined by Tolkien in his essay: Jackson wished for the suspension of the viewer's disbelief – to resort to the famous phrase by Coleridge, picked up by Tolkien –, and the representation the director proposes, especially with the collaboration of renowned illustrators John Howe and Alan Lee as conceptual artists, seems convincing, inviting the viewer to 'penetrate' the secondary world even more forcefully, perhaps, than a tale could.

Jackson is also successful with compensation and displacement: it is probable that the extensive use of Elvish – indeed greater than in *The Lord of the Rings* – is not aimed at producing some cheap effect, but is a case of using the proper resources of cinema in an attempt to counterbalance the loss of other elements pertaining to Middle-earth. Attention to linguistic portrayal is also sparklingly reflected in the (relative) faithfulness to Tolkien's own dialogues, to the beauty of his writing: from that point of view, the original English version, which features a variety of different accents, is an immense pleasure, all the more so because the actors generally offer good and believable performances, sometimes even uncovering aspects of the book often overlooked – such is the case for Boromir, who comes off with a lot more nuance than the character readers of the book typically remember. Finally, this same complexity can be found in the careful depiction of Frodo's relationship with the Ring, where the ever-growing fascination of the hobbit is made evident, even though some of the simplifications are only too regrettable: so it is that the meaningfulness of a familiar scene, where the Black Rider is drawing near the four hobbits hidden under a tree, is thwarted by Jackson. In the film, it

[17] Another important problem is the change of times: filmgoers of twenty-five years ago were soaked in the atmosphere of the seventies and could perceive what in his 'Lord of the Rings' pertains to Bakshi, director of the celebrated 'Fritz the Cat' (1971), something moviegoers of today arguably cannot relate to.

[18] For an elaboration of this important point, see *Tolkien. Sur les rivages de la Terre du Milieu*, Paris, Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 2001, particularly p. 97ff.

is Sam who prevents Frodo from slipping on the Ring, whereas in Tolkien's original version,[19] the Rider leaves at the very moment Frodo is about to succumb: this is the first telltale sign of a major issue that develops as the story is told, that of chance and of fate. We can appreciate the loss suffered by the film in this apparently insignificant transformation.

What is unfortunate is that this is not the only one; I will now turn successively to the question of focalization and to that of the representation of evil, before touching on Tolkien's play on a 'fiction of authenticity,' so as to emphasize what fundamentally separates film from book.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien chooses to present the story from a hobbit point of view, a story in which Sam and Frodo are established as the main characters. This is clearly seen, for example, in his decision to limit the importance of Aragorn, to postpone the telling of his love story with Arwen until the Appendices, etc. Now Jackson profoundly alters this equilibrium, putting Gandalf and Aragorn to the forefront as the true heroes of the film: one may think of the role assumed by Aragorn at the Council of Elrond or of his help and words of encouragement to the fleeing Frodo at the Breaking of the Fellowship – best left unmentioned is the kitschy scene involving a moonlight kiss between Aragorn and Arwen. Yet we should not be too quick to judge Jackson's aesthetic predilections, and some effects can be attributed to his credit: if the white-haloed apparition of the Elves may seem naïve, it effectively renders the slightly ingenuous wonderment of the hobbits at the sight of these beings out of what they considered to be legend.

More problematic is the representation of Evil. The in-frame appearance of Sauron during the Prologue allows the viewer to make a better assessment of what is at stake in the 'Quest' of the Ring, but this faithful depiction of an episode from the *Silmarillion* is at odds with an essential trait of *The Lord of the Rings*, where the past is evoked on numerous occasions (tales of Eärendil, Beren and Lúthien, etc.) but never actually shown, and where the incarnation of Evil is never seen. That the title character of the book (the 'Lord of the Rings') remains invisible is indeed a *coup de force*! Aside from achieving indisputable narrative success, Tolkien is here pondering the relationship between man and 'monster,' his enemy, in a kind of brilliant rewriting of *Beowulf* – he has studied the poem in this perspective –, thereby escaping Manichean dichotomies by suggesting (to put it simply) that 'evil' does not lie so much in one character than in all of them at once, most of whom experience moments of weakness, sometimes irremediably so: one may think of Gollum, Boromir and Denethor, but also of Frodo, Gandalf and Galadriel. Unfortunately, Peter Jackson trips a second time and founders in Manichean over-simplification by making too much out of Saruman, that is a mere replica of Sauron who is seen mustering his armies and making use of magic (whereas magic, on the contrary, has a complex status in Tolkien's works) to prevent the Company from crossing the Caradhras, or to fight it out with Gandalf in an extremely questionable scene.

Finally, it is important to note that Tolkien's play on a 'fiction of authenticity' has completely vanished from the film, as it was originally released and seen by millions of viewers. While *The Lord of the Rings* underlines the believability and historical aspect of the tale, it also clearly states its own nature as a book by emphasizing the writing of the

[19] *The Lord of the Rings*, London, HarperCollins, 1995, p. 73.

Red Book (as 'the book within the book', a *mise en abyme*) and providing numerous hints that characterize the tale as a *history*. I have cited elsewhere[20] as an example the passage in the Prologue ('Concerning Pipe-weed') reproducing one of Merry's texts on the origins of tobacco in the Shire, a text 'quoted' by Merry himself hundreds of pages after (during the meeting with Théoden in Isengard): 'It was Tobold Hornblower, of Longbottom in the Southfarthing, who first grew the true pipe-weed in his gardens, about the year 1070 […][21].' This sentence, appearing in the midst of the tale, has been encountered before by the reader, but it will not actually be set to paper (by Merry) until much later! Now the deletion of the Prologue (and that, now forthcoming, of the Appendices?), in which the narrator introduces the readers to the hobbits' universe, was far from inevitable, on the contrary; the choice of replacing it with an *account* of the battle against Sauron is significant, insofar as Peter Jackson sacrifices an essential element of the literary *device* for the sake of a narrative passage – it is a good thing that the "extended version" of the film, on dvd, corrects this awkward choice.

I might as well speak of what in my opinion is the most unengaging aspect of this movie, and that is the music by Howard Shore: sometimes it is so jarringly emphatic that the whole scene is dragged down into pomposity and slushiness. It is also regrettable that a book in which a slow pace and a contemplative quality are essential should be transformed into an action movie (compared to a video game in certain quarters for its succession of unexpected turns) where all that does not directly forward the main plot is set aside, for there is more to *The Lord of the Rings* than its *story*; it is regrettable that more cannot be present (or felt) of the more enigmatic side of this work, constantly hinting at a world wider than the characters can see, at a past only guessed at, and leaving a trail of unanswered questions (Bombadil, the fate of our heroes after the tale has ended), masterfully suggesting the passage of time and a sense historical depth. But 'suggestion' is probably incompatible with the choice of cinematographic means such as those available to Peter Jackson.

In the end, the fairest 'adaptation' of *The Lord of the Rings* may be a quasi-contemporary film, which admittedly has nothing to do objectively with J.R.R. Tolkien's work. This film tells the story of a man on the verge of death who may try to elude this fate; a man who must *choose* to act or to resign himself to it, as his companions did; who must clear-mindedly choose the moment and course of action. The film poses essential questions: must what befalls us necessarily happen to us? Can we alter what seems to be our 'fate'? Must rebellion be solitary, or can we rely on someone else's support (without which, in the end, we would not succeed)? This detour serves to highlight what thematically (the question of courage, of death) and technically (focalization, duration) are weak points in Jackson's work.

The name of this film? 'A Man Escaped' ('The Wind Bloweth Where It Listeth') by Robert Bresson, 1957.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 106.
[21] *The Lord of the Rings*, *op. cit.*, p. 544.