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Spirituality and Fan Culture around the *Lord of the Rings* Film Trilogy

Introduction: A Fantastic Re-enchantment of the World?

On Christmas of 2006, the Catholic broadcaster on Dutch public television, KRO, screened the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy on prime time, three nights in a row¹. The airing of this fantasy trilogy on the most important Christian holiday illustrates the typical twenty-first century take on spirituality and religion. The focal point of a Christian celebration (along, of course, with the joint family dinner) was a fantasy story depicting a world populated by elves, dwarves, and wizards, composed of fragments of Norse and Germanic mythology, Christian elements, European history, New Zealand nature, British nostalgia, Hollywood conventions, and much more. Indeed, to many viewers of this globally successful blockbuster trilogy, watching *The Lord of the Rings* is a spiritual experience, Christian or otherwise.

The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is not just a visual spectacle but also a multi-layered narrative: it deals with the battle between good and evil, loyal friends, true heroes, vile villains, and as such is a traditional fantasy fairy-tale. But the story also involves supernatural powers, spiritual moments, fate, redemption, self-sacrifice, self-fulfilment, and, at the end (after all, Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic) the Return of the King. The KRO's choice to air these films on Christmas, therefore, was more than strategic programming of a film fit for the entire family on a family holiday. The *Lord of the Rings* speaks to modern-day spirituality, which has to some extent replaced traditional organized religion. The trilogy's worldwide success reveals the importance of popular culture for the display and construction of this contemporary spirituality. Even though the majority of Dutch viewers may not have gone to church on Christmas Eve or morn, they still could have their spiritual moment at home, in front of their television.

A century after Max Weber, in 1905, announced the disenchantment of the world², we seem to witness quite the opposite: a highly mediated re-enchantment of the world. New forms of spirituality, drawing on traditional Christianity as well as many other sources, flourish, and appear to partly replace tradition-organized

¹ The Dutch public broadcasting system is still based on the arguably outdated pillorized societal structure along ideological and religious lines (e.g. socialist, liberal, Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, progressive).

² Weber, Max: *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* [1905]. Tübingen 1934.

religion³. The worldwide success of blockbusters with spiritual leanings, such as *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003), *Harry Potter* (2001–2008), *The Chronicles of Narnia* (2005), or *The Matrix* trilogy (1999–2003), is emblematic of this re-enchantment process. These films deal with spiritual and religious themes in the guise of Hollywood fantasy entertainment.

In this article, we will analyze spiritual readings and interpretations of the *Lord of the Rings*: what spiritual themes do viewers discern in this film, and how do they relate to them? For this analysis, we will use the Dutch results of a large international comparative project on the third part of the film, *The Return of the King*⁴.

The "Lord of the Rings" project

The *Lord of the Rings* project, initiated in 2003 by Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs from Aberystwyth University in Wales, is a large-scale international comparative research project on the launch and reception of the third episode of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Return of the King*. Since the first two episodes of the trilogy had been such a worldwide success, the launch of the third part provided a unique opportunity to study the worldwide responses to a global blockbuster movie. Persons from over 150 different countries filled out an online questionnaire about the appreciation and interpretation of the film. Research teams in various countries interviewed people who had filled out the questionnaire; and analyzed the film's promotion and merchandise. The global dataset of the *Lord of the Rings* project has 24,747 valid responses⁵. These revealed much of the variety of reactions the film provoked among viewers around the world: respondents ranged from people who saw the film primarily as an action or special effects

³ Aupers, Stef: *In de ban van moderniteit. De sacralisering van het zelf en computertechnologie*. Amsterdam 2004; id./van Otterloo, Anneke: *New Age. Een godsdiensthistorische en sociologische benadering*. Kampen 2000; Donk, W.B.H.J. van de/Jonkers, A.P./Kronjee, G.J./Plum, R.J.J.: *Geloven in het Publieke Domein. Verkenningen van een Dubbele Transformatie*. Amsterdam 2006; Hanegraaff, Wouter: *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Leiden 1996; Heelas, Paul: *The New Age Movement. The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*. Oxford 1996.

⁴ The Dutch research was done in conjunction with a group of students of communication science at the University of Amsterdam. We are grateful to Monique van Bracht, Tisha Eetgerink, Sabine Englander, Arlette de Haas and Pauline van Romondt Vis for their enthusiastic participation in this project. We want to thank in particular Sabine Englander and Pauline van Romondt Vis, whose interview data we have used for this article.

⁵ See Barker, Martin/Mathijs, Ernest (eds.): *Watching The Lord of the Rings*. New York 2007 (forthcoming); Barker, Martin/Egan, Kate: *Rings around the World. Notes on the Challenges, Problems & Possibilities of International Audience Projects*. In: *Participations* 3,2 (2006) (http://www.participations.org/volume%203/issue%202%20-%20special/3_02_eganbarker.htm [last date of access June 6, 2007]); Biltereyst, Daniel/Kuipers, Giselinde: *Mondiale Beeldcultuur. Lancering, Hype en Receptie van de Blockbuster "The Lord of the Rings – The Return of the King"*. In: *Tijdschrift voor Communicatiewetenschap* 34,1 (2006) 2–6.

movie, to die-hard fans who had read all books many times, before seeing the film for the first time, and those who focused mostly on the romantic storylines⁶. However, a significant proportion of the respondents in the international dataset viewed the film primarily as a spiritual experience.

In the Netherlands, 3,275 people filled out the questionnaire. Research teams at the Universities of Amsterdam and Utrecht organized interviews with people who had filled out the questionnaire. A total of 52 interviews were carried out for this project, 25 of which were concerned mostly with the way fans of the film experienced the films. In this article, we will limit ourselves mainly to the results of the research in the Netherlands, using both the survey responses and the 25 interviews, to analyze the ways in which the films spoke to people's spirituality.

Tolkien and Modern Spirituality

J.J.R. Tolkien (1892–1973) wrote *The Hobbit* in 1937. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was published in 1954, and has become a tremendous success. Set in the fictional world of Middle-Earth, the trilogy describes the quest of a young hobbit, Frodo Baggins, to destroy the One Ring, a powerful ring made for Sauron, the dark lord of Mordor. Supported by his friends ('the fellowship of the ring'), and most notably his servant Samwise Gamgee, Frodo manages to destroy the ring by throwing it in the fires of Mount Doom, in which the ring was welded. However, the destruction of the ring also means the end of the Third Age of Middle-Earth, in which elves, dwarves, humans, hobbits, and other creatures lived together, and the beginning of the Age of Man. The story ends with the departure of the elves across the sea, and the return of the lost king of men, Aragorn.

Tolkien's books were soon incorporated in the counterculture of the 1960's, and into the New Age culture, which was, at least initially, closely connected with its emergence. Tolkien himself, though, was a rather old-fashioned Oxford don and not very sympathetic to this counterculture: his anti-modernism was of the more traditional kind, and he himself was a staunch Catholic. However, the anti-modern themes of the books, the omnipresence of magic in Tolkien's world, the glorification of nature and purity, resonated well with some of the main themes in these subcultures: alienation from modern world, a focus on nature, community, and the quest for personal fulfilment. In the wake of the counterculture of the 1960's, Dutch author Mellie Uyldeert published a book on the symbolism in *The Lord of the Rings*, explaining how our modern mediated world is deeply corrupted, for example:

⁶ cf. Kuipers, Giselinde/de Kloet, Jeroen: Global Flows and Local Identifications? The Lord of the Rings and the Cross-national Reception of Characters and Genres. In: Barker/Mathijs (above, note 5).

"The deception of the soul is there again [...]. Sauron's power aims to take away the greatest treasure of Western man, his Self, by drugs [...]. Refuse to watch TV, do not read any newspaper or magazine, they are made by Sauron's servants!"⁷

Another illustration of the way Tolkien's work was incorporated into the – increasingly mainstream – New Age subculture comes from a spiritual community in the North of the Netherlands called the Hobbitstee (the Dutch name for Hobbiton). On their website, the philosophy of this community is explained, and explicitly linked both to the world of Tolkien and to spirituality:

"The Hobbitstee (Hobbiton) stands for 35 years of connectedness with humanity and the environment. Therefore, it is not just through the books of Tolkien, in which mystery attempts to ground itself in reality ['waarin mysterie met beide benen op de grond probeert te staan'] that Hobbitstee is a phenomenon. No, it is also a piece of history dating back to 1969, of challenge and renewal in beautiful surroundings and the unlimited 3.5 hectares of land within it. The Hobbitstee as a phenomenon; maybe even through the other pillar. Of the philosophy, the ideals, the people, the hobbits. Flowing along in life, in your uniqueness, against the flow. Dream and reality as nourishing paradox. Nourishment to persist into the present, even now, after over 35 years of 'resistance in time of peace'. The basis of consuming less ['consuminderen'], spirituality, sustainability, personal growth and social commitment, is more salient than ever in this time, in which free market dogmatism declares the whole world a showcase for self satisfaction."⁸

In this community, Tolkien's world, described as a world where 'mystery is grounded in reality', is clearly the inspiration for a specific lifestyle.

This lifestyle is typical of New Age spirituality, typified by Aupers as the 'sacralization of the self'⁹. In New Age, the focus is on personal growth, which is felt to be limited by institutions and the rationality of the modern world. In contrast with more traditional religions, spirituality is located within the person, not in another world, or an external being. In other words: spirituality is immanent rather than transcendent. In his book, Aupers explores the interesting paradox that such spirituality is currently also sought within technology, such as computer games¹⁰. And we might add: it is also experienced in a strongly computerized special effects blockbuster rendering of a pure pre-modern 'natural' world.

Since the 1960's, New Age spirituality has moved to the cultural mainstream. In a 2006 report on the religion of the Dutch¹¹, 26% of the Dutch population was described as spiritual without any particular religious affiliation¹². The authors

⁷ Uyldert, Mellie: *Symboliek van Tolkien's In de Ban van de Ring*. Deventer 1974, 28.

⁸ See http://www.leefgemeenschapdehobbitstee.nl/wat_is/wat_is1.html (last access May 3, 2007).

⁹ cf. Aupers (above, note 3); Heelas (above, note 3); Aupers/van Otterloo (above, note 3); Hanegraaff (above, note 3).

¹⁰ cf. Aupers (above, note 3).

¹¹ cf. van de Donk et al. (above, note 3).

¹² Kronjee, Gerrit/Lampert, Martijn: *Leefstijlen en Zingeving*. In: van de Donk et al. (above, note 3) 176.

characterize this group as: not bound to organized religion, yet with a strong orientation towards the transcendental, and a more than average knowledge of, and interest in esoteric matters. They generally have a belief in a higher world (the paranormal, spiritual beings, reincarnation), and attach great value to intuition, personal growth, originality, harmony, and a connection with nature. Moreover, in contrast with other people without formal religious affiliations, they have a strong moral orientation¹³. This emergence of a personalized religious experience outside of traditional institutions suggests that the rise of modernity has not, as Weber expected, led to the disenchantment of the world¹⁴, but rather a de-institutionalization of religion. People now look for spiritual experiences outside of the church. One of the places where they seek for such experiences is in popular culture.

'The Lord of the Rings' and Fandom

The overall average appreciation of the movie, both in the world data set and among Dutch respondents is very high, 1.34 on a 5 point scale (with 1 = like it very much; and 5 = did not like it at all). The average appreciation for the world sample was 1.40 on the same scale. Since all informants have voluntarily filled out an extensive survey this high valuation is not a great surprise: it seems justified to read the *Lord of the Rings* project as a study of global fans, or at least lovers, of the trilogy, rather than of the average film viewer. The interview data we use for this study are based on interviews with Dutch LotR fans. Before exploring their spiritual readings of the trilogy, it is important to try to understand the cultural phenomenon of fandom.

In particular in popular discourse, fans are regularly accused of having silly pleasures, of leading vicarious lives and losing their mind over their idols or favourite films. Such pathologizing notions of fandom have dominated public discourse in which fans are portrayed, according to Jenson¹⁵, as either the obsessive individual (those who view the movies, say, more than twenty times) or the hysterical crowd (the 'bewildered' audience of, for example, Robbie Williams). Fans are conscious of this pathologizing discourse, and often disidentify with the label fan itself, or try to debunk the discourse. One respondent explained she liked being part of the Tolkien fan community Unquendor as it made her feel 'not that abnormal'. The contacts with the fan community helped her to overcome the embarrassment of being a fan, she now 'feels less ashamed'.

¹³ cf. *ibid.*, 185–188.

¹⁴ cf. Heelas (above, note 3).

¹⁵ Jenson, Joli: Fandom as Pathology. The Consequences of Characterization. In: *The Adoring Audience. Fan Culture and Popular Media*. ed. Lisa Lewis. London 1992, 9–29.

Also in academic discourse, a substantial body of literature¹⁶ has debunked the pathologizing discourse, arguing that this discourse is not only patronizing fans but also serves hegemonic interests in validating 'high' culture at the expense of popular culture (neither the collector of Mozart nor the scholar who devotes his or her career to a singular topic are likely to be labelled fans). But, as Hills also observes, the more important issue is not whether fandom is 'good' or 'bad', but to explore "*what fandom does culturally*"¹⁷. According to Jenkins, fandom concerns a particular mode of reception. "Fan viewers watch television texts with close and undivided attention, with a mixture of emotional proximity and critical distance."¹⁸ Reception involves fierce discussion with others over the text, up to the level of textual production. Dutch fans of *The Lord of the Rings* do not only gather every month in a special tavern; they also develop new story lines, learn and develop the languages invented by Tolkien and dress up as hobbits, elves and orcs to engage in role playing games in Dutch forests¹⁹. In the words of Haaksma, a fan:

"We write a kind of fan-fiction, with ourselves as main character. You create an alter-ego for yourself that gets a part in the story. At first, I was part of the war for the ring. Later I also started to write stories on the background of *Lord of the Rings*."

Fandom also "involves a particular set of critical and interpretive practices"²⁰. Becoming a fan implies becoming accustomed with the preferred reading within the fan community, to become skilful in including playful references to the text and to establish links between one's own life and the text. Fans of the trilogy engage in critical comparison between the movie and the books, like Haaksma, who explains:

"During *The Two Towers*, Aragorn claimed to be 87, but then I thought, that is not correct! It was three days after his birthday, he was 88. I like this a lot, to look for mistakes in the movie."

As explained earlier, fandom also functions as an alternative social community. Fans like Haaksma indicate that they feel misunderstood in their normal social life. Being part of a fan community helps to negate that feeling. Faas explains how she cried at the end of the movie along with other fans:

"At the end of the movie, they play 'Into the West' from Annie Lennox, the lights turn on, and you see the other fans from Unquendor ... The moment you look at one

¹⁶ Most notably Jenkins, Henry: *Textual Poachers. Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. London 1992; Fiske, John: *The Cultural Economy of Fandom*. In: Lewis (above, note 15) 30–42; cf. Jenson (above, note 15).

¹⁷ Hills, Matt: *Fan Cultures*. London 2002, xii (his italics).

¹⁸ Jenkins (above, note 16) 277f.

¹⁹ Van Romondt Vis, Pauline: *In de Ban van de Ring. Een onderzoek naar fans van 'The Lord of the Rings'*. M.A. thesis Amsterdam 2005.

²⁰ Jenkins (above, note 16) 278.

another, tears arise ... ‘Wasn’t that beautiful’. And then we cry ... yes, then it really started ...”

Fandom thus constitutes a particular set of critical and interpretive practices and produces an alternative social community, both of which facilitate a spiritual reading of the trilogy. But what are the spiritual readings fans derive from *The Lord of the Rings*?

Spiritual Readings in the World Data Set

As mentioned above, variations in appreciation of the film were relatively small, both in the international and in the Dutch data sets: appreciation was very high in all national samples. Even though cross-national differences are statistically significant, overall appreciation is so high that these differences may not be very meaningful. However, readings of the film vary significantly across the data set, as is apparent, for instance, from the answers to the genre ascriptions. The questionnaire measured the ascription of genre, or ‘modality’ by asking the following question: “What sort of story is *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* according to you?” Respondents could choose a maximum of three options from the following list: allegory; epic; fantasy; fairy tale; game world; good vs. evil; myth; quest; special effects; spiritual journey; threatened homeland; war story. Worldwide, the label ‘epic’ was the label chosen most often, which is not very surprising since this is also the label that was used in the marketing of the film: “The epic continues ...” For the purpose of this article, we are mainly interested in the people who interpreted the film as ‘spiritual journey’. Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents selecting this particular description of the film.

Table 1. National variations in percentage of respondents interpreting LotR as ‘spiritual journey’.

Country	% selecting spiritual journey	N	% of respondents
Mexico	32.4%	142	.6%
UK	31.6%	4744	19.2%
Malaysia	31.4%	118	.5%
Chile	31.3%	224	.9%
New Zealand	29.5%	156	.6%
China	29.4%	1087	4.4%
Canada	29.1%	485	2.0%
Argentina	29.0%	124	.5%
Australia	28.1%	551	2.2%
Greece	24.6%	500	2.0%
Sweden	24.3%	148	.6%
USA	24.2%	3065	12.4%

Colombia	22.7%	194	.8%
Austria	21.1%	114	.5%
Spain	20.9%	1564	6.3%
Belgium	20.8%	1379	5.6%
Norway	20.6%	296	1.2%
Turkey	20.4%	334	1.3%
France	19.7%	649	2.6%
Italy	17.0%	483	2.0%
Slovenia	14.4%	966	3.9%
Denmark	14.0%	1677	6.8%
Netherlands	12.7%	3275	13.2%
Germany	11.1%	1161	4.7%
Other		1311	5.3%
Total	22.2%	24,747	100%

As is apparent from Table 1, spiritual readings of the film were rather common, at least in this sample of film lovers: they were chosen by 22.2 % of the respondents, with strong national differences. A spiritual interpretation of the film was least prevalent in Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Slovenia, and most prevalent in the United Kingdom, Chile, Mexico and Malaysia. In this article, we will not make an attempt to interpret these national differences²¹. Instead, we will limit ourselves to the analysis of spiritual reading of the film in the Netherlands.

The low percentage in the Netherlands is probably the result of the composition of the national samples as much as of 'national character': the Dutch data set is relatively large, and thus includes a fair number of 'mild' enthusiasts or 'blockbuster fans'²², whereas the smaller samples tend to have a larger proportion of serious fans, including the spiritually inclined. On the whole, people who chose the label 'spiritual journey' appreciated the film significantly more, and indicated that it was more important to them to see the film (both these findings are statistically significant in the Dutch and the international data set).

Of the 3,275 Dutch who filled out the questionnaire, 416 persons or 12.7% chose the label 'spiritual journey'. There was a significant gender difference: of the female respondents 16.0 % chose this label, against only 9.7% of the male respondents. Moreover, people interpreting the film as spiritual journey were, on an average, older than people who chose other labels. People who saw the film as a

²¹ See de Kloet, Jeroen/Kuipers, Giselinde: Banaal kosmopolitisme en The Lord of the Rings. Over de conceptualisering van de natiestaat in vergelijkend communicatiewetenschappelijk onderzoek. In: Tijdschrift voor Communicatiewetenschap 34,1 (2006) 88–110; cf. Kuipers/de Kloet (above, note 6).

²² Meers, Philippe: Fandom en Blockbusters. Aanzet tot een typologie van Lord of the Rings-fans. In: Tijdschrift voor Communicatiewetenschap 34,1 (2006) 69–87.

spiritual journey also tended to consider it as an allegory. They were equally likely as other respondents to interpret the film as myth or story about a threatened homeland, and less likely than others to interpret it as epic, fairy tale, fantasy, quest, story about good vs. evil, war movie, or special effects film. This would suggest that these respondents tended to favour more 'serious' or symbolic interpretations of the film, as opposed to more unrealistic or entertaining interpretations favoured by others.

The favourite character of the latter group was most likely to be Aragorn, the returning king mentioned in the title (25.7%), as was the case with all Dutch respondents. However, people with a spiritual reading were more likely to choose Frodo, the ring-bearer (18% of this group, against 11.3 among all respondents) and much less likely to mention the ambiguous character Gollum/Smeagol (5% against 10.7). They also were much more likely to name the elvish leaders Elrond and Galadriel as their favourite, but, interestingly, not the 'humanized' elf Legolas.

Spiritual Repertoires in the Appreciation of 'The Lord of the Rings'

In the next section(s), we will take a more detailed look at the spiritual interpretation(s) of *The Lord of the Rings* by Dutch fans. For this, we will use two different sources: the open answers in the Dutch web survey, given by people who chose 'spiritual journey'; and twenty-five in-depth interviews with people who filled out the web survey, and who are fan of the films/books.

First, we did a repertoire analysis of the themes in responses that were given by people who saw the film as a spiritual journey to open questions in the web survey. Repertoires are recurring discursive patterns in the discourse of respondents. Repertoires may overlap and contradict, as Potter and Wetherell explain²³: "Inconsistencies and differences in discourse are differences between relatively internally consistent, bounded language units which we have called [...] interpretative repertoires. [...] Repertoires can be seen as the building blocks speakers use for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes and other phenomena."²⁴

This analysis resulted in five repertoires that were important to these 'spiritual' fans: morality, friendship, experience of another world, religiosity/religious interpretation of the film, and spiritual self/personal growth. Afterwards, we coded the twenty-five open interviews for these themes. It is important to note again that the spiritual interpretation of the film is a minority reading of the film: even amongst fans, other interpretations are more dominant (e.g. the reading focusing on factual knowledge of Tolkien's world, a more romanticized 'fairy-tale' reading, the inter-

²³ Potter, Jonathan/Wetherell, Margaret: Rhetoric and Ideology. Discourse Analysis and the Identification of Interpretative Repertoires. In: *Analysing Everyday Explanation. A Casebook of Methods*. ed. Charles Antaki. London 1988, 168–183, here 172.

²⁴ See also Gilbert, G. Nigel/Mulkay, Michael: *Opening Pandora's Box. A Sociological Analysis of Scientists' Discourse*. Cambridge 1984; Hermes, Joke: *Reading Women's Magazines. An Analysis of Everyday Media Use*. Cambridge 1995.

pretation as an exciting action movie, etc.). Therefore, the five themes were not present in all of the twenty-five interviews. On the whole, we would say that of the twenty-five interviewees, eight completely subscribed to the spiritual reading, and no trace of such reading could be found in five of the twenty-five interviews. In the remainder, the spiritual themes were present alongside others. We will now briefly describe each of the five repertoires as they were found in the responses to the survey and the fan interviews.

Morality

The survey responses of the 'spiritual viewers' were remarkably emotional in tone. When asked to summarize their reaction to the film, they would often describe it as 'very emotional', 'impressive', 'overwhelming', 'breathtaking' and 'magical'. Many of the responses referred to the strong affective effects of the film: crying, goose bumps, sadness and a sense of loss when the film was over. Clearly, these spiritual viewers feel a very strong involvement and commitment with the film (as well as with the books, which they mentioned often in their responses). Even in the rather short comments people made to describe their responses to the film, morality and a moral interpretation of the film was often very prominent:

"Everything comes together. All motives that play a part in the human mind. All life's struggles death, destruction of nature, the constant battle against the powers of evil. But also the beautiful good side of life comes across in the film."

"A story about the norms and values of today."

"A story about courage, faith, love and sacrificing everything for each other and the entire world. Wonderful, very emotional. If only the world we live in would be like this for ten per cent that it would be much better for all of us!"

What these responses show is that this morality is immediately projected on the 'real' world. Spiritual viewers tend to see the film not as a story about a fantasy world that has nothing to do with everyday life, but rather as a story that has implications for the real world, or, as in the last quote, that is contrasted with this real world. This morality may be connected with the general theme of the struggle between good and evil, but also more specific moral themes such as friendship and sacrifice, the pursuit of the common good, and the fulfilment of one's goal and destiny.

In one key scene in the second part of the trilogy, *The Two Towers*, Sam has just rescued Frodo from the Nazgul. Frodo is about to kill Sam, blinded by the evil power of the ring, but regains his innocent self just on time. Sam compares their journey to the stories he heard when he was a child, in which the perseverance of the character leads to a moral victory, he explains:

Sam: "I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going because they were holding on to something."

Frodo: "What are we holding onto, Sam?"

Sam: "That there's some good in this world, Mr. Frodo. And it's worth fighting for."

The moral repertoire emerged, more elaborately, in the interviews. Sometimes these moral readings of the film were concerned with society, for example:

"I have the feeling we live in a society now that is in a critical area. In terms of the environment, pollution, the weapons people have at their disposition. How you can just destroy yourself. And that you would have to get the whole society to understand this. That would be the quest for this society, I think. That's how I see it. And for that reason I also see a parallel with *The Lord of the Rings*."

Interviewer: "That both of the worlds have some sort of quest?"

"Yes. [...] In *The Lord of the Rings* it is very clear, all these characters have a common goal and a common world view. There is something like an elf, it is of course all very fairytale-like, but it is all very, what I said, there is a common set of norms and values [...]. In this world, in our society, this is much more fragmented, there are countless religions and everybody believes something different, or nothing at all, everybody has very different goals, a huge difference between rich and poor, between the haves and the have-nots, and it is very hard to say that people have a common goal or common values. That is something attractive about this world, of course it is also very simplistic: it just can't be but it's attractive. [...] And I also think in our society technology is so pervasive. But also alienating. The Internet is wonderful, but it also causes people to communicate from a distance, which has a sort of alienating effect from people. [...] While you can communicate much more, the way in which you do it is much more distant [...] and much more real." (David)

"It's exactly the non-realism, for instance, in LotR it's about elves and hobbits and they don't really exist in our world, but because it is not limited to the rules of real life, it can show more about how real life works. [...] For instance, you could draw a parallel between Sam, who drags along Frodo to the mountain when he cannot go on anymore. That could be a parallel with war heroes saving their friends, or saving the war. But also on a smaller scale, the friendship of the elf and the dwarf, Legolas and Gimli, which becomes stronger and stronger and is unusual even for them. [...] That could be a symbol for racial hatred. And I suppose it is." (Joy)

But more often, the moral implications of the film were on the level of personal, rather than societal, morality:

"Well, for example, the lust for this ring. I think there is always something in someone's life he really wants to have that is not good for him. And a person knows that, but the attraction of this ring is simply too big. [...] Smeagol really was a horrible beast and still you could understand very well it had been a human being because it was at battle with itself all the time. It was struggle because of what it wanted and it knew it wasn't good for him." (Rinske)

[His favorite character is Boromir because] "his character in the film was, I thought, simply very human. His character flaw: wanting to make it right, while knowing better than that. He is a very strong person. This perseverance in what you do. [...] I am a karateka myself, and there you encounter, well not such big fights, but you do have the internal struggles, respect for each other. [...] And I see that with Boromir, too. Maybe not as strict as Aragorn, who is the king and has even stricter rules,

but as a knight and an emperor you have this code of honour. [...] In the end, you stand up for each other. You are fighting, and whether this is with a sword, or in thinking, you mustn't walk away from the situation." (Alexander)

"But apart from that it's a world, as I said, where good and evil are clearly separated, while that isn't the case here. Where you will still say, right, you could take this decision at a particular moment, but then you run into another decision, too, which is much more linked with this interconnectedness of good and evil, while when you know what is right and what is wrong, then you just take the right decision. But here, the right decision often isn't, let's say, not right at all. That is just very complicated." (Haaksma)

In all of these quotes, the moral implications of the film are directly connected with the moral implications in the 'real world'. In the first and last quote, people express their attraction to the moral clarity of the world in the film, where you know what is right and wrong, and where everyone has common goals. The informants in the other two quotes were more attracted to the ambivalent characters Boromir (a human member of the original 'fellowship of the ring' who is tempted by the ring's power, but redeems himself by dying bravely to save his fellow's lives) and Smeagol (a former ringbearer, broken and corrupted by the power of the ring, who is torn between the good and bad forces within himself). Both are characters vexed by moral matters, both choose wrongly, and both end up paying for this with their lives.

Friendship and faith

The second repertoire emerging from the analysis of the survey responses was the importance of friendship, faith, and loyalty. Obviously, this is a highly moral theme, and thus strongly connected with the previous repertoire. Many of the spiritual viewers mentioned friendship in their first response to the film, often in brief comments like "suspense, disbelief, friendship", "shows perfectly what friendship means", "timeless story about good vs. evil friendship, love, hope in dark times". Or more elaborate:

"I was crying a lot; the adventures and things that are happening are very touching. The feelings that the characters have, are very well performed and there is great working together to stop every problem they can find; this is how friendship should be."

"For me it's about love, beauty, friendship, and real heroes. About beautiful nature and respect for it. I don't like the battles and the ugly enemies."

Even more than the moral reading of the film, this is an interpretation that clearly moves away from the action, war, battles, and special effects that make up such a large part of *The Return of the King*. This interpretation focuses instead on interpersonal relations, and most specifically on the difficult voyage of Frodo and his friend Sam.

One important scene in the third episode – *The Return of the King* – is illustrative for the strong bond between Sam and Frodo. Since Frodo cannot bear the burden of the ring anymore, he collapses. With a highly dramatic soundtrack, Sam declares that although he cannot carry the ring himself, he can carry Frodo. And so he does, carrying Frodo to the doorway of Mount Doom. Also in the closing scene of the second part, Frodo declares he could never hold on to the journey without the support and unconditional loyalty of Sam. Indeed, many of the spiritual viewers mention the friendship of Frodo and Sam as the most memorable or meaningful aspect of the movie:

“For me, the story is mostly about unconditional friendship, most of all between Frodo and Sam. That, to me, was one of the most beautiful things in the book, this unconditional friendship. How they support each other, no matter what happens. Whether things are going well or ahm ... badly. Sam will not let Frodo down. Actually that makes him sort of the hero of the story, Sam.” (Beeten)

Interviewer: “And if you were to say in one word, or a few words, what the story is about for you?”

“Good versus evil is a very clear one. But friendship too. Those would be the main things. And faith, but that is covered with friendship.”

Interviewer: “That is together? For you friendship is also faith?”

“Well, yes, Sam is extremely loyal to Frodo. And that is how I see it, in my experience.” (Beek)

Above, it was noted that people who saw the film as a spiritual journey were more likely to mention Frodo and his servant Sam as their favourite characters. As a matter of fact, Frodo and Sam were often mentioned together in the ‘favourite character’ question, and this is not only because they were together for most of the film, but also because this particular storyline is very much about friendship. It is rather telling that even within this particular storyline, spiritual viewers were less likely than others to like Gollum/Smeagol, even though this character accompanied Frodo and Sam during the entire third part of the film. The focus on friendship and loyalty fits with the reading of the film as a personalized story: it highlights individual development, human relations and moral choices individuals have to face. But moreover, it fits with the film as a story of personal growth, and Gollum, in the end, turns out to be an example of the opposite: someone who struggles against the powers of evil, but cannot withstand them.

Another World

A third repertoire emerging from the survey and the interviews is the longing for another world and the alienation from the present ‘real’ one. For instance, in the survey spiritual viewers described their first response as:

“a unique experience outside of everyday life”.

“It is a film that speaks to every imagination and lets you dream. Certainly now in this world it is a form of flight, but in a positive way.”

"This film pulls you away from this horrible reality and makes you yearn for another world."

This yearning for another world was already visible in some of the 'moral' responses to the film: the moral clarity, the friendship, the fact that everybody was striving toward common goals. In the interviews, this longing was often connected with alienation from everyday life:

"I find this world so dull, I find these people all so boring, but that's not all. It's also that sometimes I have this displaced feeling. I think that's also the reason I study literary history. That is a time I like much better, where I feel much more at ease. I also don't like modern technology much. I was twelve before I could properly handle a computer. 'cause before I was plain scared of the thing [...]. That's the world in which I would like to live." (Haaksma)

"Yes, I have discussed this with my co-workers, they said it's such a vague film, I can't imagine you like it so much, such a world doesn't exist. The first thing I say is: how do you know? Can you say with a hundred per cent certainty that this world doesn't exist? Well, I can't. The way I see it, there might just be such a world, just not in a place where we can see it at this moment. So where would it ... I think maybe in another dimension. But often I don't say that, because people will look at you like 'I think you may have taken one pill too many.' [...] Some of the things said in the film, I find that really, that I think, yes, there is more to life than the eye can see. People should be more aware of the magic in the world, only people won't see it, or aren't conscious of it." (Beeten)

To these people, the film clearly is an escape from a world and people they feel alienated from, to a world that is less dull, more magical. Not all fans are as radical as these two, for others this different world is not necessarily in the past, or in another dimension, but rather in a world of experience and wonder, where the ratio doesn't reach:

"Rationally you know that this world Tolkien has made, that nothing of that is true. That it hasn't really existed and that the continent of Middle-Earth doesn't really exist. But yes, the idea, the feeling it gives you, like, why not? It's only my ratio telling me this, I don't have to listen to that." (Faas)

"It is what I invent, what I would like to exist. You'd best compare it with when I was little. When I would be going to sleep I would think of what would be the nicest of all things, how I would think things would be at their most beautiful. And how I would move there, and what I would do. And how that looks, with colours, and with scents." (Rinske)

This 'other world' involves magic and wonder for many of the viewers, also those who saw the film primarily as a fantasy story²⁵. However, for the spiritual viewers, this 'other world' not only has a moral, but often also a religious dimension.

²⁵ Englander, Sabine: *The Lord of the Rings. Een verbeeldingswereld*. M.A. thesis Amsterdam 2004.

Religiosity

Articulations of the spiritual self and the religious repertoire are closely intertwined. However, as we will show later, the first concerns more specific readings related to the self, whereas the latter refers to more general references to the religious implications of the film and the books. In the survey, respondents referred to Biblical themes such as the battle between good and evil:

“The religious part and the fantasy come together in one’s unconscious battle of good between evil.”

“From the first moment on I was grabbed by the story and its mysticism.”

The elves are closest to God. Nel talks about the female elf Arwen:

“She was mythical in a way, and I felt, divine may not be the right word, but she comes with a certain task, she is sent. She comes to help the good, it is important, and also the way she is visualized is very special, something vague, mythical, dreamlike.”

Niels, too, refers to the elves as religious creatures:

“To me, the elves constitute a sort of religion, but more like the native Indians with ancestors and the like. I think you can compare it with the universe of *Star Wars*. In that movie there are good and evil powers, and both do not come to the fore very much, just like in *Lord of the Rings*.”

More respondents made intertextual references to *Star Wars*, movies with similar religious and spiritual implications (albeit transposed towards an unknown future rather than a mythical past). One respondent, Vincent, refers to the resurrection of Gandalf as a sign of the religious entity that governs the Middle-Earth:

“Somehow, there is kind of a basic God (primeval god). Gandalf returns back to life and is told that new life is given to him. This is for sure a ‘primeval power’, a ‘primeval God’ that gives him new life. The God of Goodness, so to say.”

In the third part of the trilogy, when Gondor’s capital Minas Tirith is under siege, Gandalf explains to Pippin there is no reason for fear:

“No, the journey doesn’t end here. Death is just another path. One that we all must take. The grey rain curtain of this world rolls back and all turns to silver glass. And then you see it. White shores and beyond a far green country under swift sunrise.”

The Biblical themes read into the trilogy are not restricted to the resurrection of Gandalf or the battle between good and evil. According to Faas the trilogy strongly supports the importance of loyalty. She makes a point where the moral, the friendship and the religious repertoires converge:

"If people are into trouble and I can help them in whatever way, I will for sure do so, even if that implies losing something myself. That's also written in the Bible, in the end, you will be rewarded for what you give to others. This is my strong conviction. Here the *Lord of the Rings* and the Bible come very close together, in principle they say the same. [...] Unconditional love for other people, and the moment you need help, they are there for you, that's what I experienced. [...] Indeed, I had to wait long, but you must keep up your faith, keep on trusting the other."

While Gandalf represents good, Sauron and Saruman represent evil, or, in more Biblical terms, Satan:

"Saruman is like Satan. Eeeeh, I am not religious, but I do have an image of Satan [...]. So abstract, that is evil, I believe in that. The most pernicious person of the book is not Sauron, not even his mouth, but it is Saruman." (Ploeg)

Finally, the ring itself is compared by one respondent to the apple of Adam and Eve, in her words:

"The temptation of the ring, the desire to get it, is the source of a lot of evil. This theme is quite like Adam and Eve with the apple from the tree of knowledge." (Wilma)

The religious repertoire thus helps explain the world of Middle-Earth, it provides the respondents with the discursive tools to understand Tolkien's world in quite familiar terms. There may be no Jesus, but there is Gandalf who returns from the death, not Satan but Sauron represents evil, and absolute trust in the good – God – helps to overcome evil. When translated towards the personal level, articulations of the spiritual self become possible.

The Spiritual Self

Following reception theory, viewers and readers integrate media texts into their everyday lives and the construction of their identities. Respondents relate the text to the construction of their own spiritual self. As indicated earlier, we traced this repertoire already in the responses of the survey dataset, like one respondent who wrote:

"Fantasy is inside yourself, and so is Middle-Earth. In other words, you yourself are the earth and everything that lives on it. Middle Earth is your consciousness, your soul, and you will never be able to dissect this. It remains fantasy, and that's why you are alive!"

"I felt like being in touch with a dimension deep inside myself, a dimension that's once existed in this world but has become more and more invisible."

"Everything comes together, all motives that play a role in our mind. All the struggles of life, death, the destruction of nature, the constant fight against evil powers, but also the beautiful aspects of life."

When looking closely at the interviews, we traced quite similar spiritual readings of the trilogy. In particular the elves and the hobbits are important reference points. David, for example, expresses a special liking for Legolas, whose purity he admires:

“It’s almost spiritual, like all elves, their pure character represent ... they are lighter and more honest, they are not necessarily more or less, but their character is very different, a whole different way of life. [...] It gives a feeling there is more in this world than what we see. We actually live in a much larger whole, of which we do not know the boundaries.”

Later in the interview, David explains how the movie relates to the quest of one’s life, this is also where his narrative overlaps strongly with the religious repertoire:

“I must say, I am working on Zen-Buddhism, but that’s not really a religion, it is about searching for what is truly important in your life, in becoming conscious of what motivates you and to discover who you really are. That’s not really a belief anymore, it’s more practice.”

Here he slips from the religious towards the spiritual, the trilogy provides one with practical guidelines for living that helps you find your ‘true self’:

“What I just said about Zen, it is a sort of inner quest for who you are, I really associate that with the movie. Simply finding yourself in a bigger whole, the goal of your life. This is not a simple goal, like making lots of money or owning a big house, but a higher goal, and that also comes back in the movie.”

When asked for an example, he refers to Frodo, who conquers himself to destroy the ring. The spiritual reading involves a debunking of the material, very much like the movies can be read as a celebration of nature, innocence and purity. The innocence of the hobbits, the growth they experience over the trilogy, as well as the purity and outlandishness of the elves come closest to this spiritual reading. More so than the wizard Gandalf does, whose powers are rather clear-cut and remain unchanged over the course of the trilogy. For example in the words of Beeten:

“To me, elves are very wise, they are very close to nature. They really live with nature and have insights we as human beings don’t yet have, this fascinates me enormously. I wish I could have more of an elf.”

And Chang, who at the age of twenty-one cannot work anymore because of his illness, explains how Sam gave him strength:

“I don’t get angry easily, but I really thought, why me? But then I thought, as long as things go well, and you take it as it comes, things may turn out alright, just like with Sam. [...] And from Gandalf I have learnt that you sometimes must make a choice that is negative for the other, but will in the end turn out for the good.”

Personal growth is an important aspect of the spiritual self. This self is something to strive for, rather than something one possesses. Faas explains that, to her, the spiritual is a process rather than an essence, when she talks about Faramir:

"He also overcomes this, so apparently I am not the only one who has to go through all this. For him, it's about other issues, but the principle remains the same. It comforts when you read and know that I am not the only one who has to go through a struggle like that."

The idea of change and process is a recurrent theme in the spiritual repertoire. Respondents frequently refer to the spiritual progress they go through:

"To me this is a story about personal growth, about the steps you need to take to destroy the ways you are conditioned." (Haaksma)

"I will never choose the easy way [...], you won't learn anything from taking the easy way, since you will not encounter obstacles, so you won't learn a thing." (Beeten)

At the same time the trilogy confronts respondents with the choices they feel they should make, but they are not sure of yet:

"One should be far more involved with the important things of life. Sometimes I think I should throw out my television, these are small choices, but important nevertheless. [...] How do you use your time? Yes, that's what I get from the movie." (David)

To summarize, our respondents appropriate *The Lord of the Rings* – both the books and the movies – to articulate the idea of a spiritual self. This idea is considered to be more of a processual rather than an essential character trait, hence the importance of the hobbits who experience a similar journey of spiritual growth. Purity and closeness to nature are the expected destination of this journey, and following the readings of our respondents, in particular the elves come close to that ideal. Their lightness, outlandishness and almost identityless character appeal most to the respondents. The elves are read as the visualization and embodiment of a spiritual self.

Conclusion

The Lord of the Rings' combination of genres generates multiple viewer expectations and readings, including spiritual ones. Our study has explored spiritual readings of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy by fans – a social group that shows a particularly strong involvement with the text. Our study shows that fandom constitutes an active negotiation with, and at least for some fans, spiritual re-enactment of the text. Although not the most popular reading of the movie, still a 22.2% of the worldwide dataset label the trilogy as a spiritual story. Repertoire analysis of the qualitative survey data resulted in five repertoires that were important to the 'spiritual' fans. First, fans often discuss the trilogy in moral terms,

the battle between good and evil and also more specific moral themes such as friendship and sacrifice, the pursuit of the common good, and the fulfilment of one's goal and destiny. The movie was read as a moral lesson for society, but was more often translated towards the self. The second repertoire focused on the friendship theme; in particular the bond between Frodo and Sam was taken as a reminder of the importance of unconditional love and loyalty. The focus on friendship and loyalty fits with the reading of the film as a personalized story: it highlights individual development, human relations and moral choices individuals have to face. A third repertoire emerging from the survey and the interviews is the longing for another world and the alienation from the present 'real' one. Middle-Earth offers an escape from a highly industrialized, bureaucratic world from which respondents feel estranged, it offers a magical and spiritual alternative. It is also a world with religious meanings – in which Gandalf returns to life like Jesus, in which the ring resembles the apple from the tree of knowledge, and in which the elves are considered the most divine creatures. The story, finally, also offers ample symbolic materials to link it to the spiritual self. Personal growth, perseverance and a desire for purity are all elements fans appropriate from the trilogy.

In a time of re-enchantment, popular culture serves as an important visual and narrative toolbox for the display and construction of different repertoires of spirituality. Our study shows how our contemporary highly technologized popular culture – with Hollywood as the ultimate dream factory – feeds into spiritual cultures. The interviews reveal a paradoxical articulation of anti-commercial, anti-technological desires through a very commercial and high-tech Hollywood production. Our study hints at a partial re-enchantment of the world, and shows the important role products like *The Lord of the Rings*, but also other texts like *The Matrix* play. Watching *The Lord of the Rings* is a modern spiritual experience, in particular when televised during the Christmas holidays. Hollywood, indeed, operates as a multiple spiritual dream factory. The re-enchantment of the world is, in other words, underpinned by a marketing logic and deeply embedded in global capitalism.

Abstract

This study explores spiritual readings of the hugely successful *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy based on Tolkien's books. 22.2% of fans in a worldwide dataset, and 12.7% of Dutch viewers experience the trilogy as a spiritual story. Repertoire analysis of the qualitative survey and interview data in the Netherlands resulted in five repertoires that were important to the 'spiritual' fans. First, fans often discuss the trilogy in moral terms. The second repertoire focused on friendship and the importance of unconditional love and loyalty. This fits with the reading of the film as a personalized story: it highlights individual development, human relations and moral choices individuals have to face. A third repertoire emerging from the survey and the interviews is the longing for another world and the alienation from the present 'real' one. Fourth, these respondents tended to speak of Middle-Earth in spiritual and religious terms. The story, in the fifth repertoire, also offers ample symbolic materials to link it to the spiritual self. Personal growth, perseverance and a

desire for purity are all elements fans appropriate from the trilogy. Thus, this study shows how contemporary highly technologized popular culture – with Hollywood as the ultimate dream factory – provides a vehicle for spiritual and religious experiences.

Résumé

La présente étude examine des interprétations spirituelles de la trilogie filmique *Le seigneur des anneaux*, basée sur les livres de Tolkien, dont le succès a été énorme. 22.2% des fans dans un ensemble de données recueillies à niveau mondial et 12.7% des spectateurs néerlandais expérimentent la trilogie comme une histoire spirituelle. Une analyse de répertoire de l'enquête qualitative et des données d'interview relevées dans les Pays-Bas a mis en évidence cinq répertoires chers aux fans «spirituels». D'abord, les fans discutent la trilogie souvent en termes moraux. Le second répertoire porte surtout sur l'amitié et sur l'importance d'amour et de loyauté inconditionnels. Ceci s'accorde avec l'interprétation du film en tant qu'histoire personnalisée: elle souligne le développement individuel, les relations humaines et les choix moraux à faire par les individus. Un troisième répertoire qui se dégage de l'enquête et des interviews est le désir de vivre dans un autre monde et l'aliénation du monde «réel». Quatrièmement, les interrogés avaient tendance à parler de Terre du Milieu en termes spirituels et religieux. Suivant le cinquième répertoire, l'histoire offre aussi suffisamment de matières symboliques qui peuvent être associées avec le moi spirituel. Croissance personnelle, persévérance et un désir de pureté sont tous des éléments que les fans s'approprient à partir de la trilogie. Cette étude montre donc comment la culture populaire contemporaine, fort développée d'un point de vue technologique – avec Hollywood comme hyper-usine à rêves – dispose d'un véhicule pour des expériences spirituelles et religieuses.

Zusammenfassung

Diese Studie befaßt sich mit dem spirituellen Verständnis der nach Tolkiens Fantasy-Romanen gedrehten, äußerst erfolgreichen Filmtrilogie *Der Herr der Ringe* durch die Zuschauer. 22,2% der Fans aus einem weltweiten Kreis von Befragten und 12,7% der Befragten aus den Niederlanden erfahren die Trilogie als eine spirituelle Geschichte. Die Diskursanalyse des qualitativen Überblicks und der Befragungsdaten in den Niederlanden ergab fünf Diskurse, die den ‚spirituellen‘ Anhängern wichtig sind. Als erstes ist zu bemerken, daß die Fans die Trilogie in moralischen Bewertungen besprechen. Der zweite Diskurs richtet sich auf Freundschaft und die Bedeutung bedingungsloser Liebe und Loyalität. Dies paßt zu dem Verständnis des Films als einer personalisierten Geschichte: Sie betont die individuelle Entwicklung, menschliche Beziehungen und die von einzelnen zu treffenden moralischen Entscheidungen. Ein dritter Diskurs, der sich aus der Studie und den Interviews ergibt, ist das Verlangen nach einer anderen Welt und die Entfremdung von der bestehenden, ‚wirklichen‘ Welt. Viertens zeigten die Antwortenden die Neigung, Mitteleerde mit spirituellen und religiösen Vorstellungen zu verbinden. Dem fünften Diskurs zufolge bietet die Geschichte ebenfalls ausreichend symbolisches Material, das dem spirituellen Selbst zugeordnet werden kann. Persönliches Wachstum, Ausdauer und eine Sehnsucht nach Reinheit sind alles Elemente, die die Anhänger der Trilogie schätzen. Somit zeigt diese Studie, wie in der heutigen hochgradig technologisierten populären Kultur – mit Hollywood als ultimativer Traumfabrik – die Populärkultur ein Vehikel für spirituelle und religiöse Erfahrungen darstellt.