

How Bilbo lost his innocence: Media audiences and the evaluation of *The Hobbit* as a ‘Children’s Film’

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Abstract:

The Hobbit (1937) by J. R. R. Tolkien is one of Britain’s, if not one of the world’s, most beloved children’s books. It thus stands to reason that the film adaptation by Peter Jackson (2012-2014) should be similarly beloved as children’s films. Yet indeed, the largest audience study to date, the World Hobbit Project, suggests otherwise. Of all the possible ‘types of film’ that audiences could choose from they were least comfortable with ‘Children’s Story’ and in their qualitative answers described the films as not ‘suitable’ for children. The essay analyzes the historical relation between the categories of ‘Children’s Story’ and the fantasy genre, by contrasting early reviews of the novel with audience reactions from the survey. At the core of the argument are audience expectations of what makes a story appropriate or intended for children and what the genre fantasy deals with. The analysis shows how these two expectations have diverged and now seem to be at odds with each other, clearly marking a shift in the meaning-making process surrounding the genre.

Keywords: *The Hobbit*, Fantasy, Children, Audiences, Genre

When the extended version of *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies* was released on DVD and Blu-ray in November 2015, it was not only remarkable for its length, extending the 144-min theatrical cut by an additional 20 minutes and thus boosting the runtime of all three parts of the film to 532 minutes. Similarly debated was the result those additional minutes had on the overall rating of the film given by the Motion Picture Association of America. Due to the additional content, the rating moved up from PG-13 to R, meaning the film is now restricted to adult audiences of 17 and over. Children or adolescents would need

explicit parental supervision to watch the films. In the United Kingdom, a similar if less drastic adjustment has been made, readjusting the BBFC rating of 12 to 15.

In her fourth essay on the film series, 'A Hobbit is chubby, but is he pleasingly plump?', Kristin Thompson writes about the padding of the third film: In contrast to the two earlier films' materials, which provided 'more conversation and characterization', for *Five Armies*, 'much of the extra footage expanded the already lengthy battle scene'. Thompson concedes that throughout the franchise, including *The Lord of the Rings*, 'the filmmakers have pushed the limits of the rating system, always achieving a hard PG-13 label', but that the extended *Five Armies* had crossed the line, losing its original audience orientation and making it 'something of a betrayal of the fans, especially families, who have fallen in love with this franchise, sharing the films over many years'.

Considering the fact that Tolkien wrote *The Hobbit* as a story to tell his children and explicitly referred to the book as 'a fairy-story; for children' (Carpenter and Tolkien 159), the cinematic version by director Peter Jackson has taken Tolkien's playful adventure tale and moved it into quite a different direction. As Kristin Thompson argues, Jackson 'decided to adapt *The Hobbit* into an adult story with the same sorts of somber moments and terrors that *LOTR* contains'. Nonetheless, *The Hobbit* still pushes the age-appropriate standards of *LOTR* even further, making the films – to take up the somewhat loaded terminology of the rating agencies – 'unsuitable for children'. It seems then, that somewhere along the way, Bilbo has lost his innocence. This article therefore endeavors to shed a light on exactly that loss and the way audiences react to it.

Methodology

As with the other articles in this special section, my analysis starts with the data collected by the World Hobbit Project. As part of the German-Austrian team, consisting of researchers at three universities – Hamburg, Klagenfurt and Salzburg – I mostly use the German-language sample, but contrast my findings with the overall sample. Of the more than 36.000 answers from audiences worldwide, the German-language team managed to contribute close to 5000 answers. The German-language sample is thus the second largest language sample after English.

My particular interest in the project as a whole is the perception of genre and its function within society. This focus is mainly addressed in the survey in a specific set of questions that asked audiences to choose from preset descriptions of 'kinds of film' and situate *The Hobbit* among these. The section asked for positive and negative associations of *The Hobbit* and then gave respondents the option to comment on their choices. Here are the wordings of the questions from the survey:

Question 4: Which of the following come closest to capturing the *kind of films* you feel *The Hobbit* trilogy are? Please choose up to three.

Question 5: Are there any of these that you definitely would *not* choose?

Again, please pick up to three.

Question 6: Can you tell us why you've made these choices?

The options given as preset answers for Q4 and Q5 were as follows:

- Children's story
- Fairytale
- World of fantasy
- Prequel / sequel
- Star attraction
- Part of Tolkien's legend-world
- Multimedia franchise
- Family film
- Digital novelty cinema
- Action-adventure
- Peter Jackson movie
- Literary adaptation
- Stunning locations
- Coming-of-age story
- Hollywood blockbuster

A first review of the raw statistical data easily confirms the trajectory of the films' ratings that Kristin Thompson addresses in her article. Before the extended edition even appeared on the market, audiences worldwide had already judged the films to be problematic for child audiences. In terms of numbers, out of the overall participants (n=36109) only 2.7% found the films to be a 'Children's Story', the lowest rated answer. Closely linked to this is the category 'Family Film' (3.9%), which also includes children as potential viewers. Instead, audiences clearly associated *The Hobbit* with the categories 'World of Fantasy' (63.0%) and 'Part of Tolkien's Legend-World' (61.6%). The numbers for the German-language set (n=4869) are even more pronounced: 'Children's Story' rates at 2.5%, 'Family Film' at 3.5%, whereas 'Part of Tolkien's Legend World' rates at 65.6% and 'World of Fantasy' receives 76.5% of audiences' reactions.

This raw data overview becomes even more telling, when considering the negative association (Q5) and not just the positive one (Q4). The results for what 'kinds of film' audiences felt *The Hobbit* was *not* were more drastic than one would expect. Worldwide, audiences rejected the films as a 'Children's Story' at 60.8%, whereas German-language audiences topped this number significantly with 72.5% of all responses. The rejection of this category is thus drastically higher than any other category; the second highest category ('Coming-of-age Story') rating at 37.4% worldwide disapproval.

These numbers signify a strong audience reaction towards the film's content and form a drastic response of judging an intended audience for the film. The results of the WHP here clearly reveal that audiences do not deem *The Hobbit* to be a 'Children's Story', if not outright claiming the films to be unsuitable for children, as will be explained below. One caveat should be mentioned though: The survey was taken after the trilogy was completed and did not differentiate audience evaluations for the three films. As Thompson's (and other film critics') comments on the battle scenes in the third film indicate, reactions towards the

overall trilogy might have been skewed by closer proximity towards this film, especially given that the survey was timed for the release of *Five Armies*. Nonetheless, the data suggests such a strong reaction, with more than 60% of the audience (over 70% in Germany) rejecting the film as a 'Children's Story', that this cannot solely be attributed to the long battle scene at the end of the third film. In the following, I will expand this notion by adding a more nuanced reading of the qualitative data from question 6.

In terms of methodology, the German-language team has opted for a content analysis of all open-ended questions with the help of a coding system that allows for further quantitative analysis of the coded answers. The system assigns codes to specific audience reactions or answers, e.g. to emotional reactions, to evaluations of the film, to genre, to messages in the film, to community actions and so on. Each answer of an open-ended question is then assigned up to five such codes depending on the content of that answer. The decision to use one overall coding system for all answers has been made due to the great overlap of reactions in different answers. For some aspects of the survey, participants tended not to answer specifically within the limits of the question, but to address issues from across the board in several answers. Coding with one unified system allows for an analysis of specific reactions throughout the whole body of the survey. For example, the emotional reaction of disappointment can be found in answers to an array of questions throughout the survey. Question 9 dealt specifically with audiences' disappointment, but the reaction was also voiced under Question 2, asking for a general response to the film, or Question 21, which addressed the personal background of the respondent. The code '108' assigned to this emotional reaction now allows us to evaluate and analyze how often respondents voiced 'disappointment', no matter where it occurs in the survey. Due to the large amount of data in the German-language set, this is still an ongoing effort.

For the purpose of this essay, the codes assigned to genre are the most relevant; they designate responses mentioning a specific genre and mainly occur in the answers to open-ended Question 6. In an initial step, each genre is assigned three codes, one for positive mention, one for negative mention and one for neutral mention of the genre in the answer. In a more detailed second step, the category 'Children's Story' received a nuanced qualitative coding scheme, which differentiates the reasons for positive or negative mention, thus coding for comparison to the original novel, for violence, for action, for complexity, for boredom and many others. Within the German-language sample, out of the original 3526 answers in Q5 in regards to 'Children's Story', 2510 gave a meaningful commentary in Q6, which provided the source of my qualitative analysis. The results presented here are mainly of this qualitative analysis of reasons that *The Hobbit* is rejected as 'Children's Story', but they are further enhanced and contrasted by a historical perspective of responses that the original novel received and the criticism leveled against Tolkien's writing in general. It is important to note though, that all following quantitative results and percentages will be in reference to the full German-language sample (n=4869).

Early Reception of Tolkien's *The Hobbit*

When *The Hobbit* was first published, Allen & Unwin advertised the book as follows:

An unusual children's book of adventure [..., which] will appeal not only to children, but to all those interested in the fairy story as a branch of literature [...]. J. R. R. Tolkien is an Oxford Professor, and he wrote this book for the amusement of his children; another university professor was as shy as Professor Tolkien about the publication of a book which afterwards became world-famous – 'ALICE IN WONDERLAND'. We believe that, in a similar manner, there will soon arise a clamour for HOBBITS. (cit. in Anderson 16)

Interestingly, the phrasing seems to hint at the possibility that *The Hobbit* wasn't a story made 'merely' for children. And as Tolkien himself has pointed out in his essay 'On Fairy-Stories': 'The value of fairy-stories is thus not [...] to be found by considering children in particular' (36), but rather: 'If fairy-story as a kind is worth reading at all it is worthy to be written for and read by adults' (45). The original novel was thus never intended, not by its author and not by its publisher, to be limited to an audience of children.

And this intention, of the book also catering to an adult audience, is then indirectly picked up on by its reviewers in their recommendations. For example, it is mentioned in the criticism from the get-go, that Tolkien's fantasy might possibly overwhelm its intended audience. Librarian and literary critic Mary Lucas, for example, wrote about Bilbo and his companions in the *Library Journal*: 'Their adventures and mishaps are numerous, too numerous in fact for really enjoyable reading. The book would be better read aloud in small doses, or the child should be advised to read it that way, himself. It will have a limited appeal unless properly introduced and even then will be best-liked by those children whose imagination is alert' (cit. in Anderson 22). Similarly, children's librarian May Lamberton Becker wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune* on prospective US audiences: 'Into these pages a world is packed, an odyssey compressed, as adventures on the road to the dragon's ill-got treasure thickens. I do not know how our children will like a story so close-packed, one of whose chapters would make a book elsewhere; they may think they are getting too much for their money' (cit. in Anderson 20).

The idea that the stories are too dense and complex and might overwhelm inattentive readers is clearly present. But other reviewers, such as Tolkien's friend and colleague C.S. Lewis, see this as a positive feature and point towards the book's more complex themes and its appeal to be re-read with adult eyes, finding deeper layers of meaning. Lewis writes in the *Times Literary Supplement*:

It must be understood that this is a children's book only in the sense that the first of many readings can be undertaken in the nursery [...]. *The Hobbit* [...] will be funniest to its youngest readers, and only years later, at a tenth or twentieth reading, will they begin to realize what deft scholarship and

profound reflection have gone to make everything in it so ripe, so friendly, and in its own way so true. Prediction is dangerous: but *The Hobbit* may well prove a classic. (cit. in Anderson 18).

In fact, *The Hobbit* is understood to be a complex book that shifts in tone and plot, from children's adventure romp towards more complicated themes. As Christina Scull has pointed out in her analysis of children's literature contemporary with Tolkien: 'Fantasy was not uncommon but few treated it as seriously as Tolkien [...]. *The Hobbit* starts out as a good children's book but as Tolkien gets further into the story, the influence of mythology which he had been creating for many years gives the book a more serious thread and it becomes a great children's book' (55). The original novel was thus never received as being 'merely' a children's book. Its merits are precisely the complexity of the story and the more serious tone, setting Tolkien's book apart from other endeavors in the genre and explaining its appeal to adult audiences.

Too Complex for Children

In the answers of the World Hobbit Project, the issue of complexity and adult tones is present as well, but it is not discussed as a merit for the films. Instead, the respondents argue that the complexity and tone make Jackson's trilogy less suitable for children. 126 respondents (2.6% of the German sample) argue that the films transported themes of war, death, and betrayal, which are seen to be beyond the scope of a child's comprehension. For example, #14758 says: 'The whole thing is unsuitable for children, in my opinion. There is too much war and death (e.g. burning down Laketown)'.¹ And #25038 argues that the films are not a 'Children's Story' because 'they deal with a lot of adult themes, such as war, greed, decay and revenge'. This is in contrast to Tolkien's own opinion on suitable topics for children. He argues that in terms of themes and complexity, it would be better to ask too much of children than too little – encouraging growth and challenging the young mind: 'It is one of the lessons of fairy-stories [...] that on callow, lumpish, and selfish youth peril, sorrow, and the shadow of death can bestow dignity, and even sometimes wisdom' (45).

209 respondents (4.3%) expressed the view that children would not be able to follow the complexity of the story, that the narrative structure with its references to other parts of Tolkien's world would confuse children. For example, #35268 says: 'In no way are the films a children's story, [...] the whole story is too complicated and complex, so that children would not be able to understand it'. In fact, the sentiment that you need an adult mind to appreciate the intricate web of relations and the different aspects of Tolkien's stories can be found in several responses, such as #3556: 'I don't think *The Hobbit* is a children's film. Many children [...] will not be able to grasp the narrative strands correctly and understand the deeper meaning. They will not be able to appreciate its value'. Some respondents further link both complexity and more adult themes to Peter Jackson and a conscious decision to connect *The Hobbit* with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. #2222, for instance, argues: 'The book was written for children, but the film adaptation is much deeper. It tries to portray the

fantasy world of Middle-earth as intensely as the *Lord of the Rings* films did. This is why the films are much more complicated than the book and why they contain more connections to later events in the history of Middle-earth'. Seeing *The Hobbit* as part of Jackson's endeavor to film a history of Middle-earth and linking the two film series, these viewers argue that the overall story-arc is more important than keeping the original child-proper tone and intended audience. For example, #3348 says: 'Even though *The Hobbit* is a children's book, the films are not really suitable for children. *The Lord of the Rings* never was either, and Peter Jackson had to adapt the story to fit with *The Lord of the Rings*'.

Critics have brought forth this argument as well. Judy Ann Ford and Robin Reid, for example, propose that the films are more 'consistent with the canon of [...] Tolkien's fiction' than with the original book, emphasizing the 'rich historical drama of [...] Middle-earth', (208) drawing on material that was not written when the novel came out, but that Tolkien later used to edit the book and make it more consistent with the rest of his writing. Tolkien's own – only in parts fulfilled – editorial project around *The Hobbit* is also the basis for Thomas Honegger to argue that 'Jackson is using the chance to do what Tolkien thought about, but never got around to doing: to rewrite *The Hobbit* into a prequel consistent with the *Lord of the Rings*' (139, my translation). And this, in Thompson's words, is a 'fundamental mistake made by the filmmakers':

They decided to adapt *The Hobbit* into an adult story with the same sorts of somber moments and terrors that *LOTR* contains. [...] But given how far [Peter Jackson] took all this – with the overextended battles, the urge to interject grotesque humor into serious situations, and the extra characters who turn Bilbo into a supporting player in his own tale – I believe he should have done what Tolkien did: let the two books (or films) be different. Let one be aimed at children - less violent, simpler, more humor – and the other be aimed at adults.

It seems that Bilbo has lost his innocence, because his tale needed to be more like Frodo's. And in order for Jackson to accomplish this, the children's narrative had to become an epic, shifting both tone and topic away from the heist-and-adventure-motif of the original book towards a tone of conflict, darkness and despair found in the epic Ring War (Honegger 140, Ford and Reid 211).

War and Violence in *The Hobbit*

And indeed, the specific themes of war and violence found in Peter Jackson's version of *The Hobbit* are the number one reason given in Q6 of the survey for excluding the films from the 'Children's Story' category. On the one hand, 236 respondents (4.8% of the German sample) commented on action and fighting in general as inappropriate for children, some noting the pace of these scenes, others the rush of action. For example, #19842 argues that 'this is too full of action, too many fast cuts, it is too complex and too violent for a children's story', and

#4012 finds the ‘fight scenes are just way too harsh for a kid’s movie’. But it is due to the general nature of ‘action’ and ‘fighting’ that responses here are less detailed. More explicit and graphic answers, many of which apply terms such as ‘unsuitability’ or ‘inappropriateness’, mention the films’ brutality, violence and cruelty as the reason to exclude them from the category of ‘Children’s Story’. In total, 679 respondents (14%) gave this answer, with specific codes coming up repeatedly. The most common codes regarding the film’s violence were: ‘battle’ (116), ‘war’ (74), ‘brutality’ (340) and ‘blood’ (35). #3237, for example, states that ‘describing this as a children’s story is inappropriate, because of the brutish orcs and the (bloody) battle’, before giving a suggestion as to how the films could have been made more suitable to children: ‘Appropriate would be if the orcs were fighting with flower bouquets’.

An interesting aspect that emerged in the analysis here is that 236 respondents (4.8%) argue that the films are too scary for children. Especially Jackson’s depiction of the orcs and the spiders are claimed to be frightening and too dark for children. #24093, for example, says that ‘Kids will get nightmares, especially because of the sequence with the spiders’, and for #6680 the films are ‘not really a children’s story, because [...] the depiction of violence is too explicit and some creatures are too scary for small children’. 45 respondents (0.9%) specifically mention the visual adaptation, hinting at the difference between reading about violence and scary things and seeing them already fully imagined – most explicitly phrased by #28110: ‘There is too much violence and some creatures are too ugly for children; in the book this is only told, here it is directly shown!’

Indeed, a very small subgroup of responses is strikingly specific in their account of what is seen as unsuitable content for children: Jackson’s penchant for graphic decapitations, for severed limbs and swords in bodies, is mentioned sixteen times in the German sample (0.3%). #23624 states: ‘It is not a children’s film, for that way too many heads are rolling’. And #23211 says: ‘The films are not suitable for children, because too many heads and limbs are being separated from the orcs’. In fact, this graphic display of violence seems to have been emphasized further in the extended cut, pushing the film into the R-rating. According to critic Eric Eisenberg, the extended battle now includes ‘dwarves charging into battles [...] with all kinds of weapons – including a ram-driven sled featuring scythe-covered wheels and a crank-operated arrow launcher’, and the most prominent feature is once more blood and gruesome death.

It is with the graphic depiction of violence in mind that 589 respondents (12.1%) argue the film to be diverging from the tone and content of the original novel. Whereas the novel is described as a children’s story, the films are not. #10608 provides a sample answer here: ‘The book was originally intended as a children’s book, but the films are not’. And #10678 points towards the reason behind this in Peter Jackson’s filmmaking: ‘The book is a children’s book, but the way it was filmed, it is only limitedly suitable for (small) children – too much blood and violence (this is where you notice, that PJ comes from horror film)’.

It is interesting to note that in contrast to this, 54 participants (1.1%) actually disagree with the categorization of the book as a children’s story – for the same reasons that

the films are rejected for this category: that it depicts darker, more adult themes, such as war, violence and death. #14364, for example, states that '*The Hobbit* never really was a children's book. Yes, as many others I read it as a child, but it has a distinctly darker tone and the fact that Thorin, Kili and Fili die in the end emphasizes this'. This view reverberates with a reading that Maureen Carroll gives in her study on the use of *The Hobbit* in primary education: a 'possible reason for the under-use of *The Hobbit* in primary schools is that many teachers may dwell on the violence that they associate with Tolkien's literature and find difficulty reconciling this with suitable literature for children' (2). Anne-Kathrin Höfel similarly argues that children's stories are still sometimes seen as needing to 'safeguard the naivety that adults attribute to children' (24) by keeping up taboos on specific topics. But Höfel also stresses that for many topics this is a misconception, that '[violence] forms indeed an integral part of literature for children' (110) and that it is specifically the fantasy genre that frames war and conflict with 'the distance required for a more objective occupation with these realistic topics' (111).

Suzanne Rahn goes further when she argues that fiction is ideally suited to introduce children to the concept of war: 'No child can grasp the complexities of a *real* war, historical or ongoing – even historians find it rather challenging. But an imaginary war may be cast in terms that a four-year-old can understand' (163). From Narnia to Hogwarts – war is thus not unusual for children's stories and Rahn emphasizes that these conflicts can be ethically complex, discussing justification for war and its consequences for those fighting and those caught in the conflict. In depicting the Battle of the Five Armies and the price Bilbo and the dwarves pay, Tolkien provides a challenge to his audience. As Corey Olsen has so aptly pointed out, 'the story Tolkien is setting out to tell is one that is quite serious, and even at times gruesome. [...But h]e insists on the educational value of good stories dealing with serious issues, with good and evil, recognizing that there are horrible and frightening things in the world' (37f.).

Adult Audiences of Fantasy

Especially ironic in the context of this debate – that violence, war and gruesome topics are nowadays valued unfit to be presented to children – are then the most persistent forms of criticism leveled against Tolkien's writing in general, even against the epic story of the Ring War. Patrick Curry names the triumvirate of charges: 'infantilism, nostalgia, escapism' (378), rephrasing Edmund Wilson's most impressive conclusion of his review of *The Lord of the Rings*, in which he says he just read the book to his seven-year-old daughter, as it is 'essentially a children's book – a children's book which has somehow got out of hand' (312). Wilson writes that he 'is puzzled to know why the author should have supposed he was writing for adults. [... T]here is little in *The Lord of the Rings* over the head of a seven-year-old child' (312). He then continues to ask how fantasy even manages to find a market and comes to the derogatory conclusion that 'certain people [...] have a lifelong appetite for juvenile trash' (314).

Lastly, I want to mention that 46 participants (0.9%) selected the category 'Children's Story' as not appropriate, arguing that it is not *merely that*; that *The Hobbit* goes beyond the category of 'for children' and that the genre 'fantasy' is meant for grown-up appreciation too. I suspect that here lurks both a reflexive response to the pejorative reading of fantasy as *only* appropriate for children and a whole-hearted claim of a changed and grown genre conception of fantasy dealing with adult themes and topics. Respondent #1413, for example, echoes C.S. Lewis's original review of the book in that '*The Hobbit or The Lord of the Rings* cannot be viewed simply as a children's story, because the story is complexly built and interesting to all age groups'. This reaction thus reveals a rejection of the simplified categorization of all fantasy as intended for children and instead sees *The Hobbit* as part of a complex world-building on Tolkien's and Jackson's part. As #15022 argues: '*The Hobbit* films are fantasy films, based on the book by J.R.R. Tolkien and they speak to everyone interested in fantasy, not just children'.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would thus like to summarize my findings and point out the way that fantasy as a genre is headed. The most obvious conclusion is that the majority of the audience denies the films the quality of being a 'Children's Story.' The numbers on this aspect are overwhelming, with 72.5% of all German-language respondents choosing this option. But what the more detailed analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, reveals is that the historical connection between the categories of fantasy and children's story has drastically changed since the original publication of Tolkien's book. Originally, negatively inclined critics of Tolkien pejoratively lumped all his writing – no matter how complex, violent or thematically appropriate – into the category of 'juvenile trash', just because they are works of fantasy. And positively inclined critics made it explicit that Tolkien's writing goes beyond the usual children's fantasy by providing a deeper, second layer of meaning that adults would appreciate. Both, though, inherently equated fantasy with the category 'Children's Story'.

Today's audiences disagree with that assessment and rather understand fantasy as signaling something markedly different from the category of 'Children's Story'. Graphic depictions of violence and adult discussions of war and politics are today seen as markers of a specific form of fantasy that aims at adult audiences – a connection that audiences tie to Jackson's original *Lord of the Rings* films, but that is surely further advanced by HBO's *Game of Thrones* series and other adult fantasy projects. That audiences evaluate the *Hobbit* films as not suitable for and not aimed primarily at children, points toward an awareness of Jackson's first trilogy. And indeed, 98.7% of German respondents answered in the survey that had seen the films, with 79.9% rating the films to be 'Excellent'. Overall then, the *LotR* trilogy seems to have set the precedent for fantasy films as adult-oriented and serious in tone and topic, so that *The Hobbit* is understood to be linked to *The Lord of the Rings* as an overall project and measured against it. As such, I believe, we here have a strong indicator that fantasy for most of its audience has lost its inherent connection with children as

intended audience, shifting the genre's reception towards adults. One could thus say that Bilbo has, indeed, lost his innocence and finally arrived in a grown-up world.

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Note:

¹ All answers were given in German, translations are mine.