

Where has all the magic gone?: Audience interpretive strategies of *The Hobbit's* film-novel rivalry

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Abstract:

The complex relations between words and images are debated in various disciplines and have been in a variety of modes a thorny issue for centuries. Words are constantly used to represent or embody images (conceptualized as *ekphrasis*) and vice versa. At the same time, however, words are also considered not sufficient to represent the visual sign, which cannot rely entirely on text. Similarly, the visual cannot rely entirely on the verbal; its understanding should come from representational practices alone, as there is something in the image that is 'purely image'. Films and novels are accordingly opposed, considered as two separate 'pure' entities that are not translatable, and yet share stylistic, narrative, and cultural connections.

This essay tackles such relations as they are manifested in audience members' discussions of the cinematographic *Hobbit* adaptation(s). More specifically, it is focused on their interpretive strategies in the ways these relate to the novel-film rivalry. Based on qualitative thematic analyses of the 251 Israeli respondents' open-ended answers, we demonstrate how the film-novel rivalry unveils itself in the audience reception of the film(s) adaptations. Findings reveal diverse and even paradoxical tensions: From a standpoint that the movie is considered a perfect or even 'better' representation of the novel, to vehement criticism that it vandalizes the original and 'misses' its 'purpose' completely, designed entirely to make profit.

Keywords: *The Hobbit*, film adaptation, ekphrasis, reception

Introduction

The complex relations between words and images have been a thorny issue for centuries, drawing the attention of scholars from various disciplines (Deleuze, 1988[1986]; Foucault, 1982; Mitchell, 1994, 2003).¹ For the most part, this relationship is conceptualized as an essential opposition, like water and oil (Elliott, 2008): two untranslatable elements that ‘conflict irreconcilably with one another [...] The picture means itself. The sentence means itself’ (Miller, 1992, p. 95). Both image and text carry their own weight, having no common ground ‘nor a place where they can meet’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 28), while poets and artists, that is, word-users and image-makers, co-exist in time and space, respectively (Cheeke, 2008; Lessing, 1874).

In practice, however, their relations are also propelled in an eternal paradox: On the one hand, words are constantly used to represent images, a practice commonly referred to as *ekphrasis* (see Heffernan, 1993). Notice how scholars from diverse standpoints use words to analyse televisual, printed and other mediated images; how, for instance, certain news picture editors keyword archived pictures to ease their clients’ searching processes so as to enhance profits; or that images, in all their forms in the commercial world, are almost always interpreted by words that are juxtaposed to them (Frosh, 2003; Ilan, 2016). Yet words’ ability to represent images, and images’ ability to be represented by words, even to a certain extent, is in question, hence the immanent ‘problematic that is ekphrasis’ (Krieger, 1998, p. 3). Images should not ‘rely’ entirely on the text, as words are not sufficient to represent the visual, while the comprehension of the image should be found in representational practices (Mitchell, 1994). There is an inherent ‘something’ in the image that is ‘purely image’ (Barthes, 1977, p. 61); a ‘being-as-image’ (Bryson, 1981, p. 6).

Novels and films share a similar contested, not to say antagonistic, relationship. Bluestone, author of perhaps the first major exploration in the field of what is known as adaptation theory, sees both novel and film to be ‘separate institutions’ ([1957]1971, p. 218), and differentiates between the visual image and the mental one in the ways both are produced and received.

Words in film are often treated in cinema scholarship as that which disturbs the image, or simply there to help it come to life. See, for instance, how Stephenson and Phelps ([1965]1989) refer to the shooting script as nothing but a mere ‘blue-print’ whereby bits of sound and sight are put together (p. 181). Even when they are acknowledged as essential components that make a film what it is, words in film are often subordinated to the visual and are thus taken as simply contributing to the image/visual discourse. Note, for example, how Deleuze (1988[1986]) refers to the talking cinema as an image, or how Metz (1991) sees films to be closer to the image discourse, even when they encompass ‘other modes of expression’ such as the verbal element (p. 58). Similarly, visual illustrations appear to be missing almost entirely from theories of the novel (Elliott, 2008).

However, in spite of these ‘blind spots’ in both cinema and literary theorizations, films and novels do share a mutual interface in various forms, such as stylistic, narrative, and cultural connections among others (Andrew, 1984; McFarlane, 1996). Elliott (2008)

points out how the Russian cinematographer Eisenstein saw the Victorian novel, with its attention to visuality, close-ups, character viewpoints, and other characteristics, helping to shape Western film techniques. What is more, movies have also been incorporating into their diegesis literary vocabulary and diegetic voice-over sounds (e.g., a character reminisces or contemplates aloud on his/hers actions). At the same time, however, novels and films also share cultural interchanges as well as intertextual relations, whereby films have gradually been contributing to shaping novels with various cinematographic techniques, such as multiple viewpoints, the montage-sequence, descriptions that allude to the photographic gaze, flashbacks (i.e., a scene which took place in the past but is inserted into the present time of the narrative), et cetera (see, e.g., Cartmell & Whelehan [1999] for their discussions on adaptation in reverse; Chatman, 1978; Cohen, 1979; Ouditt, 1999). In short, while film-novel connections are quite powerful and interrelated, they are, by no means, supporting the dominance of the original text (Whelehan, 1999). Rather, they are pointing one to conclude that perhaps the film-as-image and novel-as-word rivalry is nothing more than an abstract battle in the name of artistic purity (Elliott, 2008).

Film–novel connections are perhaps most evident in the different forms of cinematographic adaptations of novels that got underway once the cinema had started to consider itself as a narrative entertainment (McFarlane, 1996). Adaptation theory has gone through various shifts over the years since Bluestone’s pioneering work ([1957]1971) on the metamorphosis of fiction into cinema, having a strong connection to a tradition of *fidelity*: put simply, an analytic focus on how ‘well’ books are ‘translated’ into films, how ‘faithful’ films are to the adapted novel, and the different modes of storytelling that the two entail (Chatman, 1980; Egan & Barker, 2008).

But fidelity is a highly questionable concept in adaptation discourse. To begin with, it implies the primacy of the printed text: that books are more artistically ‘valuable’ and bear more prestige than their cinematic adaptations which are meant, for the most part, to make ‘high literature’ easier to digest by indiscriminate audiences (Elliott, 2008). What is more, fidelity necessarily suggests there is a supposedly correct meaning that the film-maker succeeds in either capturing or violating it. There is also the issue of trying to stick to a ‘spirit’, or ‘essence’, of a literary work in order to make a ‘successful’ adaptation, which, of course, is hard to determine, since the process involves not only a ‘comparison’ of novel to film (in itself a questionable task due to the change of medium [Stam, 2000b]), but of the novel’s reading by the film-maker to that of other readers/viewers (McFarlane, 1996). Finally, this strand leads to ignoring the fact that film–novel relations are rich cultural processes, fails to focus on complex adaptation mechanisms that are in play, and marginalizes different production forces, all of which are influential upon the film (e.g., differences in cost and in modes of production), other than the novel (McFarlane, 1996; Stam, 2000b). While the issue of adapted films’ fidelity to their literary sources had dominated the adaptation discourse in the past (Orr, 1984), when film-makers were also encouraged to see fidelity as a desirable goal, it is still very much a favourable point of view to the films’ audiences of today, as we will demonstrate later on.

Other, more sophisticated approaches, to adaptation, lie, for example, on the structural effects of exchange and translation between the narratives of films and novels and the central importance of narrative to both. 'Narrative', says McFarlane (1996), '[...] is undeniably not only the chief factor novels and the films based on them have in common but is the chief transferable element' (p. 12). Although, to a certain extent, his approach puts to the side cultural contexts and other broader factors that bear an effect on the process of adaptation (Whelehan, 1999). The industrial aspects of such adaptive processes (as, for instance, in the form of film remakings) are also an important angle (Verevis, 2006). And there is the idea of complex intertextual exchange processes that perhaps can be identified as one of the more complex approaches to adaptation: from the ability of film adaptations to establish a connection with other texts (see, e.g., Lampolski, 1998; Stam, 2000b), to seeing intertextuality in adaptations as a broader act of interpretation, 'limited and relative – not to a [viewing] subject but to the interpretive grid (the regime of reading) through which both the subject position and the textual relations are constituted' (Frow, 1986, p. 155).

Surprisingly, and although such investigation may very well prove itself useful for adaptation theory, there is a significant lacuna in the field: namely, scant attention has been paid to the ways actual audiences perceive, regard, and understand questions of adaptations and the ways these relate to books and 'their' films (Barker, 2009; Egan & Barker, 2008). It seems then that the paradigmatic 'cultural shift' in media and communication studies (Grossberg, 2009; Kellner, 1995), which *inter alia* proposed to forsake the 'pure' analysis of texts in favour of delving into the dialogic nature of the reader-text relationship, has not been adopted by adaptation theorists, even at a time when fandom studies has already been proven useful to the field (see e.g., Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007; Jenkins, 2013), particularly the complex ways adaptations are valued by fan-readers (Barker, 2006; 2009; Egan & Barker, 2008). In other words, the aforementioned debates neglect to shed light on the ways actual film-goers and book-readers make sense and negotiate film-novel interrelations.

The following essay treads on a path paved by Hall (1980), who introduced what Alasuutari (1999) calls the Reception Phase into media audience studies. In this context, neither texts – the film or the novel – should be regarded as an autonomous or independent agent of meaning. On the contrary, the abovementioned discussion of the binary matrix of two opposing or complementary textual manifestations is best understood via the eyes of the beholders, that is, their actual readers/viewers. The latter navigate among a plethora of texts and their meanings and ramifications while being situated in lived experiences and personal identities. We are consequently hereby trying to understand 'lay' theories as conceptualized by 'real' people.

Here we tackle film–novel relations as they are manifested in the audience members' discussions of the cinematographic *Hobbit* adaptation(s). More specifically, this paper focuses on their interpretive strategies in the ways these relate to the film–novel rivalry. Following a long tradition of studies that were focused on 'real' film audiences (e.g., Bobo,

1995; Lindlof, 1988; Livingstone, 1998), we are interested then in how 'lay' filmgoers who have read the *Hobbit* book perceive the film adaptations of the written text: What are their reactions? If and in what ways do they (dis)approve of the cinematographic endeavour(s)? How do the films enhance, or not, their reading experience?

Based on qualitative thematic analyses of the Israeli respondents' open-ended answers, we demonstrate how the film–novel dialectic of words and images unveil itself in the audience reception of the film(s) adaptations. Findings reveal diverse and even paradoxical tensions: from a standpoint that the movie is considered a perfect, or even 'better', representation of the novel, to vehement criticism that it vandalizes the original and 'misses its purpose' completely; from seeing it as an authorship betrayal of Tolkien's *oeuvre* by Jackson, to a work that has no author; or simply as part of an Hollywoodized strategy designed entirely to make profit.

The Israeli Sample

This paper is derived from and based on the World Hobbit Project, conducted on-line in between December 2014–May, 2015.² It is, however, based only on the Israeli respondents, who, as we will demonstrate later, are quite similar in many aspects to the entire, global population of respondents to the World Hobbit Project. We therefore assume that, local characteristics (e.g., nationality, religion, and others) aside, their reception patterns parallel those of the population at large.

Two-hundred-fifty-one Israelis completed the questionnaire (sixteen of whom completed it in languages other than Hebrew or English and were therefore omitted from the analyses). Of this group, all but three reside in Israel. The Israeli sample is in many ways comparable to the international population (Barker & Mathijs, 2016). The education distribution mirrors rather well the international one: 41% (40% of the entire population) have acquired a university degree; 36% completed secondary school (28%); 13% hold an academic qualification (15%); 7% have a vocational qualification (10%); and 2.5% completed primary school (6%). The distribution of Israeli respondents in regards to their overall impression of the movies was also rather similar to the entire population: 13% thought they were either 'awful' or 'poor' (10% of the entire project's population) while 66% found them to be 'good' or 'excellent' (72% of the population). 72% of the Israeli sample have read, or are still reading, the book (75% of the population) while 18% (13% of the population) have not. The sex variable is somewhat different: Precisely two-thirds of the Israeli sample were males and one-third females; the international population is composed of 53% males and 47% females.

Contrary to these similarities, the Israeli sample markedly differed from the general population in the context of two variables that measure fandom: one criterion is the motivation to watch the film (i.e., being a member of a community that has been waiting for the films and love Tolkien's work) with which 71% of the Israeli respondents agreed (versus 35% of the global population) and the other criterion is taking active part in various fan activities that Israelis tend to shun (65%) versus the vast majority of the population (83%)

who participated in these activities. It seems then that the Israelis do love Tolkien and his books as well as the movies and consider themselves to be members of a fan group (just like other respondents from around the world), yet they do not – for reasons yet to be explained – partake in actual implementation of their taste.

In order to reflect local patterns that noticeably diverge from the global population, we grouped the Israeli sample's ages into four categories³: school pupils (10-18 years old): 36 respondents; military soldiers (18-21)⁴: 24; young adults (22-30): 107; and adults (31-65): 68.

Finally, the Israeli sample can be characterized as rather unique in one leisure pursuit, and is surely unlike most other Israelis in one significant aspect: They read a lot (66% of them indicate reading as one out of three of their most frequent leisure activities). It was also astonishing to find that only 14% mention TV as a means of their pastime. Their other leisure activities are rather common: they surf the internet (49%), go to the movies (35%), and are interested in sports as either spectators and/or participants (34%). A small minority (8.5% and 5%, respectively) engage in video or computer gaming and live action role-playing games (LARP) not necessarily focused on the *Hobbit* or *Lord of the Rings*.

The present essay is based on analyses of the Israeli responses to the following open-ended questions: Can you sum up your response to the films in your own words (question 2 in the questionnaire)? Can you tell us why you've made the choices regarding the definition of the film (question #6)? What element of the films impressed or surprised you most (question #8)? Did anything particularly disappoint you about the films (question #9)? Do *The Hobbit* films raise any broader issues or themes on which you would like to comment (question #10)? Do you think there are people who would share your ideas about *The Hobbit*? What are they like (question #11)? And, finally question #21: Is there anything particular about you personally that would help us understand your feelings about the book or the films of *The Hobbit*?

The main ideas presented here were distilled from these responses via a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), in which the main and frequent themes are grouped, coded, and analyzed. The conclusions, or 'theories', emerge from the texts by means of a constant comparison of the participants' responses, evaluating them, and grouping them into distinct conceptual categories, i.e., themes. This process is carried out by inductive thinking in order to seek common ideas, and reaches its conclusion when theoretical saturation (namely, when no more new themes surface or when the themes are satisfactorily corroborated by the participants' responses) is achieved. Our objective was to look for utterances significantly relevant to the research questions (Kearney, Murphy, & Rosenbaum, 1994). As qualitative readers, we did not initially know our objectives, but 'distilled' themes that were prominent and repeated by several respondents (van Manen, 1990). In accordance with interpretive epistemology, we strived to reveal those ideas while being reflexive and paying sensitive and equal attention to all participants (Orbe, 1998).

A Cinematic Triumph or a Catastrophic Adaptation

43% of the Israeli sample found the movie either 'good' or 'excellent' and found the book to be either 'good' or 'excellent', as well. 11% of the respondents found the movie to be 'awful' or 'poor', but found the book to be either 'good' or 'excellent'. We looked into the reasons people who have read the book once or more and rated it 'good' or 'excellent' gave for either thinking the movie to be 'good' or 'excellent'. We did the same for those who thought the movie was 'awful' or 'poor'. In other words, we were interested in the ways people already familiar with the original Tolkien text perceived and interpreted the cinematic adaptation(s).

In spite of their opinion of the latter, the main issue that troubled both types of audiences was the disconcerting and often infuriating gap between the esteemed book and the film(s). The vast majority of those who hated the film focused almost entirely on this film-novel gap. Their chief concern was with two modes of departure from the book: 'Narrative deviation and deviation from the author's [Tolkien] spirit. There was [narrative] content that was added [...], but it is absurd and feels like a B-movie. Regarding the deviations from the author's spirit, it's obvious that there cannot be perfection, but a romance between an Elf and a Dwarf? Since when Orks have such armor? How come Orks are so big?,' wrote a 23-year-old man (respondent #17724).⁵ Another 36-year-old woman (#22623) lamented the loss of the book's 'gentle and humorous spirit, as well as the sensitivity to the spoken language. [...] Tolkien's beautiful English was raped by an ego maniac who has no imagination'. In short, 'there's no magic that's in the books' (#24920, 37-year-old man).

Many of those who emphasized how disappointed they were from the cinematic adaptation of the book specifically mentioned how it differs from the 'original'. Thus, for example, some of the respondents mentioned how the film 'isn't faithful to the book'; how it 'does not adhere to the book's spirit'; how Jackson 'trashed everything to the ground'; or how it is simply 'an insult to the original'. One interesting example was made by a 16 year old guy (#23337) who particularly described his emotional experience while watching the film; how, given he was so familiar with the book, he began feeling 'emotionally detached' and 'highly critical' of the cinematic plot. Several respondents specifically referred to the idea of adaptation: 'Since the movies have gone so far away from Tolkien's books' said a 29-year-old man (#13461), 'they can no longer be treated as a 'literary adaptation'. It's a completely new story that cynically uses the book's title and the names of the characters in it'. Or, as put by a 43-year-old woman (#17699): 'This is hardly a literary adaptation, since it is really not faithful to the book'; it is an example, as summarized by a 29 year-old man (#13461), of how 'not to make a literary adaptation'.

Other respondents showed their appreciation, seeing the film to be a 'perfect' reflection of the literary source: 'It is clear', wrote a 35 year-old man (#11328) 'that it was highly important for the film-makers to be as faithful as possible to the literary creation'. The films, it was described by some, 'kept the childhood-like atmosphere and overall character of the original book' (#17688). They 'managed to bring to life Tolkien's wonderful

imaginary world'; a 'fantastic illustration' of Tolkien's fairy-tales. Jackson, pointed out a 34 year-old man (#25116), managed to 'create a whole visual language fitting [Tolkien's] world. [...] A cinematic masterpiece tailored for literary virtuosity!'

Such audience views clearly correlate with a rather basic, yet still very strong, view of a fidelity strand in adaptation theory, as respondents analyze the film to be either a good or bad literary adaptation judging whether it is 'faithful' to the book, that is, 'a perfect reflection'. As such, these readings of the *Hobbit* coincide with some controversial assumptions in fidelity discourse (see the concerns raised on fidelity in Andrew, 1984; McFarlane, 1996; Orr, 1984), whereby the contents of the literary source should be reproduced entirely on the screen. Furthermore, there is also a strong sense of privileging of the original; an example of what is still mistakenly the case with many comparisons of novels to their film versions that result 'in an almost unconscious prioritizing of the fictional origin over the resulting film' (Whelehan, 1999, p. 3). And this view becomes even more acute when the adaptation of a classic literary source (in this case, *The Hobbit*) is in question (ibid).

There is also a narratological, and perhaps a rather more sophisticated, approach to adaptation that is in play here, as some of the respondents clearly point to various connections, whether successful or not, in narrative between the book and the film. Note, for example, how some of the respondents mentioned the appearance of certain characters 'that weren't really in the book'. One interesting comment was made by a 40-year-old woman who declared (in English) she 'didn't like the licenses that Peter Jackson and the team of writers took with the characters and the story line. There is something very special in the original stories having characters that are not so well rounded' (#12594). On the other hand, some respondents mentioned their satisfaction with some adapted characters (e.g., the Dwarves who were 'much more interesting than what I could remember from the book' [#14247]), and the overall atmosphere in the film that eventually enriched their experience.

Such contradicting views correlate with McFarlane's narratological distinction between *transfer* and *adaptation* (1996). Thus, certain elements in the book that are not dependent on language (such as actions and happenings), and hence may be easily described audio-visually, can be directly transferred from the book to the film. Yet, aspects that are more abstract, such as characters and atmosphere, are more broadly open to adaptation. However, these views also demonstrate how audience members see certain elements in the book's narrative that are more abstract as also viable for transfer, thus showing how such narrative interconnections between novel and film are complex in the reading mechanisms of the adapted text.

At the same time, there were also a few, rather different, voices, in this theme of analysis, that were focused on how the cinematic text contributed to the literary experience. Thus, several respondents pointed as to how Jackson 'intensified' the original reading experience by adding 'more depth' to the story. 'Particular elements in the film were made more dominant than others, unlike the case in the book', pointed a 22-year-old woman (#13875), 'which made it easier to connect to it emotionally'. Jackson, it was said

(#15088), took the book and made it ‘a thousand times better’. An interesting intertextual connection is demonstrated by these views whereby the book serves not as an independent text, but an intertext (Allen, 2000) embedded in a network of textual relations necessary for its interpretation. Reading *The Hobbit* therefore unveils itself here as an infinite process of moving between its texts (book and film). So, when ‘more depth’ is added to the literary piece by the film, when the original reading experience is ‘intensified’ or ‘easier to connect to’ with the help of the film, the latter becomes a revision, in a sense, of the ‘old’ text so as to allow a closer reading of both film and book and fill the gaps in both (Permingier, 2001; Riffaterre, 1990).

This hovering between texts that allows a more complete reading of both text and intertext (here film and book) also brings to the fore certain adapting mechanisms that work in reverse – from film to novel. Note, for example, how one respondent said she had the privilege of ‘experiencing Tolkien and Middle-earth in the most amazing way that one could ask for’ (#22617). Another pointed out how he was surprised by the use of ‘cinematic tricks to visualize the literary world’ (#11328). Jackson, it was said, made the story ‘more interesting’, ‘more complex’, and ‘more mature’. ‘There is a connection to *Lord of the Rings*’, said a 28 year-old man (#25819) regarding certain scenes, that ‘solve the missing piece in the picture that is in the books’. There is no escape here from an interesting use of words to describe the book, or the holes in it, as picture, as if the book is simply a visual design in words used by the film-maker in the process of making his great cinematic creation. Such claims that the film eventually adds to the literary world of Tolkien come to show how such relations between film and novel can indeed be fruitful (Cartmell & Whelehan, 1999). Barker (2006), commenting on the responses to the Lord of the Rings Audience Project, concurs: ‘A visualisation is almost automatically a good thing because it is an achievement, a gestalt of meanings and emotions, rather than just a pictorial enactment. [...] The result, indeed, is an *intensified life* in the story – a strengthening of both meanings and emotions, a stronger and richer connection with narrative, actions, characters and thematic purposes’ (p. 18, italicized in the original). Thus, Jackson’s contribution to Tolkien’s world coincides with the inherent possibilities of cinematography that may very well contribute to the literary piece, such as montage, cross-cutting, flashbacks, etc. (Ouditt, 1999). Such options are not always available to the writer of novels, as foreseen by Woolf when she refers to the moving image: ‘The most fantastic contrasts could be flashed before us with a speed which the writer can only toil after in vain’ (Woolf in Ouditt, 1999, p. 147).

Other responses were categorized into two groups: criticism aimed at the greedy commercial orientation, and criticism targeting cinematographic methods. Several respondents were utterly furious at the commercialization and commodification of the pristine ‘true canon’, as one man called the book, and then went on to say that ‘*The Hobbit* trilogy feels awful, like a money maker’ (#17724). One 26 year-old man (#17630) felt how he was ‘being played for the sake of making money’, which was also explained as the reason why ‘certain elements in the plot that weren’t from the book had to be ‘invented’ to earn time on screen’. Characters, it was said, were made ‘more popular’. It felt, said one man, as

if the film was made in a 'rush' just to satisfy the 'stupid audience, who are only interested in action, to make profit' (#17724). One of the main explanations for this money-targeted 'exploitation' was based on the artificial expansion of the modest-length book into three, three-hour films. Quite a few respondents, regardless of liking or disliking the movie, were outright intolerant of its length and the trilogy's length, by and large. Several explanations were given of this phenomenon, chief of them was insatiable greed attributed to Jackson.

Commodification, indeed Hollywoodisation, seems to be an unforgivable sin in the eyes of audience members who, by the sheer fact they go to watch the film in a movie theater, actually collaborate with the film industry, that obviously is commercial by its very nature. That is to say, these respondents hold a somewhat naïve perception, which distinguishes between the printed and the cinematic media and inadvertently echoes neo-Marxist views. One respondent's statement mirrors an almost unanimous claim when he said that he actually understood why changes were made in the movie, since 'it is, after all, a movie, and movies need to attract an audience' (23 year old man, #17703). In the same vein, many respondents mentioned how the film 'had Hollywood written all over it': The script, it was said, was changed significantly from the book so as to make it 'interesting in a Hollywood style for the wide audience' (#24253). 'It's more of a Hollywood blockbuster than a literary adaptation' (#13888); 'A classic story of Hollywood greed whereby one book equals three movies' (#24920). 'It seems to me', said a 23 year-old man (#17724), 'that there's no more art in this world, in music, in film. [...] It feels as if the public has become more and more stupid. [...] People are interested in easy and cheap excitements while the 'artists' don't care, because they are just happy with their large bank accounts'.

Such strong claims made by the respondents regarding the commercial aspects of adaptation demonstrate the complex relations among commercial success, targeting audiences, and the conversion of highbrow literature into popular culture (Whelehan, 1999). In many ways, they reflect a well-known production strategy in Hollywood history, when the big studios had already shown their interest in different kinds of literary sources (novels, plays, short stories, etc.) in the past, and literary adaptations' faithfulness was not an issue as long as they were financially successful (Bluestone, [1957]1971). Thus, Balio (1993) discusses how the major studios in the 1930s and 1940s already had their representatives in the United States and Europe constantly searching the literary marketplace for suitable works. Beja (in McFarlane, 1996) points how, for instance, in the year 1927-8, 'more than three-fourths of the awards for 'best picture' have gone to adaptations [... and that] the all-time box-office successes favor novels even more' (p. 8).

Much like remakes, literary adaptations are clearly understood by the respondents to be industrial products whereby the films constitute a financial guarantee (Verevis, 2006), since the novels are seen by the studios as ready-made materials, 'pre-tested stories and characters' (McFarlane, 1996, p. 8).⁶ Similarly, the respondents recognized here a well-known strategy in Hollywood remakings that is, in many ways, similar to literary adaptations: A business opportunity to duplicate successes from the past (in this case, scripts that are based on successful novels) and minimize financial risks (Verevis, 2006).

Many of the respondents emphasized the ‘expanding’ mechanisms of the original *Hobbit* story in order to fit into three films while getting further and further away from the original plot, as part of a clever business scheme to make a hefty profit. Such views coincide with the process of purchasing the rights to novels as a customary studio practice to enable the studios to produce multiple versions of the same story and not have to pay additional payments to the copyright holders (Verevis, op.cit). Finally, as several respondents have directed their disappointment at the commercialization processes of the films at Peter Jackson’s cinematic choices, he clearly personifies the face of the Hollywoodisation of *The Hobbit*, and is also targeted as one of the studios’ star directors who are especially important in contemporary Hollywood. For such stars were said to serve as part of an elaborate ‘[...] *commercial* strategy for organizing audience reception, as a critical concept bound to distribution and marketing aims that identify and address the potential cult status of an auteur’ (Corrigan, 1991, p. 103). In that sense, Jackson, being a contemporary film *auteur*, is perceived by some of the respondents to be a key figure who puts his own mark on the films, ‘overwriting them’ (Grant, 2002, p. 58) with his own traceable signatures. Yet, to the eyes of the respondents, he managed to destroy the spirit of the original and to drain it from its captivating magic for the sake of commercial success, as a 24 year-old man stated: ‘Peter Jackson ruined Tolkien in the name of money’ (#8473).

The ‘Who is the real author?’ question appeared to be a significant theme in itself in the arguments made by many respondents, who seemed to be debating the success or failure of the cinematic adaptation by way of either ascribing it to different ‘owners’ (whether it be the literary author or the cinematic *auteur*) or ‘liberating’ both book and film from the hands of their creators. At the core of this theme lies the Auteurism movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, spread from France through America and elsewhere, which encouraged the idea of films as more personal documents (Corrigan, 1991). It came to dominate film criticism and theory for several decades, and would later become a popular point of departure in adaptation discourse in the form of comparisons between authors and *auteurs* (Whelehan, 1999). It also reflects a particular point of view in the fidelity debate, namely, that a literary adaptation should be faithful to the author’s intentions (Stam, 2000b).

A concept engraved in the stylistic signatures of film-makers having films resemble the artistic vision of the director; auteurism marked the cinema as a new form of creative expression (although since the 1970s the *auteur* has, in many ways, become industrialized and commercial status became its chief function [See, e.g., Corrigan, 1991]). This new form of expression was also conceptualized to be analogous to the novel so as to grant the film artist a similar status of prestige to that of the literary author (Stam, 2000a). In the postwar period, writing was seen to be a significant force in film discourse: many French New Wave directors saw both writing and film-making to bear similar effects upon their creators. In short, to make a film ‘as one writes a book’ (Varda in Stam, 2000a, p. 83) was understood to be the ultimate way.

In the spirit of this author–*auteur* conundrum, responses were divided into three main categories: the first category of respondents' views is grounded on those who specifically addressed the film as either a good or a bad adaptation of Tolkien's work, regardless of the cinematic contributors. For instance, various respondents wrote: 'I really liked Tolkien's world' (#23161); 'The films really bring to the surface Tolkien's wonderful world' (#22617); 'Another magical journey in a world created by Tolkien' (#23348); 'To me this [the film] is an illustration of Tolkien's world of fairytales' (#11328). 'The Hobbit', stated a 32 year-old man (#23417) 'is a children's tale in the magical fantasy world created by Tolkien the genius'. 'The fantasy and Tolkien's world are a perfect demonstration of what the films are all about', wrote another (#25440); 'To me, this film is first and foremost a part of Tolkien's literary world' (#31699). Even when the film was perceived as a bad adaptation, the responses in this category focused on the ways the cinematic adaptation reflected on Tolkien: 'I felt as if Tolkien's work was violated' (#24253); 'It [the film] damaged Tolkien's legacy' (#24912); 'We need to leave Tolkien's creations as they are. Let them stay as books' (#23363). 'They simply took a wonderful piece created by Tolkien,' said one respondent, 'extended it, ruined it, and smashed its good reputation' (#17724).

Such views clearly demonstrate a strong expectation about the fidelity of the cinematic version and a prioritizing of the literary work over the film. They mirror the ways comparison between novels and their cinematic versions were made by many commentators in the adaptation discourse (Whelehan, 1999). In this case, such dominance is in play by way of celebrating the literary author and comparing the film – an 'authorless' creation in this category – to the book as to how well it reflected the author's vision. Both films and books are hence seen by the respondents as clearly a part of 'Tolkien's world'. The film, therefore, is meant to mirror Tolkien's literary creation, and even if a tiny diversion is made, which has no roots in the original work, it immediately becomes impure, dishonest, and no longer does it account as a literary adaptation that is based on the sacred source created by the literary wizard.

The second category consists of respondents who evaluated the cinematic adaptation by way of discussing it in relation to both Tolkien and Jackson: 'Peter Jackson intensified my experience on several levels. [...] The characters are interesting, the scenery in the film is spectacular, and the plot is fascinating. [...] I feel I belong to a special group of people who love Tolkien and Jackson just as much as I do' (a 32 year-old woman, #15088); 'It's always fun to see Jackson's work, especially when combined with Tolkien, the king of fantasy' (#26053); 'I think Jackson's trilogy is a fascinating world that helps viewers understand Tolkien's amazing world better' (#15725). Similar relations were also discussed even when the cinematic adaptation was not considered a successful one: 'It seems as if Jackson is tired of Tolkien's world', stated one respondent (#17714). 'What's the story with all the additions to the film? Why does the director think he can invent a new Tolkien? Who the hell does he think he is?', ventilated another (#17679). 'It's a waste of time and money,' said a 23 year-old man, 'I really understand why Tolkien's family hates Peter Jackson and *The Hobbit* films' (#17724).

The book is still given more prestige, and the film is meant to reflect the literary work. In other words, the vision of the author is to be enhanced, more aspects are needed in order to make it even better. Note, for example, how Jackson's skills are summarized by one of the respondents as *work*, compared to Tolkien, 'the King of fantasy'. It is a confrontation between author and *auteur*, whereby the film-maker is evaluated by his hard working skills in the process of adapting a sublime literary creation, the literary world of fantasy created by 'The King' himself. Yet here we are witnessing a different degree of literary dominance since the cinematic adaptation is given a face. So, judging the distinction between texts by way of discussing the aesthetic talent of Jackson, some of the respondents treat him as an *auteur*-star, but one who is more similar to the earlier avatars of *auteurism* (Corrigan, 1991), and therefore held accountable for the cinematic outcome, whether successful or not.

The third category is comprised of respondents who specifically discussed Jackson's responsibility in the adapting process of the literary work without paying any attention to Tolkien at all: 'Excellent films [...] Jackson added more depth to the story' pointed a 28 year-old man (#25819); 'I was mostly impressed by Jackson's ability to take these books and turn them into films' said another (#15088). 'Jackson', wrote an 18 year-old man, 'gave his own addition to the film that contributed to its success' (#15725). 'Jackson had succeeded in transferring the reading experience into the world of film' (#17679). And then there were also a few respondents who thought things could have been done better: '[The movies] were too long; the director added too many scenes that weren't in the book and that didn't add anything' (#18252). 'Jackson's writing is pompous' (#23393), declared a 34 year-old woman; 'Jackson took a few strange 'turns' in the plot for the sake of a rather pretentious form of directing', stated another 31 year-old woman (#25499).

Here the film receives a higher status by way of discussing the skills of the director and the ways in which he either succeeded or failed in adapting the 'authorless' book into film. Such views correlate with the reverse processes in adaptation discourse (Cartmell & Whelehan, 1999), whereby films were seen to be contributing to the shaping of novels (Chatman, 1978; Cohen, 1979; Ouditt, 1999). Although even when Jackson's cinematic skills are discussed by the respondents, there is still a strong sense of the more traditional view of fidelity. Such is the case, for instance, when respondents point to certain additions made by Jackson that were not in the original book (hence seeing the film as a bad adaptation). One interesting example was given by a respondent who specifically addressed Jackson's writing skills ('pompous', to his view); the film-maker of a cinematic adaptation, to his eyes, is first a writer, and film-making – a literary process put into film.

Finally, there were a few sporadic fascinating responses that deserve some attention, as well. Thus, for example, a few respondents saw Jackson's work as an entirely different thing from Tolkien's: 'It's a Peter Jackson movie: nothing more, nothing less' (#16122); 'This is NOT Tolkien's world; it's Jackson's interpretation of Tolkien's' (#22455); 'It [the film] is part of Jackson's world of fairy tales, not Tolkien's' (#23337). Films and novels, to this view, are therefore separate institutions (Bluestone, [1957]1971), even when a

cinematic adaptation of the novel is at stakes, and their creators – the novel’s author and the film’s *auteur* – are perceived by the viewers to belong to different galaxies.

Other respondents made a comparison between the cinematic adaptation and the novel regardless of both the author and the *auteur*: ‘Even though the films did not reflect the books entirely, they were fascinating,’ said a 19-year-old chap (#24916). Or, for example, the fact that in the books, as stated by a 35 year-old man (#11328), ‘the good sometimes make mistakes and the bad were not born bad but rather turned into ones. Such complexity is missing from the films’. It seems that these respondents focus on the texts as if they were autonomous entities, independent of their creators. Here the relations between the novel and its cinematic adaptation are discussed by way of a dialogue between the viewers and the texts, bringing to the fore the intertextual relations between film and novel as the figure of the author loses focus (Stam, 2000b). For ‘it is not true that works are created by their authors. Works are created by works, texts are created by texts, all together they speak to each other independently of the intentions of their authors’ (Eco in Haberer, 2007, p. 57).

Conclusions

This essay is based on the Israeli sample comprised of 251 respondents who took part in the World Hobbit Project during the first half of 2015. Since their overall socio-demographic profile, as well as their general patterns of reception of the movie(s) and the book(s), was rather similar to those of the entire global population of respondents, we tend to believe that their analysis of the textual interrelationships is not unique, but probably reflects general tendencies and perspectives. What underscores their views is a contentious rivalry between the printed original text (i.e., *The Hobbit* book) and its cinematic adaptations; a rivalry that is also embodied in the rapport or linkage between the two artists, namely, J.R.R. Tolkien versus Peter Jackson.⁷

By and large, two camps emerged in the course of spontaneous reflections by audience members who read the book and saw the film.⁸ One camp is composed of those who hated the ‘pompous’ movie that ‘offends one’s intelligence. [...] The action was implausible, the characters have no logic, and even the great landscape of New Zealand was shot in ineffective shots’ (a 37 year-old man, #16122). Another typical example lamented the gap between the two texts: ‘The movie just denigrates the original. It irrationally stretches out the plot in order to make money. [...] It affects the audiences who didn’t read the books, and gives them wrong understanding of the book’ (a 16 year-old guy, #23337). The opposing camp was enthusiastic about the movie and appreciated Jackson’s well-executed efforts to ‘bring to life’ the book. Many in this camp thought that the movie ‘combined Tolkien’s books into one unified creation,’ and ‘resurrected the wonderful books well’. The technological advantages distinctive to the cinematic medium proved to be for many members of this camp a welcome means to actualize the printed medium’s inherently abstract details: ‘It is fun to see what others have imagined’. The concrete visualization of

Tolkien's world enabled them to be immersed within the movie to such a degree that 'it is possible to almost forget this world is not real'.

If we dare weigh-up the camps in quantitative values, enthusiastic readers of Tolkien's book(s) were happy with Jackson's film adaptation three times more than those who did not approve of the latter. In spite of the shared criticism of commercialization and disapproval of turning the single *Hobbit* book into three films, in general many more viewers were contentedly swept by the cinematographic advantages of concretization of their visions and ideas that were triggered by the printed medium. The Lord of the Rings Audience Project yielded a similar affective conclusion: 'the most common response of all, one that embraces so many people [...] is the *sheer pleasure* of seeing an external embodiment of one's previously private imagining' (Barker, 2006, p. 19, italicized in the original).

In this essay, we have demonstrated the ways in which the complex film-novel relations are represented in audiences' responses by way of analyzing the readings of *The Hobbit's* cinematic adaptations. Our findings show how the reading of a cinematic adaptation 'can also be a critique' (Stam, 2000b, p. 63). It is a complex process that covers different aspects from various fields as part of the creative endeavor such as narrative, aesthetic, cultural and industrial – among others. In so doing, this paper illustrates the audience as a significant force to consider in adaptation processes; in this case, the viewing fans of *The Hobbit* also serve as active cultural critics (Jenkins, 2013) and see matters of value in cinematic adaptations to extend 'far beyond the high/low cultural divide' (Whelehan, 1999, p. 15).

The present study is possibly one of the very few studies (Barker, 2009; Egan & Barker, 2008) in the long tradition of analytical discussions concerning textual adaptations that offers the actual readers' viewpoint, and hence can be regarded as a pioneering reception study. In other words, we have tried to assimilate two strands of inquiry: the textually oriented Adaptation theory and the audience-focused Birmingham School. Word-image conundrums that have challenged scholars since antiquity are found here to be a part and parcel of the lived experiences of 'lay' audience members, whether they are avowed fans of the Hobbit world and Tolkien's *oeuvre* at large or are random or casual readers/film-goers. Indeed, most of them – as indicated by their responses to our questionnaire – are torn between two poles of interpretation in relation to which text or which medium is supreme. Moreover, they are enmeshed in a cycle of interpretation, in which a verbal text is translated into an aural-visual medium, while the latter is in its turn translated into words.

'When is Meaning?' asks Jensen (1991), and then proceeds to propose that meaning is actively produced only at the moment of contact between text and reader/viewer. Meanings, then, emerge and are manufactured only at the interface of a person, who is situated in a lived experience (including, to be sure, his/her identity, life story, and, at times, membership in an interpretive community [Kama, 2003]), and a text. In the present essay, we have hopefully corroborated this theoretical concern by evidence that the Film-novel rivalry should not be solely dissected by 'disinterested' scholars, but can, and should, be understood from the ways the audience members themselves – who, since they are the

prime target of any cultural text, are actually the ‘real’ agents of meaning – negotiate among various approaches. Consequently, we believe that the next step of this line of research should delineate and demarcate (e.g., by employing socio-demographic variables) interpretive communities based on respondents’ stances regarding the Film-novel rivalry.

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Notes:

¹ See, for example, the idea of *ekphrasis*, that is, the verbal representation of visual representation, and how it was used as a rhetorical term by early Greek scholars to describe objects, and later as a rhetorical figure used by writers to capture artwork (Ilan, 2016; Robillard & Jongeneel, 1998).

² For further detailed information regarding the World Hobbit Project, see Barker & Mathijs (2016).

³ The general population was tabulated differently and therefore we cannot assess their similarities.

⁴ Military service is mandatory for both men and women. We took it for granted that all members of this cohort either serve at the time of the study or have completed a full service.

⁵ Quotations were translated from Hebrew into English by the authors (unless written in English by the respondent). We tried to remain faithful to the original vernacular expressions.

⁶ Most adaptations also carry over the title of the original literary piece so as 'to take advantage of the pre-existing market' (Stam, 2000b, p. 65)

⁷ Whether the respondents alluded to the entire film trilogy or one of the films is immaterial for our purposes.

⁸ A caveat is in order here, since we cannot truly know whether these 'spontaneous' analyses by the respondents would have been made outside of the context of our study.