Linking fantasy to everyday life: Patterns of orientation and connections to reality in the case of *The Hobbit*

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Abstract:
How do viewers of fantasy link this symbolic material to their everyday lives? Starting from theoretical approaches that regard popular culture as a resource for coping with challenges of social circumstances and of everyday life we develop the argument that different patterns of orientation towards cultural products go along with different references to reality. We take *The Hobbit* as a particular case of a popular product and the World Hobbit Project with its global data on viewers' reactions to these films as the basis for our research. Based on standardised indicators for viewers' interest in *The Hobbit* itself, in Tolkien's world, in the genre of fantasy, and in 'big cinema' in general we identify distinct patterns of orientation that go along with differences regarding film appreciation and perceived functions of fantasy. By means of a qualitative analysis of open answers from Austria and Germany regarding broader issues and aspects of personal relevance that are raised by the film we identify relevant ways and topics, by which viewers link the film to their everyday life, e.g. the current refugee crisis. Based on that, we conduct a quantitative analysis showing that the patterns of orientation go along with different references to the real world.

Key words: Fantasy audiences, everyday life, qualitative and quantitative methods, *The Hobbit* as symbolic material, patterns of orientation towards fantasy products

1 Introduction: On the role of media in popular culture

Peter Jackson's three *The Hobbit* films have been quite successful across the world; as such they are a transcultural manifestation of popular culture. Popular culture is a part of common culture (Willis, 1990); enacted and perceived as 'particular event', it can transcend everyday life (for the following see Paus-Hasebrink, 2006). According to this argument popular culture is no longer conceptualised as a phenomenon of trivial culture, but, following Umberto Eco, as cultural resource (Brown, 1972; Fiske, 1989 a, b; Kidd, 2007). In this sense popular culture embraces all expressions of culture except elite culture (Brown, 1972).

With regard to everyday culture and popular culture media play an eminent role. They serve as symbolic resources. 'Within everyday life media are the readily available and comprehensively used approach, by which the objectified "culture" is made productive for individual orientation and sense-making.' (Weiß, 2003, p. 25, authors' translation) Particularly mediated popular culture becomes a cultural resource; it serves as a driving force for transcending the conduct of everyday life, by which the agents within 'individualised' societies try to give their everyday life structure and sense (Weiß, 2003, p. 30).

In order to achieve high attention and economic success producers of popular culture tend to rely on current or traditional narratives that meet the interests of large audiences. Depending on the particular target group, they deal with 'stories, in which viewers can detect a high potential for recognition, interpretation and orientation in their everyday lives, and at the same time provide sufficient distance to pleasurably cope with the everyday challenges' (Paus-Hasebrink, 2006, p. 22, authors' translation). Popular media serve as symbolic material for para-social interaction, identity-building, and orientation (Paus-Hasebrink, 2007). How do viewers construct meanings of mediated content? This process happens through social experience, it is integrated in shared (cultural) habits and common knowledge (Lash, 1996, p.168). These categories that describe the entanglement of the self in biographical cultural practices require a common process of meaning production and interpretation. Scott Lash has pointed out that, due to the decline of social structures, the role of cultural structures has been increasing. These patterns of orientation are culturally traded and refer to the viewer's societal position. Transformed into everyday knowledge, they monitor individual actions and help to develop social and personal identities, e.g. to find one's own position, to gain the capability to act. Particularly in cultural experiences and in shared meanings, sometimes remaining on the surface of 'taste cultures', our culture realises community; this argument traces back to Gerhard Schulze's term 'experience society' (2005). Within this context, popular media products like *The Hobbit* increasingly serve as opportunities for witnessing, which nowadays, as it seems, has become a crucial approach to the world. Therefore we are particularly interested in how viewers of *The Hobbit* make use of this product of popular culture to deal with their everyday life and, in doing so, create common cultural experiences. At this place 'everyday life' will not be investigated as such – this would require a rather ethnographic approach.

Instead we will look for empirical indicators for all kinds of viewers' references to their everyday life. Our overall research question is: How do viewers of *The Hobbit* link the symbolic material of *The Hobbit* to their everyday lives?

We do not expect that there is one answer to this question. With reference to Stuart Hall's ([1973] 1980) concept of encoding and decoding and to the intense research that followed this direction we assume that symbolic material must be perceived as meaningful by its readers. Before a 'message can have an "effect" (however defined), satisfy a "need" or be put to a "use", it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded' (Hall, [1973] 1980, p. 129). To the extent that viewers differ with regard to their cultural resources and their everyday experiences we can expect relevant differences with regard to how they interpret the film and relate it to their everyday life. Therefore our second research question is in which respect differences between viewers with regard to their cultural resources and orientation lead to differences in how they relate their film experience with their everyday life.

In order to answer these research questions, it is necessary to distinguish different patterns of orientation towards *The Hobbit*. As a product of popular culture it includes (at least) four levels of cultural and cross-media references:

- The films refer to the symbolic material of *The Hobbit* itself, i.e. its particular story and the figures that are portrayed.
- In addition the films are part of Tolkien's world of legends; they refer to a wider range of stories and figures, particularly *The Lord of the Rings*.
- The films belong to the genre of fantasy; thus they refer to the conventional rules of meaning production that are linked with this genre.
- Finally the films are an example of international blockbusters, i.e. of commercial 'big cinema'; as such they refer to viewers' expectations with regard to stars, technological innovation and big emotions.

Based on these four levels we can distinguish different patterns of viewers' orientations towards the films: some might be particularly interested in *The Hobbit* itself, others might be fantasy fans, others might love 'big cinema' in general. In line with the concept of media repertoires that has been developed to describe cross-media patterns of media practices (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012), each viewer can be characterised by a particular combination of these four levels. Our argument is that the corresponding patterns of orientation are connected with specific connections between the films and the viewers' everyday lives. In the following we provide empirical evidence regarding this argument, which is based on data from the World Hobbit Project. In Section 2 we describe the operationalisation of the key concepts of our approach, particularly the patterns of orientation towards *The Hobbit*, and the methodological approach to the combined qualitative and quantitative analysis of answers to open questions. In Section 3, based on the global sample of the World Hobbit

Project, we investigate how the patterns of orientation and the corresponding viewer types correlate with the appreciation of the film and the perceived role of fantasy. In Section 4 we analyse 'subjective' indicators for this connection, i.e. how viewers connect the film with their everyday life, be it with respect to the general issues that are raised, or be it with regard to personal characteristics that shape their viewing experience. This step will be based on a combined qualitative and quantitative content analysis of open answers regarding general issues and personal characteristics that shed light on the connection between the viewer types' everyday lives and their *Hobbit* experience. While the analyses that are based on standardised data include the global sample of the project, the analyses that are based on open questions focus on respondents from Austria and Germany only; this is due to language reasons and the need to reduce the vast number of cases to be analysed.

2 Operationalisation

Our analysis is based on the data that have been collected within the framework of the World Hobbit Project (for details see Barker & Mathijs in this volume).

2.1 *Identifying patterns of orientation towards* The Hobbit

As argued above, orientations towards *The Hobbit* can differ with regard to the salience of four levels of popular culture: viewers might be interested a) in the particular story of *The Hobbit*; b) in Tolkien's world, c) in fantasy in general; and d) in popular cinema as a whole. In order to identify patterns of orientation we defined specific criteria for each level, which indicate whether this level is salient for an individual viewer:

2.1.1 *The* Hobbit *level*

In order to find out, whether an individual is interested in *The Hobbit* itself we referred to the following indicators; all of them indicate a particular interest in and orientation towards the story of *The Hobbit*:

- Reasons for seeing *The Hobbit* films: 52 percent of the respondents selected the option 'I knew the book, and had to see what the films would be like'.
- Other activities connected with *The Hobbit* films: 44 percent mentioned more than one activity.
- Reading the book: 44 per cent said they had read the book 'more than once'.
- Films seen: 88 percent said they have seen all three.

44 percent of the respondents met at least three of the four criteria. They can be characterised by a particular interest in the specific product, i.e. *The Hobbit*.

2.1.2 The level of Tolkien's world

In order to find out whether an individual is interested in Tolkien's world, we referred to the following indicators; all of them indicate a particular interest in and orientation towards the Tolkien's world:

- Reasons for seeing *The Hobbit* films: 73 percent of the respondents selected the option 'I love Tolkien's work as a whole'.
- Appreciation of the *Lord of the Rings* films overall: 76 percent said they find them 'excellent'.

57 percent of the respondents met both criteria and thus can be characterised by a particular interest in Tolkien's world in general.

2.1.3 The level of fantasy

In order to find out, whether an individual is interested in fantasy in general we referred to the following indicators; all of them indicate a particular interest in and orientation towards the genre of fantasy:

- Reasons for seeing *The Hobbit* films: 45 percent of the respondents selected the option 'I love fantasy films generally'.
- Functions of fantasy today: Respondents were asked 'What is the role that you think fantasy stories can play today?' Ten rather positive options were proposed; 80 percent mentioned at least three options.

38 percent of the respondents met both criteria and thus can be characterised by a particular interest in fantasy.

2.1.4 The level of cinema

In order to find out, whether an individual is interested in cinema in general we referred to the following indicators; all of them indicate a particular interest in and orientation towards cinema as a whole:

- Cinema-related reasons for seeing *The Hobbit* films: 26 percent of the respondents selected at least one of the following options: 'I wanted to experience their special features (e.g., high frame rate, 3D)', 'I like to see big new films when they come out', 'I wanted to be part of an international experience'.
- Director- and actor-related reasons for seeing *The Hobbit* films: 43 percent selected at least one of the following options: 'I love Peter Jackson's films', 'An actor that I particularly like was in them'.

58 percent of the respondents met at least one of these two criteria that are not directly linked with *The Hobbit* or Tolkien or fantasy, thus they are characterised by a particular interest in cinema in general.

2.1.5 Patterns of orientation

Based on the four criteria, we were able to identify combinations of these levels. There are sixteen logical combinations; all of them can be observed in our sample indicating a high degree of diversity in viewers' orientations. For each combination **Table 1** shows the number of cases and the respective percentage of the full sample. We also added the expected percentages that have been calculated on the basis of the prevalence of the four indicators.[1] There are some combinations that clearly appear more often than expected: on the one hand these are combinations with a strong interest in *The Hobbit* as well as in Tolkien's world and no interest in either fantasy or cinema (no. 2 [+++-], 3 [++-+], 6 [++--]).

Table 1: Patterns of orientation

	Pattern*)	Cases	% observed	% expected
1	++++	1632	4.5	5.4
2	+++ -	2152	6.0	3.9
3	++ - +	4086	11.3	9.2
4	+ - ++	788	2.2	4.1
5	- +++	2149	6.0	7.0
6	++ - -	3377	9.4	6.6
7	+ - + -	979	2.7	3.0
8	- ++ -	1626	4.5	5.0
9	+ - - +	1604	4.4	6.9
10	- + - +	3552	9.8	11.7
11	- - ++	3036	8.4	5.2
12	+ - - -	1327	3.7	4.9
13	- + - -	2040	5.7	8.3
14	- - + -	1160	3.2	3.7
15	- - - +	4247	11.8	8.8
16	- - - -	2346	6.5	6.2
	Total	36101	100.0	100.0

Base: Total sample. *) Symbols refer to 1) *Hobbit*, 2) Tolkien, 3) Fantasy, and 4) Cinema.
'+' means the level is important within this pattern, '-' means it is not important.

On the other hand these are combinations with no particular interest in *The Hobbit* and Tolkien's world and some interest in either fantasy or cinema (no. 11 [--++], no. 15 [---+]). Consequently there are patterns that have been observed less often than expected (no. 4 [+-++], no. 9 [+--+], no. 10 [-+-+], no. 13 [-+--]); they have in common that they include opposing orientations toward *The Hobbit* and Tolkien's world.

According to our conceptual approach, these combinations represent different patterns of orientation towards the films; we assume that they go along with different levels of appreciation, the perceived role of fantasy, and the links to everyday life. Before we present the findings, we describe the procedures to analyse links to everyday life.

2.2 *Relating* The Hobbit *to everyday life*

The questionnaire included two open questions that refer to the links that respondents create between the film and their everyday life: 'Do *The Hobbit* films raise any broader issues or themes on which you would like to comment?' and 'Is there anything particular about you personally that would help us understand your feelings about the book or the films of *The Hobbit*?' While the first question tries to elicit thoughts about the perceived 'message' of the films and about its implications for broader societal, moral, or cultural issues, the second question directly asks for the respondents' personal links to the films.

Since the respondents answered in their own languages, we focus on the particular subsample of respondents who are living in Austria or Germany and used the German language questionnaire (Austria: n=705; Germany: n=3350). The Austrian and the German team[2] applied an empirical approach that included several steps.

- First, in order to get an overview about the range of answers, we read all of them and noted any interesting reference to broader issues and personal relevance. At the same time we marked particularly illustrative references to the symbolic material provided by the films.

- Second, we developed a detailed coding scheme. Since we observed that respondents' answers to the eleven open questions of the questionnaire tend to include many similarities and cross-references we decided to develop one comprehensive coding scheme, which we applied to all open questions. Referring to the topics of the open questions we built twelve main categories: 1) Emotional reactions; 2) references to the book and to Tolkien's world; 3) actors; 4) figures of the story; 5) groups of figures; 6) genres; 7) specific characteristics of the films; 8) messages; 9) co-audience and fan-culture; 10) discussions about the films; 11) personal relevance; 12) cultural activities. The final coding scheme included about 500 categories and subcategories.

- Third, the answers to the two above-mentioned questions (as well as to most other questions) were coded by using this coding scheme. Since

some answers were quite complex we attributed up to five categories per answer.[3] This procedure is obviously in-between classical quantitative and qualitative content analysis. For quantitative analyses it is unusual to use a coding scheme with 500 categories. This means that normal measures of inter-coder reliability cannot be applied. We only used double coding of small parts of the material in order to reflect on short-comings of the coding scheme and to make sure that coding decisions in Salzburg for the Austrian cases and in Hamburg for the German cases are based on the same understanding of the categories. For qualitative analyses it is unusual to apply it to large samples. This means that, in a first approach to the data, we could not realise a contextualised coding that also takes the respondents' answers to other questions into consideration. Nevertheless, this procedure seemed to be the best way to make use of the rich information the respondents had provided and to relate it to the standardised parts of the questionnaire.

- Fourth, in addition to the quantitative analysis we added a qualitative step that was built on particularly informative responses. Based on the original coding we used the original answers to interpret respondents' references to their everyday life in more detail.

3   Patterns of orientation, appreciation and role of fantasy

The patterns of orientation that we have constructed are linked with different levels of appreciation (**Table 2**). Those who are not particularly interested in *The Hobbit* but in Tolkien's world, fantasy, and cinema in general (no. 5: -+++), are most positive about the films. The most negative evaluation is among those who are particularly interested in *The Hobbit*, but not in the other three levels (no. 12: +---). The findings for the other patterns underline the relevance of such a pattern-oriented approach: We find some patterns that differ with respect to just one of the four levels but are linked with very different degrees of appreciation. If we take, for instance, pattern no. 12 (+---) which leads to the most negative evaluation, and add one of the three other levels respectively, we observe another negative evaluation for those who are interested in fantasy (no. 7: +-+-) and rather positive evaluations for those who are interested in cinema in general (no. 9: +--+) or in Tolkien's world (no. 6: ++--).

In the next step we analyse the relationship between patterns of orientation and the perceived role of fantasy (see **Table 3**). The question was: 'What is the role that you think fantasy stories can play today?' For each pattern the Table shows how many respondents selected the following five items: 'They are a way of enriching the imagination' (Imagination); 'They are a way of experiencing and exploring emotions' (Emotions); 'They are a source of hopes and dreams for changing our world' (Hopes and dreams); 'They are a way of escaping' (Escape); 'They are a way of creating alternative worlds' (Alternative

Table 2: Appreciation of *The Hobbit* by patterns of orientation

	Pattern	*Cases*	Mean	Standard deviation
1	++++	1632	1.8	0.9
2	+++ -	2152	2.1	1.0
3	++ - +	4086	1.8	0.9
4	+ - ++	788	2.1	1.0
5	- +++	2149	1.7	0.8
6	++ - -	3377	2.1	1.0
7	+ - + -	979	2.7	1.1
8	- ++ -	1626	1.9	0.9
9	+ - - +	1604	2.2	1.1
10	- + - +	3552	1.8	0.9
11	- - ++	3036	1.9	0.9
12	+ - - -	1327	2.9	1.1
13	- + - -	2040	2.1	1.0
14	- - + -	1160	2.2	1.0
15	- - - +	4247	2.1	1.0
16	- - - -	2346	2.6	1.2
	Total	36101	2.1	1.0

Base: Total sample. Question: 'What did you think of the *Hobbit* films overall?' Answer categories: 1= Excellent, 2=Good, 3=Average, 4=Poor, 5=Awful. Cells in dark grey: >=3 percent lower (more positive) than average; white cells: >=3 per cent higher (more negative) than average.

worlds). Enriching the imagination turns out to be the most characteristic role of fantasy; more than two thirds of all respondents selected it (see **Table 3**, lowest row). The second important role is escaping. Both roles emphasise the difference between fantasy products and reality. Other roles like experiencing emotions or hoping and dreaming for changing our world that include a more explicit reference to the reality of everyday life, are chosen by about a third of the respondents only.

The patterns of orientation clearly differ with regard to the perceived role of fantasy. It is apparent that there is a general trend that patterns indicating a high level of engagement, i.e. a strong interest in three or more levels of orientation, are linked with a higher likelihood to select all five functions of fantasy. Correspondingly, those respondents who express an interest in only a few levels of orientation tend to attribute fewer roles to fantasy. Beyond this general trend we can observe that the level of fantasy is closely connected to the perceived role of fantasy: all patterns including an interest in fantasy have

Table 3: Role of fantasy by patterns of orientation (row percentages)

	Pattern	Imagination	Emotions	Hopes and dreams	Escape	Alternative worlds
1	++++	78	42	51	67	59
2	+++ -	76	30	43	60	51
3	++ - +	69	35	41	54	44
4	+ - ++	74	37	39	56	53
5	- +++	77	35	43	62	55
6	++ - -	65	30	38	54	43
7	+ - + -	73	33	36	58	51
8	- ++ -	76	29	40	60	52
9	+ - - +	64	30	30	52	44
10	- + - +	65	28	33	49	44
11	- - ++	76	34	35	59	52
12	+ - - -	60	26	27	50	40
13	- + - -	62	22	28	48	40
14	- - + -	73	31	33	62	51
15	- - - +	59	24	24	48	40
16	- - - -	53	19	21	45	34
	Total	68	30	35	54	46

Base: Total sample. Cells in dark grey: >= 5 percent higher than average; white cells: >= 5 percent lower than average. Reading example: 78 percent of respondents with pattern no. 1 (++++) have selected the item 'They are a way of enriching the imagination'.

at least average or higher percentages; in this respect, pattern no. 14 is particularly remarkable. This close connection can be regarded as a validation of our above operationalisation of the level of fantasy: Respondents who claim a particular interest in this level of their *Hobbit* experience also think that this genre can play an important role today.

Since the following step of our analysis is based on open questions that we have analysed for respondents from Austria and Germany only, **Table 4** provides an overview of the appearance of the patterns of orientations in these two countries compared to the rest of the sample. The results underline strong differences between countries. We assume that they are mainly due to the fact that sampling strategies were mainly based on convenience, e.g. by approaching universities, cinemas, associations in the area of cinema, fantasy and Tolkien, social media, and reports in mass media. These approaches turned out to be more or less successful in different countries; to our impression in Austria we were more successful via mass media and universities, while in Germany social media activities addressed at fantasy communities went particularly well. This might be the reason why the

samples from two neighbouring countries as Austria and Germany seem to represent rather oppositional orientations towards the *Hobbit* experience. While the German sample is particularly interested in *The Hobbit* itself – patterns no. 1, 3, 6, and 9 appear more often than in the total sample – the Austrian sample tends to be less engaged – here patterns 13 to 16 are overrepresented. This corresponds with differences between the countries with

Table 4: Patterns of orientation in Austria and Germany (column percentages)

	Pattern	Austria	Germany	Total sample
1	+ + + +	4.8	5.3	4.5
2	+ + + -	3.4	5.3	6.0
3	+ + - +	9.9	13.4	11.3
4	+ - + +	1.7	2.2	2.2
5	- + + +	6.0	4.8	6.0
6	+ + - -	9.9	14.6	9.4
7	+ - + -	2.4	2.5	2.7
8	- + + -	4.5	3.9	4.5
9	+ - - +	3.4	6.2	4.4
10	- + - +	9.9	10.0	9.8
11	- - + +	7.0	6.9	8.4
12	+ - - -	3.3	3.4	3.7
13	- + - -	6.8	5.3	5.7
14	- - + -	4.4	2.5	3.2
15	- - - +	15.0	9.8	11.8
16	- - - -	7.5	3.8	6.5
	Cases	*705*	*3350*	*36101*

Base: Total sample. Cells in dark grey: >= 0.5 percent higher than total sample; white cells: >= 0.5 percent lower than total sample. Reading example: 4.8 percent of respondents in Austria have pattern no. 1 (++++), 5.3 in Germany, 4.5 percent in the total sample.

regard to the overall appreciation of the films: respondents from Germany (1.78) rate it far better than respondents from Austria (2.24), while the total sample is between these two (2.04). We would like to repeat that we do not interpret these differences as differences between 'Austrians' and 'Germans' or between 'Austrian culture' and 'German culture', but between two samples, which represent different parts of the respective population.

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4 Connections to everyday life

As explained above, in order to investigate how viewers of *The Hobbit* link this experience with their everyday life, we draw on two questions: 'Do the *Hobbit* films raise any broader issues or themes on which you would like to comment?' (broader issues) and 'Is there anything particular about you personally that would help us understand your feelings about the book or the films of *The Hobbit*?' (personal relevance).

4.1 *Respondents' readiness to answer the open questions*

As a first quantitative indicator for the degree to which respondents link the symbolic material with their everyday life and broader societal issues we take the readiness to give us an answer on these open questions. In line with the above observation that the German sample is much more engaged with *The Hobbit* than the Austrian sample, the likelihood of German respondents to answer the open questions is much higher, particularly with regard to the question on personal relevance (**Table 5**).

Table 5: Respondents who answered the two open questions referring to everyday life (column percentages)

Question	Austria	Germany
Broader Issues	30.9	38.9
Personal relevance	32.9	47.0
Cases	*705*	*3350*

Base: Austrian and German sample

If we look at how often broader issues and aspects of personal relevance are mentioned by respondents with different patterns of orientation (see **Table 6**) we can observe that the general degree of engagement, i.e. the number of levels that the respondents are interested in, is a predictor of the respondents' willingness to answer the open questions: The percentages in the upper part of **Table 6** showing patterns of orientations that are characterized by three or four levels of interest are generally higher than in the lower part; this is particularly true for personal relevance. There is one significant exception: respondents with pattern no. 5 (-+++) are less likely to answer these questions and

respondents with pattern no. 12 (+---) are more likely. These findings show that interest in the story of *The Hobbit* itself is the crucial condition for establishing links to reality: if viewers share this interest, even if they are not particularly engaged in Tolkien's world, fantasy and cinema in general, they are more likely to report about connections between the films and their personal life; if they do not, they are less willing to respond.

Table 6: References to everyday life by patterns of orientation

	Pattern	Cases	Broader Issues	Personal Relevance
1	++++	212	39.2	51.4
2	+++ -	203	44.3	50.2
3	++ - +	520	44.6	53.8
4	+ - ++	86	47.7	51.2
5	- +++	204	30.4	35.8
6	++ - -	558	40.3	52.7
7	+ - + -	101	41.6	48.5
8	- ++ -	162	36.4	43.8
9	+ - - +	231	38.1	49.4
10	- + - +	404	38.4	40.3
11	- - ++	280	30.0	37.9
12	+ - - -	138	39.9	52.2
13	- + - -	224	31.3	33.5
14	- - + -	116	39.7	35.3
15	- - - +	435	30.3	34.5
16	- - - -	181	31.5	34.3
	Total	4055	37.5	44.5

Base: Austrian and German sample. Cells in dark grey: >= 5 percent higher than total sample; white cells: >= 5 percent lower than total sample. Reading example: 39.8 percent of respondents with pattern no. 1 (++++) mentioned broader issues connected with the films; 51.4 mentioned some kind of personal relevance of the films.

4.2   *Qualitative analysis of connections with everyday life*

In order to go beyond the question if respondents answer the questions regarding the connections of *The Hobbit* with reality and their everyday life we conducted a qualitative analysis[4] of the answers on the question referring to the personal relevance ('Is there anything particular about you personally that would help us understand your feelings about the book or the films of *The Hobbit*?').

A first observation is that many answers include a personal statement about being a fan of Tolkien's works in general, of *Lord of the Rings*, and/or of *The Hobbit* book. For example: 'I am a fan of Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* and of *The Hobbit* since I was a small child' (Participant #165, all quotes are authors' translations). These respondents are often quite critical with regard to the films about *The Hobbit* compared to the book and to *Lord of the Rings*. As one respondent puts it:

> I have been a fan of Tolkien's works since more than twenty years. In all these years I have developed clear ideas about the story; therefore I was curious how the story would be presented in a film. It did not take much time to understand that the book and the film have to be strictly separated in order to become 'happy' with them – I had the same experience with *The Lord of the Rings* which, by the way, was put on film in a much better way. (#1530)

It becomes apparent that the majority of respondents to this question have read the book; this is in line with the above findings based on standardised questions. Those who refer to the fact that they read the book are particularly critical about the film:

> I grew up with Tolkien's books; therefore they are highly important for me. Since Peter Jackson did quite well in putting *The Lord of the Rings* on film (with the exception of minor details), I hoped for a good film again, but was heavily disappointed. (#21263)

The three quotes lead to another interesting observation: All of them underline the fact that they came to know Tolkien's works very early in their lives and that reading the book or seeing the film connects them with their childhood and youth. This is a general observation: Many respondents connect their *Hobbit* experience with their own biography and a wide range of memories. Particular reference is made to childhood and youth: 'I grew up with the books and films, mainly played Middle-earth computer games and re-enacted them with my friends in a forest! This led to a strong connection to Tolkien's world.' (#18377) Some respondents remember their time at school and particular experiences. *The Hobbit* serves as a companion through one's life-time, be it because it reminds them of Christmas, or because they came to know their partner while they watched one of the films, or they remember co-viewing situations with their parents, siblings, partners or their friends. The sometimes very close connection between *The Hobbit*, biography and family life is illustrated by the following quotes:

> When I was about twelve, my father first told me about *Lord of the Rings*. Aged fourteen I was allowed to see the film on video. My father said: It is a pity that only one book has been put on film; there will never be another film

about it. Since the three books were too complicated he gave me the *Hobbit* book: Read this!!! After that there was another book with questions and answers regarding *The Hobbit*. We spent many evenings playing our own quiz. When I was nineteen, my father died in his 41st year. My first thought when I heard about the films about *Lord of the Rings* was: What a pity, Dad, that you cannot see them. Meanwhile my sons are old enough to go to the cinema with me. Thus *The Hobbit* was a family event throughout my life. This came to an end right now. Great films … great time … I will miss them!!!! (#2879)

I love these films. They have changed my life and shaped the last three years. Sometime when I will look back at this time, I will remember this. Everything that has happened. The good and the evil. Those who survived, and those who didn't. (#8024)

With regard to other explicit connections between *The Hobbit* to the respondents' everyday lives, we find a wide range of references. One respondent argues that these connections depend on the personal attitude towards fantasy stories: 'I just think, either you are able to let the stories take you along, or you aren't. Fortunately I belong to the first group!' (#1202) This quote nicely reflects our above-presented findings with regard to differences regarding the functions of fantasy in general.

One kind of explicit connection between the films and reality is a negative one: Many answers point to the fact that *The Hobbit* is used in order to escape from reality. Again this corresponds with the finding that 'escape' is regarded as an important role of fantasy. The respondents explicitly state that they regard the film as an opportunity to escape from their everyday life, as material for daydreams, and as relieve from a reality, which is perceived as dull.

As a teenager and young adult I have used Tolkien's book *Lord of the Rings* and also *The Hobbit* as a point of escape for relaxation. Due to the good memories, which go back to this time, they found a place in my heart. In particular I have dealt with the single figures, their motives, their character, their development and the moral behind the whole story. (#23243)

For some respondents Tolkien's world represents an alternative world that does not only serve as distraction but also helps to transcend everyday life and to become aware of its limitations.

These films have become a part of my life. Since I have seen these films and read these books, it seems to me as if I am a stranger in this world, and rather belong in Middle-earth.' (#1826)

Others emphasise that the symbolic material offers orientation in their everyday life, on which they can rely in different phases and situations of life and which helps them to cope with everyday challenges: 'Tolkien is my source of hope, of moral principles, and of inspiration in all circumstances of life'. (#2911) Some of them mention specific messages with regard to what is needed in their real life, e.g. solidarity and friendship.

> Nowadays I miss solidarity; everybody looks at him- or herself and does not care about others. The book and the films are the complete opposite and show how things could be better. (#3095)

Due to the specific political and societal circumstances during the period of data collection quite a few respondents explicitly connect *The Hobbit* with the ongoing refugee-crisis. We looked for statements concerning this topic in order to illustrate the potential of fantasy as a resource to reflect current political and societal challenges. Some of these statements were given as answers to other open questions of the questionnaire.

> *Unexpected Journey* has entertained me, but it did not surprise me or made me think about broader issues – I know the literary text. However *Desolation of Smaug* touched me: The homelessness of the dwarfs who, driven by the longing for the time when their world was intact, jump into a dangerous adventure, in order to go back to their roots. That reminded me of the fate of many refugees in the real world. (#1550)

In the third part an issue appears that is surprisingly topical: the question how to deal with people in need who have lost everything and ask for help. In the film these are the people from Lake-town, in our presence these are the refugees from Syria and other areas of crisis. Europe should ask itself whether it, as the dwarfs, actually wants to remain seated on its treasure of gold, entrenched behind walls, or whether they should help these people as much as possible. (#2888)

> Well, feeling lost is always a topic, the dwarfs feel lost, because they are homeless; Bilbo, because he is far from home and not regarded as part of the community. This is also true for many of us, not only for the refugees but also for many others who feel lost and look for a place they belong to. As particularly the third film nicely shows friendship and loyalty are much more valuable than the biggest treasure of gold. (#20268)

> Yes, I found one topic very interesting, which is also debated in the real world. In fact, in the film the dwarfs have been expelled and did not get any help from other 'tribes'. A highly topical issue are the refugees from

Lampedusa who do not have a home either, and are seeking for asylum in other countries. In my view these two events are quite similar and make me think why in the film all parties help each other and fight together, while here the biggest part of the population keeps complaining about 'foreigners'. (#20880)

The dwarfs as refugees have been an interesting approach; unfortunately this has not been elaborated. In today's world where wars and conflicts have created the biggest flows of refugees since the two world wars, this is a highly topical issue… (#470)

I am highly engaged in social issues and work with people with a migration background. Questions of war, justice, homelessness, company, orientation, human development and others are highly relevant for me. To watch them through the lenses of a fantasy world on the one hand relieves me and on the other hand it opens new perspectives on my everyday reality. (#1550)

Some other answers include different forms of para-social references to the story in general and to specific protagonists. For instance, some protagonists serve as role models for the viewers' own orientations and practices or as representative who help to overcome their own limitations and expand their horizon of experiences: 'I have to use a wheel-chair; therefore I love fantasy stories, in which normal people experience extraordinary adventures and go beyond oneself' (#265). Many viewers take the story and its protagonists as an opportunity for experiencing deep emotions as joy and mourning, they make it possible to take part in moving others' farewell scene. The protagonists are perceived as agents who take the viewers with them through the plot and help them to reconstruct and understand the underlying motives and why they had to act as they did.

Furthermore, although this has been explicitly treated in another question, some respondents emphasise the personal relevance of *The Hobbit* as an opportunity for co-viewing and sharing it as a member of a fan-community. To perceive oneself as part of a particular community, sometimes related to fantasy, often related to Tolkien, and, less often, related to *The Hobbit* is an important aspect of personal relevance of the films.

Finally, a few respondents mentioned creative activities related to the films, e.g. writing stories, making films, or doing research on *The Hobbit*, its plot, figures and landscapes, because they are interested in mythologies, or film music, or because they are working in film or literature studies.

4.3   Quantitative analysis of connections with everyday life

Based on the qualitative analysis of the answers regarding the personal relevance of *The Hobbit* we added a quantitative approach in order to cover the full sample of respondents from Austria and Germany. This analysis is done for those respondents only who actually

mentioned some kind of personal relevance (i.e. 44.5 percent of the respondents in Austria and Germany, see **Table 6**).

Table *7*: Main categories of answers regarding personal relevance (column percentages)

Main category	Personal Relevance
1) Emotional reactions	8.8
2) Reference to book/Tolkien	10.8
3) Actors	1.6
4) Figures in the story	1.8
5) Groups of figures in the story	1.2
6) Genres	2.7
7) Characteristics of the film	3.1
8) Messages	0.6
9) Co-audiences and fan-culture	34.3
10) Discussions about the film	29.8
11) Personal relevance	91.9
12) Cultural activities	5.9
Cases	*1805*

Base: Respondents in Austria and Germany who have answered the question on aspects of personal relevance. Multiple responses: percentages based on respondents (up to 5 categories could be used per answer, therefore the percentages add up to more than 100 percent). Dark grey: main category that corresponds with the question.

Table 7 shows to which main categories the answers have been attributed. On average 2.0 categories were coded for answers regarding aspects of personal relevance. On the one hand it is obvious that most respondents gave answers that refer to aspects of their own everyday life. On the other hand, we can also observe that other main categories apply to the answers. When asked for aspects of personal relevance, respondents also mentioned the co-audience or fan-community (34.3%), and the general discussions about the films (29.8%); this indicates that the broader social context of the films is an important aspect of the *Hobbit* experience. In addition some answers refer to the original book and/or Tolkien's world in general (10.8%) or to the respondents' emotional reactions to the films (8.8%).

In order to specify the links to reality we analysed those answers that were coded as 'personal relevance'. Building on the qualitative analysis we recoded the answers into the following subcategories:

- Empathy: references to emotional reactions, to empathy with the films' figures, and to para-social interaction;

- Orientation: references to guiding functions of the film, e.g. providing orientation and role-models, eliciting new ideas, encouraging self-reflection;
- Community: references to community-building by watching the films, to participating in debates about the films and to membership in a fan-community;
- Escape: statements that express the films' function of escaping from everyday world, of dreaming about alternative worlds;
- Biography: answers that refer to the close connection of the films with their own biography or certain memories;
- Family and friends: specific references to family members and friends;
- Research: references to academic interest in the films.

Table 8 shows the frequencies of these sub-categories among the respondents in Austria and Germany. Escapist and biographic references are most prevalent, followed by references to emotions and orientation.

Table 5: Subcategories of personal relevance

Sub-categories	Personal Relevance
Empathy	15.7
Orientation	15.2
Social contacts	3.6
Escape	19.4
Biography	19.8
Family and friends	7.9
Research	7.8
Cases	*1805*

Base: Respondents in Austria and Germany who have answered the question. Multiple responses: percentages based on respondents (up to 5 categories could be used per answer).

Following our basic assumption that connections to everyday lives are linked with the particular approach to the films, i.e. the pattern of orientation, **Table 9** provides an overview of the kinds of personal relevance that viewers with different patterns of orientation have expressed. The overall impression underlines that the patterns of orientation *do* matter: depending on the particular pattern there are significant differences regarding the way how respondents relate the films to their everyday lives. For instance, *escapist* references are most likely to be mentioned by patterns that are characterised by low interest in *The Hobbit* itself (no. 10 [-+-+], no. 11 [--++], no. 5 [-+++], and no. 8 [-++-]);

Table 9: Sub-categories of personal relevance by patterns of orientation

	Pattern	Cases	Em-pathy	Orient-ation	Social contacts	Escape	Bio-graphy	Family/ Friends	Research
1	++++	109	24.8	12.8	1.8	16.5	19.3	5.5	6.4
2	+++ -	102	5.9	8.8	7.8	19.6	21.6	5.9	10.8
3	++ - +	280	17.5	20.0	3.6	19.3	26.1	9.3	8.2
4	+ - ++	44	25.0	22.7	9.1	13.6	13.6	2.3	4.5
5	- +++	73	20.5	19.2	0.0	24.7	8.2	8.2	0.0
6	++ - -	294	12.6	15.3	4.1	20.4	30.3	11.6	6.5
7	+ - + -	49	10.2	10.2	2.0	12.2	34.7	10.2	18.4
8	- ++ -	71	12.7	12.7	7.0	23.9	18.3	5.6	5.6
9	+ - - +	114	28.1	15.8	3.5	14.0	15.8	7.9	8.8
10	- + - +	163	17.2	21.5	3.7	28.2	15.3	6.1	7.4
11	- - ++	106	17.9	21.7	3.8	26.4	7.5	4.7	6.6
12	+ - - -	72	9.7	11.1	2.8	6.9	27.8	4.2	15.3
13	- + - -	75	12.0	12.0	4.0	14.7	21.3	8.0	4.0
14	- - + -	41	14.6	12.2	0.0	22.0	9.8	4.9	7.3
15	- - - +	150	14.7	7.3	2.7	18.0	11.3	10.7	8.7
16	- - - -	62	3.2	6.5	0.0	14.5	4.8	4.8	11.3
	Total	1805	15.7	15.2	3.6	19.4	19.8	7.9	7.8

Base: Austrian and German sample. Cells in dark grey: >= 5 percent higher than total sample; white cells: >= 5 percent lower than total sample. Reading example: 24.8 percent of respondents with pattern no. 1 (++++) mentioned some personal relevance of the films that has been coded as 'empathy'.

correspondingly, those who are mainly and only interested in *The Hobbit* are least likely to mention escapist thoughts about the films (no. 12 [+---]). To the contrary, *biographic* references were most often mentioned by respondents that share an explicit interest in *The Hobbit* (no. 7 [+-+-], no. 6 [++--], no. 12 [+---], and no. 3 [++-+]); they were particularly rare among patterns indicating no interest in *The Hobbit* itself (no. 16 [----], no. 11 [--++], no. 5 [-+++]).

Other references depend on other levels of orientation. For instance, references to empathic readings are most likely among respondents with patterns characterised by high interest in cinema in general, combined with different other interests, with *The Hobbit* – alone or with other levels (no. 9 [+--+], no. 4 [+-++], no. 1 [++++]) – or without *The Hobbit*, but with the two other levels (no. 5 [-+++]).

5 Discussion and conclusions

In this paper we have investigated how viewers of fantasy link this symbolic material to their everyday lives. We started from theoretical approaches that regard popular culture as a resource for coping with challenges of social circumstances and of everyday life. Against this background we developed the argument that different patterns of orientation towards cultural products go along with different references to reality. We took *The Hobbit* as a particular case of a popular product and the World Hobbit Project with its global data on viewers' reactions to this film as the basis for our research. Based on standardised indicators for viewers' interest in *The Hobbit* itself, in Tolkien's world, in the genre of fantasy, and in 'big cinema' in general we identified distinct patterns of orientation that go along with differences regarding film appreciation and perceived functions of fantasy. By means of a qualitative analysis of open answers from Austria and Germany regarding broader issues and aspects of personal relevance that are raised by the film we identified relevant ways and topics, by which viewers link the film to their everyday life; in this respect the topic of refugees turned out to be of particular importance. Based on that, we conducted a quantitative analysis showing that the patterns of orientation go along with different references to the real world.

An issue of broader relevance for audience and reception research is the distinction between patterns of orientation towards a product of popular culture: Whether viewers want to see a particular story, a more general cultural space of references, a particular genre, or whether they 'just like to go to the movies' makes a difference. These aspects must not be analysed as separate phenomena; as we were able to demonstrate it is important to identify specific combinations of them, i.e. specific *patterns* of orientation towards the cultural product. Different patterns go along with different levels of appreciation and with different kinds of connecting their *Hobbit* experience with one's everyday life. With regard to this we have to emphasise that throughout our analyses we cannot properly distinguish between *The Hobbit* as symbolic material in general, the book, and the three films; it is in some open answers only, that respondents clearly state, to which level they refer. In our view most answers can be interpreted as references to *The Hobbit* as symbolic material.

The finding that those who were particularly interested in *The Hobbit* and not in the other levels were most critical about the film is reflected by many qualitative observations according to which those who are most involved in the very substance of Tolkien's *Hobbit* are particularly sensitive about what they perceive as superficial technical effects and the commercialisation of this story: The notion that the film is a commercial product as well as the strong focus on technical effects limit its potential as symbolic material that can be used for coping with everyday challenges.

In methodological terms, it is quite unusual to have answers to open questions from such a large sample: 33 percent in Austria and 47 percent in Germany answered our question regarding issues of personal relevance. These answers were surprisingly complex and thoughtful and thus touched many different aspects of the *Hobbit* experience, for

instance escape, orientation, biographic memories, and co-viewing situations with family and friends.

With regard to particular references to broader societal issues, the finding that quite a few respondents explicitly referred to the topic of refugees and stated that the film included relevant messages that could help to cope with this issue underlines the potential of fantasy products in the real world. This finding is even more surprising since the data collection (December 2014 until May 2015) took place several months before the refugee crisis became the top issue on the agenda in Austria and Germany (August 2015 and later).

At the same time we have to acknowledge that many respondents did not at all answer the question on issues of personal relevance. While it is not possible to definitely say whether this is due to a lack of willingness to write down another time-consuming answer or to share personal experiences with the research team, or whether they do not see any personal links to *The Hobbit*, our finding that the likelihood to answer this question is closely connected to the patterns of orientation indicates that the majority of non-responses reflects a low level of engagement with this cultural product.

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Notes:

[1] Due to the large sample the deviations from the expected frequencies are highly significant anyway. In the following we regard all differences >= 1.5 percentage points as relevant.

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