Greed, war, hope, love and friendship: Contemporary structures of feeling and the audience's readings of broader themes in *The Hobbit*

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Abstract:
This article presents the results of an analysis of the ways in which German speaking respondents to the World Hobbit questionnaire relate *The Hobbit* films to broader social issues. The answers to the corresponding open question show that viewers find multiple ways to link the movies, its contents and messages, but also aspects of their production to current social problems and developments. By using Raymond Williams' concept of 'structure of feeling', we are able to illustrate that the personal reactions to *The Hobbit* often bear traces of collective expectations and feelings, and what prevails as common sense under historic-specific conditions. The key themes that emerged in the analysis are the enticements and problems of capitalism, the binary of war and destruction on one side and community, love and friendship on the other, as well as the complex of the individual's potentials and how this relates to the dominant social discourse of neo-liberalism.

Keywords: Fantasy audiences; Structures of feelings; Neoliberalism; Capitalism; *The Hobbit*

Introduction
This essay explores the ways in which the German speaking audience referred to broader issues or themes that were raised by the *Hobbit* films. The analysis of the comments of the viewers proves to be illuminating in a number of ways: first, the answers given illustrate

how fantasy films like *The Hobbit* stimulate their viewers to make connections to and reflect on contemporary social issues and challenges. Thus these answers vividly prove that fantasy films are far from being trivial, naïve and childish as they are often accused of being for offering a fantasy world preferably with happy endings and redemption, thus leading to 'mere' escapism (Fowkes 2010, 6). Rather, as we will argue throughout the essay, the viewers of *The Hobbit* films are affected in various ways and make connections between the films and broader social issues. Watching *The Hobbit* makes them think about social values, the potentials of the individual and the community, and instigates them to problematize current film production as defined and constrained by dominant forms of capitalism. The answers also make evident how misleading and unproductive it would be to simply oppose fantasy films and 'reality'.

Second, the viewers' responses are exemplary for articulating and relating the structures of feelings offered in *The Hobbit* films with key elements of the structures of feeling that characterize our contemporary conditions. Using Raymond Williams' (1977) concept of 'structures of feeling' enriches our understanding of the audiences' readings of broader themes in *The Hobbit*, and offers an additional explanation for what makes *The Hobbit* films so attractive for their fans and aficionados. As our analysis of the answers shows, elements of the narrative as well as certain characters are referred to as expressing collective values, desires, anxieties, fears and hopes. We will point out the ways in which these are connected to today's structures of feeling, that is, to what it feels like to live under contemporary conditions in the German speaking European West. Additionally, using the concept of 'structures of feeling' allows us to contextualize some of the critique that is expressed in the survey, especially regarding the film adaptation of Tolkien's novels.

Methodologically, this article is based on a qualitative analysis of the answers to the open question 'Do *The Hobbit* films raise any broader issues or themes on which you would like to comment?' The database that was accessed for this analysis comprises 4869 German language questionnaires. 3235 of which include answers to the aforementioned question.

For the general analysis of the data, the German and Austrian Hobbit teams developed a coding scheme that was then applied to the open questions in the questionnaire[1] in order to facilitate a standardized analysis. In our analysis, we used this coding scheme as a starting point for a qualitative in-depth analysis of the answers. Our attempt to also capture the 'tone' of the answers required an additional coding step. The open questions were transferred to qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA) followed by a process of further open coding and axial coding (see Strauss/Corbin 1996: 209-212). Through this process we uncovered first indications of different readings of The Hobbit that show how the respondents make sense of the themes in the movies also (but not exclusively) linked to contemporary social issues und structures of feelings.

We first present our theoretical approach and then discuss the main results from our analysis of the answers to the open question No. 10 from the German language questionnaire[2], as expressions of structures of feeling relating to issues of capitalism, war, community and neoliberalism.

1. Beyond the fantasy/realism binary: structures of feeling

As with any genre, the question what characterizes fantasy films and makes them distinguishable from other genres is a tricky one. Since this is not the space to elaborate on genre conventions of fantasy films in detail, we just touch on one of the key elements that is of relevance when it comes to audience reactions, that is the dimension of the fantastic in fantasy films. As Katherine Fowkes points out, it 'is generally agreed that fantasies tell stories that would be impossible in the real world' (Fowkes 2010, 2). At the same time, the story-world itself is perceived as plausible and real in its own terms. As Tolkien himself stresses, his imaginary world had 'the inner consistency of reality' (Tolkien1947, 47). As he further explains, what characterizes the joy in successful fantasy is 'a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth' (Tolkien 1947, 87). Thus, rather than situating discussions on fantasy films within a frame defined by the opposition of fantasy and realism, it makes more sense to talk about 'fantastic' elements that define the story-world. In particular, this is a viable approach for our analysis of the answers given to the survey Question that we focus on in this article: 'do *The Hobbit* films raise any broader issues or themes on which you would like to comment?'

Interestingly, the issue of the fantastic has almost exclusively been raised by the respondents with regard to film production: their main critique was that certain CGI-produced characters do not look very realistic. Rarely was the dimension fantasy/real directly mentioned and if so, these were statements referring that *The Hobbit* films are fantasy films and as such do not address broader issues. This should not be much of a surprise since by asking the film audiences for possible connections that they make between the film and social issues, the question itself already goes beyond the binary of fantasy/realism. The answers relate to both aspects of the content of the film, and to practices of film production under contemporary conditions. The answers give us insights into the different ways the viewers have been affected by their encounters with *The Hobbit*. Strikingly, the majority of answers address something that can be characterized as collective moods and emotional relations.

In our search for a theoretical tool that would be appropriate to capture the specific sensibilities of the responses, we turned to Raymond Williams' concept 'structure of feeling'. 'Structure of feeling' is Williams' attempt to grasp what he describes as 'the felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time' (Williams 1977). This concept complements the analysis of the social and material with another layer, the affective (Sharma/Tygstrup 2015, 2). Williams is interested in collective cultural experiences, that is, in the ways in which public ideals or, one could also say, dominant discourses within a specific society or social group, are lived and felt. Or, as he explains elsewhere, he is interested in those affective aspects that form a set of pressures and limits through which life is lived (Anderson 2014, 115). Despite the fact that the concept remains elusive in Williams' writings (Anderson 2014, 116), one can extract some key elements. 'Structures of feelings' 'are collective because they are shared between people' and they can be 'expressed differently in personal feelings and emotions' (Anderson 2014, 116). Williams

illustrates this in his book *The Long Revolution*, where he discusses 'instability and debt' as the collective mood that characterizes the conditions of existence of the middle class in popular fiction of the 1840s. This collective mood goes beyond and cannot be reduced to the ideals and values of that time, which were piety, thrift, and sobriety. Williams often links 'structures of feeling' to specific classes or generations, which has been criticized as too homogenizing an approach. However, Williams' understanding is much more complex, as, for example, when he talks about 'structures of feeling' as entities of the social 'that are not fixed and explicit, yet still have palpable effects on how life is lived, felt and organized' (Anderson 2014, 117). Anderson (2014, 119) offers an understanding of 'structures of feeling' that is viable for our own research:

> … we can understand a structure of feeling as giving an 'enigmatic coherence' across different domains of life in two respects. First, a structure of feeling is the affective quality that is common across otherwise disparate practices, events or processes. By which I mean that a structure of feeling is one way in which a dispersed collective is gathered and comes to have some form of coherence, if only a temporary one. Second, a structure of feeling gives a kind of unity to a multiplicity through that characteristic affective quality that cuts across, draws together, and holds together disparate practices, events or situations. The term 'feeling' in the concept does not, then, simply refer to a scaled-up version of a psychological emotion or a physiological feeling. Rather, the term feeling in structure of feeling names a particularising, shared, affective quality that acts as a type of disposition towards oneself, others and the world and emerges alongside some kind of collective.

Regarding the relations of media and 'structures of feeling', there are two main approaches for exploring them. One is to analyse media contents as expressions of 'structures of feeling' that are characteristic of specific socio-historical conditions. With this approach, a film or a novel, for example, is understood as an expression of what it feels like to live at a certain historical moment. Williams' own work is one example, other more recent ones are Steven Shaviro's analysis of films and video-clips as reflecting the sensibility of living in the West in the early 21st century (Shaviro 2010), or Deidre Pribram's (2011) research on the 'structures of feeling' in fictional police and detective TV-shows in the US. The second approach regarding the entanglement of media and 'structures of feeling' is based on the fact that 'structures of feeling' are mobilized by certain events and processes, which in the 'mediatised' society we are currently living in, predominantly happens through media. We are all familiar with examples like the worldwide affective reactions following the death of princess Diana (see, for example Merck 1998), or the 'structure of feeling' emerging in the US after the 9/11 terrorist attacks which according to Mathias Nilges '… accelerated and consolidated pre-existing fears, anxieties and desires' (Nilges, 2008, 84). Similarly, any films or TV programs condense and crystallise certain collective moods and sentiments, which

have the potential to affect the audience. This is exactly where we position our analysis, because the responses to Question 10 of the Hobbit-questionnaire fathoming broader topics and issues are compelling articulations of 'structures of feeling'.

As Devika Sharma and Frederik Tygstrup (2015, 2) point out, Williams seems to prefigure the recent turn to affect in social and cultural studies where not only meanings and discourses are at stake but also 'the attunement of our being, the somehow intangible but nonetheless absolutely seminal mode in which we find ourselves energised and discouraged, receptive or hostile, inspired or put back by a given situation' (Sharma/Tygstrup 2015, 14). When the viewers of *The Hobbit* talk about broader issues or themes, they speak about how they were affected and refer to conditions of existence they see expressed in *The Hobbit* story-world, while often making connections to conditions of existence under contemporary conditions.

Employing the concept of 'structure of feeling' gives us a broad theoretical framework for our analysis of the aspects that are taken up when the viewers talk about broader themes addressed in *The Hobbit*. Thus we not only focus on the meanings and discourses but also on the affective layers involved. In addition, we are interested in the ways in which the respondents explicitly and implicitly comment and reflect on what characterizes the current 'structures of feeling' in the German-speaking context. With this approach, the relations between the films and the audience are in the centre, illustrating once more that the classical distinction of fantasy and reality no longer matters.

The question regarding broader issues or themes addressed in *The Hobbit* films was an open question that was answered by roughly half of the respondents of the online-questionnaire. The answers given concentrate on two themes which we read as two key dimensions of what characterizes the dominant 'structure of feeling': on the one hand, the viewers refer to capitalism, pointing out how capitalism works and what capitalism does. Capitalism is persistently problematized both as a condition of existence as well as a determining feature of film production, and, in particular, of film adaptations. On the other hand, issues of subjectivity and social relations, spanning the fields of individualism, community, loyalty, friendship, and diversity are addressed. Put together, these answers give us a good grasp of the viewers' felt sense of the quality of life in *The Hobbit* films and/or in present times. We start with the respondent's references to greed as a key issues being addressed in *The Hobbit*. Following Ben Anderson (2014, 9) who points out that one of the characteristic affects of capitalism according to Karl Marx is greed, we interpret the answers as examples of a 'structure of feeling' that is connected to and an expression of capitalism. As a matter of fact, this is a shared feeling that resonates with quite a large number of the German-Austrian audience. In the second part of the paper we focus on issues around the neo-liberal subject, community, loyalty, love and friendship.

2. *The Hobbit*, Greed and Capitalism

> Thorin Oakenshield: You're afraid.
> Balin: Yes! Yes, I'm afraid! I fear for you, Thorin. A sickness lies on that
> treasure, a sickness that drove your grandfather mad!
> Thorin Oakenshield: I am not my grandfather.
> Balin: You are not yourself! The Thorin I know would not hesitate...
> Thorin Oakenshield: I will not risk this quest for the life of one burglar.
> Balin: Bilbo. His name is Bilbo!' (*The Hobbit – The Desolation of Smaug* 2013)

When Balin addresses Thorin after Bilbo has been sent into the mountain to rob the dragon, he criticizes the cold-bloodedness that Thorin shows in doing so. Balin mentions 'a sickness' that apparently lies on the treasure and begins to doubt Thorin's judgment. This sickness – the Dragon Sickness – is greed. In *The Hobbit*, the theme of greed is a driving force of the story: greed is what leads to the journey in the first place, greed was Thorin Oakenshield's grandfather's doom, and greed is what influences many of the individuals' (moral) choices (see also Larimore 2012) as in the example, Thorin's decision to steal the Arkenstone, no matter what the cost is. It is therefore not surprising that the themes of greed, money and wealth including all the problems that they bring with them, are central to the interpretations of the viewers of *The Hobbit*. What is striking are the elaborate ways in which the viewers fashion the relations of this topic to the movies.

Overall, the audience's reactions to the theme of 'greed' center around a critical view that culminates in notions of criticism of capitalism. This critique can be divided into two strands: the first is a critical reading of greed as the symptom of capitalism and the scourge of humanity. Many respondents perceive the movies as a general comment on capitalism with all of its negative consequences for our world. The greed for power and money alike are part of the system of capitalism and much like in *The Lord of the Rings* (see Kellner 2006, 28), the obsession with power and wealth becomes a destructive force in *The Hobbit*, one that not many are able to withstand, as these answers, for example, show:

> *The Hobbit*, and especially The One Ring that Bilbo finds show again that people are easily blinded by power and fame and that only a few can withstand the temptation. [#25038][3] (All quotations are translated by the authors)

> [...] One can see how money (gold in this case) changes a person. [#30206]

In *The Hobbit*, greed becomes a test of character: Those who are weak make poor moral choices, those who are strong are able to withstand but often not without prior struggles, like Bilbo.

What the audiences' remarks in the survey furthermore show is that many directly criticize the issue of Capitalism in this context. It is Capitalism that leads to greed and greed becomes a root of evil – not only in *The Hobbit*, but in today's society as well, as is articulated in this response:

> The greed for gold/money, which fits, since capitalism rules most societies. The dance around the golden calf has ever since ruled the thoughts and deeds of mankind, as we can read in the Holy Scripture. [#3720]

Some respondents make connections to other major forces in capitalism as, for example, the modern banking sector, as this response illustrates: 'The central theme in the third movie is Thorin Oakenshield's insanity that is caused by the dragon's treasure. He forgets who his friends are and loses all sense of reality, puts wealth before the people who die in the battle. In the modern world of 'predatory' capitalism and banks, the topic is as current as ever.' [#1485]

All these comments are elaborations of the 'structure of feeling' associated with capitalism; they also make clear that this 'structure of feeling' propels certain (social) relations. Some even refer to the relationship with nature as well, as one response relates the story to current threats that endanger the environment and the eco-system and connects greed and capitalism with the finite nature of natural resources.

There is also a group of responses that explicitly address capitalism per se. Some acknowledge *The Hobbit*'s attempt to deliver a critique of capitalism, while others stress the movies' failure to do so due to the movies being rather shallow and themselves a product of capitalism. The latter point leads to the second strand of criticism of capitalism that we discuss in the next paragraphs in more detail.

The second strand of criticism of capitalism refers to the movie franchise and the commercialization of *The Hobbit*. While many respondents address how the critique of capitalism and greed are central messages of the movies, many directly relate this theme to the movie franchise itself. Peter Jackson and New Line Cinema managed to create a powerful brand with *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Following its success in cinemas, this brand became a huge franchise that is known worldwide. Douglas Kellner (2006, 18; italics in the original) states that '[c]ertainly, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy has been the most popular, acclaimed, and fetishized film cycle of the Third Millennium and has intensified and expanded Tolkien readership for the novels that are the basis of the cinematic epic, while generating a devoted following for the films.' The newest trend in blockbuster-cinema is now to not only focus on book adaptations and more-part movies, but prominently a further splitting-up of the original book has become popular among movie makers. This was the case with *Harry Potter*'s 6th book, which was split into two movies, also with *The Hunger Games* and the *Twilight Saga*. With this, the trilogy follows a trend to (financially) make the most out of a concept, a trend that started with *Star Wars* and continues to the *Harry Potter* franchise (see Conrich 2006, 119).

As a consequence of the success of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy it was almost a logical step (at least financially) for Peter Jackson to use the momentum and further build on the brand by adapting *The Hobbit*. Long anticipated by fans, the astonishment was big, when details of the adaptation became known – especially the plans to make the book adaptation into two and in the end, three movies (see *The Guardian* 2014). Criticism rose in the forefront of the release when people began to wonder why the relatively thin *Hobbit* book was made into a trilogy, when the more extensive three *The Lord of the Rings* books were turned into one movie each. This point of critique arose/prevailed often among the respondents in the survey with a reference to the irony of it: the movie was essentially a story about greed and the sorrow that greed brings with it, yet the driving force behind the adaptation was itself nothing more than greed, as some respondents note:

> Orotund sequel/prequel to make money.... [#24432]

> Exploitation of a brand to the absolute maximum... [#502]

> The concept is a sign of the impoverished culture through capitalist exploitation. [#28087]

> The development in the film industry to mainly go for extended sequel/prequel movies in 3D. The maximization of revenue through the fragmentation of the original. [#19941]

In general, the *Hobbit* movies seem too commercial and over-digitized, which is the case with many movies today.

> CAPITALISM! It seems to be en vogue to make as many movies as possible out of a book. [#3393]

The abundance of action and fight scenes, the adaptation as a trilogy, the special effects that are for many blown out of proportion, according to these readers all serve one goal: the maximization of profit. Where Peter Jackson's adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* was celebrated, *The Hobbit* leaves a bad taste of greed and commercialization for many fans and viewers. Yet, this issue does not have negative consequences for all of them. For some it is a kind of common sense and they take a fairly pragmatic stance where it seems clear, that money plays an important role. This does not necessarily mean that the movie itself is bad just because of the fact that someone wants to make money out of it, as this quote exemplifies:

> The exploitation of book classics. Of course *The Hobbit* is all about money and of course Peter Jackson wants to earn even more money with it, but it does not mean that the movie is bad. [#19765]

This reading makes sense if one considers that the movie business is just that – a business like any other, with the ultimate goal to create revenue. Some even voice on their own ambivalent subject-position in this context, like this respondent who asks him/herself:

> As a consumer of media I ask myself: Why three movies? At the same time I am caught in the antagonism between 'wanting more of these movies' and 'in favor of fewer movies that are instead closer to the original, which is to be against money making. [#23370]

While s/he recognizes the issue of money-making as a problem, s/he also articulates how s/he as a consumer is lured in and positioned and how s/he has the desire to see more of the movies and to immerse her/himself in this fantastic world more than once.

To sum up, the answers comprise various ways of addressing and problematizing capitalism in general and how capitalism affects the individual and the social. This also includes the viewers themselves as they talk about being caught in the dynamics of capitalism by anxiously awaiting the next film. The movie is perceived as a critique of capitalism, and at the same time as the best example for it. Additionally, the answers illustrate that critiquing the commercialization of *The Hobbit* production does not prevent oneself from being hooked.

3. From desolation to hope: War, Love and Friendship in *The Hobbit*

Many respondents draw a connection between the previously discussed theme of greed and another prominent theme in Tolkien's books and Jackson's Hobbit movies: War. As one respondent puts it, the movies are about '[…] typical world issues like how wars are fought because of greed for wealth and power […].' [#25646]

War is a special theme in Tolkien's works in general, since they are strongly influenced by his own experiences during World War I. Though he knew the cruelties of war first-hand, he never appeared to be as critical of it, as other contemporaries, he often emphasized the opportunities and positive aspects that are sometimes born out of destruction. (See Loconte 2015, xii ff.) This is an interpretation of war that some viewers voice as well, as for example: 'A topic would be war, because there is always war in this world. But it does not mean that this is necessarily bad. Sometimes a war is fought in order to solve a problem. Of course violence is not the ultimate solution, but as you can see in the movie, sometimes there is no other way.' [#21231]

War is also important for film director Peter Jackson, since war scenes warrant action and provide a way to integrate impressive battle scenes that rely on CGI, special

effects and that are supposed to lure the audience into the cinemas (at least the part of the audience that enjoys such scenes).

The theme of war inspires viewers to draw parallels to past and current events and conflicts. In their talks about war, a certain structure of feeling comprising of destruction, inhumanity, and brutal, ferocious actions that result in harm and suffering resonates:

> I am reminded of the fascism in Europe during the 20th Century. And the story of the dwarves vividly shows where greed and the destruction of the environment will lead us to. [#20632]

> The war was portrayed in a brutal way. That's how it is in our world. [#22452]

Viewers also link the story to what has been labelled 'refugee crisis' and has become one of the key social and political issues in Germany and Austria during the time when the Hobbit questionnaire was collected: 'The dwarves as refugees was an interesting approach, but it was unfortunately not dealt with in depth. This is a pressing issue especially today, where wars and conflicts lead to the biggest refugee movement since the World Wars.' [#470]

Besides the structure of feeling that comprises of desolation and hardship resulting from war, greed, and schemes, there were many answers alluding to a sense of what is really worth living and fighting for – love, friendship and belonging (to a community). Friendship is the one positive thing that, for Tolkien, came out of World War I and it is the hopeful beacon that seems to shine in all of his works. Tolkien himself wrote that all of his friends were dead by the end of WWI, except one. Yet, out of these dark times, a close friendship developed with author C.S. Lewis, one that would greatly influence his writing (see Loconte 2015, xiii). Friendship is a theme so prevalent in the movies as well, that it was to be expected to also be one of the most often addressed issues in the answers to Question 10. These readings of *The Hobbit* thus had a very positive and optimistic tone, since friendship, love and loyalty seem to trump greed and war in the audience's perception of the story:

> Friendship and solidarity are more important than tangible assets. [#20242]

> […] That friendship can be strong enough to safe someone from death. The virtues of companionship, family and altruism have an essential meaning in these movies. [#20837]

In a world that seems to be dominated by capitalism, friendship seems to be a remedy and a counterpart to the destructive forces of capitalist greed and war: 'The meaning of friendship and wealth in our capitalist world. I find it interesting that this topic seems to be always present.' [#17225]

The idea of a community that is forged out of a common quest seems appealing to the audience, who reads it as both a hopeful sign in 'hard' times and a sense of nostalgia. Although not explicitly mentioned by the respondents, this points towards the broader issue of the subject-position that dominates the contemporary Western world, the neo-liberal subject. With the proposed sovereignty of the subject and the freedom/pressure to make the (right) choice in a social ecology defined by permanent competition, there also comes a longing for a community and a sense of true friendship. The following quote alludes to this: 'The topics of friendship and loyalty are big in the movies. Things that we seem to forget in our current times'. [#1747]

The structure of feeling expressed in the answers includes a sense of containment and support given by the community. The community is seen as not only supporting and backing up individual endeavors, it also enables common goals and solidarity, as for example, these quotes illustrate:

> As a team you can achieve more than on your own and that even the smallest can be the biggest. [#20662]

> It is nicely shown how we should all stick together and act in concert. [#20656]

Linked to friendship and community is the theme of love, both in terms of romantic love between (in the case of *The Hobbit*) a man and a woman and in terms of platonic love between the members of the quest. It is a theme that apparently affects some members of the audience deeply: 'Adventure and love ... whether it is the love to one's friends or between Kili and Tauriel … it is so touching in some parts! :(.' [#15956]

Although some criticize the love story between the elven-lady Tauriel and dwarf Kili that film director Jackson added to the book version, there are also positive reactions as to its message. Love can develop between anybody and can even transcend death:

> […] Love between an Elf and a Dwarf, something that is not compatible in Tolkien's world, made me think. Behind it is the more general theme of odd couples. [#328]

> They [the movies] show that love transgresses all boundaries, even in death. [#20837]

The plot is experienced as comforting with its focus on friendship, community and love as counterpoints and opposing forces to hatred and war. There seems to be a hopeful beacon in the dead of night: '*The Hobbit* movies tell beautiful stories about friendship, love, sacrifice, in which all evil (greed, enemies) is defeated through solidarity. I would love to once see so much loyalty in real life.' [#20768]

All people who know love are good. […] [#1730]

It is about community and how much you can achieve with it. In hard times you can count on your true friends. And no matter how dire it all seems, in the end any problem can be solved one way or the other. Life is an adventure, with ups and downs that are over after a certain time. Hope dies last, as we know well. [#23792]

The strong sense of hope that resonates in these answers reflects what for many scholars see to be a central affect that characterizes Tolkien's writings, that is, hope. According to Fowkes (2010, 6), for Tolkien fantasy is a literature of hope. Similarly, Patrick Curry (2004, 23) makes the point in the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, that the book does not offer 'an 'escape' from our world, this world, but hope for its future.' Tolkien himself spoke about 'hope without guarantees' in a letter to Michael Straight (Carpenter 1995, 237), thus addressing the indeterminacy and uncertainty that characterises hope as stressed by philosopher Ernst Bloch (1986) in his magnus opus *The Principle of Hope*. One of the key aspects in Bloch's complex discussion of hope is the 'not-yet', that is to say that hope is an orientation towards an open future, anticipating something that has not-yet become. The principle of the 'not-yet' also is at work for us subjects according to Bloch, since we continuously project ourselves towards some hoped-for future and yearn for something better (see also Anderson 2006; Gunn 1987; Kellner n.d.). It is in this respect that for Bloch we are what our hopes are because our 'possibilities are our utopias; these possibilities are what we are' (Gunn 1987, 95). At the same time, 'nothing guarantees that our utopian venturing ... may not, just because they are self-chosen, go awry' (Gunn 1987, 95).

For Bloch, the different products of popular culture (like fairy-tales or films) contain potential elements that are oriented towards a better future and a different organization of society. In these forms of popular culture, Bloch locates the desire for change and transformation while stressing at the same time that these progressive elements are permeated with ideology (see Kellner n.d). For Bloch, ideology and utopia are interconnected because ideologies 'pander to human desires, fantasies, anxieties, and hopes and cultural artefacts must address these, if they are to be successful. … On the other hand, ideologies exploit and distort this utopian content and should be criticized to expose their merely embellishing, legitimating, and mystifying elements' (Kellner n.d).

The responses to *The Hobbit* questionnaire can be understood as expressions of hopes for a different world defined by solidarity, common actions, mutual support, love and a sense of community. Referring to Anderson (2006, 744 ff.), hope can also be described as a feeling of possibility that is 'characterized by a yearning to live' and by establishing new relations. He speaks of hope as 'a specific constellation based on an affective relation to an open not-yet elsewhere or elsewhen' (Anderson 2006, 746.). Similarly, Massumi (2015, 2) speaks of the vagueness and uncertainty related to hope which actually can be empowering:

' … once you realize that it gives you a margin of manoeuvrability and you focus on that, rather than on projecting success or failure. It gives you the feeling that there is always an opening to experiment, to try and see. This brings a sense of potential to the situation'.

While there is a strong sense of hope in the audiences' comments, the ways in which hope is labelled resonates what is offered as that what can be hoped for in *The Hobbit* – love, friendship, solidarity, community. Anderson uses the term 'affective contagion' for processes of that kind in which the naming of hope emerges and 'people describe the atmosphere of a space or time as hopeful' (Anderson 2006, 746). This might be a useful approach because it helps explain the transference of Tolkien's narrative of hope to the audience's reactions to the film.

4. Bilbo – supporting and going beyond the neo-liberal subject

As Fowkes summarizes her discussion on the fantasy-genre, fantasies dramatize maturation processes through coming-of-age- stories, engaging us in 'imaginative experiences that invite us to temporarily transcend our sense of what is possible' (Fowkes, 9). In *The Hobbit*, it is especially the character of Bilbo that embodies these processes of transformation. Or, another way of saying this, by connecting to the discussion on hope above, the figure of Bilbo embodies hope 'as a type of relation emergent from particular encounters' (Anderson 2006, 741). There is a group of responses that euphorically refer to Bilbo's maturation from an easy-going guy, enjoying the normal course of life, to an adventurer. He is referred to as exemplary for the necessity to get away from one's comfort zone and daily routines in order to explore the world and experience something new and exciting in one's life. Bilbo's actions are also seen as expressions of courage and the benefits of acting spontaneously are stressed.

> […] One should dare to take a chance, you never know, it might result in something exciting and joyful. [#22830]

> […] It is about exploring the world out there.[…] [#8042]

> Everybody should take a look at the outside and explore the world. [#27217]

Again and again, one specific aspect is mentioned, namely, how important and how difficult it is to make decisions and take responsibility for them. Rather than focussing on the effects of the decisions in the sense of success or failure, the key emphasis is on responsibility.

How important it is to make decisions – every decision, be it good or bad, has consequences. Bilbo did not always make the right decision, but he never ran away from the consequences of his decisions.

> […] Despite being scared to act and act ethically correct. [#20119]

In many respects, the ways Bilbo is referred to fit the ideas of what can be described as the dominant subject position in the Western world: the active, self-determined subject, that needs to be flexible in order to face and cope with the challenges of contemporary society and current modes of capitalism. The neo-liberal subject is defined by ideas of free choice, which also means taking responsibility for one's decisions and feeling the pressure of making the right decisions. The neo-liberal subject is also requested to continuously perform his/her competences and take seriously its impression management to be seen and acknowledged in times of 'economy of attention' and permanent competition. However, the dimensions of the subject-position represented by Bilbo that catch the viewers' interests, are more subtle and not of the kind where one intentionally tries to represent oneself in the best light. Rather, Bilbo affects the viewers with the (hidden) potential that they see located in all of us. Explicitly, the positive message coming from Bilbo is referenced – everybody is able to do something and keep evil at bay. It is the small deeds of small or average guys that actually do make a difference – based on the condition that one is committed:

> […] A very positive message is that an individual (Bilbo) can make a big difference if he/she is ready to stand behind it. [#11979]

> It does not matter what size one is, one can always accomplish big achievements. [#18321]

In this respect, Bilbo is perceived as an empowering role model. This is a role model that is ambiguous in regard to the hegemonic neoliberal subject. On the one hand, it comprises of features that fit neatly in neoliberal discourse, as, for example, becomes clear when some responses refer to Bilbo's perseverance and resilience, which are main characteristics of what is currently celebrated as the neoliberal subject. On the other hand, what differentiates Bilbo from the contemporary neo-liberal subject is that Bilbo's actions are perceived as being embedded in a web of true values like fidelity, loyalty, and friendship, expressing an obvious community-orientation. Also, the tension of solidarity and team spirit on the one hand, and selfishness on the other, is articulated.

> The film shows how important it is to get involved with true values. [#20441]

> Yes, we should start thinking more about the true values in life. [#11919]

> […] To concentrate on what really counts, to face what is really evil and not fight among one another about bagatelles. […] [#9110]

Admittedly, when the issue of values is addressed, there are responses that see the fight between the forces of the good and the evil, and the victory of the good as something typical for fantasy-sagas.

The character of Bilbo is so appealing to many members of the audience because of its embodiment of elements of what characterizes the contemporary neo-liberal subject as well as a subject defined by notions of virtue and community-orientation. Thus, the audience refers to a major aspect of the structure of feeling that comes with neoliberal rhetoric – the idea that one forges one's own destiny and is thus fully and individually responsible for one's own fortune and life. However, what goes hand in hand with this 'responsibilization' in neoliberalism (see Rose 1999) – competition – is not addressed in the responses. Rather, there is another structure of feeling emerging, which undermines the 'common sense' of neoliberalism and calls forth older virtues like cooperation, commitment and orientation towards a greater good.

Conclusion

We can detect from the responses to Question 10 that the readers find multiple ways to link the movie, its content and its messages to current social problems and developments. The answers show that the audience draws these connections fairly easily. Only a few actually note that it is 'only a movie' – a fantasy movie at that – and therefore does not address any broader issues that can be transferred into 'the real world'. By using the concept 'structure of feeling', we are able to illustrate that the personal reactions to *The Hobbit* often bear traces of collective expectations, feelings, anxieties, desires, goals, and what prevails as common sense under historic-specific conditions. At the same time, the responses resonate with structures of feeling that are offered by Tolkien's books and the films, which partly concur with the structures of feeling that are currently dominant, while also containing divergent elements. Expanding on Tolkien's (1947, 88) understanding of the 'peculiar quality of 'joy' in successful Fantasy … as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth', we propose that the structures of feeling expressed in the responses are exemplary for grasping what it feels like to live under certain conditions.

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Note:

[1] See also the article by Uwe Hasebrink and Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink in this issue.

[2] At this point we would like to thank the members of our German and Austrian Hobbit Team, Uwe Hasebrink, Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink, Lars Schmeink and Sascha Trültzsch-Wijnen who were central to the distribution of the questionnaire and the later processing of the raw materials collected during the survey. We would also like to thank Werner Müller-Schell, Mosche Wallach, Katharina Kücke and Manuela Finster for their work as coders.

[3] The numbers in brackets refer to the case ID of the individual questionnaire from which the answer was retrieved.