

Search for moral support, or escape from reality? Media psychological analysis of the Russian segment in the World Hobbit Project Database

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Abstract:

In this essay we look at dominant reasons for positive and negative attitudes to the *Hobbit* films on the part of the Russian Federation viewers through their expressed regrets (Q9) and their portraits deduced from qualitative answers characterizing their attitude to the book (Q21), and information on cultural predilections of the viewers. Another correlation we are looking more closely into, is with the chosen and rejected type of films as reflected in the answers to Qs4-6. Our observations are supported by comparisons with the USA, Swedish and French segments, which have very close numbers of respondents. The hypothesis we are testing with our research concerns the general mode of fantasy films consumption in the Russian Federation: we suppose it to be based on seeking moral support in life rather than on pure distraction from reality attributed generally to a reaction called 'escapism'. Discussion of the results touches also upon the influence on the respondents' reaction of cultural and political dimensions.

Keywords: Tolkien, Peter Jackson, Russian viewers, Fantasy reception, mediapsychology, cultural background, Fandom studies, escapism, moral values

Data collection

As a team for gathering answers to the international questionnaire in Russian, we established a working connection with a major portal for cinemagoers in the Russian language – kinopoisk.ru, where a link to it was several times displayed on a Facebook page and on Twitter in February-June 2015, each time attracting from 200 to 400 answers. This

portal is used all over Russia and – as the spread of answers showed – in Ukraine and Belarus too. The link to the survey was also distributed through the site of the Russian Society of American Culture Studies (www.rsacs.org), several university sites in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Volga region, the Urals and Siber, major science fiction and fantasy fandom portal www.fantlab.ru and Tolkien fans sites. The present article is based mainly on comparison of the answers from the Russian Federation and three other countries with roughly similar number of answers: Sweden, France and the USA.

By providing an opportunity for people to fill in the questionnaire in their own language, the study widened the base of participants, including those viewers who did not necessarily possess a knowledge of English to the extent of being able to express their opinions in it. We consider it an important aspect of the study, as it reflects national-cultural sensibilities to a greater extent, as opposed to approaches addressing only active English-speaking audiences.

Significantly more people answered in Russian than are from Russia itself. Among 2436 answers in Russian, 1785 are given by the respondents from the Russian Federation, 271 from Ukraine, 115 from Belarus and 241 from other countries of the world. 24 answers were given by citizens of the Russian Federation (RF) in other languages than Russian: English, Turkish, and Czech. The multinational constitution of the RF set includes 1729 respondents who identify themselves as Russians, 18 as Ukrainians, 10 Armenians, 6 Belorussians, 4 Polish and British each, 3 each Mongolian and Israeli, 2 each Kazakh, Azerbaijani, Slovenian, German and Bulgarian, and single representatives of twenty more nationalities.

The further analysis proceeds with the set of 1809 surveys from the Russian Federation. In the last section we draw some comparisons with the Ukrainian set (271 respondents).

Methods

A quali-quantitative analysis is presupposed by the construction of the questionnaire, and in the present article a quantitative SPSS analysis of the database (multiple regression and factor analyses) is used in conjunction with a hermeneutic-oriented cross-cultural analysis (Barker & Mathijs, 2012; Pronina, 2014; Князева, 2009) of interpretive perspectives of the viewers (Haraway, 1991) analyzed through their cultural predilections, singled out by themselves.

Although we are also interested in the possible relationships between subjective viewpoints and people's socio-demographic characteristics, seeking 'understanding of audience reception as a social, rather than individual or idiosyncratic, phenomenon' (Davis et al, 2014, 75), compared to Q methodology used by a Canadian- and New Zealand-based group of researchers (Davis & Michelle, 2011; Michelle et al, 2015), the one implemented in our research is less oriented to singling out certain groups of overall film appreciation, and more on characterization of country-specific responses and suggesting of possible causes of such idiosyncrasies of cultural perception.

General analysis of the complete set of answers

Before proceeding to the analysis of the answers in Russian, we would like to display some findings which emerged from the worldwide quantitative database scrutiny as a background for other observations.

Multiple regression analysis of the database of the countries with 1000+ completed questionnaires helped to determine the most significant indicators for the prediction of the variable in question. In our case, we were analyzing the dependence of the high opinion of the viewers (Q1) from the answers to the reasons of viewing the films (Q3).

Calculations showed the largest positive input of:

- 1) Q3.10 – I love Peter Jackson’s films
- 2) Q3.12 – An actor that I particularly like was in them
- 3) Q3.2 – I am connected to a community that has been waiting for the films

which can be represented by the following formula:

$$\text{High opinion} = 0,37Q_{3.10} + 0,24* Q_{3.12} + 0,23* Q_{3.2}$$

It is interesting to note that the third motive Q3.3 ('I love Tolkien’s work as a whole') shows as positive but with a significantly lower value (0,028)

The strongest negative correlations are:

- 1) Q3.11 No special reason
- 2) Q3.9 I knew the book, and had to see what the films would be like
- 3) Q3.8 I was dragged along

The complete formula is then as follows (the weaker correlations are marked in grey):

$$\text{High opinion} = 0,37*Q_{3.10} + 0,24* Q_{3.12} + 0,23* Q_{3.2} - 0,41*Q_{3.11} - 0,22* Q_{3.9} - 0,18* Q_{3.8} + 0,06* Q_{3.1} + 0,03* Q_{3.3} - 0,04* Q_{3.4} + 0,11* Q_{3.5} + 0,11* Q_{3.6} - 0,12* Q_{3.7}$$

The Russian audience demonstrates similar correlations with a difference that the motive 'I wanted to be part of an international experience' here is connected rather with a negative opinion of the film (-0,25), whereas in the general set with the positive one (0,105).

Similar calculations were performed for Q13: 'What is the role that you think fantasy stories can play today?' The resulting three motives demonstrated the most expressed positive correlation:

- 1) Q13.3 They are a source of hopes and dreams for changing our world
- 2) Q13.1 They are a way of enriching the imagination
- 3) Q13.2 They are a way of experiencing and exploring emotions

With only Q13.8 ‘No particular role’ giving an expressed negative correlation

$$High\ opinion = 0,24*Q_{13.3} + 0,14* Q_{13.1} + 0,12* Q_{13.2} - 0,51*Q_{13.8}$$

Russian audience opinion didn’t differ much from the general set. Still, when we add another method of quantitative analysis – factor analysis – we can see marked differences in a way the *Hobbit* films are appreciated by audiences of various countries. And in that context the answers of the Russian and Ukrainian audiences possess features which characterize their specific attitudes, touched upon in the last section of our article.

Factor analysis allows singling out groups of similar variables, tied together by a common quality – a factor. Such a method makes it possible to reduce a large number of parameters to a few active factors. We factorized the answers to the questions 3 and 13.

When answers to Q3 (‘Please choose up to three reasons for seeing *The Hobbit* films’) were subjected to factor analysis, two components, and two groupings emerged. Factor loadings for the overall sample are shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Factor analysis of reasons to watch the films

Reasons	Components	
	1	2
Q3.1 I wanted to experience their special features (eg, high frame rate, 3D)	,369	,090
Q3.2 I am connected to a community that has been waiting for the films	-,101	,381
Q3.3 I love Tolkien’s work as a whole	-,690	,204
Q3.4 I like to see big new films when they come out	,517	,038
Q3.5 I wanted to be part of an international experience	,367	,231
Q3.6 I love fantasy films generally	,112	-,001
Q3.7 There was such a build-up, I had to see them	,431	-,097
Q3.8 I was dragged along	,331	-,271
Q3.9 I knew the book, and had to see what the films would be like	-,611	-,057
Q3.10 I love Peter Jackson’s films	,086	,529
Q3.11 No special reason	,094	-,603
Q3.12 An actor that I particularly like was in them:	,213	,463

In the first group (component 1) the reasons 4, 7, 5, 1, 8 (in the order of receding importance) are on the positive side:

- Q3.4: I like to see big new films when they come out
- Q3.7: There was such a build-up, I had to see them
- Q3.5: I wanted to be part of an international experience
- Q3.1: I wanted to experience their special features
- Q3.8: I was dragged along

Reasons 3 and 9 were on the opposite pole:

- Q3.3: I love Tolkien's work as a whole
- Q3.9: I knew the book, and had to see what the films would be like

According to the character of the groups, the first factor was labeled 'I watch all blockbusters'. Based on the positioning of the respondents, the factor shows that an interest to cinema as an amusement and technical novelty is juxtaposed with Tolkien's works as a source of attraction.

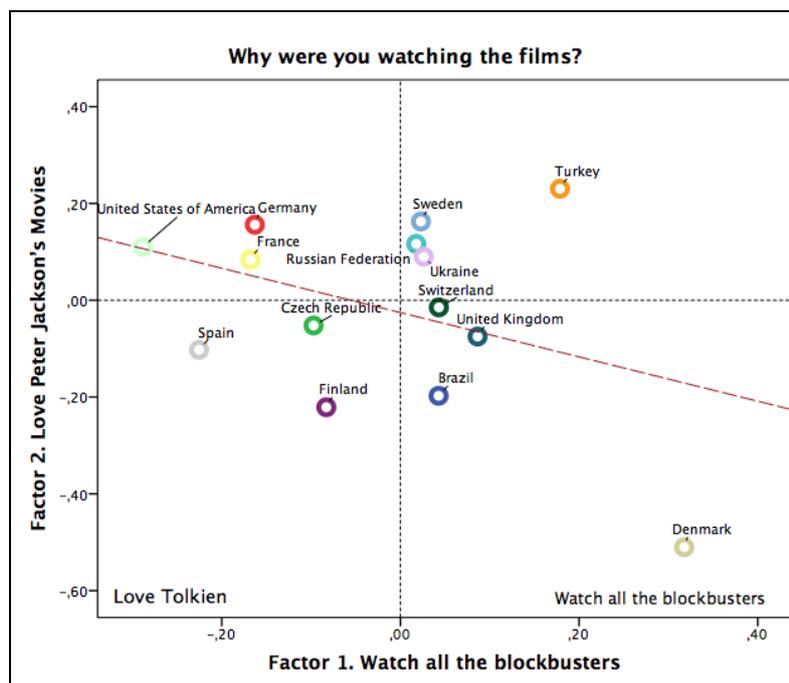
The second factor on the positive pole has the reasons 10, 12 and 2, expressing interest to Peter Jackson and actors in the film. This factor 2 was labeled 'Love Peter Jackson's movies':

- Q3.10: I love Peter Jackson's films
- Q3.12: An actor that I particularly like was in them
- Q3.2 I am connected to a community that has been waiting for the films

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the respondents from various countries in the factors space. The distribution was plotted on the basis of the each country mean estimator for the factors in question. One can see from **Figure 1** that the most enthusiastic lovers of Tolkien among the respondents live in the USA, Germany and France, while for Danish and Turkish viewers love for Tolkien was the least important reason. Russian and Swedish viewers occupy the medium position. Peter Jackson's and the film actors' most avid lovers live in Turkey and Germany, and slightly less in Russia, the USA and France.

In **Figures 2** and **3** we represent the analysis of the role fantasy stories play today, in the opinion of the viewers, and here the factors plotted are 'Fantasy as a way of enriching imagination' against 'A way of exploring different ideas' (**Figure 2**), and 'Fantasy as a way to explore an experience emotions' compared to seeking in fantasy stories 'a hope to change the world' (**Figure 3**). In such spaces, the Russian responses are positioned closest to the Ukrainian ones, demonstrating a strong predilection to appreciate fantasy as a source of hopes to change the world, reflecting current dissatisfaction with the status quo.

Figure 1: Factor analysis of the reasons to watch the films (countries with answers $\Sigma \geq 1000$)



One thing is without doubt: for viewers of fantasy films in Russia, as well as for many respondents from other countries, the reason for watching such films is far from being just shared entertainment and escape from everyday life. The strongest motivation lies with looking at them as a source of moral support and hope to change whatever is considered imperfect in the real world surrounding them. It creates a very high level of expectations, as we will observe in the section analyzing the regrets of the viewers who chose 'Excellent' for their overall impression.

Observations from the overall figures in relation to the Russian set of answers

The most obvious difference to other countries is the predominance of females in Russia, who participated in answering our questionnaire twice as actively as males. We can see in **Table 2** the almost full coincidence on gender distribution with the data on the USA and Finland respondents, and though it does not necessarily reflect the overall number of males and females in the audience, it is in line with the greater activity of females in Russian, Finnish and American fandoms in general [Bacon-Smith, 1991; Mikhaylova L., 2012; Mikhailova Y.D. & Torchinov E.A., 2008]. Lovers of fantasy films are not an exception to this rule.

Figure 2: Factor analysis of fantasy stories' role (imagination – exploration of ideas) (countries with answers $\Sigma \geq 1000$)

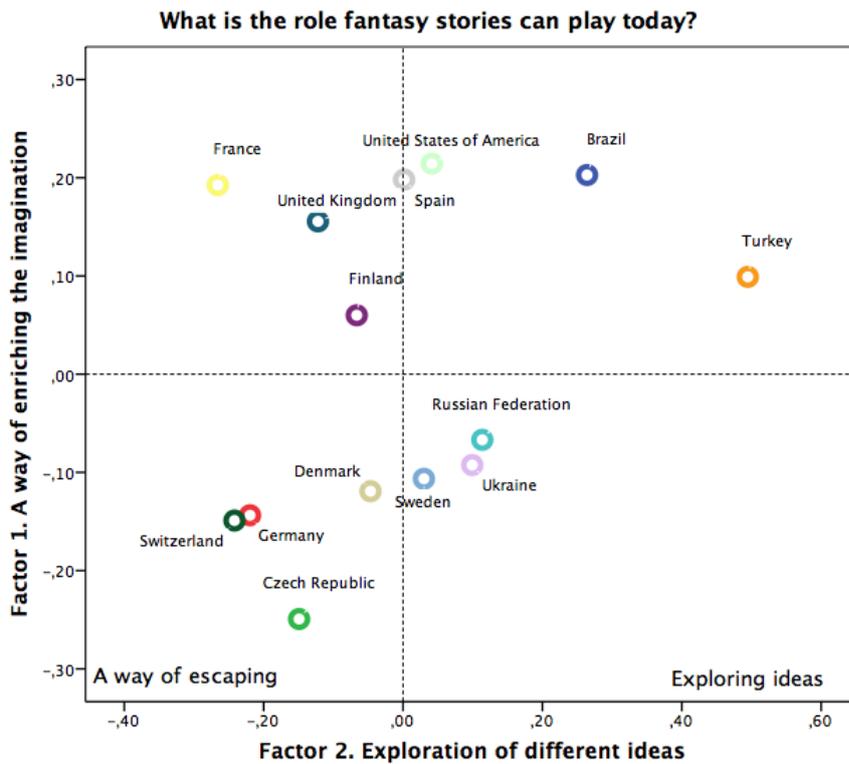


Figure 3: Factor analysis of the fantasy stories role (experiencing emotions – hopes to change the world) (countries with answers $\Sigma \geq 1000$)

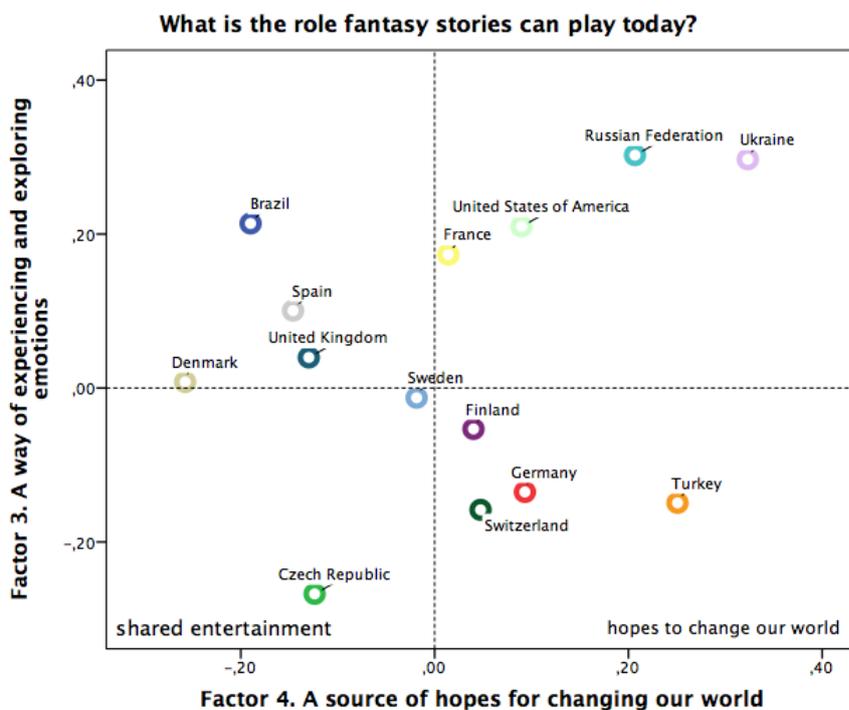


Table 2: Total answers from the countries with over 200 surveys in relation to gender

	Total	Male	Female
Czech Republic	3921	2569	1352
Germany	3602	1600	2002
Turkey	2945	2219	726
Sweden	2139	1119	1020
UK	2066	1267	799
USA	1871	672	1199
Russian Fed.	1809	666	1143
Finland	1607	544	1063
Denmark	1510	881	629
Brazil	1208	684	523
Spain	1165	762	403
France	1147	576	571
Switzerland	1011	617	394
Portugal	880	429	451
Austria	793	479	314
Belgium	628	322	306
Greece	624	358	266
Canada	608	271	337
Slovakia	585	430	155
Australia	533	218	315
Netherlands	505	224	281
Poland	438	177	261
New Zealand	346	124	222
Italy	325	177	148
Ukraine	271	107	164
Israel	257	172	85
Mexico	241	123	118
Japan	230	24	206
Hungary	225	95	130
South Africa	225	102	123
Ireland	216	138	78

The second general observation is a very pronounced difference in age distribution of respondents to other countries ($\Sigma \geq 1000$): almost none over 55 years.

Table 3 shows that in Russia we got just 5 answers from such individuals, meaning that watching *The Hobbit* films was not significant for this group, in contrast to almost 200 respondents over 55 years in the US and Denmark. Possibly, less expertise in using Internet for this age group in Russia also added to a near absence of people willing to share their experience of watching the film with their grandchildren, though there was definitely a

Table 3: Age distribution of the respondents

	Under 16	16-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	Over 65
Czech Rep.	247	2397	967	231	60	16	1
Germany	312	1575	830	483	325	85	12
Turkey	149	2067	621	86	14	2	1
Sweden	136	1164	437	261	117	21	2
UK	77	826	568	309	209	65	10
USA	108	709	409	239	208	168	25
Russian Fed.	74	1173	395	134	28	5	0
Finland	135	704	416	211	94	40	6
Denmark	23	427	352	282	241	137	46
Brazil	117	654	318	78	29	11	0
Spain	35	583	329	166	41	13	0
France	54	746	208	98	30	9	1
Switzerland	44	537	270	55	53	12	0
Portugal	28	474	197	106	52	18	4
Austria	27	386	279	97	40	9	4
Belgium	14	431	114	34	28	5	2
Greece	37	394	139	49	2	2	0
Canada	36	355	97	52	31	28	5
Slovakia	39	394	120	22	9	1	0
Australia	30	199	143	69	53	33	6
Netherlands	26	267	100	57	37	14	4
Poland	21	240	142	32	2	1	0
New Zealand	13	168	60	43	42	15	5
Italy	10	195	74	37	8	1	0
Ukraine	20	164	56	26	4	1	0
Israel	25	103	91	31	5	2	0
Mexico	10	135	62	25	8	1	0
Japan	1	93	73	38	19	4	1
Hungary	19	127	57	18	3	1	0
South Africa	5	108	62	26	14	8	2
Ireland	8	119	45	31	7	3	2

visible portion of grandparents with grandchildren in the cinemas. As this group is so small, any information deduced from their answers could hardly be considered representative for this age group, but we can say that mostly they received the films with less zeal – all 5 rated them as ‘good’ or ‘average’ –, and their comments reflected greater life experience and wider comparisons, using images from world mythology and philosophy. Some respondents in the answers to subsequent questions are returning to their thoughts and strive to express them more precisely, with colorful comparisons, as this male viewer, a professional with a

University degree and interest in ecological innovations and Star Trek, age 55-64. His positive choices for the films are 'Fantasy', 'Action adventure story', 'Literary adaptation', and negative – 'Fairy tale', 'Multimedia franchise', and 'Blockbuster'. We present his opinion expressed in open answers in full in order to display the maturity of his responses:

Скорее отрицательное, но есть некоторые достижения.

Если не выходит Сказка с большой буквы, то получившееся можно всегда считать Фэнтези, впрочем, в данном случае это кинопроизведение, конечно, глубже пустой франшизы, хотя основные элементы не сложились. Вместо мягкой, творчески достигающих своих целей силы добра имеем в данном произведении акцент на шаткий и скучный, если не сказать нудный, паритет сил добра и зла естественно переходящий в скрытую апологию цинизма, приобретательства и более менее уютного эскапизма и невмешательства - героизм и альтруизм таких условиях заведомо бессмысленны, в последней части трилогии ощущается духовный кризис самого режиссера, сменившего первоначальную, как оказалось, нефондируемую эмоционально-романтическую увлеченность на ремесленнический монетарный прагматизм. Книга давала повод, к сожалению, для таких тенденций, но имела наряду с главным посылом о неброской, но побеждающей силе человечности множество других интересных возможностей развития содержания достойных киноэпопеи, не говоря уж о мудром юморе первоисточника.

Хоббиты как выразители основного посыла произведения - 'джокеры' связывающий все миры на основе гуманизирующего начала, - неуловимо, в чем-то симпатичные,- удались и в фильмах, впрочем не больше чем в книге, хотя в последней части трилогии, к сожалению, и это сходит на нет и становится схематичным, . Схематичности, мягко говоря, добавляет и нарочитая эстетическая

The impression is overall tending to negative, but there are some good points worth pointing out.

If one could not make it up to a Fairy tale with a capital letter, you may always call it a Fantasy. In this particular case it is more than a soulless cash in on the franchise, but there are some glaring missteps in the film's execution nevertheless. Instead of a lighthearted tale of ingenuity and kindness, we are left with a drab and frankly over-represented juxtaposition of good versus evil, tending to a covert apology of cynicism and cozy hoarding, where heroism and altruism don't seem to make any lasting impact. With dwarves we see the theme of greed, with elves of cold indifference and noninvolvement. In the third film one can clearly tell that any creative momentum that Jackson had was gone and the promise of wonder that the first film had was not fulfilled. By that point it was simply a film that had to be made since the other two were out. Unfortunately the book does lend itself to such tendencies, but it also had many worthwhile themes (such as the strength of the insignificant - hobbits are the ones that save the day, not kings) and clever humor that got left out.

Liked:

The Hobbits in the films were always the charming soul of the franchise, the tricksters that connected the seemingly irreconcilable worlds through the strength of their sympathetic character, not their fists. That

непривлекательность отрицательных героев многократно усиленная в фильме по воле режиссера, низводящая произведение до уровня примитивной компьютерной игры, а не особого внутреннего видения. Работа отдельных актеров, независимо от позиции режиссера, заслуживает внимания.

В последнем фильме обращает на себя внимание заслуживающая признания работа Ричарда Армитаджа по созданию объемного образа Дубошита передающего глубину поисков реального совмещения смыслов ответственности, человечности, лидерства; и как говорит сам актер, смысл его деятельности не в 'получении легких аплодисментов'. Чувствуется реальное творческое развитие Армитаджем идей школы Ли Страсберга родившегося, кстати, в Украине на месте древнего села Скоморохи. Кроме алогизмов и мелких сюжетных неувязок, а также высказывающихся неведомо откуда нужных для развития эпизода вещей и нужных действующих лиц, основное, что перечеркивает все достижения фильма - это подмена противоборства добра и справедливости со злом акцентированными бесконечными убийствами (со спортивным азартом) разнообразных уродливых злодеев, неизвестно откуда берущихся и неизвестно как и где живущих. Не удивительно, что юмор, к сожалению, при этом, приобретает зловещий оттенок и вообще перестает быть фактом искусства, и режиссер в итоге его просто отбрасывает, заводя всех в духовный тупик.

Механически затрагивать проблемы, раздвигать нервы зрителя с целью просто привлечь внимание и поднять рейтинг, конечно, еще не значит затрагивать. проблему в художественном смысле этого слова. Общая проблема - отношение ко злу и его власти, по-видимому постулируемая одной из

was true for the first two films, however in the third film even they became too formulaic. The formula is further drained of the emotional connection by making the antagonists (orcs, goblins) purposefully ugly and void of intellect, which kills the semblance of moral conflict and makes the fights seem more like a video game than anything. Actors did do a good job, however, regardless of the mishaps of the director.

Surprised and impressed:

In the third film I would like to point out the performance of Richard Armitage. Through his work we really got to feel the weight of responsibility and leadership on Thorin's shoulders, and how he struggled with keeping his humanity from slipping away. As the actor himself said, he wasn't looking to earn eager applauds. Armitage's tutelage really shows: he studied under Lee Strasberg, who was born by the way in Ukraine, in a city standing on the place of an ancient village Skomorokhi (that is the place famous for bringing forth actors!).

Disappointments:

Films are plagued by small plot holes and when plot does try to develop by showing some important characters and happenings, those scenes seem to come out of nowhere and do not tie in to the rest of the narrative. Theme of good versus evil seems to be mostly represented by countless murders (with fervor) of various gross-looking villains, who are not established in any meaningful way. It is not surprising in this context that humor takes on a more haunting tone and sizzles out leaving everyone at a loss.

Broader theme:

<p>центральных в кинотрилогии, и долженствующая быть глубоко разработанной, затрагиваются скорее, именно в худшем. примитивным смысле этого слова и конечный результат является шагом назад во многих смыслах. Уже в ранних книгах Авесты духу зла противопоставлялся дух творчества, и это было началом отсчета нового цивилизационного этапа развития человечества. Силы зла отсвечивают не собственным, а отраженным от добра завистливым светом и, иногда лишь только кажутся привлекательными (проблема привлекательности отрицательных героев) из-за своей внешней статической квазисбалансированности. Добро же вырождается в зло через утрату своего свободного творческого начала. Возвращаясь к фильму, убить злодея в безальтернативных условиях, это конечно же не значит убить зло, это означает только начало непростого пути борьбы со злом и утверждения активного добра. Герой олицетворяющий активную позицию человека и всех людей в борьбе за добро, из древнего эпоса, не убивает средоточие зла - Аримана, а побеждает его и запрягает в повозку, хотя это и не гарантирует герою и всему человечеству спасения от дальнейших драматических перипетий. Ядовитую змею убивают лишь после третьего ее удаления с большой территории детского лагеря Режиссер, по-существу, отбрасывает нас, как минимум, на два тысячи лет назад, и это вовсе не безопасно для нашей бурно развивающейся современности..</p>	<p>Overall the <i>Hobbit</i> films seem to be a step back from its predecessor Lord of the Rings in many ways. Take the theme of good versus evil for example. Evil doesn't have an innate power and its appeal is only temporary, stemming from its seeming balance that crumbles on the closer inspection. It is reactionary and inferior to good, which is a creative and transformative power – so it was expressed starting from the ancient Avesta books marking a new civilization stage. Evil powers shine only by a jealous light reflected from the good and only seem attractive. Good can only become evil if its capacity for creation is lost. A hero from the ancient epic story didn't kill Ahriman but subjected him to pull a chariot, which doesn't guarantee success but marks a start of the path to active good. You cannot defeat evil by killing a villain. His death in the last film does not help the hero grow, no alternatives are offered or explored, and this main theme is carnal rather than cerebral. It is not the takeaway message appropriate for the current world. At least two thousand years backward.</p>
<p>Люди, уважающие первоисточники.</p>	<p>Similar views: People that like the original books share this view.</p>
<p>#26513 A Russian male of a Ukrainian descent, 56-65, Reasons to wanting to see the films: wanted to be part of an international experience and knew the book. A Professional with a University degree, doesn't like unscrupulous scholars.</p>	

Hobbies: Sport, reading, technical handicraft, gardening, ecological innovations.

Cultural impressions: Van Cliburn Jr.'s playing of Tchaikovsky. Star Trek. Mass media turning into the means of mass delusion.

There is nothing typical in such answers but still wide scope of argumentation is emblematic for this age group, and is compatible with American answers of the same group:

An American male, age 56-65/ shares interest with the RF one in Star Trek and likes 'Commenting in curmudgeonly fashion on the local newspaper's website as well as on Facebook'. He expresses his opinion about wider themes in the movies:

The idea of self-sacrifice for the good of others versus the individual protagonist of today's films generally seeking either revenge or riches. A willingness to accept the oddities of others rather than immediately condemning them for their actions.

Other peculiarities of the RF set of answers will be discussed in the following three parts, devoted to the analysis of the expressed major regrets, attitude to the type of story the Hobbit films are considered to be, and the cultural impressions characterizing the audience.

Regrets

Question 9 was articulated as follows: 'Did anything particularly disappoint you about the films? Can you say why?'

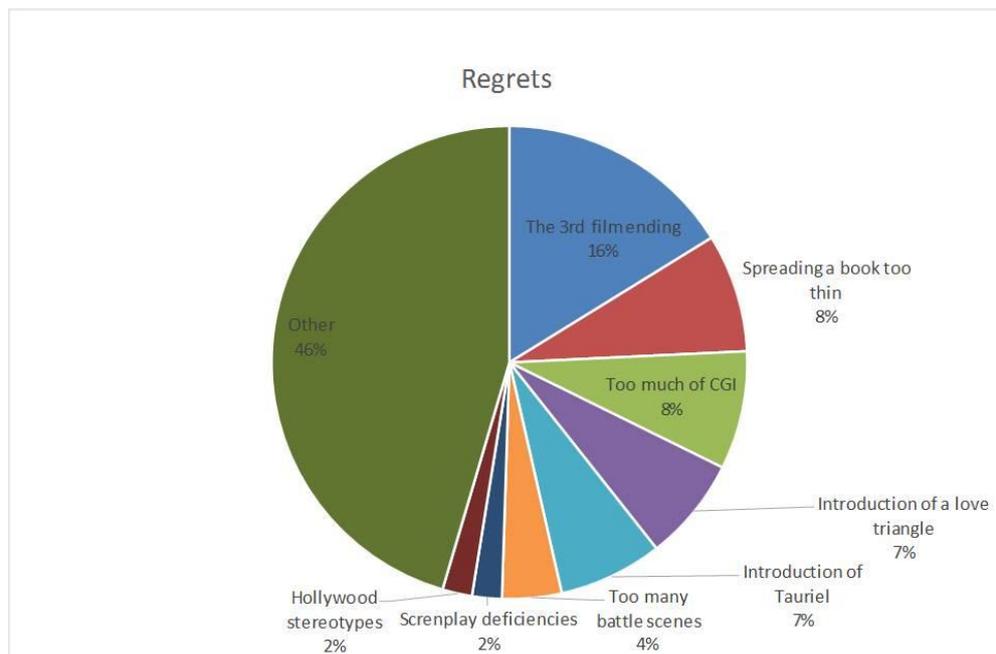
Approximately two thirds of those Russians in whose opinion the films were 'Excellent' (41.2%) still found some major or minor flaws. The nature of those regrets doesn't differ much from the ones expressed by the absolute minority of those who disliked the films (6%).

Things that disappointed the respondents were less numerous than the pluses, still in more than 1000 answers altogether one or several things were mentioned that caused concern, and the variety of such concerns exceeded 60, meticulously pinpointed.

Russian viewers are mainly disturbed by disparities between the spirit of the book and the films, even if they mark the creative approach of the director and the film makers in general as positive. The issue of the film adaptation fidelity to *The Hobbit's* book is most often put in question because the deaths of the characters were not acknowledged enough in the end – almost 150 (16% of the regrets), as here:

In the third part of the film there was no burial of Thorin, which might put a stop to all the war. It is a very fine scene in the book. (Russian male, 16-25, a college student)

Figure 4: Groups of regrets expressed by Russian viewers.



Fili and Kili do not die heroically defending their king. Bilbo’s gift to the Elven king – one of the most touching moments in the book – is absent! Arkenstone and treasures – what happens to them further? Omitted are the parts with the heroes’ burial, restoration of the Dale etc. Too much is omitted. And this is just what came to mind first. (Russian female, 36-45, University degree, Creative occupation)

Spreading a short book into three films and too many CGI effects are met with equal measures of disapproval – 80 each (8%)

The introduction of a love triangle comes next, with 74, and of Tauriel character, 60 (7% each) (although a number of those who cared to expand their opinion admitted the positive aspect of a love story, but complained of its underdevelopment). Here, we may remark, lies a very distinctive difference with the US respondents’ dissatisfaction with introduction of Tauriel, especially female responses: they liked the idea of a strong female character but despised the compulsion to ‘burden her with romance’.

People are also rather strongly disappointed by turning a balanced fairy tale into a gloomier story which inflicted on the viewers an exceeding number of action scenes – 40 (4%). The third film is blamed the most (56), and *The Battle of the Five Armies* is the cause – 45.

Screenplay deficiencies are named by a number of respondents – 20, and Hollywood stereotypes – 20 (2% each).

Some of the introduced characters – such as Necromancer and Azog – cause negative feelings, as well as a perceived insufficient presence of Beorn.

Other aspects were somewhat less pronounced, though the details show high involvement of the respondents with the material of the book as compared with the films. People discuss the measure of the characters – such as Radagast, Sauron, Galadriel, Thranduil, Gandalf and dwarves – the correlation with those from Tolkien’s book, the tone of Tolkien’s *Hobbit* and Jackson’s *Hobbit* in general, obscuring the magic by gimmicks. The strange appearance of giant worms also was not left unnoticed and caused baffled remarks.

A feeling that many scenes were ‘thrown out’ to introduce more ‘action’ caused a substantial portion of Russian viewers to look forward to watching ‘the director’s cut’ as soon as possible in the hope that it may restore some balance – 40 (2%).

Legolas jumping on falling steps caused caustic remarks (18), and over 30 viewers (2%), mainly of the younger respondents, named his visible aging a regrettable feature.

We agree that ‘cultural products such as films are not message-vehicles, to be assessed for their lesser or greater “effect”, but complexly organized bodies of meaning, which draw on and react back onto their constitutive culture’ (Barker & Mathijs, 2012, 676). That is why we register this attention to the ‘physics of the fantasy world’ and a regret that it is not ‘real enough’ as reflection of the viewers’ desire to watch fantasy films as a reflection of themes and problems of our reality by the means of fantasy:

Important themes: real problems of real people, even if they are experienced and solved by fantasy characters. That may be useful to see for children too (parents often do not approve of fantasy). There were many sacrifices for what is just and fair, for love and friendship. That is why it is not simply an Action Adventure story. Bilbo and the dwarves’ adventures taught them a lot, made them to choose between greediness and friendship. I consider it important.
(Russian male 16-25, student)

Possibly that is the reason why credibility deficiencies cause such frustration and discontent. Close attention to the signs of credibility and plausibility, hot discussions around the translation of minute details of the Tolkien’s world in the Russian tradition have been noted by the researchers (cf. Hooker, 2003), and they testify to the search in fantasy for everyday life spiritual and moral support.

‘Mythology is not a place for leisurely walks; it’s a battlefield’, wrote Victor Shklovsky (2011, 374). Later years Shklovsky’s ‘ostranenie’, artistic estrangement, the enclosing of the story in mythical conventions help to relegate this support of the fantasy characters and situations to one’s life, unless their interpretation by a creator of the film titled by the same name as the book steps too far from the core story and character properties, in the opinion of the viewers.

The realism of the story in the *Hobbit* films is more than, as mentioned by Michelle et al, ‘a sense of heightened realism flowing from the film’s visual presentation’ (Michelle et al 2015, 10), which could be attributed to CGI and new techniques and which actually is regretted by many Russian viewers. Plausibility of the filmed reality is put to the front to the

extent of making us as researchers stress this characteristic as the defining one for the viewers in their reception of the films, as a complex quality including expression of the leading concepts of the story, vivid rendering of the environment, casting true to the characters' core qualities and lack of contradiction with proclaimed characteristics of the depicted world. Reception of the films is largely defined by their extent to maintain this balance, which in traditional Russian literary criticism used to be called 'an artistic whole'.

The next section will help us to understand to which type of this artistic whole, to which type of story the respondents in the Russian Federation attribute Jackson's *The Hobbit* films.

Type of story

Our choice of the four particular countries for closer comparison was determined by two factors: the researchers' proficiency to compare the sets of answers in Russian, Swedish, French and English and knowledge of the respective countries' culture, on the one hand, and by a comparable number of completed surveys, on the other.

Table 4: Q4. Types of films (chosen) – totals NB: Average numbers of responses per country are calculated in the final row (eg showing that French respondents made slightly more choices [ave. = 3.27] than the others).

	Russia	France	USA	Sweden
Children's story	36	37	43	75
Fairytales	193	30	87	333
World of fantasy	1389	547	1075	1388
Prequel/sequel	390	282	525	411
Star attraction	77	40	69	87
Tolkien's legend world	1397	738	1121	1210
Multimedia franchise	158	144	370	202
Family film	113	74	68	92
Digital novelty film	71	211	152	163
Action-adventure	109	332	628	483
Peter Jackson movie	418	323	505	478
Literary adaptation	599	274	513	362
Stunning locations	456	386	352	776
Coming-of-age story	133	34	71	83
Hollywood blockbuster	211	300	340	427
Totals	1809	1147	1871	2139
	5750 = 3.18	3752 = 3.27	5919 = 3.16	6570 = 3.07

We show the general figures of respondents choosing the types in **Table 4**, and then in **Table 5** the percentage of these choices by country.

Table 5: Types of films (chosen) – percentages: NB: % are of the totals of numbers responding from the country, not of the numbers of responses.

	Russia	France	USA	Sweden
Children’s story	2.0	3.2	2.3	3.5
Fairytale	10.7	2.6	4.6	15.6
World of fantasy	76.8	47.7	57.5	64.9
Prequel/sequel	21.6	24.6	28.1	19.2
Star attraction	4.3	3.5	3.7	4.1
Tolkien’s legend world	77.2	64.3	59.9	56.6
Multimedia franchise	8.7	12.6	19.8	9.4
Family film	6.2	6.5	3.6	4.3
Digital novelty film	3.9	18.4	8.1	7.6
Action-adventure	6.0	28.9	33.6	22.6
Peter Jackson movie	23.1	28.2	27.0	22.3
Literary adaptation	33.1	23.9	27.4	16.9
Stunning locations	25.2	33.7	18.8	36.3
Coming-of-age story	7.4	3.0	3.8	3.9
Hollywood blockbuster	11.7	26.2	18.2	20.0
Totals	1809	1147	1871	2139

Several observations immediately arise from comparison of viewers in Russian Federation defining which types of films Peter Jackson’s *Hobbit* are or are not in their opinion to the answers given to Questions 3, 4 and 5 by Swedish, French and USA respondents. RF viewers are definitely not in favor of defining *Hobbit* as an ‘Action Adventure’ story (only 6% chose this category as opposed to 33.6% of Americans, 28.9% of the French and 22.6% of the Swedish), and the difference is even more pronounced among those who definitely were ‘Kinds of film’ Chosen, number:

	RF	FRA	US	SWE
Action-adventure	109	332	628	483

‘Kinds of film’ Not chosen, number

	RF	FRA	US	SWE
Action-adventure	625	24	28	117

not inclined to define it as such – 34.5% of the RF viewers as compared to just 1.5% of the American, 2.1% of the French, and 5.5% of the Swedish ones.

To an extent, one might explain this by a difference in the meaning of the expression «Приключенческий боевик» from the original 'Action Adventure', as «боевик» defines a type of the film with predominance of fighting scenes over the others generally, whereas for the English-speaking respondents it might have meant a more general category. But the categories were supplemented in the questionnaire by floating definitions which were supposed to make more common ground for understanding the meaning of each of them. Therefore, it is doubtful that such a large and distinctive difference can be explained just by the shift in translation. Most probably, here one can look for an explanation on a more general level of understanding these categories have in the mentality of the people. Traditionally in Russia 'Action Adventure' is not considered to be a category of film which is capable to evoke deep feelings or serious thoughts, but even if some of the more critically inclined Russian respondents regretted inclusion of too many fighting scenes, still they did not overshadow for them the general meaning which they connected with positive hopes for change. Thus Russian viewers were more deliberate in not choosing this particular category for the *Hobbit* trilogy than respondents from the USA, Sweden and France.

This film changed a part of me! I expect more of myself now. If something seems too hard I remind myself of all the characters from this amazing trilogy and ask myself 'What would have happened if they gave up?' And with that thought in mind I gather all my willpower and carry it through to the end!
(Russian Female, 16-25, secondary school student)

There is a bigger-than-life scope to the beautiful world brought forth from Tolkien's pages to the movie screen (although with some discrepancies). Action films and blockbusters don't even hold a candle to how big and thought provoking these movies are. (Russian Female, 26-35, Service worker, University degree, has two children)

Cultural background

We conducted a comparison of Russian and French answers to the Question 27, that gave the respondents a great freedom to choose any impression from their life: 'What are your three all-time favourite cultural or media experiences or products? Feel free to name any kind that you like'. Two thirds of the respondents took an opportunity to share information about cultural events which produced the strongest impression on them. The invitation for 'Any kind' brought such a variety, which we managed to organize in no less than 43 categories. Here we share the most prominent common features of those responses which could help to draw some lines in the portrait of the 'projected community' (Barker & Mathijs, 2012, 689) of *Hobbit* viewers in the Russian Federation.

Some named even more than three variants, so we got over 2000 of answers from the Russian viewers; the French respondents were slightly less eager to answer. Cultural context of the fantasy film perception correlating with the *Hobbit* audience appeared to be very rich and variegated in both countries, but for the purposes of the present article we have used the French answers as a set to stress the features which stood out as more specific to the Russian respondents.

The highest rating – one third of the answers in the Russian sample – went to Tolkien, his books and his world as depicted by Jackson. Within the group, many marked specific aspects of the events connected with perceiving this ‘Tolkien world’: e.g. the first *LOTR* film, the premiere of *The Hobbit: The Unexpected Journey*, the last film or episode, introduction to this world by a friend, visit to films about Tolkien’s world with a partner or a bride, or watching them as a family. That is, a private experience is introduced into this world, and sometimes just this personal aspect is appraised. Often we see several separate mentions: reading the books, watching the films, going to the premiere or press shows.

The second group predilection characterizes the lovers of fantasy and science fiction cinema in general. The leaders among the mentioned variety of favorite films are *Harry Potter* films and Cameron’s *Avatar*.

Unsurprisingly, individual choices and cultural impressions are defined by geography of people’s home city: besides Moscow and St. Petersburg we see answers from people residing in many regions: Barnaul, Voronezh, Vladivostok, Murmansk, some far from the cultural capitals. It causes appearance of many local events entering the list of strongest cultural impressions: e.g. Celebration of the Days of the cities they live in, local festivals or concerts.

Besides local events, quite a number of influences come from the travels, as impressions from such special occasions sometimes are stronger than the more attainable local ones. We noticed here events and artefacts from many parts of the world, including Paris museums, London theatres, visiting the cities of Europe, America and Australia.

The mapped events spread not only through space but also through time: the Russian responses unexpectedly display among important events in cultural/media history a lot of political events, almost totally absent from the French answers. Moreover, the time scale appeared to exceed the lifespan of the respondents, which might mean they include emotional and intellectual understanding of those events into their individual cultural history: among such events there are not only the most recent shocks such as hostilities with Ukraine, but we can see the shockwaves from much more distant events, such as the 9/11 terrorist attack, 2001, the dismantling of the Soviet Union, a 1993 coup d’état, the fall of the Berlin Wall and even the New Economy Policy, reintroducing private sector to the economy of the Soviet Russia in the 1920s, which was almost a century ago! More than one third of the Russian respondents included political or cultural-political events as the most memorable ones. (Actually here translation discrepancy was possibly the reason of such category of ‘cultural or media magnets’ appearance. The word ‘favorite’ is usually translated into Russian as ‘любимый’, but in a combination with ‘cultural or media event’ this word

could not be used, that is why we translated the meaning as ‘самые запомнившиеся – most memorable’, and it appeared that people remember stronger the shocking events than the positive ones. In unexpected manner, it helped to measure one more aspect of perception). The most often mentioned in this category is the 70th Anniversary V-Day in WW2 Parade in 2015.

Also unlike the French, the cultural predilections of the Russian viewers are strongly connected with sports and sport events. A number of 2014 Olympics in Sochi mentions is comparable only to a number of Tolkien mentions in their answers.

Despite the predominance of mass culture events in the circle of impressions, it is not limited to them. Very substantial is the list of world art museums. Violin concerts and symphony concerts of classical repertoire – Rachmaninov, Mozart, Tchaikovsky etc. – are also mentioned. There emerges an interest in musical theatre – especially to ballet in France and to opera in Russia. Among musical impressions of the Russian audience Grushinsky festival of singers-songwriters – a Russian Woodstock, as it is sometimes called – is singled out as significant for the respondents.

The analyzed answers describe the audience of *The Hobbit* films in Russia as rather widely erudite sensitive unfettered people, whose attitude to the world around is emotional, and who are sufficiently open to accepting differences in other people, which in general is confirmed by the answers to other qualitative questions. Cultural events are experienced as personally important ones within their social significance.

Tolkien discourse in political discussion

In the previous analysis of Tolkien audiences it was mentioned that ‘a film of this kind, although in itself a fantasy, might become a means for thinking and debating public political events’ (Barker & Mathijs, 2012, 665). One can call it a predictable effect that in the audience of such sensitivity the tensions between neighboring countries of Russia and Ukraine could cause people to use common pool of images and connotations to relate to them. Indeed, in discussing the situation in reality not only Tolkien fans in Ukraine are using Tolkien analogies, but it became part of the language of media discourse, as pinpointed one Ukrainian respondent in her answer to the Q10 concerning the wider themes in the films:

For me it is obvious that all Tolkien’s stories, no matter whatever whoever is doing with them, always are stories about inner growth or degradation and about mutual responsibility – a lesson that Humanity is stubbornly refusing to learn. Peter Jackson neither added anything to it (it is hard to think of what to add), nor removed anything, and thanks to him for that. These are very difficult times for my native Ukraine, and you even cannot imagine, how it activated Tolkien discourse during Maidan and the information war after that on social network platforms. Even political analysts write using Tolkien’s terms, to speak nothing of people on Facebook. We border Mordor – just East of us, the Dark Lord is sending hordes of orcs to our eastern borders, and Ukrainian people

consist of hobbits, who keep on working for the country not to crash, and audacious Rohirrim, who are fighting the orcs without waiting help neither from the Elves of the West, nor from the People of the South... In Russia they are writing approximately in the same vein but about Ukraine... It seems we are doomed to think in Tolkien terms but in a very simplified, black and white manner. So *The Hobbit* release this year {2015} very well resonated with public sensibilities. It can be a subject of serious research, so the Tolkien myth is very alive and current. (Ukrainian female, 36-45, PhD degree, Creative occupation)

The same respondent even would have preferred to speak not in Russian, nor in Ukrainian, but using English instead, as the language of Tolkien, who has expressed a lot in writing about these topics.

We give two more examples of how this discourse is used in other reflections on wider themes in the films:

Peculiarities of national mentality=) And, what is not funny at all, how similar is what is shown on the screen to the happenings in my country. The same darkness, coming from the East... (Ukrainian female, 16-25 student)

I think an interesting element of the film is the political line, which is not on the surface but which led to the situation in the beginning and which is moving the characters in the end... And also – what is the victory cost and is it a victory after all?.. (Ukrainian female, 16-25, student)

Among the respondents from Russia we could not find similarly vocal expressions of this discourse, though we could attest to the veracity of the observation on the topicality of Tolkien discourse in current Russian social networks. And the question of ‘precedential symbolism’ of Tolkien’s images for political argumentation served an object of research in Russia before, though in comparison with the USA mass media (cf. Сидорова, 2012)

But again, as the author of the first opinion cited in this section said, Tolkien’s books equip the readers and viewers for discussion in wider terms than just black and white.

Conclusion

Though data are strongly concentrated on the positive end of Peter Jackson’s *The Hobbit* films’ acceptance by the Russian audience, analysis of the answers enabled us to discern definite variations in the reasons and functions of the so-called ‘escapism’ being the main attraction of fantasy films. It appears that for a significant portion of the viewers it serves the role of a strong booster, of a moral support stimulant rather than simply a means of escape, an entertainment helping them to forget daily troubles. For the Russian and Ukrainian viewers there was a new actuality in Tolkien’s images which are used in political discourse by both parties. We believe this viewing pattern of relating to fantasy films as a

new global common lore in the traditional everyday struggles acquired a strong expression in the answers of the Russian audience. It contradicts the prevailing derogatory attitude in Russian criticism to popularity of fantasy films as a childish trait, reflecting lack of analytical agency.

The survey questions were specially designed to elicit explanation, but more than one third of Russian respondents used this as an opportunity not only to speak about their appreciation of Peter Jackson's movies, but also to subject their own opinions to scrutiny, almost with confessional zeal. We do not consider it country-specific as it rather characterizes fandom attitudes throughout the world, acquiring in the context of Russian culture an additional role to back up the efforts of disempowered 'insignificant people'. There was a long tradition in Russian classic literature of drawing 'small people' thus called of course not for their height but because of their place in life, and Tolkien's tale is appreciated as a story where a main character of literally 'small people' conquers his fears, learns about the big world around him, and helps the readers to discern those capacities to overcome dangers and to enjoy life in themselves. Thus regrets when something on the screen jarred with that general idea of Tolkien's tale were worth mentioning even to those respondents who were generous enough to rate the films as 'Excellent'.

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