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Review essay

The rise of the Qualiquants: On methodological advances and ontological issues in audience research

Carolyn Michelle, Charles H. Davis, Ann L. Hardy & Craig Hight, *Fans, Blockbusterisation, and the Transformation of Cinematic Desire: Global Reception of the* Hobbit *Film Trilogy*, London: Palgrave, 2017. 344pp. ISBN: 978-1-137-59616-1.

I have to begin by acknowledging my awkward position as reviewer of this book. The book reports the processes and outcomes of a substantial project exploring responses to the trilogy of films of *The Hobbit*, which deployed a distinctive quali-quantitative methodology. I was principal investigator of another near-simultaneous project, using a *different* quali-quantitative method, on the same trilogy of films. Both projects had the ambition to show the potential value of new approaches to studying film or other media audiences. Some of the results of the project in which I was involved were published in a Themed Section of *Participations* a year ago (Vol. 13, No.2, 2016). This book presents the overall findings of that other project. In reviewing this book, I want not only to describe its achievements, and to offer some judgements on the book, but also to extend an invitation to a debate which in my view needs to happen – and could at least begin in pages of this Journal. Where else, and how, I have no idea at the moment. But if we are to take forward the development of audience research, methodologically and substantively, then the issues raised by this book – and indeed by the unprecedented phenomenon of there having been two major projects on the same topic – need to be examined in detail.

First, then, what does this book present? It gives an account of four linked investigations, each of substantial size. The first was a study of audience *expectations and prefigurations* of the *Hobbit* trilogy, drawing on the responses of 1,000 people around the world. The second gathered 2,870 responses to viewing the first film in the trilogy, *An Unexpected Journey* (*AUJ*) – most distinctively managing to hold on to 434 of the original 1000, enabling the authors to track their 'before and after' responses. The third and fourth studies gathered separate audience responses to *The Desolation of Smaug* (*DoS* – 1,051 responses) and to *The Battle of the Five Armies* (*BotFA* – 840 responses). All four projects deployed the distinctive approach known as Q-methodology – a method which appears to be very much coming into its own in media and cultural studies. I say more about this shortly.

First off, the authors have to be congratulated on the sheer ambition and scale of their achievements. Mounting and managing four multi-national and multi-lingual projects, each attracting substantial numbers of respondents, is simply impressive in itself. They are also to be congratulated on the rich grounding of their research within a wide and critically appraised literature, covering many fields (from recent histories of Hollywood, through debates around special effects and new production technologies, to debates about the role of particular cultural categories such as gender and nationality).[1] What is also to be welcomed is the determination to take audience research to another level: to show ways in which we can generate more than just local portraits of particular groups or communities, but begin to theorise patterns, and the intersections of complex cultural forces on particular contexts of audiencing (and Chapter 8 of their book, which considers the complex varied contributions of gender, age, class, educational level, language, and national origins to responses to the *Hobbit* trilogy is bold in this, and simply fascinating).

Alongside Q-methodology, the book deploys a generalised model of audience relations with media known as the 'Composite Model'.[2] This seeks to distinguish four universal modes of attending: transparent, mediated, referential and discursive. This is presented as a basis for generating theories and generalisations otherwise unavailable to audience research.

What this combination permits, chapter by chapter, is the identification of what are claimed to be the predominant orientations to each of the films. So, the major forms of prefiguration are captured (in descending order of scale) under the headings '*LotR* film fans', 'Tolkien aficionados', 'Anxious investors', 'Jackson critics', and 'Celebrity followers'. Each of these is characterised both quantitatively (in relation to acceptance or rejection of various attitudes to the forthcoming films), and qualitatively (with selective quotations from answers to open-ended questions). These major positions evolve, after their encounters with *AUJ*, into (again in descending order of frequency) 'Enchanted *Hobbit* fans', 'Disappointed Tolkien readers', 'Critics of technological "enhancements"', 'Bored and disillusioned *Hobbit* critics', and 'Mildly entertained casual viewers'. In each study, the authors acknowledge the existence – although say little about – people who mix ('cross-load') approaches. And they also emphasise that there are at least some who change orientation as a result of their encounter – some sceptics being won over, some enthusiasts feeling let down. They do also, and very helpfully, chart the general fall in enthusiasm across the four films, so that by their final study, overall levels of disappointment have substantially increased, and this (as their book's title suggests) is one of their major concerns. But even at the close of *BotFA* there are those who insist on their enjoyment and valuation of the films, setting up a stark contrast between 'Fulfilled *Hobbit* fans' and 'Angry *Hobbit* critics'.

In between these core chapters are two other very interesting discussions: first, on audience responses to the controversy over the manipulation of New Zealand Labour laws, to the benefit of the Studios, so that people working on films such as this did not count as 'employees'[3]; then, on responses to Peter Jackson's controversial introduction of new film technologies (the use of High Frame Rates (48 frames per second vs the usual 24)), for instance).

But at the heart of the book, and its constituent projects, is that deployment of Q-methodology. It is this that I want to focus upon, because it is clearly very important.

What is Q-methodology?

Q (for short) is an approach to the study of subjective responses which was developed in the 1930s by the physicist-turned-psychologist William Stephenson. It was one among a number of attempts in this period to find ways to make feelings and attitudes measurable (perhaps the other most famous, albeit now largely neglected, was Osgood's Semantic Differential Test, which sought to capture the range of meanings and connotations around objects and images). But Stephenson's work is rooted in the rise of attempts at mental measurement (including, notoriously, IQ – and it is striking that Stephenson was for a time associated with the now highly-controversial Cyril Burt[4]). Q is distinctive in important ways. It involves generating a 'concourse' of statements which represent the main circulating attitudes to the object or topic under review. People are then asked to sort these, with a range of choices from Strongly agree, to Strongly disagree.[5] Factor analysis (usually now done with one from a small range of software packages) is then applied to their answers to look for clusters of interconnections between responses. This is very different from the kinds of factor analysis used in a great deal of conventional psychology, where the interest is in the interrelations of traits. Or as Jim Good (one of the best exponents of Q) puts it: 'Q-methodology applies to a population of tests or traits, with persons as variables; R-methodology to a population of persons, with tests or traits as variables' (Good, p.214).[6] What it thus claims to discover and display is the spread of major points of view, their typical component parts, and even (though this really requires the addition of qualitative responses) how they hang together to constitute overall attitudes. Until recently, Q has been very much a minority sport, largely dismissed by mainstream experimental psychology. Stephenson was frustrated throughout his life by repeated rejection of his work by some of the big psychology journals. In the last couple of decades, however, it has found favour with a considerable number of people. At least three Journals (perhaps most importantly *Operant Subjectivity* [1978–]) are devoted to its development and promotion. Indeed, it is not exaggerating to say that now it has quite a number of strong disciples, arguing its distinctive benefits, and promoting its adoption.[7]

But to my eye there are a number of tricky issues which come together in the end under these headings: 1. *How does one tell the difference between a strong and a weak Q-*

study? 2. *What can be done with the kinds of knowledge that Q offers us?* 3. *What ontological commitments are involved, as part of the 'package' that is Q-methodology?* I must acknowledge here that my knowledge of its uses is *largely* restricted to its emergent use within audience research – there is a small world of other kinds of work out there.

My way into addressing these big questions comes through a series of smaller queries that I found myself asking as I read this book (of course, on the back of having read a number of other examples of such work).

How (many) are participants recruited, and how does this affect the strength and reliability of a study?

In traditional quantitative research, a great deal hangs on the notion of a 'sample'. It is not any group of people, large or small. Rather, a 'sample' is distinguished from a 'recruited population' by being able to *stand in for a larger group*. There are of course a number of different kinds of sample, but in every case there are rules for determining how securely one might generalise from the recruited group's characteristics, to the larger body of people it can claim to represent in shorthand. It's for this reason that in studies I've been involved in, even the largest (which was our *Hobbit* project, at 35,000 responses), I have always resisted calling them a sample (and this book does get me wrong on this). It has meant, practically, that it isn't possible to draw conclusions from the *surface results* of our *Hobbit* project. For instance, our questionnaire recruited almost exactly equal numbers of males and females. I would make no claims at all as to whether that is true of the overall levels of watching the trilogy – we simply don't know. To me, the equal numbers were a convenient fact, nothing more, allowing us to ask some second level questions: given that we have large numbers of each gender, to what extent can we say that they display similar or different kinds of choice, preferences, involvement, judgement, criticism, and so on?

In Q-studies this doesn't appear to be seen as an issue. The expression 'participant sample' is used frequently throughout this book, including one to me very paradoxical statement: 'While our sample is substantial and diverse, it is not representative of the wider *Hobbit* audience'. I think this slippage matters. It shows in a significant way when they write (p. 79) that they have 'located the dominant pre-viewing perspectives'. That is very risky indeed, when their recruitment was effectively opportunistic and, indeed, in their own words, was skewed towards film fans.

So, how many subjects are needed, to make a strong study?

Stephenson, as Good makes clear, had played with the notion that Q might be an appropriate method for studying *the single individual* – a kind of adjunct to psychoanalysis, but one which reintroduced the concept of a coherent 'self' (against the Freudian trend to personality into competing components). His goal was to make researchable and measurable all the 'yearnings, wishes, ruminations, reflections, wantings, inclinations, fancies, dreams, remembrances, and a thousand other "inner" forms of behaviour' (quoted in Good, p.233) that are vital parts of us. That idea didn't much take off. But one of the characteristics of Q-studies is their happiness to work with really small numbers of participants. Where in general statistically-based studies follow the maxim that the greater the 'sample', the more secure the study (because accidental and random factors are thereby reduced), Q's proponents say the opposite. I recall my honest astonishment at hearing Charles Davis, one of Q's most articulate proponents saying at a conference, in response to a query about this, that the number of participants could in fact be less than the number of items in a typical Q-sort. If correct, this must surely put a question over its right to proffer generalisations. Certainly, in *any other quantitative approach* that would be the case.

But the issue is not simply about the number of participants. In another respect, Q studies go against expectations. Traditional statistical studies have as it were a 'lower limit': smaller numbers *within* a study reduce significance and relevance. Not so for Michelle et al. While their overall recruitment is impressive, without question, this plays only a small part in their subsequent reasoning. Small numbers appear to count *as much as* large ones. At one point, for instance, they accord significance to a group constituting just 1.5% of their overall population – this is judged to be a 'major audience segment' (p. 126). I certainly don't want to suggest that small groups cannot be very interesting, but it goes very strongly against all other expectations of how numbers work, to say this.

What does it mean to cross the divide between quantitative and qualitative traditions?

One of the most important aspects of Q-methodology is its claim to be able to make subjective materials fully researchable, without losing their sense of being subjective (complex reasoned and felt positions taken up by different kinds of people). And this is something the two *Hobbit* projects had very much in common: each of us was trying to find ways to gather large bodies of responses in forms which would give voice to the patterned complexities that make up all actual audiences. The Q study certainly does gather both quantifiable responses, through its Q-sort table, and specimens of *talk* through answers to open-ended questions. Yet I come away with an abiding sense that the qualitative materials never get to speak as such – they function only as illustrations of quantitatively arrived-at conclusions. Indeed, it is striking to me that the book insistently talks of qualitative *data* (not *materials*, *discursive responses*, or etc) – as if the qualitative elements are adjuncts of the quantitative data.[8]

For example, a point in common between our two projects is the recognition that some people objected to the sense that characters weren't really *at risk* in scenes of conflict. The authors quote one such:

> In *LotR* they had really realistic combat where you feel like. Okay, this guy could die because he's not Superman', and they were very mortal, it seemed. … The barrel scene … when Legloas is like jumping around and stuff like that, I felt that

> was really like 'okay, that CGI is so crap the whole Legolas is CGI right now' (p. 172).

Their commentary on this refers only to the complaint about the overuse of technologies involved. They say nothing about the other thing that this quote hints at: the kind of 'reality' created (the 'really realistic', or otherwise), which makes characters seem invulnerable. A more discursive approach, allowing the qualitative some independent weight in the analysis, might have been able to follow this through and begin to think about the contemporary meanings and expectations of 'fantasy' as something 'really real'.

To me, this matters a lot, as we tackle the difficult task of crossing the barrier between quantitative and qualitative modes of research.

What is 'immersion', and why does it matter?

Running behind and within this study is that adherence to the Composite Model, which has been largely developed by Carolyn Michelle (see her 2007 essay), and which looks to me to contain more than a little residue of Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model (although it is not directly referenced). Their Composite Model in fact reminds me not only of Hall's model, but perhaps even more of the one deployed by Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, in their study of the comparative reception of *Dallas* in the USA, Israel, Palestine and Japan (*The Export of Meaning* [1990]). What it particularly has in common with the latter is its aim to establish *psychological universals*. These are the all and only kinds of response possible, however much people might shift between them. And they have distinctive normative implications. In Hall's model, a 'dominant' reading is the most ideologically-laden, while the 'resistant' is … well, the most resistant (something that David Morley rightly queried, pointing out that there is at least one other kind of response: the not-interested dismissal). In Liebes and Katz, the normative opposition becomes the 'referential' vs the 'critical'. In Michelle at al., it is the 'transparent' vs the 'critical'. I've argued elsewhere (Barker & Brooks) in relation to Liebes and Katz that they are not only inconsistent in their uses of their categories, but also that those inconsistencies come close to racial stereotyping of Arab audiences as the most 'traditional', and unable to escape the programme's 'message'. Here, the 'transparent' is made virtually synonymous with the 'dominant', the 'immersive', and the uncritical.

This all comes into view when the authors apply the Model to *The Hobbit* (and of course potentially other materials). It shows in the way the book casually asserts that there is a 'preferred reading' of the film, which is taken (assumed) to be 'transparent', and 'fully immersive'. The authors have elaborated on this in a separate essay in *Convergence*, as follows:

> A transparent mode of reception 'reflects a close subjective relation between viewer and text whereby viewers temporarily suspend disbelief and critical distance to grant fictional worlds the status of real life, entering fully into the

> story to derive the specific forms of pleasure and enjoyment intended by the text's makers'. (Michelle et al., 2012: 110) The transparent mode represents the preferred response to a fantasy adventure film, such as *The Hobbit*, and is generally marked by suspension of disbelief, narrative transportation and immersion, character identification and strong emotional affect. (p. 230)

I find this not just unconvincing, but unclear. *Whose* preferred reading is this? It is not at all clear that the films' makers wanted uncritical participation – if they did, they would not have done all the work they did, to make sense of Jackson's decisions in adapting from the book. It is assuredly not enough that Peter Jackson has occasionally said that he wants to create an 'immersive experience' for audiences, for us to adopt a whole *theory* of immersion. But also, why is it assumed that 'immersion' is incompatible with the deploying of critical judgements? At least since Victor Nell's pioneering work of (1988) in *Lost In A Book*, there has been plenty of reason to challenge the equation of devoted attention with loss of critical capacity. Intense interrogation of the film, while watching, is surely immersive, in the ordinary sense of the word.[9] The casual adoption of the idea of 'suspension of disbelief' – as if *the Hobbit* was ever going to be a site of literal belief … – stands in the place of actual examination of the *kinds of reality* that people are willing to accord to Tolkien's world.

This said, I am not at all sure that the working model which underpins this is really compatible with Stephenson's own motivating model of 'the self'. Stephenson was very much a humanist, arguing for the centrality of sustained self-aware moral positions to the ways in which humans respond and make meanings. In an essay written late in his life, he posits that Q-methodology is closely tied to this theory of the self. Setting himself explicitly against Erving Goffman's sociologically-informed notions of impression-management as the way in which 'the self' is manifested in social spaces, Stephenson argues: 'The self is always at issue, usually implicitly, and Q brings it into daylight' (Stephenson, p.31). Q, for Stephenson, was a tool for unpacking and validating his conception of the coherent, conscious self – this was part of his 'break' from those who trained him, including Charles Spearman and Cyril Burt (classic trait psychologists), but also via the emendation he wanted to make to classical psychoanalysis, which 'dissolved' the self into warring elements. His insistence on this was surely one factor in his rejection from the psychological establishment. His position is not entirely lucid, but is best captured, I think, in this sentence from his late essay:

> In Q, however, the self is unpredictable, but not lawless, and it always involves moralities, the belief systems by which the person lives. (Stephenson, p.39)

This for sure marks him apart not only from trait psychologists (Spearman, Burt et al.), and from performance sociology (Goffman), but also from a great deal of contemporary thinking about 'mobile identities' (Giddens, et al.). The authors may want to mark themselves off from this aspect of Stephenson's work, but there is relative silence on the study's theoretical implications. There is not even a consideration of any implications of Q originating in psychology, while the bulk of audience research development has taken place under the aegis of cultural studies and sociology (with smatterings of history thrown in). Instead, Q is presented as *technique* only, a means to an end. I do note that the authors express a wish for some kind of rapprochement with media psychology – something which I would contest on many grounds, since I see in that the resurgence of a form and style of media research which is continuous with 1930-50s 'effects theories'. Indeed, one of the strong drivers for the rise of qualitative audience research, in the cultural studies tradition (within which I very much grew up), was precisely to establish a distance from the psychologically-driven and American-dominated communication studies tradition, which paid no attention to meanings and their construction, but also set aside social processes as 'interferences'. But I am also pretty sure that the *implicit models of mind*, the *ontologies of the self*, in contemporary media psychology are sharply at odds with Stephenson's original conception.

What kind of knowledge of audiences emerges, and what wider view of 'audiences' is implied?

First and foremost, Q studies claim to reveal the *main kinds and patterns* of responses, adding up to a series of distinct orientations (coherent ways of making sense and judgements). That is of course strictly dependent on their population being a 'sample' in the sense of representing a larger 'whole'. I believe I have said enough to indicate why I have doubts about the validity of this claim. A weaker claim to identify *some* such orientations is still of course in itself a valuable achievement. But this aside (and it is less of an issue for this particular study, because of its large numbers), what do these identified orientations amount to? We are offered attractive labels for each of them, labels which claim to capture the central imperatives of each orientation. That *might* be OK, but it would have been good to be offered at least occasional close interrogations of individual cases, to see where and how complexities and conflicts might arise – something which in my experience almost *always* happens with actual audiences. No one is really as tidy as our labels might imply. (Their 'cross-loaders' could have been crucial here. Oddly, the one point where I felt the book came closest to this was right at the end of Chapter 8 where, in a closing note, the authors cite a few cases of people who manage their disappointment by consciously reducing their expectations.) But that would have required some separate deployment of qualitative examination of discursive forms, going beyond simple quotation of answers. Without this, their labels and what they offer really constitute at best *ideal types*: that is, positions to which actual individuals may more or less adhere. The labelled orientations are at risk of being hypostatised, overriding individual variations, compromises, local circumstances.

As to the wider implied view, a considerable amount is made in the book of the Composite Model's four kinds. The relations between this and the basics of Q-methodology are rather taken for granted. As I've said, reading some of Stephenson's own work, I sense there would be some strain, at least, between his working model of 'self' and the semi-politicised version proposed by the Composite Model. But setting that aside (because at this point I can only ask the question, not really offer an answer), let me make this concrete with a particular important aspect of the study: their theorising of 'disappointment'. Here again, I have to acknowledge my own interests in this, having very recently published a study of the meanings and significance of 'disappointment' to *Hobbit* viewers, drawing on the World Hobbit Project database (Barker, 2017).

On some things we clearly overlap and confirm each other. There was certainly a rising wave of disappointment across the three films, and this disappointment had several foci: in particular, the alterations from the book; the introduction of new characters (Tauriel, and Alfrid, more than any others); the ways new technologies were used. There were also people who, well aware that others were having these reactions, still insisted on the enjoyment and value they got from the films. In Michelle et al.'s book the longest consideration of this topic comes in Chapter 8. There, they draw on qualitative responses to one question used (with slight variations) in each study: 'What does this film mean to you?'. Answers to this question were inductively coded, producing 27 categories, and the frequency of these was cross-related with their main identified orientations (results presented as Table 8.1). There are some interesting, if hardly surprising, matches between orientations and meanings ascribed – a strong association, for instance, between Enchanted Hobbit Fans, and the codes 'adaptation of a favourite book', and 'return to Middle-earth'. Whereas, coded references to 'disappointment' was much more widely present among Bored and Disillusioned Critics and among Disappointed Tolkien Readers – with some interesting differences in the reasons given by the two types of viewer. (That does leave a question, mind. The Disappointed Tolkien Readers were obviously clear that the films were an 'adaptation' – so what did they call the outcomes instead, if that term was avoided? Words like 'ruin' and 'desecration' certainly turned up in our research.)

They write, on the value of their findings, in a slightly boosterish way:

> Clearly then, the majority of respondents experienced considerable shifts in their affective orientation over the course of an evolving three-part *Hobbit* saga. Importantly, it would have been difficult to perceive, let alone accurately trace, the evolution of audience reactions to this blockbuster event film trilogy had we not adopted our unique longitudinal approach and quali-quantitative methodology. Surveying audiences before and after each instalment of the trilogy, in conjunction with a range of additional strategies, has allowed us to pinpoint, with a high degree of confidence, the primary sources of viewing pleasure as well as major discontents and their origins. (p.202)

There is certainly some truth in these claims. But what interests me is a slippage. First, they argue that there are things possible on their approach (longitudinal, repeated) which are not possible in other kinds of research. Single-film approaches, they say, lose sight of *change*. A single-film study

> neglects to consider how these receptions might have evolved over time in response to repeated viewing or conversation with others, for instance. Such studies consequently tend to present reception as a fixed phenomenon. (p.29)

I am sure there are studies of which this is true, but – while there may well be benefits to longitudinal studies – it is absolutely *not* the case that single-film studies must lose the sense of history. Many kinds of question can capture the process and sense of the evolution of people's views: closed (eg, 'how many times have you seen …?'), and open (eg, 'have your views changed in any important ways over time? Can you tell us how?'). Indeed this becomes clear from their own arguments. In tackling disappointments, they very usefully provide *quotations* from a number of respondents giving (within one single study) personal histories of views changing over time. And that's helpful – except that the quotations are not examined in any substantial way, to see what they might independently reveal. Taking just one of these, I was struck by the tenor and implications of a New Zealand woman (p. 201) writing of 'the spirit of Tolkien' being lost, and giving as an essential characteristic of this the 'lightheartedness of the story'. This hints at several things. Among them, it for her marks *The Hobbit* off from *The Lord of the Rings*, whose 'tone' was overwhelmingly serious. It also makes it odd that in the same array of answers is one from a Danish man complaining at the forced intrusion of 'unsuitable comedy' into the second and third films. The two answers *may* be compatible, but we are not given the tools to find out. Quotations become illustrations, rather than opportunities for identifying discursive themes and repertoires. This to me signals a limit to the extent to which we can 'distinguish and reliably classify respondents who clearly have radically different cognitive and affective relationships to the *Hobbit* films' (p. 206). Classification appears to *close* the analysis. The workings of those 'cognitive and affective' relationships remain elusive (and oddly un-social). Once again, the imbalance between the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of their research comes to the fore.

The concept of 'discursive repertoires' is surely relevant to the book's overall conclusion: that for a rising proportion of viewers the films proved in the end to be just examples of studio interference and greed, and the 'blockbusterisation' of cinema. I do not doubt at all that large numbers did so blame Warner Bros., New Line Cinema, and Peter Jackson for their disappointment – but that can be because this is a strong contemporary rhetoric. When something *works*, nobody is to blame – and *The Lord of the Rings* was only very rarely accused of being an outcome of bloated Hollywood. Where something *fails* – and where it *matters* in big ways to people – blame needs to be assigned. And in a great deal of contemporary thought and talk, the nameable but somewhat shadowy entity called

'Hollywood' awaits people's wrath. So while for most *The Lord of the Rings* films were 'magical', and thus exempted from this kind of talk, *The Hobbit*'s failure to live up to this turns on the tap of blame. But this still remains a discursive trope. That question that is largely ducked in the book is: why it mattered so much to very many people, that they felt the need to call upon the trope so strongly.

Here, to me, lies one of the book's limitations. Although of course the authors recognise that different groups brought many prior interests and commitments with them as they watched the films, they miss the sheer extent to which, for both the trilogy's severest critics, and its insistent enthusiasts, the films *mattered* intensely. This was not just about 'cinematic desire' (a puzzling expression anyway). This was about something where disappointment could be bitter, and could resonate way beyond the cinema. Or, for those who stayed true to the trilogy, it was because of resonances with other things deep in their lives. This is something I tried to show in my own work on 'disappointment' in connection with *The Hobbit*. It is something the visibility of which is made somewhat difficult, if not blocked, by the book's adoption of the concept of 'immersion' to describe avid participation. This too easily summons back decrepit assumptions about 'loss of self' within viewing, uncritical notions of 'identification', and almost notions of pre-rational viewing. 'Immersion' is not an innocent term, it cuts against the idea that people, in loving the films, were operating with complex interpretive frameworks. They could *recognise dilemmas*, *understand characters' motivations*, *find parallels with their own lives*, and engage powerfully with the films *because of and in the light of* these. The workings of these become available through the patterns and processes of people's talk.

My best sense is that Q most supports a certain kind of *descriptive* account locating the spread and clustering of kinds of responses. Not a bad thing at all, and certainly going beyond much that audience researches have achieved up to now. But little to enable us to ask what might be being *lost* for those who were disappointed, or *retained* by those who weren't. The Composite Model which runs alongside Q adds not a lot. At this point I found myself looking again at the book's title, and the notion of 'transformations of cinematic desire'. Is this just a slightly hyperbolic choice of title, or does it signify something wider? There are *hints* that they are looking at the *Hobbit* films for indications of a wider world-shifting change, of audiences turning against 'blockbusterisation' as an overall historical phenomenon. If that is seriously intended, there ought to be consideration of the range of possible counter-examples, in the continuing success of the *Star Wars* series, and of at least some of the Marvel adaptations.

Conclusions and invitation

So where does that leave my honestly partial evaluation of their research and this book? There is a great deal to admire and learn from, but there are also a number of problems and limitations. But I am also absolutely clear that there are many matching or different problems and limitations in the World Hobbit Project, in which I played a role. I share absolutely their will to move forward from the limitations of purely qualitative or purely quantitative methods, and can see the attractions of Q methodology as a quali-quantitative method – not least the very risky reason that it allows large claims from very small numbers (and I am simply unpersuaded by the viability of this, however much 'internal validation' within Q studies it may have had). But most importantly, I do not see in Q, as practised here, much sign that the qualitative aspects of the research play anything more than a support role. No new or additional findings are added to their array, nor are any aspects of their findings developed, or qualified, or queried as a result of an examination of their qualitative materials. Instead the qualitative *merely illustrates* the quantitative. That's not triangulation in my understanding. And given my conviction that the next stage in the development of audience research methods has to be some effective combinations of quantitative with qualitative methods, that matters a great deal.

I'd like to hope that this review is seen as non-polemical (though I am not sure I have managed to achieve this), self-critical (I am more sure about this), and constructive. What I am sure of is that having two projects on the same topic, each with high ambitions for methodological advance, is without precedent, and if we don't find ways and fora to share thoughts and to debate where things might go next, we do the field a massive disservice. Too many people in our broad field are scared of methodological debates, and we need to find ways and places to debate developments in open and comprehensible ways, to help overcome those fears.

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Biographical note:

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Notes:

[1] I want to acknowledge, directly, that their literature review at one point comments on some inadequacies in the work emerging from a project I coordinated in 2001-3, on audiences for *The Lord of the Rings*. The authors argue that there is a lack of a clear over-arching theoretical frame to the outputs. I accept that these criticisms are spot on. And indeed, for all the queries I am raising here about this project's methods, I have to emphasise that I value greatly its coherence and determination to pursue a definite theoretical and methodological project to its limit.
[2] For those interested, perhaps the best place to see this model spelt out in detail is Carolyn Michelle's essay in *The Communication Review* ('Modes of Reception: A Consolidated Analytical Framework', Vol. 10, 2007, pp. 181-222.
[3] There is an interesting issue posed by this discussion, mind. It becomes very clear that there is a *preferred* position, one critical of the NZ Government. They comment (p. 95) that people who didn't criticise them 'had not 'picked up on the profound implications' of the eventual solution. They 'eschewed deeper consideration' of the issues, in order to avoid cognitive dissonance. This clearly imputes *inadequacy* or *error* to these respondents. This to me couples with the wider tendency to borrow bits of standard political economy critiques, hinting that audiences who didn't see these things were overly and riskily engrossed in the films, caught up in 'commodity desire'.
[4] Cyril Burt was famous for providing the theoretical justification for Britain's post-WWII three-tier educational system (grammar, technical, secondary modern), through his work on IQ. But he became notorious after 1976 when a *Sunday Times* journalist uncovered what appeared to be fraudulent claims in his work – even to the extent of inventing a research assistant who appears not to have existed.
[5] Examples of these, from their Prefiguration project: 'I remember reading the book when I was younger. I hope the film reflects, in every way possible, the spirit of the book'; and, 'I don't care that much about *The Hobbit*, but will probably watch it just to see what the fuss is all about' – the first two of 38. Respondents were asked to rate their degree of agreement or disagreement with these. Full sets of all the statements in each project concourse are helpfully given in the book's Appendices.
[6] My sincere thanks to Jim Good for enabling me to read several of his essays. I hope he will feel that I am not making unfair use of his help.
[7] A useful introduction to the rise and spread of such uses can be found in Davis & Michelle (2011).
[8] This very much reminds me of the concerns expressed by Deacon et al. ([1999] 2007), that cultural studies analysts frequently use pseudo-quantitative terms while eschewing the paraphernalia of quantitative research. They complain that authors purportedly doing qualitative research still talk

about ‘many’, ‘few’, ‘most’ or ‘hardly any’ without providing tested datasets to make these meaningful.

[9] A small but to me significant example: on p.116 they cite as an example of ‘transparent’ reading a respondent commenting that in the films the Dwarf Hall was ‘literally took my breath away with its majesty, and it was created just PERFECTLY’. There’s no doubting the *intensity* of this response, but the wording to me hints strongly at an *operative criterion* being brought into play. This is a viewer with powerful expectations guiding his viewing.