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A B S T R A C T This article presents a series of key findings from the international *Lord of the Rings* project, around the meanings and implications for audiences of choosing to describe the films as a 'Spiritual Journey'. Drawing on a combination of quantitative results and qualitative responses, and presenting one woman's responses in detail, it proffers a set of implications for the fields of film, and cultural studies.

K E Y W O R D S adaptation theory, audience research, *Lord of the Rings,* meanings of 'epic', spiritual experiences.

> I have never before had a film experience that literally changed my life and the way I look at things. This trilogy could be a religion.[1]

In this article I draw upon materials generated in the course of the international *Lord of the Rings* audience project, to attempt two things. I seek to explore and explain a remarkable set of results which emerged from the project's core quali-quantitative questionnaire. Briefly, in concert with this, I point to a number of conceptual and methodological implications for the ways in which, currently, cultural studies tends to talk about texts and about audiences. This latter part is consciously provocative in scope. The 2003–4 the *Lord of the Rings* project was designed to tackle the following overarching questions. What is the function of film fantasy in the lives of different kinds of audiences? How is the film's reception affected by its simultaneous English (Tolkien's story), New Zealand (the film's locations)

Table 1 What kind of story is *The Lord of the Rings* for you? Please choose up to three. (World total: 24,739 with up to three choices per person)

Modality	World total[a]	World %	Modality	World total	World %
Allegory	2,592	3.8	Myth/Legend	8,895	13.1
Epic	13,038	19.1	Quest	8,282	12.2
Fairytale	2,809	4.1	SFX Film	2,037	3.0
Fantasy	9,882	14.5	Spiritual Journey	5,408	7.9
Game-world	583	0.9	Threatened Homeland	1,686	2.5
Good vs Evil	10,721	15.7	War Story	2,172	3.2

Note
[a]Unfortunately the figures presented here do not precisely match those given in the Appendix to our book, through an error there for which the publishers are entirely blameless.

and Hollywood (financing) sources? And, how did the film's prefigurations in different national contexts affect the manner of its reception? Tackling these required three research stages: a three-month period of intensive gathering of prefigurative materials of all kinds; six months in which audiences across the world were invited to complete a questionnaire

available in 14 languages (mainly on the web, but supplemented in some countries with paper-based completions); and then follow-up interviews with individuals who appeared to typify patterns and tendencies identified through analysis of the questionnaire database.

The questionnaire's design was critical to the whole project. It contained: Likert-type questions which asked people to scale their responses along several dimensions, coupled with invitations to explain their choices in their own words; some other key qualitative questions which previous projects had shown to be effective at drawing out audiences' hopes and expectations; and some demographic measures, shaped to be as applicable as possible to all countries and cultures. Question 5 (which we termed our 'Modality Question') was a key one. It asked people to nominate froma list of 12 terms (see Table 1) up to three which came closest to capturing their sense of the *kind of story* this was for them (an option to nominate their own alternative was so rarely taken up as to be discountable).

It was, of course, essential that we didn't assume these terms' meanings for those choosing them. At best, they might be approximations to people's own preferred terms. And we had, of course, to accept that translation between so many languages would probably tap into variant cultural categorizations, which again would need exploration. But by gathering them in quantifiable form, we hoped that patterns might emerge which could then be the subject of further qualitative exploration. This proved to be the case, decisively. Ultimately, almost 25,000 people completed our questionnaire, giving us the largest and richest data-source to date on a film's reception. A book of the core findings of the project has recently been published (see Barker and Mathijs, 2007). It contains, *inter alia*, some of the key quantitative results of our enquiries, and explorations of the meanings and implications of these. But it does not directly address what is arguably the most signal of all the quantitative findings, which arose from exploring the relations between these Modality responses and those for Enjoyment, Importance of Seeing, and Reading of Tolkien's Books.

Overall, the most widely chosen Modality term was 'Epic'. Although there are important country variations, it was among the choices of nearly a fifth of all respondents, significantly ahead of all others. Its 'constituency' was almost equally among men and women, young and old, readers (single or repeat) and non-readers, and all kinds of occupation. This very commonality and spread itself became a focus of interest, as I outline below.

It is evident that five choices – but with Epic their clear leader – are most popular. At the other end, six choices show very low overall returns. However a wonderfully complicated story emerged, the moment we cross-related Modality choices with two of our other multiple-choice questions, addressing levels of enjoyment and the importance attached to seeing the film. It is important to see the degree of interdependence of these two measures. Over 85 percent of those declaring that it was Extremely Important to see the film found it Extremely Enjoyable, leaving 0.2 percent of those for whom it was Not At All Important. In the other direction, while 13 percent of those for whom it was Not At All Important still found it extremely enjoyable, the largest proportion along this axis – almost 29 percent – did not enjoy it at all. It appears that the first and overwhelming predictor of Enjoyment is the Importance attached to seeing it. This is not at all an obvious finding, since in other cases books as sources often generate expectations which the films fail to fulfil. Indeed, there is a strong tradition of seeing film versions of books as lesser, by default. For whatever reason – it could be something special about this audience, about the nature of the book, or simply a particularly successful adaptation – this has not happened here in any noticeable degree. But

it does make Table 2 all the more striking, where figures for Spiritual Journey are markedly ahead of all other choices on both dimensions.

'Spiritual Journey' was nominated by 5408 (21.9%) individuals within our world population (751 [18.3%] from the UK set of 3115). Across the world, this group is skewed towards women; while overall responses divided virtually equally by sex, Spiritual Journey responses split F = 59.5 percent to M = 40.5 percent (UK: F = 61.8%, M = 38.2%). There is a further difference in the sexes' prior experience of the books. Choice of Spiritual Journey strongly associates with Repeat Reading of Tolkien's books (54% – equal highest with Epic for the whole population), but while this holds true across the sexes, twice as many women as men report Still Reading for the First Time. It appears that more women than men were tempted by the film to go to the books for the first time – and that for them this readily coupled with both Extreme

Table 2 Relations (%) between Extreme Enjoyment and Importance, and Modality Choices

	Extreme Enjoyment	Extreme Importance		Extreme Enjoyment	Extreme Importance
Allegory	71.0	59.2	Myth/Legend	74.7	64.5
Epic	73.8	65.9	Quest	72.0	63.4
Fairytale	64.3	42.9	SFX Film	45.3	36.4
Fantasy	66.6	57.6	Spiritual Journey	80.3	71.2
Game-world	61.8	41.2	Threatened Homeland	71.6	62.5
Good vs Evil	71.2	61.2	War Story	65.9	56.1

Enjoyment and Importance. For both men and women, there was an upwards age skew, with more in their 30s to 40s than expected. Favourite character choices also show a skew from overall populations – most strongly towards all the 'small characters', notably Frodo, Sam and Pippin. Another sex-differentiated response shows that men in the Spiritual Journey group predominantly nominate the books as the primary source of their Expectations, while the women veer towards nominating the First Two Parts of the Film as their primary reference point. And a further cross-check showed that the Still Reading population accounts for a large proportion of these. What this suggests is that this group adopted the books in a particular and striking way. The books were not for them a barrier to enjoyment of the film. While the books must, for Repeat Readers, generate expectations, these did not interfere with the enjoyment they sought. And seeking was important, as their exceptionally high levels of attached Importance indicated; this was not an accidentally achieved pleasure. These were not, then, 'bookish' or literary readers, rather, they were readers who found in the books some kind of imaginative satisfaction – one which made choice of Spiritual Journey a likely expressive summary. Unpacking these quantitative discoveries required different, qualitative methods.

The meanings of Epic

Rick Altman has written interestingly about the processes whereby genre terms, as they emerge, can shift from adjectival to noun form. Writing of the 'epic', he says:

> When a descriptive adjective becomes a categorical noun, it is thus loosened from the tyranny of that noun. *Epic poetry* calls to mind Homer, Virgil or Milton, poets all. But

what mental images does the stand-alone substantive *an epic* call forth? *The Song of Roland*? *War and Peace*? *Alexander Nevsky*? *Lonesome Dove*? No longer is our imagination bound to poetic form, instead it seeks out similar texts across media. Before, an epic was one of the possible qualities of the primary category *poetry*; now film is one of the possible manifestations of the primary category *epic*. (1999: 50–1)

Figure 1 Interrelations of modality choices

Altman is illustrating the ways in which genre terms frequently emerged and 'stuck' at the point when a production cycle was losing steam. To be labelled a 'musical' was to hint that it might be old hat, passé. This valuable insight into the operation of genre-labels nonetheless has a weakness, in that (and this is a larger weakness of Altman's and others' work on 'genre') it has little to say about the role that audiences might play in encouraging these relabeling processes.

Our understanding of the meanings and implications of 'Epic' emerged from combined quantitative and qualitative investigations of our world database. This confirmed that Epic was capable of linkage with *all* the other choices. Taking advantage of the fact that we had invited respondents to nominate up to three terms, we explored the cross-connections between modality choices. For every one of the other 11 terms, Epic appears among the top three cross-linked terms. For this reason, we came to regard Epic as the Modality choice of least resistance – that is, in and of itself it does not appear to commit a person to very much. Figure 1 summarizes these interconnections:

The reason for Epic's position is because its meaning is very fluid. A sample search across 200 uses of the term located 11 broad uses of the term within audience responses. Epic could designate:

1. The scale of the world depicted in the books/films
2. The length of the stories
3. The scale of the challenges faced by the film-makers
4. The length of time the story has been with us
5. The visual scale, size of cast, size of monsters, etc.
6. The scale of the problems facing characters
7. The moral seriousness of it all
8. The scale of the big issues and emotions
9. The parallel with classic Epics
10. Membership of a genre of films
11. The success of the films in dealing with these

By itself, this merely reveals variety. To go beyond this, we searched the database for points at which audiences' meanings could become clearer. We identified 56 respondents who not only chose Epic as one of their Modality categories, but also used the term in describing their experience of the film. These responses not only reproduced this wide range of meanings, but also showed that these were associated with degrees of praise or criticism of the film. Setting these out along a rough dimension from conditional to unconditional participation produced the following (with illustrative examples for each section):

> *Group 1*: 'Epic, but …'
> Scope of story, adequacy to the books (5 references)
> Scale of conflicts, battles (5)
> Equivalence to myth (2)
>
> 'Wasn't the book! Missed too many things out characters portrayed different
> to own imagination loss of epic scale (not in terms of scenery but allusion
> to other tales people events … loss of the huge history and sense of
> magic of middle earth.'
>
> 'Epic and fitting though it felt like the end of a 12 hour mini-series rather
> than a standalone film.'
>
> *Group 2*: 'Epic as film …'
> Cinematic style, film genre (9)
> Grandeur of action and scenery (5)
> Scale of story, story-telling (5)
> Generalized, 'it's just epic' (8)
>
> 'Awe at the landscape the epic proportions of many of the scenes and the
> acting all v. good. A lot of deviations from the book. Special edition should
> be good. End was a bit of a come down.'
>
> 'Met my expectations of being a brilliant epic film but did not go any further
> for me.'
>
> 'A grand and sweeping epic which managed to encompass most human
> experience while being intimate. Perfect escapism.'

Group 3: 'Epic adventure …'
Scale of heroic tasks, emotional vastness (6)
Fantasy genre (4)

'So glad that it was made – a beautifully crafted and played film … a fantastic epic story that was almost perfectly transferred to the big screen. Sad that it is now over but glad in the knowledge that even Hollywood can put money into real quality stories … a film that helps one drift off and be in this other world of heroes and bravery kindness and companionship … the hope that one could be part of it somehow …'

Group 4: 'A true epic … beyond words …'
Transcendence, 'religious' scale (4)
Beyond words, overwhelming impact (3)

'A beautiful moving breathtaking epic which includes moments of intense action which contrast with moving tender intimate character moments. Terrifyingly grand on a biblical scale is how I believe Peter Jackson summed it up – and I totally agree with him.'

'Transcendent. Magical. It is so wonderful to see good overcome evil and the people who are pure & beautiful prevail. Best epic ever.'

'It's too epic for words!'

What struck us forcefully was that the most unconditional commitments to the filmic world came from those whose experience of it contained a *moral* or even *spiritual* dimension. Here was a point where, for some, Epic encountered, merged and became almost synonymous with Spiritual Journey.

The meanings of Spiritual Journey

What can we say about what the meanings of Spiritual Journey to its choosers? What emerges is what I would call a *cascade of four possibilities*. Not all individuals make the move to the final stage, but many who do not, are aware of the final possibility and acknowledge it by hesitating over it. The four phases of a Spiritual Journey orientation are these. (1) For very many book readers, there is a tendency to measure the films by their capacity to *capture the spirit* of the books. Changes, deletions could be excused because the films captured the story's 'essence'. (2) Spiritual Journey choosers are more likely to use *emotional languages* to express their experience, and to see the attainment of these emotions as a vital part of the film's meaning for them. (3) Very many of them then take a further step, to call the experience *overwhelming*, and *outrunning their capacity to describe it*. This quality of excess is seen as a defining characteristic, emphasizing the importance of the issues and situations addressed. (4) Finally, for a substantial number of this group, their experience of watching the film was felt to be on a par with a religious experience – but with the advantage that they could surrender to it unconditionally because it made no direct truth-claims, and carried no institutional implications. As the quotation which mastheads this article puts it, the experience was felt to be life-changing, and 'could be' a religion.

The questionnaires could only reveal a part of these qualities, because of their relative brevity – although some people wrote at astonishing length about their experiences. But in the project's third phase, we interviewed by telephone 107 UK individuals. Obviously, having identified the patterns around Spiritual Journey, we were keen to interview a number of such people. What interviews can reveal is how in practice the parts of an orientation cohere and interweave – or perhaps even at times conflict. They can also reveal the complex qualities of people's experiences. No one individual will exactly embody all the pattern traits. But rather than sketch a number I have chosen to look at one individual in detail – a professional woman aged between 36–45.

'Vivienne' is a striking example of someone who, almost against their own will, became caught up into a way of responding to the film. As Vivienne put it in the interview: 'I remain a bit taken aback by how much I really did sort of feel a very strong emotional reaction to it all.' What lies at back of this admission? Vivienne was chosen as someone nominating Spiritual Journey but not Epic, among her Modality choices. In her questionnaire she had described the films as 'reawakening her interest in the books', which she subsequently told us she had unconditionally loved when young (having first read them in her early teenage years). As a young adult, she had come to see elements in them which made her uncomfortable. This had, first, a gendered component:

> I'd read the books when I was kind of very young, liked them a lot when I was younger and got to a stage, I think, when I was older where, erm, in a, in a sort of way I think there's a certain masculinity about the books, it's partly the writing style.

But she also sensed a politics in the books which she came to suspect:

> I grew up in, err, in Warwickshire, and I'm back here now. Erm and it's all kind of fairly Tolkien-esque countryside, or hobbity-ish country-side, if you see what I mean. Erm, and also I did an English degree and the periods or time I tended to quite like were, err … I mean, you know, I'm a [indist.] I kind of liked old English and Middle-English and so I think there's something about, y'know, for me, the, the sort of, the hobbit environment that Tolkien was trying to describe was something definitely more Medieval than Renaissance, erm, because it is very, err, very uncultured in its way, it's not sort of … or unsophisticated is probably the right word, you know, it's kind of well-mannered and people respect each other and everybody knows their place and, y'know, it's very agrarian. Erm, and there is sort of quite a lot of feudalism around in it, which … y'know, as I said, I mean, it makes me squirm a bit now, but, y'know, that's how it's set up, but that accorded with the time, I wouldn't necessarily say I'd want to be living in that kind of time myself, unless I owned, y'know, 68,000 acres of land and …[2]

There are various ambivalences in here. She sees the story as too 'English' for comfort – albeit finding its simpleness quite attractive – but she knows (clearly reinforced by her English studies) that this is a thing 'of its time'. So this was not a simple rejection (the ideas of being 'well-mannered' and respectful clearly hold an appeal to her, for all their 'agrarian', even 'feudal' associations). But her encounter with the films broke the hold of these concerns. The films fascinated her – especially the final part of the trilogy (the first two parts had been for her brilliant cinema, but that was all). Vivienne made a tactical decision to see the final part on her own, in order to give full play to her responses. She was aware in the cinema of men crying as well as women, and in some sense this licensed her own powerful

emotional responses. Subsequently she watched it again with some women-friends, and had a very different kind of experience. But the first viewing pushed her to some rethinking. The clearest demonstration of this comes through a doubling in her attitudes to one character: Denethor, Lord Steward of Gondor.

At an intellectual level, she was very critical of the film's transformation of Denethor's character. In the books he was noble, able, the city's ultimate defender – sacrificing his sanity to its defence. It bothered her that the film undid this portrait:

> I would say that the Denethor thing is something that is important in a kind of slightly negative way […] I mean, I think John Noble was, *played* a really intriguingly good Denethor […] but at the same time, it was kind of slightly exasperating […] the Denethor of, of the book is very subtle, is a sort of a worthy, potential rival, and you get this whole idea that Aragorn's return isn't the thing, like a panacea, that will necessarily, y'know, perfectly change everything. There's a reason for, you know, you get, the books give you best sense that Aragorn spent a long time avoiding his responsibility, if you like. For a whole slew of reasons. And at the same time that Denethor has been, y'know, a more than capable steward. But I think there are things in the book that Gandalf effectively said, you know, he is more or less, you know, in kind of lineage, he's more or less akin to a king.[…] Minas Tirith is a huge city, it's been on the borders of, you know, the nameless evil for all of its existence, and Denethor in *Return of the King* was just very, very, very, very simplified, and he was bonkers. Erm y'know, there wasn't any kind of particularly great sense that this was somebody who had a great depth of understanding. What you got was someone who was sort of mad, scary, a bit petulant, erm, but mostly mad. And although, I mean, it was one of those weird things where everybody in the cinema probably *bar* me cheered wildly when Gandalf kind of knocks him one with the staff, but that felt [breathes out loudly] it, it sort of did feel a bit crowd-pleasing in a curious way. I mean, y'know, yeah, he's a terrible man, he makes hobbits cry, but, y'know, erm … it's still … in some sort of way it, y'know, it's another of those things where *I* would sit here and say *I* would like the film to be five hours long so that they could have made something more out of the fact that Denethor's been hanging in there by his finger nails, and you have to have some kind of spirit and some kind of intellectual gravitas to be doing that rather than, you know, you're nuts and Gandalf is gonna have to just come in and seize the day.

I quote Vivienne at length because her defence is itself extended. It mattered a great deal that this figure whom she had valued was belittled. This was not an uncommon criticism, this reduction of a noble overborne figure to selfish insanity.[3] But in her cinematic experience, something else took over. Vivienne chose Pippin as her favourite character – and this was indeed the choice both of many younger women and especially of those nominating Spiritual Journey. To many, Pippin was the character with the longest character-journey in the film (for detailed evidence on this, see Barker, 2005). His transformation from happy-go-lucky, almost childlike hobbit, to brave if fearful adult moved many of these viewers tremendously. In the questionnaire Vivienne explained her choice of him thus:

> Pippin – because his is the greatest development from irresponsible/unwitting to aware/active/resolved. He represents the closest in the film to an Everyman – not chosen not elite not driven by particular fanaticism. Shows that the seemingly small and insignificant individuals have their part to play in the greater history.

And one scene had devastating impact on those who engaged in this manner: the intercut scene where Pippin has to attend Denethor as he eats greedily, while his son Faramir is sent out, almost certainly to die, in the heroic but useless defence of the river crossing. Pippin is forced to sing for Denethor's entertainment:

> … I think, I mean, I did think it was, I just thought it was a genius scene, because everything in it, I mean, I, I, I think of it as almost, y'know, as, as a … the whole sequence of, you've seen Faramir riding down through the streets, and that sort of funereal casting of flowers and, it's very grave, and it's slow-motion, and the faces of the people in the crowds are sort of almost medieval painting-esque, you know, it's sort of … that's kind of already setting up an emotional charge. I think that it's [breathes out] when the sequence of those things, you see Pippin is kind of literally physically very tiny in Denethor's hall, y'know, this kind of … it's by far the grandest place that you've sort of seen in the whole of the films, you know Theoden lives in a great, grand, wooden hut, so it's not quite so sort of stylish 'n, y'know, the elves live in kind of great, fairly grand, beautifully woody, shrubbery surroundings, so it's sort of…it's almost like the most artificially man-made fantastically, high-falutin hall, marble, black and white, you know, it's enormous and it's very sort of cold as well. Erm and y'know, Pippin is the character who you know by then and you sort of know why he's there and, and, he's very, you have a fairly good idea of what makes him tick. And also, you know he's, for the first kind of time, he's really sort of on his own, which he'd never really been. He'd been, you know, able to kind of duck behind Merry or, or his various kind of emotional props or whatever. So he's totally isolated, Gandalf isn't even there, and Gandalf has always been a bit critical of him anyway. And then this sort of, I mean, one of the things that in a way was *good* about the film-Denethor was that he was that [laughing] evil bastard, y'know, you've sort of seen [pause] you *know* Pippin won't kiss his ring properly, he knows, he's kind of like dodging off from that. So you've already got this idea that he's sensing that Denethor is not y'know, the evil of the evil times and not necessarily sort of an external evil, it's an evil that can be in the actions of men. He's watched Denethor kind of absolutely break Faramir's heart in a totally fantastically cold-blooded way, and nobody else in the films, up to that point, has really done anything that was explicitly and unmotivatedly evil. […] And so y'know, Denethor does something which is on a personal scale sort of unforgivably cruel. And Pippin's watched that happen. And then I think, to have this whole sequence where y'know, you're seeing three things happen at once, you're seeing Denethor sort of just gratifying himself with this really, erm, squalid self-, self-nurturing eating erm and the fact that it's kind of messy and slobbery, it makes it quite disgusting, so you associate that disgust with him as well. And you see Pippin watching this, and, y'know, hobbits are kind of totally convivial creatures who want to eat, drink and be merry with a bunch of other creatures, so it's sort of, you know, he's watching something which is like a err [blows air out] prostitution is the wrong word, but you know what I mean, a kind of abasement of something that ought to be at the sort of heart of hobbit culture. You know, eating sociably. He's kind of pushed aside from that and then turned into this sort of entertainment object. And it's clear that Denethor uses him as kind of amusing trivial, really. Erm … [stretched] and so, you know, he's sort of, he's set up in this kind of unconscionably uncomfortable position … Erm and then I mean, he sings fantastically, Billy Boyd sounded like a fucking angel and [chuckles] because singing unaccompanied anyway, y'know, you sort of brace for it to sound horrible, but no, it

sounded great. And then y'know, the tracking-backs and forwards between Pippin singing and Denethor eating and the slow-motion of Faramir riding out, and the creak of the orc's bow being pulled back [longer pause] it had just an irresistible, you know, it, there was, I think it, it sold like the sense …Pippin is absolutely caught, there's nothing he can do, he's not actively doing something evil or wrong, he's just sort of a witness right at the eye of a point of something very terrible, and he can't see what's happening out on the field, but you know that he knows that Faramir's ridden off to virtual destruction with all of his men, and, and he knows why it's happening, and err … [high-pitched] I mean it was great, [whiny] I cried.

There is much to take note of in here. Note the way in which Vivienne has to range over the rest of the film to recall the hobbits' fundamental nature: Pippin and Merry's relationship, and how Pippin is now isolated; his overall characterjourney. All these feed into and warrant her *very close recall* of the scene. She is even aware that she knows things that Pippin couldn't, and that this is leading to her attributing extra meanings to his singing – it is as if he is singing it for Faramir, even though he couldn't know what is happening. But that doesn't stop her saying that 'You see it very explicitly from Pippin's pint of view.' She *constructed* Pippin as the focal point of her experience of this long scene. And for this purpose she completely accepts another account of Denethor – the 'genius scene' simply could not have worked without his cruelty and insanity.

Vivienne found herself simply pulled into and along with the film.[4] The experiential pull of the film was simultaneously narrative, cognitive and emotional. And the overall effect was to make her revalue the importance of the story as a whole. Almost against her will, *The Lord of the Rings* forces her to abandon her preferred mode of dealing with the wider world of science fiction fandom, of which she is a self-mocking member ('a nit-picking critical bastard'). It set itself apart, and she had to 'take it or leave it as it is'.

Vivienne does not reach the fourth cascade position. But she comes close. Her celebration of 'hobbit-culture' is, I suspect, part of this – a will to defend the ideal of simple homely pleasures. Her choice of Spiritual Journey never was fully explained in the course of the (long) interview. But Vivienne did reveal the toe of something we found almost exclusively among those who at the very least took seriously the idea of the experience as a *journey*. This was the strange phenomenon of knowing the story very well, but experiencing it *as if it were for the first time*. In some, this took the form of a strategic 'forgetting'. For Vivienne, it happened almost despite herself. Talking of the hobbits, and especially Pippin, she said:

> You know, they're small, and they're fairly helpless in the face of what's going on around them. And therefore, you know, it's sort of a question… it comes back to that Gandalfy thing about doing the best thing you can. And that best thing isn't in any sense ever really guaranteed to come off right, so I think, y'know, it was sort of, in a way what happened … throughout the whole of that sort of siege sequence was you saw Pippin repeatedly sort of trying to kind of live up to *something*. You know, either in the fighting, or with Denethor and Faramir. And with no great expectations who's gonna pull it off. I mean, you know again, from the books, that it will work, but actually, at that point, there were sort of elements to which it was significantly different enough from the book, that I was watching I guess for the first time, thinking 'I wonder what', rather than 'I know exactly what's gonna happen.'

It is as if it was a necessary condition of her total engagement with 'Pippin's point of view' that she could not 'know' how things would turn out. In accompanying him on his personal journey and transformation, Vivienne had to set aside her actual narrative knowledge. I have not come across an acknowledgement of this remarkable process anywhere else in the literature on audience responses, where prime attention indeed has been given to 'knowing' audiences.[5]

Some immodest implications and proposals

Much more could be said about these research materials and findings. Space forbids this. But anyone who has ever done audience research involving listening to actual viewers' responses will attest that the first joy/challenge is their unpredictability. In small-scale studies, this usually cannot produce much more than a recognition of *variety* and *difference*. The larger and more complex the research, the more it is possible to discern distinctions, patterns and groupings within and between responses. The *Lord of the Rings* project was distinctive in two important ways: it was much larger and wider than almost any preceding research; and its implements and stages were precisely designed to permit pattern-searching, and subsequent exploration of rich semantic seams. Briefly, in closing, I want to point to a number of challenging implications which seem to me to arise from our findings. I only outline them here, but hopefully enough that their importance and potentials are clear.

Beyond the 'active' and the 'passive'. Following a period in which the ideas of 'active' vs 'passive' audiences played a substantial role in the cultural studies field, and following a number of critiques of the rhetorical figures in these ideas (see for instance Roscoe et al., 1995; Seaman, 1992), thinking on the meanings of this has rather stalled. Only fan studies, paradigmatically the site of 'active audiences', have explored the concepts much further, by unpacking the ranges of ways in which fans seize upon, respond to, and expand their beloved story-worlds. But a few researchers have begun to insist on the importance of *willing subordination* to media materials (see e.g. Williamson, 2006) – or, as I have called it elsewhere, 'strategic passivity' (Barker and Mathijs, 2007: 15). The findings and materials outlined here press this point further. Spiritual Journey respondents typically gain their maximal pleasure – and pain – through letting themselves be *overwhelmed* by the film. Emotional submission to the problems and dangers of the characters, allied with a powerful sense of the importance of their struggles, are conditions for this optimal response. In Vivienne's case (as in a number of others we encountered) this goes so far as to be a *position* which she is astonished to find herself taking up – a point I return to in a moment.

The experiential 'hit'. Vivian Sobchack (e.g. 1992) was among the first to take a serious interest in the phenomenology of the cinema experience, albeit from a predominantly philosophical angle. Among other things, Sobchack emphasizes that our experience of watching a film is a whole-person process, not something engaging just one part of our natures. But once this important point becomes concretized in audience research, we discover that this is a different process with different films, and that in some cases it is built around a sought-after 'hit', perhaps like a drug-induced high, which sets off trains of subsequent self-examinations. The Spiritual Journey folk, with their meaningfully intense first experiences, look to be such a case. Our research points to the need to intensify Sobchack's theoretical interest, not just as an interesting phenomenon in its own right, but as a *necessary condition* of understanding how films may matter emotionally. Consideration of emotions in relation to film is in a funny state. As an example, the *Journal Film Studies* (vol. 8, summer 2006) has nine essays considering the question of emotional reactions to films. Offering themselves as

contributions to the fast-evolving field of cognitive film theory, which has led recent thinking about the place of emotions, they offer a good indicator of the general state of play. Disappointingly, the entire set is based on 'readings' of what films *must* be doing to 'the viewer'. Not one of the essays reports a single actual emotional reaction, let alone any structured research into audience emotions. What the *Lord of the Rings* research demonstrates is the potential contribution that this can make.

The status of the 'text'. The current common but awkward stand-off between textual analysis – with its tendency to impute responses to audiences – and audience research, which frequently finds the unexpected, the surprising and 'wayward' responses, is singularly unproductive. No serious research can be designed or developed on this interface. Current suggested compromises are simply empty. Jonathan Bignall (1992), for instance, notes the opposition between semiotic analysis and 'ethnographic research', insists that 'texts' *must* be influential in the ways analysts determine – but then allows that audiences can always 'resist' or 'negotiate'.[6] I rate this as a recognition of *failure* not of any breakthrough to understanding. Our findings, again, appear to invite a whole new approach, in which *through carefully structured audience research* it may be possible to derive a range of competing accounts of what the 'text' is – which aspects become particularly visible, what 'wholes' are constructed, and thence what kinds of purchase and 'influence' on people these texts can have. In other words, we can circle back to the structure and operation of 'texts' through their patterned meanings for different audiences. But along the way, I strongly suspect, we will end up getting rid of the term 'text' – as indeed a small but growing number of researchers in parallel fields have in effect been recommending.[7] The term's persistent unfortunate literary connotations, and the associated notion of 'readings' subdividable into conscious or unconscious, are now a barrier to actual research. Relatedly, I believe that this will lead inexorably to the position that Kim Schrøder et al. forthrightly state: 'As we see it, the question of the relative openness or closedness of a media product can only be answered through empirical study of actual readings' (2003: 136) They are specifically responding to followers of Umberto Eco (e.g. the position: some texts are more 'closed' than other more 'open' ones). But their argument equally applies, I would argue, to Hans Robert Jauss (e.g. the position: people's capacities to interpret are limited by their 'horizons of expectations) or to rhetorical adoptions of the encoding/decoding model (e.g. the position: there cannot be an indefinite number of interpretations of a 'text').

The idea of the 'journey'. A considerable amount of contemporary textual writing, when it turns to 'the audience', works with a distinction between 'aware' and 'unaware', or 'conscious' and 'non-conscious' responses, in particular in relation to knowing or not knowing how something was made – as if *knowledge* of a phenomenon functions as some kind of automatic distancing device (see Taylor, 2007, for a particularly egregious example). So, becoming 'aware' of intertextual connections, or of the identity of a piece of music in a film, or of constructive devices being employed, virtually guarantees a shift in the manner of attention. (This idea has underpinned some versions of media education, which seek to make children 'aware' of the purposes and goals of advertising, for instance.) The evidence we have accrued challenges this notion. Being 'aware' is neither here nor there. It is the *orientation* which people take up towards a film, or whatever, which drives the kinds of attention they give to particular aspects or moments – to the extent, in extreme cases, that people can deliberately overlook things they already know, in pursuit of a form of participation which they are committed to.

The idea of 'positional readings'. One of the very striking features to arise from our research is that while responses are extraordinarily varied, there aredefinite patterns and structures within them. This is not the same as saying that the range of possible interpretations is not infinite (as some adherents to textual analysis would put it). Rather, I propose the following risky – but worthwhile because testable – propositions: that the *more a person commits to a film*, the *more their response is likely to be patterned*, and even *predictable*; and the *more a medium or cultural form is embedded within a culture*, the *more certain it is that responses will be highly patterned*. I propose that we should think of these patterned ways as 'positional responses', because they indicate an emergent point of nexus between individuals-in-groups and media forms. These can be *experienced* as existing independently of individuals, and as having a 'pull' on people. And in principle, thence, it should be possible to use research into the nature of such nexuses to disclose the direction and potentials of those groups – as has of course been done (although we tend to forget the work – see Lucien Goldmann's *The Hidden God* [1964]). Viewed in this light, Vivienne's responses, with their sense of a powerful *pull* to a response, which even makes her a little uncomfortable, are indicative of a nexus around the film which would repay closer examination. But by the same token, the positionality of such systems of response almost invites individuals to mark their more-or-less agreement to take them up. In Vivienne's case, we can see the hesitations and doublings in her personal involvement. It also, incidentally, provides the theoretical ground for the methodological move that I have argued for on several occasions – that investigating people's hesitations, doubts, refusals, disappointments and frustrations can give special access to their *recognition of positional ideals*.

Individual/group relations – shifting the idea of 'interpretive community'. As Kim Schrøder (1994) has shown, the concept of 'interpretive community', while influential within recent years in media research, is muddled, multiple and unclear. And to his list of problems with the notion I would add the virtually unaddressed issue of the manner in which individuals are understood to *belong* to such 'communities'. My strong suspicion is that researchers interested in this would do well to step outside their own domain, to learn from such fields as reference group theories, or social network theories, in order to open up and concretize thinking and research on these processes.[8]

Adaptation theory and research. As Kate Egan and I have tried to summarize briefly (Egan and Barker, 2007), work on adaptations is experiencing change and indeed regrowth at the moment (indicated among other things by the emergence of the specialist journal *Adaptation*). The various pulls of fidelity critiques, ideological and intertextual theories have not yet been much tested by audience research. As ever, when this is fed into the melting-pot, things become complicated. From what I have shown here, I would pick out the following probable implications. First, to very many people, the relation which they experience between books and films of *The Lord of the Rings* is *not* one of 'adaptation'. Their alternative terms have to be taken seriously: 'visualization', 'embodiment', 'realization'. In important ways, the films *completed* their experience – and the notion of 'completion' at work here is challenging. For many viewers, it included getting a sense of and sharing *other people's vision* of the books. Second, contemporary cinema induces a real fluidity as to which version people are inclined to accept as definitive. Waiting for the DVD, and the extended version, and the director's cut, produces deferment – and that can mean milking each version for what it, in particular, offers. So, the cinema experience offers a kind of immersion which is not likely to be easily gained at home, even though the latter is expected to be the more 'authentic'. Audiences are *good at getting the best out of each version.*

Relations to fan studies. There is no question but that the proliferation of fan research is one of the great success stories within recent audience research. Yet its very success has led to a strange process close to colonization, where virtually all audience research can apparently be subsumed under its terms. With a number of others, I would want now to mark out some boundaries, and point to some vital differences – especially from predominant theorizations. 9 Certainly, with scholars like Matt Hills, our research points to the need to reinstall emotions at the core of our understanding of audience responses. But the emotions our Spiritual Journey respondents tell us about, are ones of *thought and hope made possible through immersion*. While they can be fierce combatants regarding the nature of Tolkien's work, their pleasures come neither simply from being purists, nor from extending and adjusting the stories to suit their purposes. Their engagements are, in a very significant way, devotional – because *this story-world* outlives and outruns almost all others for them. To conflate this with other kinds of 'fandom' loses more than it adds.

A final point of a very different order arises: our research overall indicates that a new large cultural purpose for film may be emerging, or have emerged. Particular films, for considerable numbers of viewers, are capable of acting, even if only in the short-term, as religious substitutes – with the added advantage that an adherent does not need to commit him or herself to any prepositional claims about god. Beginning, perhaps, with *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), there are clear signs of a rising interest in the capacity of films and cinema to evoke a series of sublime feelings, equivalent to spiritual pleasure, and a sense of the communality of these feelings. At another level Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (2004) may not be comprehensible without this. The last decade and a half has certainly seen the rise in Europe and America of a new fascination among theologians with film. Publishing houses and book series have emerged. Courses on religion and film have proliferated. *The Lord of the Rings* is certainly not alone in arousing this kind of serious response. We need to learn more about the different, devotional relations with film implied by this.10 As the anonymous referee for this article noted, this could provide empirical warrant for the long tradition of thinking (from Bloch, 1986 to Jameson, 2005) that sees utopian impulses – a will for signs of a better world – inside cultural materials.

Notes
1. These sentences are taken from one respondent's answer to our first question in the 2003–4 *Lord of the Rings* questionnaire, which asked: 'Can you sum up your response to the film in your own words?' This project was made possible by research funding from the British Economic and Social Research Council (Grant No. RES-000–22–0323), to whom I record our gratitude.
2. I acknowledge that I have done some 'cleaning' of the original transcript, here and in subsequent quotations, to ease reading. Mostly, this has involved the removal of pauses. Wherever there was any sense that a pause was more than a speech-manner, and indicated some kind of hesitation over phrasing or qualification, I have left them in.
3. Attending the 2005 Tolkien Society annual conference, I heard a young woman's well-received presentation of a powerful defence of the book-Denethor against his diminution by the film.
4. 'Unbelievably amazing tragic funny jaw dropping, it was brave, honest, made me feel the whole range of emotions. I laughed cried cheered clapped gasped hid my face, had tingles down my spine. Cannot believe a film could have this impact.' This response from another young female respondent, Joanne, captures much of the same sensibility.

5. I have discussed this striking tendency further in my essay 'Envisaging "Visualisation"' (Barker, 2006).
6. It would be interesting to hear if Bignall, or others who share his point of view on this, would feel as comfortable with the equivalent 'confident' when it comes from those who assert the 'obviously harmful' effects of television, on the basis of content analyses.
7. See the work of Michael Baxandall (1988), and E. McClung Fleming (1982) – and especially Alfred Gell (1998), who directly counterposes 'textualist' and 'semiotic' approaches to one which sees cultural materials as *objects endowed with agency by social actors*.
8. I have done a little further thinking and work on this in an essay addressing what it meant to be a reader of Tolkien in the 1960s (Barker, 2006).
9. These conceptualizations are of course themselves in some transition. Rereading recently the selection of Henry Jenkins' essays in his *Fans, Bloggers and Participatory Culture* (2006), it is interesting to reflect on the theoretical 'travel' they reveal. At the outset, and under the influence of Michel de Certeau, Jenkins celebrated fans for their 'poaching' of dominant culture materials for counter-purposes – even to the point of constituting an emergent new democratic force. From here, emerged his fascination with the sheer 'weirdness' of fandom, and its 'sluttishness' – the ability of fans to travel wildly from object to object (and his and others' interest in Slash clearly fits this mode) without any apparent political significance. From this, he moved to a more general celebration of 'participatory culture' as a kind of cultural retooling. But again emergent was a suggestion of a politics, now borrowing from Pierre Levy's notion of 'collective intelligence' – that somehow blogging, gaming and other online participatory activities may constitute a kind of counter-culture. I find myself asking: who are the 'heroes' in this cultural positioning? It has long been the way with cultural studies-inflected work that it seeks radical agencies to embody its hopes for the world. My growing worry is that Jenkins' work may have parallels in the boosterism of Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2004), which sees all things good in the emergence of a 'class' of creative technocrats. I offer this as a provocation, not a certain conclusion.
10. In his otherwise splendid book on *The Shawshank Redemption*, Mark Kermode (2003: 85−6) notes that he cannot understand many reviewers' enthusiasm for the film's ending, which, to him, is aesthetically and thematically unsatisfactory. An investigation of the process and grounds for this enthusiastic embrace could constitute a small but equivalent study to ours.

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