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Mathijs, Ernest; Barker, Martin

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SEEING THE PROMISED LAND FROM AFAR The Perception of New Zealand by Overseas *The Lord of the Rings* Audiences

Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs

 VER SINCE it was announced that Peter Jackson would be shooting *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy in New Zealand, it has become a “special place” for filmgoers. Years before the trilogy was released Barry Keith Grant predicted that Jackson would seek “to make Middle earth look like it was shot on location”, (Grant, 1999: 27) and New Zealand was increasingly hailed as a new cult location. (Wu, 2003: 84-108) In prefigurative coverage on the film, New Zealand became a prominent and persistent feature. A symptomatic narrative in that discourse tells how Jackson, as a young lad, was reading the books while on a train in New Zealand, and how, passing through the different landscapes, he could not help noticing the striking similarities between the book’s descriptions and the views outside, imagining himself *really inside* Middle-earth. (Mathijs and Pomerance, 2006: 5)

There can be no doubt that the filming of *LotR* in New Zealand contributed significantly to the film’s pictorial palette, and it certainly raised the world profile of New Zealand. But in what ways did audiences outside New Zealand take note of this, and how did “New Zealand” play a part in their appreciation of the films? This chapter uses materials from the 2003-2004 international *LotR* audience project to investigate how understanding of the film was shaped by its antipodean locations, and what this in turn added to people’s ideas of “New Zealand”.

The Locus of “Locations”

The role of film locations in generating meaning-potential has received little attention from film studies.¹ The long love affair with the concept of *mise-en-scène*, with its theatrical origins and emphasis on the pro-filmic’s integration into narrative has surely helped in this marginalization. But the recent increase in attention to ancillary or satellite materials has begun to change this.² In discussion surrounding films, the actual filming locations often play a very large part. The relations between *LotR* and its New Zealand locations are a perfect type-case.

Fiction cinema often refrains from the costly and logistically complex organization of location shooting, and settings are instead recreated in studios or through special effects. Francis Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992) famously does not contain one single actual outdoor shot, managing to imitate all of the Carpathians, Transylvania, London, Carfax Abbey and other locations either in the Columbia studios or through special effects. (see Pouroy, 1993)³ But when fiction cinema does rely upon real life landscapes, with their own historical and ideological weights, two processes are set in train: the transfer of meaning from landscape to film, and from film to landscape.

The Transfer of Meaning from Location to Film

There are plenty of studies of how locations have impacted on understandings of film, the most obvious ones analysing how film can use real-life locations and their connotations to produce a certain frame of reference. It is for instance a much-heard claim that part of the appeal of Friedrich Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922) are the qualities it deploys through its location shooting. The hyena, the running wild horses, the mountain ranges, the wild river, and the harbour town in which *Nosferatu* arrives have all added something extra to the feel of the story—making it, according to

¹ Note the small but significant number of studies on the ‘cinematic city’; see for instance Clarke (1997).

² For an examination of this rise, see Barker (2004).

³ Another famous example is *Titanic* (dir. James Cameron, 1997).

critics, more horrific because it looks so “real”.⁴ Examples from this strain involving New Zealand include Ian Conrich’s study of the Kiwi Gothic, and Estella Tincknell’s analysis of landscapes in Jane Campion’s *The Piano* (1994), which, tellingly, appeared in a collection entitled *New Zealand—A Pastoral Paradise?* (Conrich, 2005; Tincknell, 2000)

Beyond the textual imprint which a location can leave, also of essential importance in framing a film culturally is when locations become a topic in tales *about* the film. When Steven Spielberg insisted for *Schindler’s List* (1993) on filming the arrival of a train in Auschwitz outside the gates of the actual place, even though he could not obtain permission to shoot in that location, it was because he felt it would add gravitas to an already compelling historical narrative. The weight of the place could add a particular feel to the film, enriching it with additional meaning, regardless of whether audiences actually knew what the real Auschwitz looked like. It would be the *ancillary story* that Spielberg shot this scene just outside Auschwitz that would give many viewers the means to construct this meaning.⁵ Needless to say, the ancillary discourses of *LotR* abound with such stories and references.

Locations and Fantasy

But representations of places become particularly complex when the fiction concerned is fantasy. There is the sheer fact that fantasy makes no claims to a “real” against which it can be measured; its world never did and never will exist. Yet this does not mean no references are circulating, either through existing visualizations (previous adaptations of the story, book-jackets and illustrations, record-sleeves, landscapes said to have inspired the writer, artists inspired by the work, and so on) or through critical inference and interpretation (associations made when the work is discussed, topical connections with particular events and places in history). In the case of *LotR* there is a wealth of such references, each potentially impacting on

⁴ See for instance Göttler et al. (1990: 105-112).

⁵ Other such examples would include Werner Herzog’s *Aguirre* (1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1981) filmed in the Amazon jungle, or David Cronenberg’s *Crash* (1996), filmed in and around Toronto.

the film's reception, and on the audiences' viewing experiences. Here is, for instance, how Lin Carter, in 1969, describes the landscape and setting of Middle-earth:

Tolkien's picture of Middle-earth during the Third Age is not very different from Europe during the Middle Ages. It is mostly made up of great and ancient forests, where dark things lurk, with here and there a patch of homely life—small farms and furrowed fields and little towns—forming islands of quiet, rural society amid the blackness of the wilderness. It is a world rising into the full noon of civilization, gradually exploring its limits and taming its wild places, half-remembering the high and noble civilizations of distant ages from whence it sprang. (Carter, 1969: 22)

Carter is not alone in visualizing Middle-earth. Since Tolkien's story became an entrenched part of popular culture, there have been numerous attempts to visualize the landscapes and locations of *LotR*, ranging from paintings, drawings, maps, book covers and illustrations, to Ralph Bakshi's 1978 animated version.⁶ Each has added to the frames of reference available for producers and viewers of the movie trilogy, together creating a vast repository of imagery against which images of Peter Jackson's visualization could be seen, compared and tested.⁷

The depth and range of these make it unlikely that Jackson's version would be universally accepted—many would be disappointed at his choice of some images over others. Strangely, this disappointment seldom occurred. Instead, and to many observers' surprise, there was an overwhelming consensus that Jackson's visualization was not only very good, but by far the nearest to what Middle-earth “would”, and “*should*”, look like. Indeed, what is particularly striking is that the New Zealand setting of the film was seen as a major element in this achievement—it was often argued that New Zealand's landscapes and views were key to why Jackson's version was received as the ultimate Middle-earth. We will pass on the textual implications of this; on Jackson's claim that he wanted a realistic Middle-earth, to look as if it was shot on location, (Grant, 1999: 27) and on how his (and indeed the

⁶ For an overview of popular culture artefacts using *LotR* in visualizations, see Mathijs (2006: 1-21, 43-60, 103-120, 287-303, and 321-335).

⁷ We would like to emphasize at this point that by the name “Jackson” we actually refer to all personnel on the production involved in creating imagery, from the location scouts, to carpenters, to assistant cinematographers. We use the name “Jackson” not as an authorial label here but as a sign of collective corporate creativity.

audiences’) conception of this realism relates to prior visualizations of Middle-earth, and ask instead under what conditions this consensus about the look of Middle-earth, and its connection to New Zealand, exist.

The Transfer of Meaning from Film to Location

Less attention has been given to the process by which films can, in their use of certain locations and landscapes, transfer meanings to them. But if film studies have said relatively little about locations, tourism researchers have made more valuable statements about the reverse processes. This attention arises from the “cultural turn” in tourism studies in recent decades, which has led to closer examination of the role of “images” and “myths” about peoples, sites and landscapes. The exemplar of such work is John Urry’s *The Tourist Gaze* which drew on Michel Foucault’s concept of the “medical gaze” to argue that contemporary tourists are involved in a global knowledge-making enterprise. In visiting “other cultures”, which are increasingly displayed for visitors’ consumption, the tourists are seeking in the form of myths the “authentic” that they have lost from their own lives. This is a power relationship, the “empire of the gaze”, as Urry calls it. (Urry, 2002: 151) Urry does refer albeit briefly to the role within tourism of “mediated locations”. But, be it the *Coronation Street* set or the stately home locations of a Jane Austen adaptation, these sites invite forms of participation which are hard to contain within notions of “authenticity”.

In the case of New Zealand and *LotR* there are some examples of such an approach, most of them focusing on the impact of the production process rather than any change of perception. (Thornley, 2006: 103-120) Focusing particularly on landscapes, Stan Jones analyses how several tourist initiatives such as *The Location Guidebook*, the Te Papa exhibition, and the Hobbiton set produced a link between the production and local and indigenous cultural life. While stressing how difficult it is to ascertain how this impacts on perceptions of the country, Jones nevertheless notes that it equips New Zealand with a “wider out of frame reality than the actual”. (Jones, 2006: 287-303) Similarly, Thierry Jutel has observed how *LotR* has created

the possibility for a “geography of the virtual” in which the films’ use of the landscape of New Zealand has transformed perceptions and attitudes towards it:

First the discourse around New Zealand is firmly grounded in the imperialist projection upon the colonized land. Second, as a postcolonial society, Aotearoa produces multiple and often contradictory discourses about the landscape. Third, the landscape of New Zealand has come to represent a transposable “otherness”; and finally, New Zealand, especially as it is recognized as Middle earth, offers its land as a commodity, which inscribes it in the forces of the global economy. (Jutel, 2004: 55)

We want to test Jutel’s claim by drawing upon evidence of the ways non-New Zealand audiences negotiated the presence of New Zealand. How did *LotR* audiences from elsewhere in the world perceive New Zealand? What did they think its landscapes added to the film? And, on the other hand, what kind of land, and place, did New Zealand become in their imaginations as a result of the filming? These questions need to be set within the context of “cultural tourism”.

The Rise of “Cultural Tourism”

The recent growth in interest and research into cultural tourism has taken two main forms. There has been the inevitable rise of a substantial body of governmental and market research, often on a country-by-country basis, attempting to identify possible “brand” features of particular countries. This is in response to the realization that a considerable segment—and a wealthy one—of people travelling for leisure do so with the wish to access “local colour and culture”. Such research has had to consider not only how to attract such visitors, but also, in many cases, how to manage the consequences of attracting them: the problems of security in countries liable to attacks on tourists visiting “ancient worlds” (Egypt, for example); the problems of unintended spin-offs of brand images (Thailand as a land of “innocence”, and the growth of sex tourism); the problems of success, and the threats to the very culture that has attracted large numbers (Macchu Picchu is an evident example); and the problems of reconstituting local cultural features as tourist spectacles.⁸ New Zealand, famously, has sought to build on the tourist

⁸ See for instance Genocchio (1995: 35-46), and Bell and Lyall (2002: 35).

potential of the film locations for *LotR*, and subsequently *The Chronicles of Narnia: the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (dir. Andrew Adamson, 2005). But this was no pure invention; rather, it built on pre-existing structures (patterns of tourist organization and facilities) and constructions (touristic representations of New Zealand).

As we have seen, in the same period as the rise of policy-driven tourist research, there was a growth in critical studies, questioning not only their economic bases, but the ways in which tourists—predominantly from metropolitan countries—participate in ways of “knowing” the non-metropolitan world (and especially the “Third World”). But New Zealand, albeit not a metropolitan country, is hardly Third World. And the application of notions of the “tourist gaze” is not readily appropriate, as some studies have demonstrated. In an essay on the place of “adventure tourism” in New Zealand, Cloke and Perkins paint a historical portrait of the emergence of styles of tourism which eschewed conventional “beach holidays” and native tourism. (Cloke and Perkins, 1998) Instead, an image and a set of practices was constructed of New Zealand as an adventure playground against the backdrop of Vast Nature. One of the outcomes of their argument is a challenge to Urry’s notion of the “gaze”, from a case where the emphasis is on encounter, activity, and risky use. Wendy Larner meanwhile has addressed other aspects of this pre-Jackson tourist era. (Larner, 1998) She discusses tourist strategies in New Zealand in the context of radical shifts in government policy in the 1990s, away from a social democratic conception of the State towards a more market-driven, and Pacific Rim-oriented economy. Two features of this which she emphasizes are the drive for skilled, new technology investment, and a sense of the country as a hub through which money, goods and utilities could flow. This marks a dramatic shift for an economy that had, until recently, been heavily based on agriculture. The *image* of the land could thence shift from one of farms with contented cows and sheep producing food for export, to an *empty but fertile* set of imaginary spaces.⁹

⁹ As a younger person, Martin Barker recalls the intense marketing of New Zealand lamb, butter and cheese in the U.K., and the advertisements stressing the bucolic farm environments from which the products came. For an interesting consideration of the ways in which New Zealand’s own film industry has incorporated many elements of this into its own representations of landscape, see Le Héron (2004).

According to Cloke and Perkins, the crucial step towards this was taken in 1993, via a Saatchi & Saatchi report, “The New Zealand Way”, which proposed the conscious development of a “Brand New Zealand”. This Brand did not attach to individual parts or aspects of the islands, but to the land as a whole, emphasizing that “it’s a new place, youthful, fresh and still experimenting to find its feet in the world” (quoted in Cloke and Perkins, 1998: 191): a place of changes rather than traditions, leaving little space for Maori history. This was the brand conceived at the end of the twentieth century. But while the opportunities afforded by *LotR* could not be ignored, they were quite easily assimilated into this “personality”: raw Nature mediated by high tech (digital) industry. Hobbit-like folklore offers miraculous experiences to the rest of the world. Expanding these themes, in 2001 and 2003 major reports commissioned by Tourism New Zealand, in the formulation of its “National Tourism Strategy 2010”, identified cultural tourism as one of the foremost opportunities. The Reports focus on what is called the “interactive traveller”, an Internet-savvy person who seeks, among other things, to feel “vital and alive”, “social and carefree”, “balanced and bonded”, and “mentally stimulated”. (Anon, 2001; Colmar Brunton report, 2003) “Natural wonders” are top of the wish-list, for this group. Interestingly, these reports make no mention of *LotR* or related experiences. Instead, they identify the problem of the so-called “cultural cringe”—New Zealanders’ unwillingness to promote their *own* cultural productions and heritage. In a significant way, we might say that their unspoken concern is that the heritage of Jackson’s films is *too temporary* to constitute a long-term substitute for local cultural traditions.

Alternatively we might see Peter Jackson’s film as an event waiting to happen. Here is a film which celebrates the combination of a high-tech production regime and wild Nature, finding and putting “magic” into extraordinary locations. The general tale of the marketing of New Zealand via *LotR* is well captured in an essay by Rodanthe Tzanelli, who unpicks the curious ways in which the various production sites across the islands became “enhanced locales”. (Tzanelli, 2004: 23) Tzanelli notes, among other things, that the official website for *LotR* was copyrighted by both New Line Cinema and Tourism New Zealand. She mounts an argument, through her essay, that in the relationship between New Zealand and

LotR we can see a new phenomenon: the merging of an old cultural industry and a contemporary tourist industry into a new “sign industry” leading to “an appropriation of the *LOTR* sign industry for purposes of economic growth”. (Tzanelli, 2004: 23) She is particularly interested in the role of the State in these processes:

The New Zealand state decided to take some initiative to protect commercial interests in the country. The stakes are high: the new Zealand Institute for Economic Research, an independent economic forecast group, predicted that “tourism will be the ‘star’ of the country’s export sector in the next two years”, attributing this change to the *LOTR* success.... Opinions converged behind one observation: New Zealand, a country that historically was seen as “the dullest place on earth with more sheep than people” (*Guardian*, 06/01/02) attained a new identity as the exciting Middle earth of Tolkien and Jackson. (Tzanelli, 2004: 37)

Thus, for Tzanelli, investment in the country/film crossover constitutes a “long-term investment in New Zealand’s self-perception and global image”. It is new in the sense that this is pure simulacrum. Not even the film sets remain (preservation rules requiring their complete removal)—all that remains is the *idea* of the film being made in different places.¹⁰

Whether one film and its associations can be sustained remains to be seen, but we do not doubt the force of a sustained series of fantastical crossovers. The question remains: what precisely *did* audiences, and in particular those who most promptly accepted the film’s invitation, make of the New Zealand/*LotR* combination? To answer this, we turn to the body of materials gathered in the international *LotR* audience project 2003-2004.

¹⁰ Taking a materialist approach, in their chapter entitled “On the Brink of a New Threshold of Opportunity: *The Lord of the Rings* and New Zealand Cultural Policy”, Jenny Lawn and Bronwyn Beatty also consider the impact of Jackson’s achievement on the New Zealand economy, on the government’s export-driven creative industries policy, and on the longer-term shape and sustainability of local film production in New Zealand, in their discussion of the economic and cultural implications of the government’s policy to make feature films a “value-added” export industry. (Lawn and Beatty, 2006: 43-60)

New Zealand in Overseas' Audience Perceptions

a. Methodology and Scope

This project was a fifteen-month study, originating from twenty countries but gathering responses across the world, of the launch and reception of the final part of the film trilogy.¹¹ It generated a unique data-resource. Its complex questionnaire, available in fourteen languages on the web and combining quantitative and qualitative questions, generated almost 25,000 responses across the world. No question asked specifically about New Zealand. But one open-text question—Question 5: “Where, and when, is Middle-earth for you? Is there a place or a time that it particularly makes you think of?”—produced a substantial number of spontaneous mentions of “New Zealand”. There were more than 700 responses from across the world (excluding New Zealand). Of these, just under 600 were in English. For this chapter we explored these responses both quantitatively (to discover the kind of people who made these responses according to our demographic measures; and to further seek recurrent discursive patterns) and qualitatively (to build a model of the semantic meanings associating with “New Zealand” via *LotR*).

b. Who mentioned “New Zealand” in their Question 5 responses?

We limited ourselves to the English language responses for reasons of language competence. Also, we were unsure how to assemble all possible mentions of New Zealand in non-Latin scripts. Searching our database under various spellings

¹¹ This research was developed as part of the International Lord of the Rings Research Project, supported by a grant from the U.K. Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC Grant No. 000-22-0323) to whom we record our gratitude. The project had three stages: a study of the prefigurative materials in each country (marketing and publicity, press, magazine, radio and television coverage); a databased questionnaire combining multiple-choice with free-text responses, available on-line but also completed on paper in some countries; and follow-up interviews with individuals chosen to typify response-positions from the questionnaire responses. The volume and density of materials produced by the project was enormous: 24,739 questionnaires from around the world. Because of this, over time it should permit systematic investigation of many questions which have, until now, been the subject of speculative claims. A book of core findings from around the world is currently under development. (Barker and Mathijs, 2007)

(Zealand, Zeeland, Sealand, NZ, etc.) we could be sure of locating just about every English-language response. It was central to our investigation that people who mentioned “New Zealand” (henceforth “NZ-namers”) in answering this question did so spontaneously, without any prompting from us. It was, for these people, one of the first things that occurred to them in thinking about the *kind of reality* that the film had achieved for them. Indeed, we were surprised at the frequency of this “naming”. It was therefore important to determine how typical of a wider population the NZ-namers were.

Our research generated sufficient responses to permit internal differentiation, and groupings, in order to locate recurrent patterns and associations. In looking at our collection of 592 responses, we compared the nature of the group with all 11,429 English-language responses, to see how far they were representative of that wider set. The results were striking. On most measures, NZ-namers matched very closely the wider population. This held for age, for occupation (broadly), for country, and for familiarity with the books, and indications of the kind of story. In certain respects, one substantially, the others marginally, the group varied. While in the larger set, the gender breakdown was M=43.2% to F=56.8%, among the NZ-namers the proportion of females rose sharply: M=29.0%, F=71.0%. The other changes were more marginal, and apparently paradoxical. First, the relative ages of NZ-namers were higher than those of the full population. This increase was particularly noticeable in the age-ranges 26-45. Secondly, however, there was one shift within occupation, to a lower percentage of professionals, and a higher percentage of students—who might have been expected in the lower age groups. Finally, our group accentuated what was already a substantial tendency in our wider population, towards finding the film both “extremely enjoyable” (up from 75% to 80%) and “extremely important” (up from 69% to 79%). We will reflect on these variations later. But as a broad indication, the fact that in so many of our measures this NZ-namers group was representative of its base population suggests that this reference to New Zealand may be a direct response to the *film itself*, rather than arising from special features in the audience environments.

These responses some quite lengthy, turned out to be representative of our response population, except that nearly three quarters were from women, and

showed slightly raised levels of reported filmic enjoyment and importance. In other respects (country, age, occupation, familiarity with the books, etc.) they reflected the overall spread of respondents. Our structured study of these answers explores the ways in which “New Zealand” operates as a figure within an imaginary world, focused around ideas of “nature” and “the mediaeval”.

We took a random 200 set of the 592 English-language responses.¹² We did this expecting to develop, and then follow, a coding system which could capture differences among the responses, which might then be sorted for patterns, and then studied both quantitatively and qualitatively.¹³ In fact this approach singularly did not work on this occasion, because there were no discernible differences, other than those arising from greater or lesser explicitness.

It is necessary to note the twenty-three respondents whose answers consisted of, for instance, “New Zealand” (henceforth we ignore variant spellings as irrelevant to our investigation), or “New Zealand most definitely!”, or who perhaps took their account one stage further by extending this to “New Zealand in the Middle Ages”. For these writers, the reasons for saying these things must have seemed so obvious as to be beyond elaboration. But as a result, while we may (reasonably) guess that their reasons are “mainstream”, and thence of the kind that we find displayed among those who *do* elaborate, it is impossible to be certain of this. Simply, they have chosen complete implicitness.

Passing beyond these, we find different degrees of elaboration. Some people’s responses only hinted at the nature of the associations linking Middle-earth with New Zealand. Other people (and we can say something about who they are) flesh out their pictures of these associations. What struck us forcefully was that these appeared to accumulate into a *single semantic model*.

Before we disclose this it may be helpful to first say what is revealed by asking: to whom do people appear to feel they are speaking, as they answer this question? We can see some signs of an agenda from which people wished to distance

¹² As previously, this was done using a facility within Microsoft Access, which allows all responses to be sorted alphabetically. By using the responses to another question, it is possible to ensure that nothing within the answers to this question is being privileged.

¹³ See Martin Barker’s article on patterns of character-choice for an example of how this works, and the kinds of understanding it permits. (Barker, 2005)

themselves. The main form this takes is a caution about appearing *over-involved* in the story-world, as in:

“Well I think of New Zealand, but of course I know that it’s just an escape.”

“But” here functions to circumscribe the implications of this thinking, and the adoption of “escape” reassures the writer that s/he is doing nothing inappropriate or nerdish. We see the same impulse, but managed differently, behind this answer:

“New Zealand! Just kidding...”

The implication here is that the writer is playing a game of over-involvement, to “have us on”.

In between these extremes, we can depict a long chain of responses addressing the same semantic dimension, from those for whom New Zealand is never much more than a convenient place, a set of sites for filming (a true location), to those for whom it stands for something “fantastic”. When we put these answers in a series of transitions we see increasing transference of meanings between the real and the fictional, on a semantic sliding scale, as follows:

Location...

stand in...

embodiment...

a wished for place...

where fantasy lives

It seems to make little difference to people’s answers whether they have or have not visited New Zealand; or whether they dream, hope or plan to visit. Many people seem capable of making a strong separation between New Zealand as a physical reality—with its own history, peoples, problems, strengths and weaknesses—and “New Zealand” as a landscape invested forever with the supervenient meanings of Tolkien’s world. This may in itself say much about the power of cultural tourism.

What is fascinating about these answers is that they are found among those who wish to distance themselves slightly from the experience of the film. From our wider researches into the questionnaire responses we have been able to identify which groups have the strongest and most committed relationship with the film. Most strikingly, our quantitative data shows that the highest levels of pleasure and

importance are associated with those selecting *Spiritual Journey* as one way of characterising the *kind of story* Tolkien's world is for them.¹⁴ Experimentally selecting one hundred *Spiritual Journey* respondents from the rest, and comparing them with one hundred others from within our NZ-namers, we discovered first, that the former gave markedly *longer* (and therefore more elaborate) answers than the latter. Second, there was a concentration among the latter of both entirely implicit answers, and of cautionary answers just described. Those experiencing *LotR* as in some sense a *Spiritual Journey* are sufficiently committed to it not to worry about how they might appear to us, and to want to express more fully what, for them, is the association between Middle-earth and New Zealand.

c. Elaborations of Time and Place

We also find this dimension of proximity and distance (of real and abstract) when we take into account references to time and place. We found that we could sort responses along three axes: 1) *implicitness*—those responses where references were fast, indexical, and unelaborated; 2) *distancing*—those responses where the time and space of New Zealand might have been acknowledged, but simultaneously denied too much “reality”; and 3) *explicit and connected*—those responses which combined the opposites of these, making simultaneously real and elaborated links with New Zealand, and tending to suggest links within and between the two strands of qualities. Table 1 captures the results of classifying responses in this way. The right hand column captures the responses of those with the highest levels of pleasure in and commitment to the film. We offer the following as an emergent portrait of the ways in which “New Zealand” as a site of representation plays on the meanings of *LotR*.

- **Time:** the temporal location of Middle-earth, and the qualities that New Zealand needs embody that location, are wonderfully imprecise. The point seems to be that this is precisely a *mythical* past, which can even—in one or

¹⁴ The choice was between thirteen types of stories: allegory, epic, fairytale, fantasy, game-world, good vs. evil, myth/legend, quest, SFX film, spiritual journey, threatened homeland, war story, and “other”.

two responses—be a “future” time. This is an *idea of pastness*, reaching into stories and fragments of moral narratives for the sufficient associations to place itself.

- **Place:** the qualities associated with New Zealand/Middle-earth range from the aesthetic to the moral. The cinematic qualities of the landscapes immediately become more than that for many. These are *clean* and *unsullied* places, before humans began despoiling them.

In combining these, respondents themselves sometimes puzzle over the complexity of the mental operations that they are performing. For instance:

“I actually believe it’s somewhere on earth but not on earth. Confusing but I see it in my mind.”

TABLE I. References to Time and Place

	Implicit	Distanced	Explicit/Connected
<i>Temporal location and qualities</i>	-The past -1500s -The Middle Ages -The Dark Ages -Ages ago -A few thousand years ago	-This is nowhere and nowhen—Middle-earth isn’t real -There is no equitable time period -Not a particular time -The book says it’s 1300s	-Not here though maybe it was once here -Earlier than our knowledge -Predating written records. Before Christ -Before we went there -A timeless place that is just about anywhere -A more innocent time
<i>Spatial location and qualities</i>	-Wonderful -Awesome -Truly beautiful -Pristine -Primitive -Lush -Nature	-Good locations -Without the beautiful landscapes of NZ the films would have been difficult to make	-Pure and isolated -Such a beautiful and diverse world -Landscape with mountains, rivers and forest is perfect -The country has that primitive feeling with nature at its base -Fitting that it is NZ due to the immense variety of lands and characters

This would seem to derive from an awareness that they are creating a composite from different sources:

“I do borrow from the English middle ages to fill some of the gaps.”

In other words, audiences know that they are constructing composites from a range of sources, and this very compositeness allows them to “manage” the kind of reality that they wish to apply to Middle-earth. Not a literal reality, but one which nonetheless *resonates* with their live world. This can be seen in the following two tendencies discovered in our materials.

d. A World Without Evil

First, this “land” is *enormous*. New Zealand—two mid-sized islands in the South Pacific—in the minds of those approaching it through *LotR* is able to contain an entire continent, a whole world which overflows maps, contains many peoples, and is almost unknowable to its own denizens. Viewers here encompass what the inhabitants of Middle-earth cannot. “New Zealand” can contain everything and everyone, through its expressive landscapes. They are simultaneously visual, cultural and moral, what one person describes as “the scenery and natural feelings”. The landscapes force journeys and test characters.

Nevertheless, these landscapes are *without evil*. It may be a world of different cultures, but neither the Orcs, nor Saruman, nor the Balrog, nor Sauron even *belong* there. They live there, and threaten it, but it is not their world. Among the answers mentioning “New Zealand”, many name different inhabitants. But only two mention the place of evil in this world, and both of these specifically place it as coming from “outside”: one says that “a different kind of evil has permeated our world”, the other identifies it as “the evil from the east”. Evil does not truly inhabit New Zealand/Middle-earth, which thus retains its paradisaical quality.

e. The Shire: Home

This portrait is uncannily common and shared, but carries within it one remarkable exception. In references to the Shire, a different dimension enters: “home”. A number of people add a reference to another place to embody their feelings about

Hobbiton. And in each case where this is done, it is something very close to 'home'. In some cases, this is explicitly England. In one case it is Red River Valley in Minnesota (where the respondent grew up). In another one, it is Norway.

In each case, the writing reveals that this is the author's own "sense of home". What is interesting is that Tzanelli, working with quite different materials (a large sample of discussions about the film gathered from the Internet Movie Database), found precisely the same distinction at work:

The idea of representing the "Old English" way of life was thought to be implicit in Tolkien's story. The little Hobbit houses with their gardens and the small Shire community occupied some space in English reviews of the LOTR trilogy (see for example IMDB, London, England, 20/11/04). Here, although the controversy was over the "appropriate" simulation of a fantastic community, the idea of an authentic "way of living" (which is British, not New Zealandish!) persists. (Tzanelli, 2004: 29)

Tzanelli suggests that this persistent Englishness might constitute a form of "cultural resistance" to the New Line/Tourism New Zealand proposition. We doubt this. To argue thus involves dividing people's responses to the landscapes into two parts: "dominated" responses to New Zealand, and "resistant" responses via their homelands, which makes little sense. We propose instead that it should be seen as a curious mental geography, with its own internal rationale.

New Zealand and "New Zealand"

There is nothing surprising about the idea that New Zealand has become a fantasy landscape for many fans of the *LotR* films. What is pertinent is the remarkable uniformity across English-speaking respondents in this regard, suggesting that this is a strong feature of the film itself and its marketing and established status, rather than a feature of the differentiated social lives of the audiences.

But it is also a landscape with a moral use, a *moral landscape*. Almost without exception audiences seem to approach the meanings Middle-earth embodies, through its placing in New Zealand, very seriously: as something that matters greatly to them. This is evident in the care with which they disconnect it from any "evil", and with which they try not to see the Shire (the true home ground) on the same level as other location-related meanings. It is as if they are determined to

safeguard their feeling of “home” from any appropriation, not as Tzanelli suggests as cultural resistance but, rather, as a safe-haven.

We think that our sample’s answers strongly indicate that degrees of time-distance and place-distance are used to situate value systems held by audiences, and which they want to ascribe to *LotR*. In film studies it is often suggested that such situating happens through identification with characters, but it is clear that for those people mentioning New Zealand, this country and its representation in the films carry value as well. It embodies good; it allows for elaborations of what matter (“nature”, “purity”, “innocence”, “knowledge”) in varying degrees of explicitness, and in varying degrees of closeness to the actual landscapes of New Zealand. Sometimes our respondents seem to ascribe these values to the actual locations, but more often they link the values to more abstract, distanced, *ideal* locations—the “New Zealand”—for which the New Zealand landscape (and its use in the films) functions as a trigger, an inference, or a stimulus.

Pilgrimage: “New Zealand” as a Touchstone for “Home”

We would go further. Beyond the use of the fixed place New Zealand we believe many overseas audiences use the idea of “New Zealand” as a touchstone for a journey of discovery, an abstract destination for a pilgrimage the films’ stories invite them to take. This accords with Stan Jones in his chapter “Fixing a Heritage”: “Seeking Middle earth does not mean wandering, but a form of ‘grounded pilgrimage’. That is: there and back again between home and very distant goals already visualized.” (Jones, 2006: 292) The idea of “New Zealand” as a destination for pilgrimage is a useful one. We suggest that the various meanings associated with “New Zealand” provide a possibility to find “home”—a home ground with its values, comfort and certainties—elsewhere. In this sense, it matters not so much where “New Zealand” is and what it looks like, but how it facilitates the journey from “home” (the Shire, and the real home this stands for) to a place one goes to in order to find home. There is no incongruity in this reasoning, it is in fact at the core of what a pilgrimage embodies.

For overseas audiences enticed by their appreciation of *LotR* to embark on a journey to (re)discover the values that underpin their own lives (or at least the place

of *LotR* in their lives), “New Zealand” is a fleeting home away from home—a checkpoint for re-evaluating home values, much like Lourdes, or Salamanca, or Macchu Picchu or Tibet. It is in that sense no coincidence that we found the strong connection between explicit and connected mentions of New Zealand, and the choice of “Spiritual Journey” as a way of framing the story—it is indeed a journey for them. What distinguishes “New Zealand” from real pilgrimage locations, is that its representation filtered through *LotR* offers the possibility of completing this journey by proxy. In that sense, the glorious representation of the real New Zealand’s landscapes in the films may possibly counter the tourist board promotions, since the real could hardly be as good as the “real”.

Conclusion: The Utopian Impulse of “New Zealand” in *LotR*

In a famous essay, Zygmunt Bauman uses the metaphor of pilgrimage to explore modern quests for identity. He explains how pilgrimages involve distancing oneself from the locus of identity (home) to achieve a clearer view of one’s personal identity and belonging: “‘here’ is the waiting, ‘there’ is the gratification,” Bauman writes. (Bauman, 1996: 22) But he also adds that in modern times such a trajectory is no longer achievable: people find themselves embroiled in a senseless wandering, vector-less, in a world inhospitable to sense-seeking. As a stroller (purposeless), a vagabond (homeless), a player (inhibition-less), or as a tourist (value-less, or at least substituting moral with aesthetic values), the modern pilgrim finds it impossible to find meaning.

Bauman seems to point a damning finger at modern media for this loss, and especially at how its global village appeal has, in his eyes, erased all possibilities for a “there”. That is where we differ. As our findings indicate, audiences of *LotR* do seem able to “travel” to a mediated location, “New Zealand”, to form meanings about not just the film and the landscape (the aesthetic component, which the tourist board would like us to see), but also about themselves and their values, thence changing forever their perception of the location (the “grounded pilgrimage” Jones suggests). As Sean Cubitt writes: “...the country has not become Middle-earth, as some of the tourist board campaigns suggest, but it has achieved a certain imaginary power, as a utopian landscape for fantasies of a different humanity in tune with its

world.” (Cubitt, 2005: 7) It may surprise many that this “different humanity” also exists outside New Zealand in the form of numerous people seeing *LotR* as a journey.

We believe that using “New Zealand” in such a journey is not a senseless operation but rather one which we would like to call, with Ernst Bloch, a “utopian impulse”. (Bloch, 1986, vol. 1: 12-18) It provides a powerful antidote for postmodern cynicism about meaning—it is not that our audiences find one single meaning, but that they believe that continuing to seek one counts.

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