

'One Ring to Rule Them All': Pre-viewers and Pre-Texts of the *Lord of the Rings* films

Bertha Chin and Jonathan Gray

*'Why to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on.
Don't the great tales never end?'*

*'No, they never end as tales,' said Frodo. 'But the people in them
come, and go when their part's ended. Our part will end later –
or sooner' -- J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (403)*

As we began research on this project, *The Fellowship of the Ring: The Lord of the Rings I* was nine months away from its New Line Cinema celluloid birth. And yet it was already as many months bathed in hype: amidst continuing and excited press releases, magazine articles, and official website updates, the cast had been announced, interviews with cast and crew had been penned, 'spoilers' had been released on the Internet, and posters and trailers were starting to emerge. In itself, this hype hardly distinguishes the film from any other blockbuster in the 'New Hollywood.' However, one distinguishing mark was that the film had already attracted numerous and sizeable organised discussion groups. Indeed, the *tolkien-movies* Internet discussion group alone has, at last count, over 16,000 messages posted. A curious situation therefore exists in which people are congregating to discuss, often in great detail, a text which does not yet truly exist. Or, to reword, 'pre-viewers' are discussing a 'pre-text.' What we have in our hands with the *Lord of the Rings* film and its two sequels, then, are profoundly slippery texts. Common sense would seem to suggest that involved and active discussion of a text can only occur once the text itself exists (once there is something *to* discuss, to react *to*). After all, we rarely find people meeting for coffee to discuss a film in detail *before* watching it. But, opening up new spaces for textual becoming, the Internet discussion groups of the *Lord of the Rings* films challenge common sense notions of textuality and of the relationships between text and audience. The existence of such groups asks of us how pre-viewer discussion creates a framework for interpretation of the *Lord of the Rings* films post-release, and what it can tell us about textual meaning. Following up on such questions, by studying pre-viewer discussion of *The Lord of the Rings*, we aim to chart how the existence of pre-viewers of a pre-text invites us to study texts in new ways.

At first glance, the matter of where and when a text begins and ends would appear to be remarkably obvious, and its spatial-temporal position precise: front cover or opening credits equal beginning, back cover or closing credits equal end. Consequently, both common sense and academic theory regarding texts quickly assumes firm textual boundaries, and uses them as the basis for discussions of textual effects, power, or meaning. Certainly, audience research within the Cultural Studies tradition (see, for instance, Morley, 1980; Lewis, 1986; Radway, 1987; Buckingham, 1987) has played a vital role in reminding us that audience members' societal positionings frequently inflect response to and decoding of a text, but amidst discussion of dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings (Hall, 1980), active audiences (Fiske, 1989b & 1989c), and the like, the structural integrity of what is being responded *to* has often avoided discussion. All-too-often, whether theorists have conceived of the text as a substance to be injected, diluted to taste, or containing its own antidote, what the substance *is* is not questioned.

Recently, though, textual ontology has been under attack. Versus the traditional spatial-temporal definition of the text, Nick Couldry has offered the enticing

definition of the text as 'a complex of interrelated meanings which its readers tend to interpret as a discrete, unified whole' (2000: 70-71), hence shifting the onus of definition from analyst or producer to audience. Similarly, Robert Allen writes that 'a film is no longer reducible to the actual experience of seeing it' (1999: 119). When cross-marketing and synergy surrounds and engulfs so many modern movies, then fast food promotions, toys, soundtracks, and the official baseball cap can all become part of the text, reducing the movie 'itself' to no more than 'the inedible part of a Happy Meal' (1999: 123), or inflating it to include all manner of related products. Here, Allen's work connects with studies into James Bond (Bennett and Woollacott, 1987), Batman (Pearson and Uricchio, 1991), and Judge Dredd (Barker and Brooks, 1998) in their various textual incarnations. These studies examine how intertextual links provided in the form of associated novels, comics, television programmes, ads, or movies feed into, and indeed become *part of*, any given Bond, Batman, or Dredd representation, producing an 'ongoing macrotext' (Bacon-Smith and Yarborough, 1991: 112). In the actualisation of any text, Bennett describes, its intertextual accumulation 'is all there, like so many sedimented layers of plot, narrative and characterization' (1991: ix), so that in any given 'text' of, say, Batman, all other Batman texts are potentially present, working within what we would otherwise call a single text, acting as the very soil from which any organically inseparable textual meaning will grow. Or, to shift metaphors, John Fiske proposes that texts can work as 'ghost texts,' 'like the ghost image on a television set with poor reception' (1989a: 66), layered over the text at hand, the ghost's work not yet done on this earth.

While the work in Bennett and Woollacott, Pearson and Uricchio, and Barker and Brooks closely connects with our own and provides interesting parallels, we do not feel it has gone far enough in interrogating textuality. With a few brief exceptions (most notably Tony Bennett's foreword), textuality is not on the agenda in any of the essays in Pearson and Uricchio; and, for all their book's strengths and considerable accumulation of data, Barker and Brooks study audiences primarily for the sake of audience study and illumination, and thus more could be done to relate their findings to the nature of textuality. Meanwhile, although Bennett and Woollacott propose a valuable model of inter-textuality and intricately map the fluidity of the text's boundaries, they do not show how those people who *do* believe in the text conceive of that text. However, we believe that this missing link is of vital importance, for if we are at all interested in textual effects, power, and meaning (or lack thereof), we must know not only the nature of the beast but also how the beast is perceived.

It is with this in mind, then, that we turn to our examination of the pre-viewers of the *Lord of the Rings* movies, to see of the films what strange creatures stumble toward their release dates, and to see how these pre-viewers are constructing a notion of textuality that we as critics may transplant to media and cultural studies. *The Lord of the Rings* is by no means alone as a text with pre-viewers. One may, for instance, also look to the upcoming *Harry Potter* film, to the recent *Planet of the Apes* remake, to the continuing *Star Wars* saga, to next year's *Spiderman*, and to the countless other remakes, adaptations, prequels, and sequels that populate the film industry. However, the *Lord of the Rings* phenomena has been rather unique in the size and longevity of its Internet discussion groups. Pre-viewing discussions occur all around us, in bars and coffee shops, at dinner tables, on buses and trains, and in cinemas themselves, but for a researcher to gain access to such discussions, which are usually private conversations, can prove a difficult task. By contrast, the wealth and volume of *Lord of the Rings* postings offers us a rare opportunity to study an important early and defining stage of textuality that otherwise may elude the media and

cultural studies researcher.

Research Project

As is the case with many blockbuster films these days, New Line Cinema has used the Internet as a marketing tool in promoting the film, with a merchandise store; an official website which released a brief trailer of the film as early as 7 April, 2000; news and 'spoilers' from the set in New Zealand during the duration of the filming; and a message board for fans to discuss the highly-anticipated film. In the duration of our research, we observed discussion forums that were formed specifically for the film – the official board (www.lordoftherings.net), the 'lotr' and 'lord_OT_rings_movie' lists on Yahoo Groups (groups.yahoo.com), and the message board of another website (www.tolkien-movies.com) which moved its forum from Yahoo Groups to Ezboard (www.ezboard.com) [1].

Christine Hine argues that the Internet could be 'viewed as shaped by [our] social context' (2000:30), in that we could have different views of what the Internet is, and what its uses are in relevance to our everyday practices. In our case, the Internet is looked upon as a public space where fans of the text, *The Lord of the Rings*, have gathered to discuss the upcoming film scheduled for December 2001 release in depth – be it in anticipation or trepidation. The easy accessibility of the Internet allows us to peruse and observe discussions of the film in both official and unofficial discussion forums. In this essay, we are looking at the Internet as an object instead of observing it as a culture rife with complexities of authenticity and identity, community and commitment, and so on. Much work on the Internet has looked at it as a social and cultural apparatus, but not only do we not have the time and space to delve into the many complexities of the Internet from a social and cultural point of view; we also feel that, based on the online discussions surrounding the film, in this case, we need to look at the Internet as an object, simply because this is how the Internet appears to be treated and thought of in these particular fan groups.

Discussions on the various forums were varied, from arguing about the accents that were going to be used in the film, to discussing the possibility of *Lord of the Rings* breaking the box office records of the 1997 blockbuster film *Titanic*, to speculating about what parts of the book would be left out of the film; and we have focused on how Tolkien fans [2] anticipate the film, enthusiastically or otherwise by their constant speculation on, among others, how the film will look and what is going to be included or excluded. Of prime interest to us was how Tolkien fans are already constructing the concept and details of, and reactions to, the filmic pre-text.

We decided against contacting any of the active posters on the various message boards as we felt that their general reactions and discussions were enough for us to use as data. We realise that this may lay us open to charges of academic 'lurking' but must therefore stress that we were looking primarily at the text, and Tolkien fans' talk surrounding the text itself, not at how they use the Internet as a social apparatus as that would be too lengthy and complex a discussion to get into in this essay. Far too often in discussions of the media, analysts have tried to read viewers and the nature of viewers off the text. But in a flip of this rubric, in this essay we have tried the reverse, by attempting to read a text off its viewers (a necessary step, of course, because there is as yet no text to study in itself). As such, our aim is not to explain or theorise these viewers since it is not ethnography that we are concerned with, but an insight into how a pre-text takes form in the discussion of pre-viewers.

Research Findings

In analysing the postings, what is immediately noticeable is that all come from devoted fans of *the books*. Perhaps elsewhere, pre-viewers are congregating around stars such as Sir Ian McKellan or Liv Tyler, over cult director Peter Jackson, or over the fantasy genre in general, but here the pre-viewers all display the utmost familiarity with, and regard for, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Many of the posters employ a markedly 'Tolkienesque' vocabulary, illustrating and making obvious their intricate knowledge of the books. For example, Mithril1960 ends a message by stating that, until (s)he receives a reply, (s)he will 'wait and watch carefully, like Elendil waiting for Gil-Galad' (LR2 1/2/01), and in general, the postings often wax prosaic, mimicking the grand diction of the knights and kings of Middle Earth. Even the posters' choices of online names often refer to characters or objects from the novels, such as Ms.Took, princeimrahil, theprecious, and Eowyn. Furthermore, the postings frequently include statements of loyalty and fealty to the books and/or to Tolkien as the creator-figure, so that LongshanksII writes of how he 'will always return to the books over and over' (LR1 24/7/00), while shadowwalk proposes that 'If [the movie] use[s] a narrator I think he should sound like Tolkien' (LR1 18/8/00). Many or most of these posters are self-identified longtime fans of the books, whose discussion exhibits a strong passion for and identification with Tolkien's trilogy, and who have come together as an online community with, let us underline, that love of the books as the common, uniting factor.

However, if the aegis for their congregation is a common regard for the books, the posters cannot be said to share their feelings regarding the upcoming films. In discussing the differences in their reactions, we can distinguish between three pre-viewing positions: those who are inclined to dislike the films, those who are inclined to love them, and those who balance themselves somewhere in between [3].

To the purists, those who are inclined to dislike the films, the story *is* the books, and any attempt to transplant the books into a movie or other such form represents a crime against *The Lord of the Rings*. For instance, robyn explains:

I'm afraid I've [4] been gun shy of any movies, etc, of LOTR [*Lord of the Rings*]. Several years ago, I caught an animated version of the hobbit on TV. I couldn't bear to watch it, though, because the elves were purple. PURPLE! sorry, but in my book, they are not purple, or green, or any other color. Then, I had the misfortune of reading a play adaption of the Hobbit, which butchered the story beyond all recognition. (LR2 2/11/00)

As robyn's choice of terms – 'gun shy,' 'butchered beyond all recognition' – signifies, (s)he regards the TV and play adaptation as perpetrating *violence* to the story, and as such, (s)he is apprehensive about the movies [5]. Similarly, others write in obvious fear of 'Hollywood-ification': 'you know,' writes Krista, 'having all the women run around with no clothes on, gratuitous sex scenes, getting rid of complicated concepts, etc.' (LR4 27/3/00). To these posters, the movies pose a clear threat to the story, which is seen as immutable, and best honoured and respected by being left alone. 'I can't help but feel,' writes Cuzza, 'that it's gonna be screwed up and wrong. And be a total veggie effort' (LR1 2/1/01) [6].

By and large, though, this sort of textual purism is rare. More common is a negotiated, balanced position, whereby Tolkien fans hope for three great films, and are willing to allow the film-makers some leeway in transferring the books to

screen, but nevertheless remain somewhat fearful. This sense of anxiety is best illustrated in the many postings of predictions. A particularly interesting discussion here is over the ending of the trilogy. In Tolkien's *Return of the King*, the major battle and victory end a full one hundred pages before the book's conclusion, with the rest of the book focusing on the adventure home for the hobbits. Many posters are united in feeling that New Line will clip this lengthy denouement. 'I think,' voices Vermin Deathstack, 'that it will confuse the general film-going public' (LR3 14/10/00). Likewise, Sharon writes that 'The filmgoing public likes "good" closure,' and thus 'would freak out and cry foul, as they have not the insight to see the true message here' (LR3 14/10/00). Besides generalising and typing the 'uninitiated' viewer (in an interesting, refreshing flip of the usual relation between fan and non-fan!), statements such as these express an awareness that the story as these Tolkien fans know and love it will likely change, as the shift in intended audience and in medium occurs. Tolkien fans realise that the story cannot translate *as is*, and their discussion, and supposed ability to predict such changes, becomes a way of preparing themselves for change, and coming to terms with this change.

Certainly, a substantial portion of the postings include expressions of 'understanding' why changes must be made. As mentioned above, the general viewing public and their supposed desires for a film are frequently listed as the guilty party, but as Mithril1960 somewhat representatively states, 'I am not thrilled with the changes [...but] I am inclined to be the voice of reason' (LR2 1/2/01). Along similar lines, LongshanksII writes that 'Everyone should know that to condense such a huge book, with all of the background information into a Movie would be impossible' (LR1 24/7/00), and Leithian remarks that 'I can understand dropping [the character of] Tom Bombadil, even though I wish he could be left in' (LR1 11/8/00) [7].

Aside from reasoning and explaining away predicted differences, another way these posters appear to prepare to content themselves is by engaging in exaggerated and humorous predictions. One discussion board, for instance, sees posters come up with alternative casting, such as joeartist's idea to cast television's Ally McBeal, Calista Flockhart, as the wirey, shrivelled-up monster Gollum (LR1 20/1/01). Such suggestions serve to remind that the casting could be so much worse than it is. Amidst all these predictions, expressions of understanding, and preparations for disappointment, though, as Barker and Brooks note, 'disappointment is an obvious mark of the presence of an ideal' (1998:60). These Tolkien fans may appear to acquiesce over changes or shifts, but constant throughout such acquiescence is the presence of an ideal of the perfect translation. In effect, then, these posters are allied with the film-dislikers, for their joint ideal, and hence the yardstick against which any final realisation and film will be measured, is the original books, and any shift or difference will clearly be regarded as deviation.

The third and final position adopted by some 'pre-fans' is one of complete excitement and heartfelt anticipation. tar_miriel sums this position up most quaintly, by stating that 'when I found out that they were making the movie I could have peed!!!!' (LR1 25/7/00). Likewise, Hix26 asks 'Why can't we just wait for the movies to come out and not be so picky about everything. I don't care about the wrong hair or pointy ears, I'm just glad to see the project being done' (LR1 24/7/00), while Tolkienized, under a posting title of 'I can't wait!!!!!!!!!!' declares that 'Good or bad I'm still looking forward to seeing them' (LR1 2/1/01). Indeed, our viewing positions are only analytical, and we saw numerous examples of such expressions of excitement amidst otherwise supposedly anti-movie or ambiguous postings, with a general slippage occurring from anti-movie purism to pro-movie excitement. Certainly, we might note that one of the things on offer

from these online communities is the chance to share one's anticipation with other like-minded individuals, and we saw no real cases of people trying to extinguish or otherwise condemn others' excitement.

Wrapped up in this excitement is the belief that the movies will bring the books 'to life,' or, rather, *keep* them alive. 'Finally,' writes Ms.Took, 'my favorite books of all time are coming to life!!' (LR1 27/4/00), while Luke posits that 'I'm not that interested in details about the movie. I'd rather think that Peter Jackson's work could be a good reason for us to re-think of Tolkien's books in today's scenario' (LR3 27/3/00), and Allan hopes that 'future generations will find enough merit in the story to re-film with special effects 50 years on' (LR2 22/1/01). These posters look to the movies as breathing new and continued life into the books and reassuring their place in cultural history and importance for more years to come. There is even an element of self-vindication in these glowing endorsements of the film, a feeling that, as oldmanwillow states, 'Our only hope is [...] that [family and friends] see the movie. Then we can set back, smugly and say "see that's what I'm talking about!"' (LR1 27/4/00). 'I am so glad,' adds Kathy, 'that [the movies] will draw even more attention to the books' (LR4 27/3/00). Of course, *Lord of the Rings* is already a highly-acclaimed, hugely popular trilogy of books, leading a *Sunday Times* reviewer to write that the 'English-speaking world is divided into those who have read *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* and those who are going to read them' (Tolkien, 1999:back cover), but a clear desire of posters of this position is that the movies will further weight the balance towards those who have read (and love) the books.

We have suggested that, behind this desire for more viewers/readers, is a desire for self-vindication, but ultimately every poster has his or her own reason for excitement. A particularly interesting answer, though, comes from princeimrahil (LR3 26/1/01), who asks why the very people who are anticipating the films the most are those who know the books chapter and verse, and why sharing good works with others is so important a part of human nature. A very sophisticated analysis follows, in which he argues that 'The motives behind these actions are [...] based on a desire to extend, validate and prolong our own experience of the subject. Having had our imagination fired, our emotions stimulated and our intellect piqued on the journey through Middle Earth, can we then just leave it behind?' princeimrahil then goes on to discuss whether it truly matters if the resulting movies are good or bad. Using *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* as comparison, he asks 'Was Phantom Menace a good film (by Star Wars Standards)? No, It was not. Did it enhance the Star Wars experience? Yes, It most certainly did,' and from there progresses to ask 'Will Peter Jackson's version live up to expectations? I don't know, but come December I intend to be one of the first people to find out. Will it enhance the Lord of the Rings experience? Look around you, it already has.' On this last point, princeimrahil echoes Jagle, to whom 'the entertainment value of an adaptation is indeed in anticipation' (LR3 22/1/01).

In some ways, then, princeimrahil and Jagle provide an answer to what these communities might tell us about *The Lord of the Rings* movie and book texts. Opening this section, we noted that the communities share a love for the books, but we may extend this to say that, to these fans, the movies themselves, and the fans' reactions to them, will be centred largely and predominantly on the books. Whether they will revile the movies, will watch tentatively, or whether they plan to enjoy them to the fullest, what their web discussion suggests is that their reactions to the movies will, as princeimrahil states, continue the experience *of the books*. To these fans, the movies are functionally junior to the books, and any response to the movies, to a large degree, *pre-exists* the movie texts, belonging more to the book texts. We return to Frodo's observation of great

stories that began this article, and note that the *Lord of the Rings* books, and reactions to or decodings of them, live on in the shell of the *Lord of the Rings* films. The movies may, as Allan believes they will, 'inform, expand and improve my vision [of Middle Earth]' (LR3 22/1/01), but this vision is first and foremost a vision from, of, and affiliated with the books.

The Role of the Internet

What role does the Internet play in all of this? For starters, like the fast food promotions, toys, soundtracks and so forth that accompany various other big-budget Hollywood productions, the Internet is an extension of New Line Cinema's endeavour to market the film. The official website, the 'spoilers', interviews, set reports and the discussion forums become ways in which to generate and keep pre-viewers' interests in the production of the films at peak. At the same time, the Internet allows a space for Tolkien fans to congregate and discuss the film in relation to the books where before they may not have had the chance to talk about *The Lord of the Rings*. Therefore we refer to the Internet here as an 'object' – a communication device utilised by the pre-viewers to come together in one space.

As such, the very notion of virtual community comes into question when we look at the interactions of this particular discussion group. According to early literature on virtual communities, they either renew the sense of community which is traditionally bound by a common geography, obligation (not interests) and a sense of interdependency among its members; or virtual communities threaten the further disintegration of the traditional community, as argued by Postman (1992) and to a certain extent Sherry Turkle (1995), as people spend more time communicating online via a computer terminal instead of face-to-face. However, arguments are coming forth (Baym, 1995; Miller and Slater, 2000) suggesting that virtual communities should not just be looked at either from a utopian or dystopian point of view, but perhaps from a more neutral ground – a chance at providing new grounds for the formation of new forms of communities but with their own complexities.

Fan communities materialised as a result of fans getting together to talk about a particular text – the formation of a community based on a shared interest, not a common obligation. In the words of Howard Rheingold, 'virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace' (1992: xx). As the communities grow, fans start developing their own language unique to the particular fan community (usually in relation to the text) and developing their own set of rules for the communities, commonly known as FAQs (frequently asked questions). The FAQs serve to provide an accepted guideline of behaviour and expectations of the particular fan group.

While this may be the case in many other fan communities, we found this to be somewhat lacking in the discussions among *Lord of the Rings*' posters. That is not to say that the virtual community element is missing here, but as we have noted earlier, this is not one part of the issues surrounding the Internet we are looking at. The discussions on the various *Lord of the Rings* forums are first and foremost about the text itself, and about the process of transferring the printed text into celluloid. Indeed, on a few instances, we saw posters trying to start a more personal, less *Lord of the Rings* discussion, but in each case no such discussion arose.

The language the posters use is synonymous to the language Tolkien developed when writing the trilogy, but there is no evidence that nicknames or a specific 'dialect' [8] in reference to the text have been concocted. As suggested earlier, a 'Tolkienesque' vocabulary is employed by the posters as a display of intricate knowledge of the trilogy; however, they have made up no 'secret' language, as is common among other online fan communities [9]. There is also a lack of a FAQ in the discussion boards. The primary concern for these participants is to talk about the text. However, it is perhaps interesting to note that despite the absence of a special 'language,' discussions surrounding the text are still exclusive to Tolkien fans who are extremely familiar with the books and the characters. This brings us back to Hine's (2000) argument that the Internet is shaped by our own social context. For the fans of *The Lord of the Rings*, despite the exclusivity of membership into the fan group, the Internet is conveniently there for them to employ as a communication device – a space for them to talk about the text just as it is a space for us, the researchers, to learn from such discussions.

(P)Re-engaging Textuality

As we hope to have shown, whether, pre-release, the pre-viewers dread or keenly anticipate the films, or have mixed feelings, the wealth of their comments suggests that their reaction to the finished films will in large part be a function of their feelings towards Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* books. While these online communities are very open, the implicit entry pass is not so much an interest in the films as it is a devotion to the books, and almost all discussion centres around how successfully the original texts will be *embodied* in celluloid. As such, these viewers may not be as much 'pre-viewers' of the films as they are simply viewers of the books. And yet, truly they are viewers *between* texts, anticipating one text *with* the other, already reaching to one *by way of* the other. What, then, does this tell us of textuality?

In trying to answer such a question, we should first ask which texts are primary. Here, the books clearly take precedence over the movies: these pre-viewers are under no mistake which texts matter more to them. Indeed, there is the sense, worded as such by many, that even if the movies are perceived as truly incredible, this will serve largely as testament to the power of the books, and certainly not to any superiority of the cinematic texts. We should remember, too, that many of these posters have been self-identified devotees of *The Lord of the Rings* for many years; thus, their affect is neither momentary nor, they suggest, will any cinematic text supplant the original's place in their 'mattering maps' (Grossberg, 1992: 57).

Ultimately, then, we are left with the conclusion that these pre-viewers regard the films as *correlates* of the books, and not as unitary, independent entities, not as texts in the traditional sense of the word. To return to Bennett's metaphor of intertextual links as sedimentary layers under the text at hand, while such an image might imply the primacy of the 'fresh' layer, here it appears as though one 'underground' layer is of considerably more importance, serving as firm and vital bedrock to new layers of silt. Barker and Brooks pose that 'high investors' will approach a text with a strong 'DRIVE,' or Desired Regulative Ideal Viewing Experience (1998: 235), and here, this DRIVE entails subjugating the films to the books. Or, to shift metaphors, these pre-viewers could be said to regard the films as accessories to the product that is the book, much like a new outfit for a child's doll [10].

Much has been written in recent years of nomadic subjectivity (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977; Grossberg, 1987; Radway, 1988) and of subjects constructing themselves through their voyages through the global flow of mediascapes

(Appadurai, 1995), but here we have a case of *nomadic textuality*. On the move, one text is working in the (supposed) territory of another, so that reactions to the 'host' text will channel first through the filters of the 'guest' text. As Barthes noted, 'the Text cannot stop [...]; its constitutive movement is that of cutting across' (1977:157), and as we see here, this textual motion is not limited to leaps and bounds between readers and contexts alone; rather, for these Tolkien fans, the *Lord of the Rings* books have moved in on the territory of the *Lord of the Rings* films and set up before the territory's supposed inhabitants have arrived. Textuality does not stand still, stuck in the field, stuck in one place and one time. When and where there are readers involved (and what is a text without readers?), textuality's inclination is towards movement.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, the title serves as a powerful link between the primary texts of the books and the linked, secondary texts of the films (for those who have read the books, most likely an unavoidable one). Yet now that this link exists, and should it be followed – should a fan of the book choose to watch the film – his/her reaction to it is contextualised and mitigated by his/her reaction to and interest in the primary text. The degree to which it is truly secondary will change from person to person, and thus for some viewers familiar with the book, the film may function more like a traditional text, while for others (such as these fans), it promises to be solely a corollary to the primary text. Similarly, though, now that the link exists, it has the power to comment on and inflect the overall nature of our involvement with the primary text, hence the commonly expressed fear of these posters that the movies will be awful, and so 'damage' the books. Ultimately, although to different degrees, this map of textual movement is always open to revision and each subsequent secondary text may augment the macrotext.

Not only, therefore, do texts work in and through each other, some subordinating others, some subordinate to others, but as Frodo informs Bilbo, this also means that many texts never end, a remark that bears stunning resemblance to the great theorist of intertextuality and dialogism Mikhail Bakhtin's observation that 'Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival' (1986:170). We are best to move away from simplistic ideas of texts beginning or ending, or setting up permanent borders, instead positing that they continue, renew themselves, and augment, even if on another text's territory.

Conclusion

For those of our readers unfamiliar with *The Lord of the Rings*, the tale concerns a struggle of good and evil centred on a set of magical rings that, should they fall into the wrong hands, could allow the dark lord Sauron absolute power over the realm of Middle Earth. Amongst these rings, one has reigning power over the others, or as ancient elf-lore tells:

One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,

One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.

(Tolkien, 1985a:77)

While we do not wish to suggest that *The Lord of the Rings* should be read as an allegory of textuality, if we think of texts as magical rings, there is much to be learnt from the tale. Texts, let us first posit, have magical powers, and yet the nature of those powers is never certain: what happens when we put on a ring, when we read a text, is not an exact science. Indeed, the fact that over 2000 years after Plato first began to discuss textuality, the debate continues in earnest

amongst academics, journalists, politicians, and 'regular' people is testament to the text's ethereal nature. Furthermore, though, as in *Lord of the Rings*, where the race of hobbits bears a particular resilience to the power of the rings, who is wearing a ring, who is reading a text, will always inflect the exact nature of that ring, of the text's power.

But as we have been arguing, and as we feel the pre-viewers' reactions to the *Lord of the Rings* films attest, to understand the nature of our ring, to truly grasp a sense of its power, we must know how it relates to other rings. Of course, unlike *Lord of the Rings*, in which there are only twenty rings, our world is full of texts. Indeed, it is saturated with them. However, in answer to Nick Couldry's question, 'On what terms can we go on thinking, and talking, about "texts" *at all* in a culture where, in a sense, we have too many texts?' (2000:69), we can answer that relational, intertextual studies of texts are where our efforts should lie. Rather than turning a ring endlessly in our hands waiting for it in some way to announce itself, we must find in what ways it is related to other rings. If, as Roger Silverstone believes, texts 'can do no more than claim' (1999:55), what claim might they have over *other* texts? If there are texts that, like the One Ring, can rule, find, and bind others, while nothing as grand as *The World As We Know It* may be on the line, exploring the nature of such texts, and such textual relations, may well grant us substantial powers in understanding the textual environment.

Throughout media and cultural studies, a certain tradition has blindly assumed that the Dark Lord Sauron of the cultural industries has hoarded these texts, manipulating them so that the Dark Lord might manipulate us. While our prime purpose is neither to completely dispel fears of the cultural industries' agenda, nor, by carrying our *Lord of the Rings* analogy too far, suggest that the process of textual consumption equates to a cosmic battle between good and evil (as, again, some writers within media and cultural studies can tend to), we do hope to have suggested that in the case of the *Lord of the Rings* films, to the fans of the books, the One Ring certainly does not belong to New Line. In his essay on 'Decoding Television News' (1986), Justin Lewis boldly suggests that a text's preferred meaning is to be located in what its audience believes it to be, and thus only exists as such *after* consumption. Here, though, we would like to go further, for in reading the discussion of the *Lord of the Rings* films, we have found preferred meanings that *pre-date* the text.

Of course, *finding* pre-viewers and their discussion (and hence creation) of texts-in-progress may traditionally have been a hard task for the media researcher. As we have shown, though, the Internet is now a key site of pre-viewer congregation, and hence of textual becoming, offering researchers a prime lens through which we can witness pre-texts (not to mention established texts) accrue meanings. What we have seen here is that the *Lord of the Rings* books, as One Ring, have pre-empted their junior ring of the *Lord of the Rings* films, for the books' fans. Consequently, we believe that any discussion of the *Lord of the Rings* movies' power, effects, or meaning will be flawed and inadequate without first discussing those of the books, since, to Tolkien fans watching the films, the former will only ever be a correlate of the latter. Moreover, while our focus in this essay has been on Tolkien fans, pre-viewers will arrive through other texts too – Sir Ian McKellan fans, Peter Jackson fans, fantasy fans, etc. [11] – and each of these groups will likewise bring their own dominant pre-texts to the films [12]. Thus, where Tony Bennett writes of Batman (1991) and (with Janet Woollacott) James Bond (1987) as 'shifting signifiers,' our research suggests that it is not just signifiers that shift: Bennett and Woollacott, and the Pearson and Uricchio collection document well the appeal to producers of a shifting signifier, but fans ensure that signifieds move with their signifiers, unshakeable as Fiske's ghost

texts of intertextuality. As such, it is our role as critics to become as Gandalf, students of ring/textual history. We have a duty to look for intertextual links with a vigour that, to date, media and cultural studies as a discipline has not.

Finally, though, we must ask to what degree our findings here might be replicated with other texts, or whether the *Lord of the Rings* book is a solitary ring of power. After all, the adaptation of one of the world's most popular books into a trilogy of films would seem to be a rare event. However, while *The Lord of the Rings's* transferral is indeed an event, textual relationships are everywhere. Hollywood has always found many of its hits (or flops) in the pages of popular books, or in making sequels, prequels, remakes, parodies, homages to certain directors, or series. And lest chronology appear important here, the chronology that matters is *viewing order*, not release date: as Bennett and Woollacott point out, for instance, many Bond book readers came to the books via the movies (1987:54). Films are not alone in featuring intertextuality either, as we may point out that the very nature of a television series, for example, means that we will only understand any given episode based on what previous episodes we have seen (hence, for instance, we may forgive or explain away a poorer episode of a favourite show). Moreover, all of the above links are direct, but if we introduce the notion of genre as partially determining a pre-viewing technique, our textual environment gets even more complex. Nevertheless, we must not be intimidated by such complexity. In the tale of textuality, solitary textuality's part has ended, and it is time to usher in pre-textuality and intertextuality.

Bertha Chin is currently doing her MRes in Media & Communications in Goldsmiths College, University of London. She is writing her dissertation on online fandom and *The X-Files*; *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer*; and *Angel*.

Jonathan Gray is working towards his PhD in Communications at Goldsmiths College, University of London. His thesis is provisionally titled *Reading Through Intertextuality: Televisual Textuality, Parody, and The Simpsons*. His research interests include rethinking the nature of textuality and genre theory, examining the political in entertainment, and studying televisual fan communities.

Notes

[1] Hereafter, in citations, *LR1*, *LR2*, *LR3*, and *LR4* respectively. When citing, we include posting date, but have not included individual (often very long) URL strings. [back](#)

[2] Throughout this essay, we use 'Tolkien fans' to refer to fans of the books (distinguishing them from *Lord of the Rings* movie fans). [back](#)

[3] It should be understood that these are only analytical categories, and we do not mean to suggest that there are three *actual* sub-communities. [back](#)

[4] Due to the relatively relaxed nature of discussion group grammar and spelling, and hence a frequency of typos and grammatical errors in our data, we will avoid signalling each with '[sic]' throughout this article. [back](#)

[5] It is also interesting to note in passing that, in painting these past adaptations as of poor quality, robyn disassociates them from his/her predominantly Tolkienesque register, shifting instead to a vocabulary of trashy, pulp fiction ('gun shy' and 'butchered beyond all recognition' versus, say, 'battle weary' and 'cleft in twain'). [back](#)

[6] Barker and Brooks observed similar responses from their 'high investor' interview subjects, who likewise claimed a form of ownership over the original texts, and thus regarded poor adaptation as a violation of these rights of ownership, and as producers messing with what which is not theirs to play with (see 1998:234). [back](#)

[7] Here we see a process akin to that documented by Barker and Brooks in their study of how *2000 A.D.* comic fans prepared for the *Judge Dredd* movie, a process of 'getting ready to be disappointed,' or at least contenting oneself with what one feels is likely, and hence 'tactically reducing your expectations' (1998:59). What Barker and Brooks uncover in some interviews, as is noticeable in our own data, is that, as with Tolkien fans, Dredd fans prepare for the worst or for nothing as grand or 'complete' as the original so that the final product can only impress. [back](#)

[8] Here we use the word 'dialect' instead of 'lingo' as we feel the former seems to reflect what we are trying to convey – a spoken (or, in this case, typed) language unique to a group of people. [back](#)

[9] Fans in other communities often refer to their favourite characters with nicknames, for example, either concocted by themselves or from a reference made in the text. For instance, the character Alex Krycek from the TV show *The X-Files* has, for the last 6 years been affectionately known in fandom as 'Ratboy' after it was revealed that he was working against Fox Mulder in Mulder's quest for the truth. Meanwhile, the character Angel from the shows *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, is often referred to among fans as 'the puppy' after a reference made by fellow vampire Spike in the show. [back](#)

[10] Importantly, this pure dominating link between the books and movies exists only for the fans of the books, and thus our statements should not be generalised to an overall appraisal of the films' reception. Nevertheless, other work on textual transfers suggests the original text may become more dominant than we might at first think over those unfamiliar with it. Camille Bacon-Smith and Tyrone Yarborough's ethnography of *Batman* fans found that movie theatres often contained groups of friends in which there were only one or two comic-book enthusiasts (1991), and we might well ask whether the non-enthusiasts in any way respected their friends as authorities. Similarly, Barker and Brooks note the degree to which being a 'knowing audience' is admired by others (1998). Hence both studies suggest that uninitiated viewers may look to fans for assistance in decoding, in the process strengthening the hold of the original text over even them. [back](#)

[11] For instance, Barker and Brooks (1998) found that, not only Dredd fans were anticipating the *Judge Dredd* movie, but also Stallone fans, sci-fi fans, and action-adventure fans. [back](#)

[12] Indeed, while beyond the scope of this paper, it would be interesting to study how producers might respond to such pre-texts, and how they might work to privilege certain pre-texts and pre-text readings over others. [back](#)

Bibliography

Allen, Robert C. (1999), 'Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the "Family Film"' in Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (eds) *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, London: BFI.

Appadurai, Arjun (1995), 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy' in Mike Featherstone (ed.) *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, London: Sage.

Bacon-Smith, Camille with Yarborough, Tyrone (1991), 'Batman: The Ethnography' in Pearson and Uricchio.

Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich (1986), *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* trans. Vern W. McGee, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press.

Barker, Martin and Brooks, Kate (1998), *Knowing Audiences: Judge Dredd, Its Friends, Fans and Foes*, Luton: University of Luton Press.

Barthes, Roland (1977), 'From Work to Text' in *Image/Music/Text* trans. Stephen Heath, Glasgow: Fontana/Collins.

Baym, Nancy (1995), 'The Emergence of Community in Computer-Mediated Communication' in Steven Jones (ed.) *Cybersociety*, New York: Sage.

Bennett, Tony (1991), 'Holy Shifting Signifiers: Foreword' in Pearson and Uricchio.

Bennett, Tony and Woollacott, Janet (1987), *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero*, London: MacMillan.

Buckingham, David (1987), *Public Secrets: EastEnders and Its Audience*, London: BFI.

Couldry, Nick (2000), *Inside Culture*, London: Sage.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix (1977), *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* trans. Robert Hurley et al., New York: Viking.

Fiske, John (1989a), 'Moments of Television: Neither the Text Nor the Reader' in Ellen Seiter et al. (eds) *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power*, London: Routledge.

---. (1989b), *Reading the Popular*, London: Unwin Hyman.

---. (1989c), *Understanding Popular Culture*, London: Unwin Hyman.

Grossberg, Lawrence (1987), 'The In-Difference of Television,' *Screen* 28.2 (Spring).

---. (1992), 'Is There a Fan in the House?: The Affective Sensibility of Fandom' in Lisa Lewis (ed.) *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, London: Routledge.

Hall, Stuart (1980), 'Encoding, Decoding' in Stuart Hall et al. (eds) *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*, London: Unwin Hyman.

Hine, Christine (2000), *Virtual Ethnography*, London: Sage.

Lewis, Justin (1986), 'Decoding Television News' in Phillip Drummond and Richard Paterson (eds) *Television in Transition: Papers from the First International Television Studies Conference*, London: BFI.

Miller, Daniel and Slater, Don (2000), *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*, Oxford: Berg.

Morley, David (1980), *The 'Nationwide' Audience*, London: BFI.

Pearson, Roberta E. and Uricchio, William (eds) (1991), *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Super Hero and His Media*, London: BFI.

Postman, Neil (1992), *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Radway, Janice (1984), *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

---. (1988), 'Reception Study: Ethnography and the Problems of Dispersed Audiences and Nomadic Subjects,' *Cultural Studies* 2.3 (October).

Rheingold, Harold (1992), *The Virtual Community: Finding Connection in a Computerized World*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Silverstone, Roger (1999), *Why Study the Media?* London: Sage.

Tolkien, J.R.R. ([1954]1985a), *The Fellowship of the Ring*, London: Unwin.

---. ([1954]1985b), *The Return of the King*, London: Unwin.

---. ([1954]1985c), *The Two Towers*, London: Unwin.

---. ([1954]1999), *The Lord of the Rings*, London: Harper Collins.

Turkle, Sherry (1995), *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, New York: Simon & Schuster.