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2009

## Review of The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood, by Kristin Thompson

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### Recommended Citation

Leibiger, Carol A. The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood, by Kristin Thompson. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2009, pp. 436-439.

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Thompson, Kristin. *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood*.

Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007. xxi + 399 pp.

Hardcover. ISBN 978-0-520-24774-1. \$29.95.

Film theorist Kristin Thompson is uniquely qualified to write *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Hollywood*, which describes the transfer of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR*) novel to an independent film (including financing, marketing, and filmmaking), accompanied by the constellation of franchise "revenue streams" (film distribution in theatrical and DVD versions, sequels, and ancillary products such as video games) that are necessary to produce a modern blockbuster film (4). It is a fascinating look at both the development of the modern blockbuster franchise in a business and popular-culture context and at the creation of the *LOTR* films, which Thompson characterizes as "one of the most historically significant [film series] ever made" (8-9). Her perspective is valuable because of her expertise in film, her love and respect for Tolkien's work (8), and her access to both the production process and to over seventy individuals involved in the creation of the films (xiv). This work should interest any scholar or fan of fantasy literature curious about the transfer of the *LOTR* novels to film and the franchising of modern independent films.

Thompson divides her treatment of the *LOTR* films and the franchise they "spawned" into four parts. In "Part One: The Film" she discusses the pre-history of the *LOTR* films: Tolkien's writing of his most famous novel and early attempts to film it (the Beatles' Apple Films' attempt to obtain filming rights [which failed because no serious director would sign onto

the project], Saul Zaentz' acquisition of the filming rights, trademarks, and characters; and the disastrous 1978 Bakshi animation of a portion of *LOTR*, after which the property languished in Zaentz' possession until the late 1990s). Thompson provides a fascinating account of the complex convergence of Peter Jackson's directing career and the engagement of the independent New Line Studio in the *LOTR* film project (a story so complex that the reader is grateful for the schematic diagram of filmmaking relationships and activities that gave rise to the films [21]). Despite the risks inherent in the *LOTR* project (Jackson was an unknown filmmaker, the studio had to commit to making three films to cover the *LOTR* material adequately, and New Line as an independent studio had to provide financing for its largest project ever by itself [30]), all involved recognized benefits as well as risks in the films, which were not only box office successes, but won record numbers of Academy Awards for filmmaking, acting, and direction. Key to the success of the films was Jackson's insistence on making all three films simultaneously in New Zealand, a decision that provided the requisite distance from Hollywood and the monetary savings to produce the films as he wanted to make them, utilizing innovations in computer graphics that have revolutionized filmmaking (30-33).

Thompson accounts for the differences between the *LOTR* novel and its film representation by noting the difficulty inherent in trying to sell modern audiences on fantasy films, long considered box office "poison," complicated by the perception of Tolkien fans as non-movie-goers (55). Jackson, himself a Tolkien fan, created the films as "feigned history" of Middle-earth rather than fantasy, providing a "richly realized world," conveying a sense of history that gave depth to the story (55-56). Jackson and his associates packed filmic Middle-earth with images culled from the work of renowned Tolkien illustrators like Alan Lee (87), supplied invented languages and cultural history uniquely associated with each race of Middle-

earth (95-96), and generally provided visual clutter (all of the 48,000 objects used in the film were handmade by artisans from appropriate raw materials) to create a sense of historical depth underlying the films (96). Additionally, the filmmakers lured a larger target audience by creating a popular genre film with conventions from action films (martial arts, horror, swashbuckler, war films, and even Westerns) that provided mass-market appeal (57-59). Innovations in computer graphics developed for the *LOTR* films were helpful in creating creatures, monsters, and crowds that were believable because they followed “real-world principles of anatomy and physics” (90).

It is in the description and analysis of the transfer of the *LOTR* literary material to film that Thompson is most comfortable and her analysis strongest. This is also the portion of book that is of greatest interest to Tolkien fans and scholars, since it provides Jackson’s rationale for the changes he made in creating his films. While one might disagree with Jackson’s work, Thompson’s presentation of his appreciation for Tolkien, his need to satisfy a modern audience, and the soundness of his decisions in the compromises necessary for filmmaking, aid in neutralizing objections to Jackson’s films.

The book’s two middle sections relate the history of the *LOTR* franchise, including Jackson’s strategic use of the Internet to publicize and maintain interest in the *LOTR* films. Since the films coincided with the rise of the Internet as a meeting place for those with common interests, no matter where they were located, New Line found in its official and fans’ Web sites an essentially free source of advertising for the films (the studio only spent 2% of its marketing budget on its official site, relying on a few trusted fan sites for most of its Internet publicity [141]); this free publicity needed to be balanced, however, against fans’ desire to know more about the films than the studio was willing to divulge (138). Other, essentially free sources of publicity for the films were the exhibitions, conventions, and parties associated with the

theatrical openings of the films (197-201), ancillary products accompanying the release of the theatrical versions (194), the various DVD versions and documentaries that kept the *LOTR* films in the public eye between productions (215), and the video games that replicated and built upon the film's story and location (225). The convergence of filmmaking and gaming, both of which use computer graphic imaging, allowed the production of high-quality games that use both the images and the scores of the films, that can be produced quickly and relatively cheaply, and have become the "most important component of a franchise's licensed products" (233). Thompson's coverage of these phenomena is thorough, providing both the history of the marketing or publicity ploy under discussion as well as the specific actions taken by Jackson and New Line. Especially interesting is Thompson's demonstration that the films were made at the right place, at the right time, and by the right people who were able to harness technological advancements like the rise of the Internet, the replacement of VHS by DVD format, and the multiple uses of computer graphic imaging in films and ancillary products to produce a superior product that enabled franchising and moved filmmaking away from the Hollywood studio model.

In the final section of the book, "The Lasting Power of the Rings," Thompson discusses the effects of the *LOTR* franchise on the independent New Line studio and on the satellite companies and locations involved in the films, concentrating on their effects on filmmaking in New Zealand and the strategic use of the films by New Zealand to change and enhance its image. She demonstrates that New Line's calculated risk in investing in the *LOTR* project came at just the right time to repair a downturn in the fortunes of Time Warner (New Line's parent studio) and in sales of independent films on the foreign market (259), and how studio executives became heroes in Hollywood through their championing—and effective franchising—of the *LOTR* films (263-65). Jackson's insistence that the films be made wholly in his homeland, plus New

Zealand's effective marketing, identifying the film's location with Middle-earth, has brought a boom in tourism and jumpstarted the film industry in that country (284). It will be interesting to observe whether the innovations introduced in the *LOTR* films will eventually lead to the end of Hollywood-based studio model.

In her conclusion, Thompson summarizes that “[...] an epic film not only can be made more cheaply abroad, but even, in the right circumstances, can be made better” (330) and asks an important question, namely, what effect franchises have on filmmaking (331). Thompson very briefly discusses her reasons for dismissing this question, pointing out that the film is still at the center of the franchise and that Hollywood (with which she identifies with highly commercialized filmmaking) produces only half of the films available for viewing nowadays (331). While that may be true, the story told in this work points to the crucial role of franchising in financing most modern films, and independent films like *LOTR* are no exception. What is exceptional about the *LOTR* films is the role of the independent-minded filmmaker Peter Jackson, who insisted on a high-quality film that both remained true to Tolkien and paid homage to genre films, thus ensuring an audience. However, given Thompson's early claim that “[t]oday the franchise is often the star” (6), one is tempted to ask whether the need to franchise drives the choice of films by modern studios, a question that requires more extensive study before the effect of franchising on filmmaking can be determined.

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