"The effort to translate": Fan Film Culture and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien

Maria Alberto
Cleveland State University, m.l.e.alberto@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch

Part of the Interactive Arts Commons, Other Film and Media Studies Commons, Reading and Language Commons, and the Translation Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol3/iss3/2
"The effort to translate": Fan Film Culture and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien

Cover Page Footnote
I am highly indebted to Julie Burrell, without whose enthusiastic and ongoing readings this paper would cover more ground with less coherence. Thank you!
Introduction: Why Translation?

In his 1940 preface “On Translating Beowulf,” J.R.R. Tolkien contended that “The effort to translate, or to improve a translation, is valuable, not so much for the version it produces, as for the understanding of the original which it awakes” (“Translating Beowulf” 53). Though made with a specific literary purpose and tradition in mind – in this case, the twentieth-century British student’s self-translation of a text from the Old English into modern vernacular as a practical exercise in learning a new language – Tolkien’s assertion about the value of translation bears re-examination in light of circumstances where its terminology has assumed new complications, and consequently, new stakes for revisiting Tolkien’s own work.

The most telling of these new complications have been foregrounded by critical debates surrounding Peter Jackson’s ubiquitous film trilogies: the 2001-2003 Lord of the Rings, and a decade later, the 2012-2014 Hobbit. Here in particular, the term “translation” and its associations bear a weight beyond even the abovementioned “understanding of the original” (“Translating Beowulf” 53). One additional stake in re-examining the term “translation” comes from the fact that Tolkien espoused a process of that name: under certain redefinitions, then, Tolkien’s approval of something called “translation” could be taken as universal authorial sanction for filmmakers’ depicting his secondary world. However, another additional stake in re-examining the term “translation” stems from the question of whether any such process comes into filmmaking at all: in this sense, some re-definitions of “translation” could be taken as a firm reiteration of Tolkien’s well-documented “reservations about drama” as a medium (Carpenter 254). Here, then, the precise definition and application of the word “translation” could either reiterate or provide a neat way around Tolkien’s recorded opposition “to the ‘adaptation’ of stories, believing that this process invariably reduced them to their merely human and thus most trivial level” (Carpenter 254).

Today, our ability to use some form of the term “translation” when discussing films depicting Middle-earth involves massive stakes, since so many new readers’ experience with Tolkien’s secondary world have been mediated through Jackson’s films. Determining whether the once authorially-sanctioned term “translation” can be applied to film might be a step toward examining the concern that those who see Jackson’s films first are somehow deprived of experiencing Tolkien’s work, even if these audiences do approach the original texts next as a result. My primary purpose here, though, is to suggest yet another item for consideration in this debate. I maintain that fan film culture, a phenomenon that comprises several types of associated fan productions, has come to occupy a noteworthy if relatively unexamined place in audiences’ engagement with Middle-earth. Moreover, I would add that fan film culture offers an invaluable way to consider whether the term “translation” might be used in conjunction with
film, especially once we differentiate between the purposes of commercial and noncommercial films: the former focused primarily on profit, and the latter focused primarily on community enrichment and involvement.

In order to demonstrate the role of fan film culture in the larger context of debates over translation and film, I will briefly revisit critical positions on filmic adaptations before examining how such criticism intersects with contemporary scholarship on both Tolkien’s texts and Jackson’s films. I will then expand on fan film culture in relation to other fannish traditions. For the most part, though, I am concerned with actual examples of fan film culture: how they function as simultaneous threats and homages to a certain idea of canonicity, and why this combination poses such thought-provoking implications for the debate over film as a potential means of translating Tolkien’s secondary world.

So, talking about Tolkien means talking about Jackson?: Adaptation vs. Translation

While Tolkien scholarship post-Jackson does not always reference the question of film-as-translation directly, indications of this debate are often evident all the same. For example, scholars who refer to Jackson’s work switch among terms that seem synonymous, linguistically speaking, but that evidently also carry enough baggage to indicate a specific position on the writer’s part. Notable examples of this switch among similar yet connotative terms include “translation” (Flieger 47) and “transposition” (Shippey 240) but also “adaptation” (Thompson “Gollum” 25), “interpretation” (Ford and Reid 180), “rendering” (Ricke and Barnett 264), and “characterization” (Timmons 133) among others. In making specific choices among seemingly synonymous terms, Tolkien scholars are effectively enacting a more specific version of a debate that originated in the litero-filmic offshoot known as adaptation studies.

James Monaco makes the seminal argument that film is not a true language, citing the lack of a formal grammar and inbuilt vocabulary (Monaco 170), but then goes on to observe that it does function remarkably like language because in watching a film “The observer is not simply a consumer, but an active – or potentially active – participant in [a] process” (Monaco 175). The main difference, he suggests, is the relationship between signifier and signified: i.e. between the object, emotion, and/or person depicted and then the perceivable sign (text or image) that conveys that depiction to the audience. For Monaco, “The power of language systems is that there is a very great difference between the signifier and the signified; the power of film is that there is not” (Monaco 177). In this view, the fundamental differences between text and film also become their greatest assets in delivering different impressions and messages.
Monaco, however, offers this principle for films in general, and the need for a more specific method of dealing with filmic adaptations was soon noted, since such films involve explicitly building from the sign-based system of textual narratives. As early as 1957, George Bluestone was characterizing the relationship between text and film as “overtly compatible, secretly hostile” (2). He contends that a novel and a film must necessarily portray an identical narrative differently according to the disparate expectations, tastes, time constraints, and even educational levels of their respective reading and viewing audiences (Bluestone 2) – a consideration he emphasizes before even addressing the inherent technical differences between the two media. Andrew Dudley further ties the work of adaptation studies to Monaco’s more general difference between textual language and filmic pseudo-language by maintaining that all film is representational of some pre-existing concept (Andrew 29), and in that sense, filmic adaptations are both representative of and “delimited” by the concept of the original text’s cultural status, since that original “is already treasured as a representation in another sign system” (Andrew 29). More recently too, Thomas Leitch has asserted that critical complaints about an adaptive film’s “faithfulness” stem from the discipline’s initial basis and assumed values in literary studies (Leitch 3), which leads to what he calls the questionably default “proposition” in which “novels are texts, movies are intertexts, and in any competition between the two, the book is better” (Leitch 6). Even from a more purely technical point of view, experienced screenwriters also insist that adaptation depends on the understanding “of what is intrinsically undramatic” in other narrative forms (Seger 10) and the knowledge that audiences “already have, filed away in their memories, their own interpretative worlds for these stories. . . [and the film adaptation] of a respected work may suffer by comparison” (Faithfull 47).

It may seem self-explanatory to insist, as such critics do, that text and film should be judged differently since they are different media: film is dimensional and depictive where text is sequential and descriptive. This insistence quickly proves more difficult to practice, though, when the narrative that a text and a film share originated with the text, and when some audiences might have a stake in either legitimizing or de-legitimizing the succeeding film. This stumbling block is particularly evident in some aspects of contemporary Tolkien scholarship: Kristin Thompson has called the abundance of critical essays on Jackson’s films “a genre unto itself” despite its being an “odd topic” with no distinguishable readership, as “Those who dislike the films presumably don’t want to read about them, and those who love the films won’t be convinced by a group of scholars to stop loving them” (“Gollum Talks” 25). In addition, some of the critical scholarship Thompson references is heavily dependent on value-based comparisons, often presented as close, cutaway-style evaluations of scenes and characters from Tolkien’s text and Jackson’s respective film, sometimes to the point where
Jackson’s characters are deemed completely separate, and thus separated, from Tolkien’s.¹

Final conclusions about the value, impact, and intention(s) of Jackson’s films may never be reached with anything even resembling complete satisfaction, then, and certainly not by me. To close, then, might be to repeat Philip Kaveny’s case that Jackson and Tolkien found different solutions to similar issues of audience and narrative because they worked in different media (Kaveny 190-1).

Thompson, however, again offers an intriguing new line of thought to consider when she maintains:

Still, the question is not whether Tolkien would have approved of the three-part film created by Jackson’s team. No doubt he would have been impressed by some elements of it and annoyed by others. The same is true of Tolkien scholars and fans. In essence, Jackson admitted that he didn’t expect anyone who knew the books well to approve of all the changes he and his collaborators made. (Thompson 27, emphasis mine).

Thompson’s passage is remarkable less for its content – which is noteworthy but no longer exclusive, as anyone who addresses Jackson’s work must inevitably run up against the many ways in which it differs from its source text(s) – than for the way in which it conflates scholars and fans. Here, both are audiences with similar stakes in the eventual filmic production as something to examine, criticize, and perhaps take a protective stance against. Thompson’s conflation later becomes more conscious still with her note that “Like other fans, I certainly feel that some decisions which the filmmaking team made in changing Tolkien’s book were unnecessary or perhaps not the most successful” (28, emphasis mine). Such conflations are notable because Henry Jenkins’s 1992 observation about the term “fan” still holds true: “it never fully escaped its earlier connotations of religious and political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession, and madness, connotations that seem to be at the heart of many of the representations of fans in contemporary discourse” (Poachers 12).² Instead, though, the shared stakes that

¹ For instance, see Daniel’s Timmons’s “Frodo on Film: Peter Jackson’s Problematic Portrayal.”
² However, while the comparison of fan and scholar (and the increasing comfort with conflating the two in a single identity) may be becoming more common, it is by no means universal. David Bratman, for instance, maintains that “The heartbreak of these films has been how easily Jackson could have created something to make Tolkien readers proud” (28, emphasis mine), and the difference in values is seen in the comment “While my filmgoing self was cheering, my Tolkien reader was wincing” (37, emphasis mine). This may certainly be a case of me reading into unintended meanings, but when such differences in authors’ and critics’ self-positioning among or
Thompson is acknowledging more closely echo the idea that fans are best defined as a community with a “reassuring bond of shared interest and common knowledge (Brooker 863-4) and protective instincts toward the canon and/or its author (Brooker 875), which practically begs our re-examination of the relationship and/or delineation between the fan and the scholar. In her response to Norbert Schürer’s editorial “Tolkien Criticism Today,” Robin Reid similarly points out “the assumption that ‘fans’ and ‘critics’ are somehow always already separate” (par. 25) is often “a distancing stance that was perhaps once required to support the myth of academic objectivity” (par. 26) more than an actual difference of admiration or even purpose concerning the source text(s).  

Beyond fans become visible within the same community or even collections, the disparity becomes more obvious (and, I admit, more interesting).  

Here I must add the necessary codicil that these shared stakes are not always defined or perceived the same way among different audiences. Tellingly, though, this particular divide does not always fall between fans and scholars: oftentimes it can also be found among fans themselves, with the terms “book-firsters” and “film-firsters” denoting whether the fan first read Tolkien’s work or watched Jackson’s films (Thompson 42-43). This difference among fans themselves is noteworthy because book- and film-firsters may hold disparate values, even to the point of overvaluing the medium (and thus, the version) they first encountered – despite the inherent attributes and flaws of each. It must also be noted that Jackson’s 2012-2014 Hobbit trilogy has likely widened the gap between book- and film-firsters still further through its banking on the LoTR trilogy’s success and its far greater concessions to primary-world demands for action films. These concessions are especially visible with the Hobbit trilogy’s extended use of CGI-bolstered battle scenes, its additions of further comedic falls, and the star power commanded through popular male actors Martin Freeman, Richard Armitage, Orlando Bloom, Lee Pace, and Benedict Cumberbatch.

Brooker actually offers a definition of five components, which include: community, or the existence of a group united by a “reassuring bond of shared interest and common knowledge (863-4); arcana, or extensive knowledge of canonical detail whose density excludes those outside the group (866); pilgrimage, or visiting geographic locations associated with the canon or its author (868); performance, or adopting some particularly admired aspect of the canon or its author, such as a similar writing style (872); and finally curatorship, or protective instincts and actions toward the canon and/or its author (875). His definitions of community, arcana, and curatorship seem especially apt in the case of those who read or study Tolkien’s works.

Although, as an interesting comparison to this and to the footnote above, see Neil D. Isaacs’s 1968 preface “On the Possibilities of Writing Tolkien Criticism.” Among the many astonishing impressions Isaacs offers here is the statement that “Nor does the fact that The Lord of the Rings and the domain of Middle-earth are eminently suitable for faddism and fannish, cultism and clubbism encourage scholarly activity” (1). Though he later admitted that such bitterness was “indesensible” due to its focus “on carping critiques of material we had deemed unworthy of inclusion” (“On the Pleasures of (Reading and Writing) Tolkien Criticism” 5), Isaacs also explained that the 1977 publication and reception of The Silmarillion had actually fulfilled those precise fears. He claimed that critics used The Silmarillion’s stylistic differences to bolster their arguments against The Lord of the Rings, while “devotees” used it “to range far beyond The Lord of the Rings in their enthusiasm for Tolkien’s created world, thereby deflecting critical attention from, and appreciation for, a major work of fiction” (5).
This complex and growing critical awareness of the fan’s place in reading, studying, and reacting to Tolkien’s work also becomes apparent when considering how film adds further to the mix. For instance, Dimitri Fimi points out that Jackson’s filming of *The Lord of the Rings* presented “interesting problems” not just for the technical demands of addressing such a complex text, but also “given the necessary consideration of the expectations (and demands?) of Tolkien fans” (Fimi 70). Janet Croft has maintained a similar position, observing that fan involvement quickly became as much a factor as textual complexity for anyone who tried to make a film based on Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*: “Add to [these complications] a vocal fan base familiar with every nuance of the book and its background legendarium, and in many cases very unforgiving about any deviation from the original, and the task of adapting *The Lord of the Rings* becomes quite a test of the scriptwriters’ skill” (“Three Rings for Hollywood” 7). More interestingly still, the awareness of fans’ roles is not limited to the recent post-Jackson decade-and-a-half, either. Whether writing Tolkien to share their love for his work (Carpenter 251, 254, 271), working to bring out an authorized American edition of *The Lord of The Rings* (Carpenter 259), encouraging him to publish other texts such as *The Silmarillion* (Carpenter 262), or creating their own shared “folklore” of Tolkien’s mythologies (Fimi 85), fans also played pivotal roles in the initial publication and reception of Tolkien’s text as well as in the decades between those publications and Jackson’s films.

As unlikely a segue as this might seem, the connection between questions of fan engagement and of the term “adaptation” vs. the seemingly-synonymous “translation” is not actually all that far-fetched. Essentially, both concern purpose. The questions of ‘why make a movie if there’s already a book?’ and ‘why care if the movie is different from the book?’ are not unrelated to questions such as ‘why visit someone else’s secondary world more than once?’ or ‘why try to share that secondary world with other people?’ The most consequential difference, in fact, is typically one of means: who has the resources and capacity to meet legal demands, mainstream market expectations, and economic pressures? In some cases, those with such means also share the “passion for the story and characters” of those without (Gore xi), and the resulting production demonstrates clear knowledge of and affection for its textual predecessor – as is the case, whatever else their flaws, with Jackson’s films. Jackson is a fan – a fan with means, certainly, but also a consumer with evident affection for and stakes in Tolkien’s narrative. However, in producing *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* Jackson also had to meet and overcome challenges in addressing unfamiliar audiences, genre expectations, budget and opportunity costs, and other “market forces which are beyond the ability of the artist or creator, or even a production company, to control” (Kaveny 184).
Keeping in mind the necessity of this balance between potential fan knowledge and affection on the one hand and “the lens of economic reality” on the other (Kaveny 184), then, I would argue that commercially-produced and -intended films are most accurately classified as adaptations first and translations second – if not simply “borrowings” that only include the most suitable parts of the text (Andrew 30). I make this distinction because commercial films’ primary purpose is to succeed in capturing general audiences’ attention as a means of re-capturing and multiplying the resources expended – and if this directive necessitates changes (i.e. adaptations) to the original narrative, these changes are made primarily for that “economic reality” (Kaveny 184) rather than as an accommodation to the different pseudo-language of film (Monaco 170).

“Commercial” is the key word in this contention, and I use it intentionally in order to avoid the classifications of “mainstream” vs. “indie,” which would provide little help here: the term “mainstream” has become unhelpfully ubiquitous in the now genre-saturated film industry. In addition, technically speaking, The Lord of the Rings is an independent film: “a huge, expensive, and extremely successful independent film, to be sure, but independent nonetheless” (Thompson The Frodo Franchise 257). Using the description of “commercial,” however, also brings to mind the “cash or kudos” agreement reached by Tolkien and his publishers when first faced with filmmakers expressing their interest in The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit. According to Carpenter, filmmakers would have to provide “either a respectable ‘treatment’ of the book, or else a good deal of money. As Sir Stanley put it, the choice was between ‘cash or kudos’” (Carpenter 256).

Today, the cash part of this aphorism can be seen in the financial success and cultural dominance of commercial films: for Tolkien’s Middle-earth, these are most notably Jackson’s films. The International Business Times has estimated that as a trilogy Jackson’s The Lord of Rings earned $2.92B at the box office alone (Garofalo par. 1), while altogether Jackson’s trilogies have been valued at almost $6B as of August 2015 (The Numbers par. 1). Because commercial film thus dominates the “cash” part of the aphorism, then, we might easily imagine that this leaves the “kudos” – the compliments and appreciation for a job well done – for other types of film.

This is not to say that a commercial film cannot earn kudos as well as cash. As we have just seen, though, this version of a job well done necessitates financial

---

6 Thompson points out that “In the film industry, ‘independent’ chiefly refers to the way a film is featured and distributed” (257): a major studio will use its own resources for production, publicity, and release requirements, where an independent company “typically raises a substantial portion of a film’s budget by pre-selling the local distribution rights to firms in foreign countries” (257), as was the case for The Lord of the Rings (257-8). For more, see the chapter “Fantasy Come True” in The Frodo Franchise.
success, and commercial film must thus be made “with an eye to a ‘happy ending’” that will satisfy viewers and impel them to see the second installment” (Chance 182). The definition of a job well done, however, is something entirely different for fan films, since they “are made with no expectation of box office success or return on a financial investment” (Gore xi). Due to this difference, fan films are free to pursue the kudos approach of putting Middle-earth on film in a way that commercial films cannot. As noted above with the example of Jackson as a fan himself, commercial film may strive for kudos but by its very nature must ultimately prioritize cash, and this level of priorities is reflected on all levels of the filmmaking process, including adaptation(s) from the text. Fan films face the opposite paradigm entirely: not only is the “cash” not a priority, but as Gore pointed out, financial profit is also not even an option (xi).

As I will demonstrate in the following sections, the nature and value of kudos in fan film culture can be debated along several axes of technical production, canonical fidelity, and audience assumptions, but the fact that this community evaluation is the driving force for fan film culture rather than cash cannot be emphasized too strongly.

“A ‘respectable’ treatment”: Talking about fan film culture

Before beginning this examination, it is necessary to clarify what I mean by the terms “fan films” and “fan film culture,” which will re-surface frequently throughout this article. At the same time, though, it must also be noted that critics have never agreed upon universal meanings for either, and that I am proposing accumulative definitions as a result.

Fan films are generally agreed to involve digital distribution of a fan-created narrative related to a pre-existing fictive space. Other than this, definitions vary widely, and are often popularly-derived rather than critical. James DeRuvo on VideoMaker.com insists that “fan films are typically movies made for the Internet, based in the universe of a blockbuster epic like Star Wars, The X-Files, and even Spider-Man, and whose authors are the fans themselves” (DeRuvo par. 4). On the other hand, TVTropes offers the following definition:

[A fan film] consists of an original story utilizing the characters and/or setting from an established franchise. . . [it] isn’t just a re-editing and redubbing of existing footage, but rather an entirely new work consisting of footage that has been shot or animated by the producer(s) of the film themselves. (par. 1)

While both of these definitions presuppose a filmic canon or starting point, though, Clive Young acknowledges other possibilities. After offering the
“classic” definition that “a fan film is a fictional movie created by fans imitating their heroes from pop culture” (3), Young contrasts this with a “modern” alternative defining a fan film as “an unauthorized amateur or semi-pro film, based on pop culture characters or situations, created for noncommercial viewing” (4). In addition, Young’s “modern” definition doesn’t simply acknowledge that the fan film can be based beyond a film canon: instead, it also makes commerciality a central factor of the definition, similar to the emphasis on commercial film that I proposed earlier. Young also takes the first few tentative steps toward the concept of fan film culture by describing a phenomenon he calls “fan cinema,” which is wider than fan films in that it can also include “other moving image-related formats” (Young 259).

Due to their shared roots, though, concepts from other modes of fannish production can also be applied to fan film culture, and so will be folded into my definition. Some of Henry Jenkins’s early observations about the nature of fanvids, for instance, still apply: Jenkins argues that fanvids are “ideally suited” to fannish culture since their significance depends “upon the careful welding of words and images to comment on the series narrative” (225) and that both gain “new associations from [their] contact” (225). Some of Sheenagh Pugh’s observations about fanfiction also apply, such as the idea that fanfiction is produced because fans “wanted either ‘more of’ their source material or ‘more from’ it” (Pugh 19).

With this deluge of partial classifications in mind, then, I will start from Young’s “modern” definition of fan films as “amateur or semi-pro film[s], based on pop culture characters or situations, created for noncommercial viewing” (Young 4). However, where all previous definitions depend on fan-producers filming their own new footage based on existing works, I argue that fan film may

---

Readers might already be aware of the terms “fanvid” and “vidding,” which refer to a visualized fan narrative created by layering a popular song over shots from a commercial film or television series. In this process “fan artists appropriate ‘found footage’ from broadcast television and re-edit it to express their particular slant on the program, linking series images to music similarly appropriated from commercial culture” (Jenkins 225) and the result is “music videos, edited from pieces of those programs and other sources into something new: a story, an essay, a mood piece, a love note (Coppa and Walker par. 1). Experienced readers may also question why I do not simply use these existing terms instead of proposing “fan film culture.” In answer I maintain that although the two are related (both result from fannish production and may make use of similar or even the same material from pre-existing commercial film), fanvids/vidding and fan film/fan film culture are separate phenomena. Each is intended to address a separate need of the fannish community: fanvids address perceived shortcomings or wishes for existing characters and narratives (OTW’s Vidding; Coppa and Walker par. 19, 38), while fan films and fan film culture primarily depict narratives in pre-existing fictional spaces. Thus the difference between fanvids/vidding and fan film/fan film culture is not to be found so much in their source material (in fact, both may be produced using the same stills, shots, or clips from pre-existing commercial film) as it is to be found in their disparate purposes.
use pre-existing footage from commercial films; fan films may also convey their narrative(s) through non-traditional means, such as light effects, graphics (either fan-produced or from existing commercial sources), and/or animation of still images such as fanart. Whether footage is primarily fan-produced, appropriated from existing commercial sources, or created from non-filmy effects and/or other existing non-film sources, I propose that the most important factors in assigning the designation of “fan film” are the producer’s effort, the film’s effect, and the overall purpose of the filmic project. Similarly, my term “fan film culture” includes fan films alongside several types of smaller yet associated fan productions, including screenplays, trailers, soundtracks, and cast lists.

Most importantly, though – and similar to critical definitions of fanvids and fanfiction – both fan films and larger fan film culture derive their significance from appealing to the specialized knowledge of fannish audiences: in Brooker’s terms, by promoting the community through the creative depiction of arcana (Brooker 863, 866). In this case, fan films and fan film culture generate productions that are aimed at and appealing to audiences who delight in using their extensive knowledge of Tolkien’s work to fill out the necessary context that no film can fully reproduce from the language, lineages, description, or other aspects of Tolkien’s writing. Fan films and fan film culture are also significant for their hands-on answer to fans wanting “more from” (Pugh 19) either a textual or filmic canon: this can include wanting a different, non-Jackson take on filming Middle-earth as well as looking for filmic representations of narratives, events, or characters that Jackson, or even Tolkien himself, never undertook.

In either sense, though, the examples of fan film and fan film culture we will look at next are primarily based in – and survive on – the “kudos” of a Tolkien-oriented fannish community, rather than on the commercial success of “cash.”

“Much prospect of kudos”: Fan Films of the Third Age

Fan films offer the best starting point when discussing how fan film culture can offer noteworthy translation(s) of Tolkien’s beloved work, thanks to their relative familiarity and visibility. Similarly, fan films set during the Third Age make for an effective first example because of their widely recognizable narrative material from Tolkien’s most popular books, even though this age comes last in the timeline of his literary canon.8

8 Or, to be precisely accurate, The Return of the King and the Appendices actually leave off with the Fourth Age soon after Aragorn’s coronation, when the Three Rings perish and Elrond, Galadriel, and Gandalf leave Middle-earth. However, since this lapse of time is comparatively short, it is more convenient to just use the appellation “Third Age”: in addition, I have encountered few fan films that deal primarily with this very short, very specific slice of the Fourth Age.
Third Age fan films, however, face specific challenges in their translation of Tolkien’s world from page to screen – challenges that are due predominantly to their existence alongside Jackson’s ubiquitous trilogies, which I have already shown are more adaptation than translation by their very nature as commercial films. Generally, Third Age fan films must work with and around comparisons to their commercial counterparts (again, mainly Jackson’s), and often must also acknowledge issues that audiences have brought up against adaptations that those commercial films make to Tolkien’s original narratives. As we will see, the translative efforts of Third Age fan films cannot necessarily offer solutions to the adaptive changes of commercial films – and many do not even try. Instead, for these particular fan films the translation of Tolkien’s secondary world from text to film becomes a balancing act between fannish values, expectations, and effort on the one hand, and then commercial pressures/influences on the other. This balancing act can be seen in two distinct issues facing Third Age fan films. First is the conflict between commercial and noncommercial cultures: how do fan-producers work from “official” producers’ “sanctioned” narratives, and from there, how do they reach appreciative audiences? Then comes the question of satisfying these audiences once reached: when faced with different precedents from Tolkien and from Jackson – the infamous conflict of “book canon” vs. “film canon” – which should fan-producers reference and why?

Three particular examples offer an inkling of how Third Age fan films can treat their shared challenges while ultimately producing completely different translations of Tolkien’s world. Kate Madison’s 2009 *Born of Hope*, for instance, approaches a “book canon” narrative, while Chris Bouchard’s 2009 *Hunt for Gollum* offers an expansion of a “book canon” incident and the Tolkien Editor’s 2015 *The Hobbit* presents a reduction of an entire “film canon” narrative from Jackson. Despite their distinctly different approaches and results, though, these three Third Age fan films ultimately aim to translate something of Tolkien’s Middle-earth that commercial films have been or would be unable to adapt.

The first example, Kate Madison’s *Born of Hope*, is a 70-minute fan film that focuses on the story of Aragorn’s parents and his childhood community. The film, which took Madison and her crew over six years to plan and make (“Production Diary – Archive”), follows Arathorn and Gilraen from their first meeting through Aragorn’s birth and until the beginning of his fosterage with Elrond.

*Hope* must begin dealing with the conflict between commercial and noncommercial cultures immediately. As we will see with other Third Age fan films as well, this means operating very carefully in terms of filming and distribution because other entities control the legal (i.e. commercial) rights to Tolkien’s secondary world. With business entities’ controlling interests at stake, then, *Hope*’s fan-producers must demonstrate that their film is not a commercial
threat: i.e., that it will not be competing for financial resources with commercial films that are legally sanctioned to do so.

Hope’s solution to this conflict is to acknowledge the commercial stakes of others while disclaiming any such stakes for itself. At every turn, both audiences and any litigious eyes are reminded that fan-producers are aware of their film’s relationship to legally-licensed work, but also that fan-producers never have, or will, receive any commercial gain. For instance, Hope can only be watched online (viewing options at http://www.bornofohope.com/ScreeningRoom.html) and is always preceded by a message warning audiences that any commercializations are fraudulent: “You are about to watch a FREE streamed version of Born of Hope. The film will not be available in any other form or format, so please do not pay for pirated copies” (Hope 0:04). Then, in a disclaimer preceding the actual film (Hope 0:31), Hope’s fan-producers acknowledge several commercial entities, clarifying their own relation to these entities’ commercial rights as one that makes “no claim” and remains “personal, uncompensated” (Fig. 1).

![Born of Hope’s pre-film disclaimer](screenshot by author)

Elsewhere across the film’s official website (http://www.bornofohope.com/), visitors will learn that neither cast nor crew received any payment or other form of “financial gain” (“Production Diary – Archive”), and that the £25,000 filming budget was achieved through self-funding (“Production Diary – Archive - 3rd February 2006”) and international donations (“Behind the Scenes”). Finally, a disclaimer on the bottom of every page echoes the pre-film disclaimer by reminding visitors that “This work is produced solely for the personal, uncompensated enjoyment of ourselves and other Tolkien fans” (“Disclaimer”). Hope’s 2006-2009 campaign to reach viewers was similarly unpaid and fan-dependent: the film was covered and/or screened over twenty-four times at venues around the world, such as Ring*Con 2009 in Germany, Olamot Con 2010 in Israel, DragonCon 2010 in the United States, the 2010 London Independent Film Festival, and the 2010 Cannes Independent Film Festival (“Screenings and Events”). Yet these strategies have served very well so far: since its “official”
Internet release in December 2009, *Hope* has received over 37 million views on YouTube and 292,000 on DailyMotion\(^9\) and is often included on popular “best of” articles that list fan films.

In addition to these commercially-oriented issues, though, *Hope* also faces certain challenges posed by its assumed audience – who, due to the way the film is available for viewing, actually cannot be concretely “assumed,” as they might be watching it due to their familiarity with and love for Jackson’s film trilogies, Tolkien’s texts, or any combination of the two. *Hope*’s fan-producers certainly seem to have held these different possible audiences in mind, though, as they utilize both book and film canons. In terms of book canon, or the material actually provided in Tolkien’s published texts, *Hope* translates Tolkien’s world onto film by expanding several aspects of a brief and historicized side-narrative. Then, in terms of film canon, or the filmic adaptation(s) provided by Jackson’s trilogies, *Hope* bolsters its translation of Tolkien’s world by using and/or referencing recognizable aspects of Jackson’s particular envisioning of Middle-earth.

This combination of book and film canons can be seen from the start through director Kate Madison, an independent filmmaker and producer, who has said that *Hope* was “[i]nspired by only a couple of paragraphs written by Tolkien in the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*” (“Story”). Yet Madison and her crew also move beyond book canon by expanding the limited material Tolkien provides about two minor characters to create what Robin Reid maintains is a transformative narrative that “shift[s] the focus” of its source material (“Tracking Issues of Fandom Cultures” 3.6). In part, the focal shift of *Hope* involves featuring Arathorn and Gilraen as primary characters rather than just an aside in the history of Aragorn and Arwen (*Appendix A.I.v.* 1032),\(^10\) and giving substance to the few years mentioned in the *Appendices* by showing their first meeting, their growing relationship, their roles among the Dúnedain community, and their marriage. Yet other aspects of *Hope*’s transformative approach to Tolkien’s *Appendices* side-story include fan-producers’ construction of a community and culture for the embattled Dúnedain, and, as Reid maintains, a focus on this community and its daily workings rather than on an extraordinary, solitary undertaking such as a quest (“Tracking Issues of Fandom Cultures” 3.5-3.6).

Interestingly, too, *Hope*’s transformative approach to the story of Arathorn and Gilraen expands on Tolkien’s book canon in several ways. These include fanspecific creations such as original characters as well as expansions of Tolkien’s limited material (such as contextualization for Gilraen’s mother Ivorwen’s prophetic “If these two wed now, hope may be born for our people,” *Appendix A.I.v.* 1032) and ties to Tolkien’s more complete work (such as the introduction of

---

\(^9\) As of June 1, 2016.

\(^10\) To be specific, the material concerning Arathorn and Gilraen consists of five timeline entries in Appendix B and three paragraphs in Appendix A.I.v. of *Return of the King*. 
Halbarad, Aragorn’s captain in *Return of the King*, as a neighboring villager’s older child, and the explanation that orcs kill Arathorn after a long hunt for Barahir’s ring, a historical artifact introduced in *The Silmarillion*). For *Hope*’s fan-producers, then, working with book canon becomes a negotiation of how far fan-producers can extrapolate from the limited material provided by Tolkien in his *Appendices*, and where this is not enough, how *Hope* can plausibly develop from that original material.

*Hope* does not grapple with book canon alone, though. While its narrative certainly derives inspiration and direction from Tolkien’s writing, many of *Hope*’s audio, visual, and/or filmic techniques also reference precedents from Jackson’s film canon, thus providing its audience with sensory connections to an immediately-recognizable vision of Middle-earth.

Some of these sensory references to film canon are immediately apparent in *Hope*’s filming locations, casting and costuming, and other appearances. Settings provided by Great Britain’s haunting Epping Forest and Wales’s rugged Snowdonia National Park allow Madison and her crew to simulate “some beautiful Middle-earth locations” (“Locations”) and evoke Jackson’s use of New Zealand locations such as Closeburn and Arrowtown Recreational Reserve (“Movie Locations: *Lord of the Rings*”). Certainly *Hope* also acknowledges Viggo Mortenson’s appearance as Aragorn with its casting and costuming of Christopher Dane as Arathorn, and in a different character light, *Hope*’s orcs suggest visual similarity to Jackson’s through their particular combination of brutish features, ragged uniforms, mismatched armor, ill-maintained weaponry, and lurching-shuffling movement patterns. Interestingly too, *Hope*’s orcs are also audibly recognizable with their replication of the screeching, Cockney accents, and “guttural vocal quality” (par. 2) regimen created by *Lord of the Rings* vocal coach Andrew Jack to reflect the “evil characteristics, brutality and physical ugliness” of Jackson’s orcs (par. 11).

Yet *Hope* also references film canon through its replication of certain filmic techniques that Jackson uses to emphasize the scope of events or of Middle-earth itself, techniques that include accelerated exposition as well as authentic treatment of Tolkien’s invented languages. In accelerated exposition, an unseen narrator conjures the basic outline of an ancient story through voiceover while audiences are treated to sweeping location shots, battle scenes, and details from a character’s life; in his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, this technique allows Jackson to speed the narrative past while preserving something of its mood. In evident reference to this technique, *Hope* opens with a female narrator’s voiceover situating the history of the dwindling Dúnedain as audiences are shown a nighttime orc attack on a firelit village, an overview of *Hope*’s northern Middle-earth, and finally the figures that will soon be introduced as Gilraen and her parents, Ivorwen and Dirhael (*Hope* 0:31-3:32). *Hope* also references the way Jackson’s films treat the Elvish tongues
and the Black Speech much as primary-world foreign languages, with automatic English subtitles except during certain moments of great significance, when a speaking character will then paraphrase for non-speaking characters – and by extension, audiences.

These considerations of commercial and noncommercial cultures, and of book vs. film canons, ultimately corroborate the argument that fan films are translating Tolkien’s secondary world to film where commercial films can only adapt it – Hope’s fan-producers can afford to make these choices because they are not angling, and thus adjusting, for financial success. As Hope also shows, though, translation is not necessarily an argument of greater accuracy, canonical fidelity, or filmic quality on fan films’ part. Indeed, as we have seen with Hope, and will see with other examples shortly, fan-producers certainly make their own additions and expansions to the secondary world Tolkien has provided. Instead, this difference between translation and adaptation can be condensed to admit differences of purpose. Fan filmmakers’ primary stake in filmmaking is to transmit or communicate Tolkien’s work to others, and any changes or additions to Tolkien’s work in the process are made in order to facilitate this communication according to the fan-producer’s vision, or by the necessities of making this communication with few to no resources. Conversely, commercial filmmakers’ primary stake is financial recuperation and gain, and any changes or additions to Tolkien’s work are made for the purpose of increasing these chances.

With this examination of Kate Madison’s Born of Hope in mind, it is interesting to see how a second example of a Third-Age fan film, Chris Bouchard’s 2009 Hunt for Gollum, also deals with similar issues of commercial and noncommercial purposes, and of book canon vs. film canon. Hunt, a 38-minute fan film, follows Aragorn’s search for and capture of Gollum as both the Ranger and Gandalf try to find answers about the Ring that Bilbo has been hiding. Much like Hope, Hunt also begins by dealing with the conflict between commercial and noncommercial cultures. Also similar to Hope, Hunt must prove that it is not a financial threat to “sanctioned” commercial entities, as can also be seen in the language of its pre-film disclaimer (Fig. 2).

![DISCLAIMER](https://example.com/disclaimer.png)

**Fig. 2: Hunt for Gollum’s pre-film disclaimer**

*(screenshot by author)*
Interestingly, too, Hunt’s negotiation between commercial and noncommercial interests becomes even more specific than Hope’s. In a 2009 interview with the BBC, director Chris Bouchard reported that “We got in touch with Tolkien Enterprises and reached an understanding with them that as long as we are completely non-profit then we’re okay. We have to be careful not to disrespect their ownership of the intellectual property. They are supportive of the way fans wish to express their enthusiasm” (“Making Middle-earth on a shoestring” par. 23). This exchange is especially fascinating for the way it reiterates that content – i.e. Tolkien’s secondary world – is not actually the primary focus for Tolkien Enterprises (since rebranded as Middle-earth Enterprises), which is a division of the independent filmmaking Saul Zaentz Company and deals primarily with licensing the rights it controls “in certain literary works of J.R.R. Tolkien including The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit” (“Middle-earth Enterprises: About”). Instead, what Bouchard reports of the interaction with Enterprises reveals that entity’s focus on commercial interests, as is reflected in the way that concerns about “intellectual property” are couched in terms of “ownership” and Enterprises benevolently okayed Bouchard’s production of Hunt “as long as [they] are completely non-profit” (Making Middle-earth on a shoestring” par. 23).

Hunt’s noncommercial nature and purpose are also further emphasized on its official website (http://huntforgollumfilm.github.io/website/updates.htm), where the bottom of each page bears a reproduction of the pre-film disclaimer and a copyright that covers only the film’s “original portions.” Site visitors will also learn that Hunt was completely funded by its fan-producers and made with “very limited resources” that included locations around London, a “small army” of volunteers, and a £3,000 shooting budget (“About”). The site also warns that the film can only be streamed, and no downloadable version can be made available “due to copyright reasons” (“Alternate Viewing Links”) – an implicit admission that a downloadable version could be burned to CD and from there sold as pirate copies, which would negate Hunt’s non-commercial status and thus open the door to litigation. In addition, Hunt fan-producers’ campaign to reach viewers was similarly noncommercial and fan-sustained: the film was screened or previewed at venues such as the Tolkien Society’s annual conference in 2012, ComicCon France 2010, 2009’s Le Festival Cinema Tous Ecrans in France, 2009’s Festival du Nouveau Cinema in Canada, and the 2009 London Comic Con (hunt4gollum.blogspot.com, “Screenings”). Fan-producers also worked alongside their peers from Hope, sharing resources in order to further lower costs for both films (“Making Middle-earth on a shoestring” par. 18), and much like Hope, Hunt has managed to reach a considerable audience, with over 12.7 million views on
YouTube and 2.3 million more on DailyMotion since its Internet release in November 2009.\footnote{As of June 1, 2016.}

As both fan films presume an audience of mixed exposure to Tolkien’s and Jackson’s work, \textit{Hunt}’s negotiations between book and film canons make for an interesting comparison to \textit{Hope}’s. For instance, although \textit{Hunt} also begins with book canon, or limited material from Tolkien’s own writings,\footnote{In this case, a few sentences’ reminiscence from Gandalf in Tolkien’s \textit{Fellowship of the Ring}: “The trail was long cold when I took it up again, after Bilbo left here. And my search would have been in vain, but for the help that I had from a friend: Aragorn, the greatest traveler and huntsman of this age of the world. Together we sought for Gollum down the whole length of Wilderland, without hope, and without success. But at last, when I had given up the chase, and turned to other parts, Gollum was found. My friend returned out of the great perils bringing the miserable creature with him” (\textit{Fellowship of the Ring} 1.57).} it primarily extends the side-narrative from Tolkien instead of adding to it as \textit{Hope} does. Similarly, \textit{Hunt}’s reference of Jackson’s film canon is much more central to its narrative than such film canon references had been to \textit{Hope}. Earlier we saw how \textit{Hope} had done multiple things with limited material from Tolkien’s book canon: establishing its own independent narrative by creating from the \textit{Appendices} material, contextualizing that narrative, and finally tying it to other parts of Tolkien’s work, all while referencing Jackson’s film canon mainly to make its own changes recognizable to audiences familiar with that particular envisioning of Middle-earth. \textit{Hunt}, on the other hand, is dependent on \textit{The Lord of the Rings} for immediate context — its narrative arc may be invisible or incomprehensible without audience’s knowledge of the larger stories that prompt Aragorn’s hunt for Gollum — and establishes close ties to Jackson’s films without shifting focus from the characters that both Tolkien and Jackson emphasize.

Throughout \textit{Hunt}, the film’s expansion of the limited material provided by Tolkien’s few sentences in \textit{Fellowship} is undertaken in noticeably close conjunction with the visual and auditory cues of Jackson’s Middle-earth. For instance, when \textit{Hunt}’s Aragorn and Gandalf meet to discuss Gollum, audiences’ first view of Aragorn deliberately mirrors Jackson’s introduction of his \textit{LoTR}’s Aragorn. \textit{Hunt}’s Aragorn, played by Adrian Webster, is deeply hooded, smoking, and seated with his back to the wall in a boisterous but ominously half-firelit pub just off a dark, deserted street (\textit{Hunt} 2:22-2:48). Both interior and exterior appearances imply that this setting is meant to be the Prancing Pony, the same Bree pub where both Tolkien’s and Jackson’s hobbits meet their respective Aragorns — save that \textit{Hunt} never names the Pony, and instead depends on audiences catching the similarities to Jackson’s Pony. Similar references abound throughout \textit{Hunt}, as when switches among filming locations in northern Wales, Epping Forest, and Hampstead Heath (“Middle-earth on a shoestring” par. 3) are intended to tell audiences where in Middle-earth \textit{Hunt}’s Aragorn is and how far
he travels first seeking and then carrying Gollum. And although Hunt’s orcs are made recognizable by the same combination of visual and auditory references as Hope’s, Hunt’s orcs are also depicted in far more fighting situations, giving this film’s fan-producers the opportunity to reference the fighting styles of Jackson’s orcs as well as their brutish appearances, grunting, and Cockney-derived speech. Hunt also revisits the technical aspect of film canon through its use of certain filming techniques from Jackson, including an opening with accelerated exposition and atmosphere-building treatment of Tolkien’s invented languages. However, Hunt also adds implied exposition. In Jackson’s films, the camera pans over the travels of miniscule figures to the accompaniment of a recognizable film score, thus letting Jackson speed the narrative present while maintaining the appearance of time and distance: similarly, Hunt uses this technique to establish the scope of its Aragorn’s travels.

To summarize these differences between the two fan films then is to return to Reid’s idea that Hunt is “imitative” where Hope is transformative (“Tracking Issues of Fandom Cultures” 3.7), a distinction that derives from fannish discourses that set “transformational” against terms such as curative, affirmation, or affirmative. Where “transformational” work involves fans creating their own interpretations of and additions to the source material, the latter

11 It is especially interesting to consider the comment left on Reid’s article in May 2015 by Julianne Honey-Mennal, one of Hunt’s co-producers (http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/comment/view/162/123/724). Essentially, Honey-Mennal seems to be protesting Reid’s contention that between Hope and Hunt “The gendered nature of film topic and creators seems clear: the men focus on the epic hero, and the women focus on community” (“Tracking Issues of Fandom Cultures” 3.4) and that male-produced fanworks are often more professionally-recognizable and oriented (3.2-3.3). To counter these views, Honey-Mennal points out the number of inexperienced, female, and inexperienced female crew members who were involved with Hunt and maintains that Reid has misread crucial aspects of both films as well as their respective production aims and values. Both Reid and Honey-Mennal offer interesting points, but I would venture that Reid approaches the question from a larger scholarly context where Honey-Mennal has the unique experience of working on a particular fan film that may or may not have been outside a definite norm.

14 Curative has been defined as the valuation of fannish knowledge over change/transformation (LordByronic par. 2-3), with particular concerns for the “preservation” of a revered canon against outsider perspectives (par. 4-5).

15 The term “affirmational” has been applied to describe the “sanctioned” side of fandom, in which the original creator is the final authority, “the source material is re-stated [and] the author's purpose divined to the community's satisfaction” (obsession-inc par. 4). “Transformational” thus becomes the “unsanctioned” side, which is “all about laying hands upon the source and twisting it to the fans' own purposes, whether that is to fix a disappointing issue . . . in the source material, or using the source material to illustrate a point, or just to have a whale of a good time” (par. 6).

16 The two have been compared thus: “The affirmational school focuses on privileging authors (including fan authors of fanfic) and their feelings; the transformational school, on open discussion and critique” (alixii par. 4).
terms all connote strict fidelity to the original source and its creator/producer – much as these values are typically applied in judging cinematic adaptations of originally textual works (Leitch 6). As I pointed out with Hope, though, this is not necessarily an argument for one mode being better, or that fan films need be judged by fidelity or “accuracy” – similarly, a transformational focus or fanwork is not inherently of greater value than an affirmative or imitative one. Instead, I point out these differences here merely to show that both modes have their place in translating Tolkien’s Middle-earth to film, and either may be adopted by fan-producers to great effect with the same purpose in mind: communicating a vision of Tolkien’s world to others.

Following these considerations of Madison’s Born of Hope and Bouchard’s Hunt for Gollum, it is especially interesting to turn to a final example of a Third Age fan film that addresses the same issues – commercial and noncommercial cultures and book vs. film canons – in a completely different way. This last film, TolkienEditor’s 2015 The Hobbit, offers audiences the story of Bilbo Baggin’s quest to reclaim the Lonely Mountain with Thorin Oakenshield’s Company by paring the nine hours of Jackson’s 2012-2014 Hobbit trilogy down into a single four-hour film.

In a notable first difference from the two Third Age fan films previously examined, Hobbit immediately conflates the conflict between commercial and noncommercial cultures with the many issues of combining book and film canons. On the one hand, Hope and Hunt begin by offering disclaimers to placate commercial entities before developing material from Tolkien’s book canon in the style of Jackson’s film canon: Hobbit, on the other, offers no preliminary concessions to commercial interests, and actually stems directly from its fan-producer’s opposition to Jackson’s work. In a statement on their homepage, TolkienEditor admits that they enjoyed “many aspects of Peter Jackson’s Hobbit trilogy” but overall “felt that the story was spoiled by an interminable running time, unengaging plot tangents and constant narrative filibustering” as well as decreased screen time for “supposed protagonist” Bilbo Baggins (“I Have Recut” par. 1).

TolkienEditor also makes no direct mention of commerciality either before or during Hobbit, and their website offers nothing like the highly specific disclaimers that we have seen from both Hope and Hunt: instead, visitors will just find the declaration that “This was a labour of love, so please share and seed. And feel free to reupload the video and post your own links wherever you want” (“I Have Recut” par. 14). Earlier, we saw that fan-producers were able to publicize Hope and Hunt through conventional and established fannish venues thanks to their non-profitable work where commercial entities held the rights to Tolkien’s secondary world. In a complete turnaround, Hobbit depends on digital circulation and word of mouth among fans, and its story was only picked up by established
news venues afterwards (see the list of over forty online publications, ranging from Forbes to Reddit, at [https://tolkieneditor.wordpress.com/](https://tolkieneditor.wordpress.com/)). In another departure from the tactics of Hope and Hunt in negotiating between commercial and noncommercial cultures, Hobbit is only available via torrent,¹⁷ and viewership statistics cannot be accurately calculated. This transparent, unapologetic use of Jackson’s commercial footage and the complete lack of legal-language disclaimers acknowledging the commercial rights to Tolkien’s world held by other entities mean that Hobbit would be removed for copyright violation if hosted and available in a single fixed place, as Hope and Hunt are. At the same time, though, Hope and Hunt probably won’t be removed outright for copyright violation as long as they are not available for any form of actual distribution (i.e. via downloading).

As I have already noted, these differences in dealing with commercial and noncommercial cultures also lead Hobbit to deal with questions of differing book and film canons completely differently from Hope and Hunt. To begin with, TolkienEditor makes it clear that they are not concerned with maintaining any contact with Jackson’s film canon, and Hobbit is instead about returning more closely to Tolkien’s original text. Where Reid has called Hope transformative and Hunt imitative, it is tempting to label Hobbit affirmative or affirmational, thanks to TolkienEditor’s clear valuation of the original Hobbit text and “focus on privileging [original] authors” (alixtii par. 4). This temptation that only increases with TolkienEditor’s list of excisions made to Jackson’s trilogy.¹⁸ All of these excisions concern Jackson’s filmic additions to Tolkien’s world, but more so, additions that certainly seem to have been made for commercial purposes. A brief partial list will demonstrate: among other things, TolkienEditor writes that they excised battle scenes, “filler” scenes, the Legolas/Tauriel/Kili love triangle, several original or inflated characters, and side-stories about Dol Goldur and

---

¹⁷ Torrents are any files transmitted via a BitTorrent client from multiple servers: when the user starts a torrent download, “the BitTorrent system locates multiple computers with the file and downloads different parts of the file from each computer” (TechTerms par. 2). In practical terms, audiences can watch Hope and Hunt online but can’t download their own copies: however, audiences can download a BitTorrent client (ex: BitTorrent, KTorrent, uTorrent) and get their own copy of Hobbit.

¹⁸ TolkienEditor’s list of excisions from Jackson’s Hobbit trilogy ([https://tolkieneditor.wordpress.com/](https://tolkieneditor.wordpress.com/)) includes the prelude with Elijah Wood, several battle scenes, and the investigation of and attack on Dol Goldur, among others (“I Have Recut” par. 3–10). However, half the pure fun of watching Hobbit is catching even smaller excisions. Some of the additional cuts I noticed included the plate-throwing song at Bag-End, parts of the Company’s stay in Rivendell, all but one of the flashbacks to Smaug, and Kili’s protracted recovery from an arrow wound. Interestingly, almost half of TolkienEditor’s Hobbit comes from Jackson’s first Hobbit film – a definite indication of just how many additions the last two films of Jackson’s trilogy include. This again might lead to noting just how many of these additions were made to meet genre expectations or draw audiences – i.e., for commercial purposes.
Azog (“I Have Recut” par. 3-10) in order to “re-centre the story on Bilbo, and have the narrative move at a much brisker pace” (“I Have Recut” par. 12). Many of the excised items, such as the battle and filler scenes, were added to Jackson’s *Hobbit* in order to meet the genre expectations of length, action, and combat for contemporary fantasy and action-adventure movies (interestingly, some of these expectations set by Jackson’s earlier *Lord of the Rings* itself). Other excisions were things meant to attract and retain audiences whom commercial producers seem to have imagined would have no stake in Middle-earth otherwise, as can be seen with the *Lord of the Rings* tie-in of Orlando Bloom’s popular Legolas, and the introduction of a female protagonist to an otherwise male-dominated narrative with the Silvan Elf Tauriel. Insisting on fannish labels, though, runs perilously close to insisting that one mode of production is more valuable than the others, when actually all are translating Tolkien’s world to film in different ways. Instead, it might be more helpful to note that *Hope’s* and *Hunt’s* fan-producers worked from one or both of their two canons, book or film, to create “more of” their source material” while also getting “more from’ it” (Pugh 19), while TolkienEditor’s *Hobbit* concentrates specifically on the “more from it” angle.

In examining the negotiations that Third Age fan films must conduct between commercial and noncommercial cultures, and often also between competing book and film canons, we can easily see the immense effort and intention that fan-producers put into films such as *Born of Hope, Hunt for Gollum*, and TolkienEditor’s *Hobbit*. Notably, these complex negotiations made by Third Age fan films also demonstrate my earlier contention that fan films are best defined by the fan-producers’ effort, the film’s own effect, and the overall intent of reaching fannish audiences, rather than by whether fans produced all of their own footage without any outside filmic reference(s). Although Third Age fan films may reference Jackson’s particular vision of Middle-earth (or in *Hobbit’s* case, use Jackson’s own footage), these films should be considered separate and distinct filmic creations – and as translations rather than adaptations – because they are rendering Tolkien’s world on film primarily in order to share it, rather than primarily profit from it.

---

19 For this matter, my designation of TolkienEditor’s *Hobbit* as a fan film could be questioned: why not call it a fan edit, as even its producer does in places (“I Have Recut” par. 12)? I would answer this by pointing out that the fan-producer obviously sees and intends this *Hobbit* to be seen as a completely separate entity from Jackson’s trilogy, even though it uses footage from that trilogy. Put differently: TolkienEditor sees their work not as “editing” or changing Jackson’s work, but as replacing or re-creating it entirely in order to follow Tolkien’s more closely.
“Not much cash either”: pre-Third Age fan films

As we have seen, fan films set during the Third Age of Tolkien’s secondary world face certain challenges regarding narratives and audiences: such challenges often include how to reach audiences more familiar with Jackson’s Middle-earth, as well as how to avoid prosecution or removal for copyright infringement. As a result, for these Third Age fan films translating Tolkien’s secondary world from text to film is often more a matter of transmitting an “emotional location” (Ford and Reid 180) or an “emotional tone” (Croft 75), than of strict narrative fidelity to Tolkien’s texts. For fan films set prior to the Third Age, though, translating Tolkien’s secondary world to film requires confronting some completely different challenges. Where Third Age fan films had to negotiate between commercial and noncommercial priorities as well as between competing book and film canons, pre-Third Age fan films face the lack of a monolithic commercial precedent, the competition among textual canons and fan knowledge, and far more limited opportunities for basic filmmaking resources such as equipment and funds.

While pre-Third Age fan films still involve comparisons to pre-existing work, these issues now stem from fan-audiences as much as from fan-producers’ need to remain noncommercial: most notably, pre-Third Age fan films are dealing with audience expectations derived from individual exposure to Tolkien’s mythic prehistories 20 where Third Age fan films were dealing with audience expectations derived from universal exposure to Jackson’s trilogies. This difference means that pre-Third Age fan films have an exponentially larger and more complicated timeframe from which to draw narratives, but at the same time, an exponentially smaller base of knowledgeable fans from which to presume audiences and/or financial backers. Practically speaking, then, fan-producers of pre-Third Age fan films are less limited to referencing or duplicating Jackson’s particular vision of Tolkien’s secondary world, but at the same time, are typically unable to offer comparable live-action filmmaking and also often judged by audiences on the basis of whether their films meet individual interpretations of Tolkien’s work. This combination of limited filmmaking options and selective audiences means that pre-Third Age fan films are usually more individually-driven efforts, and presupposes a much closer and more dialogic relationship between fan-producers and their audiences. Typically, pre-Third Age fan films are also more episodic or anecdotal, and they frequently assume audiences’ active knowledge and participation in “filling in the gaps” left by non-traditional filmmaking.

---

20 As a further complication, this exposure typically varies by individual audience members as well. Such exposure may be limited to having noted the side-references in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, or may include partial or full knowledge of one or more of the texts collected in *The Silmarillion*, *The Book of Lost Tales*, *The Children of Húrin*, and/or the various *Histories of Middle-earth* volumes.
To date, no commercial film has been able to adapt much pre-Third Age material: noncommercial fan films, though, have been able to translate several of these lesser-known narratives from Tolkien’s world to film using very few resources. Furthermore, as we will see in particular examples, each pre-Third Age fan film generates its own unique translation of Tolkien’s secondary world. For instance, Hitokage’s February 2014 Music of the Ainur is an 8-minute fan film that visualizes Tolkien’s creation story The Ainulindalë through limited live action, while the 8-minute fan film Ainulindalë from Willow Productions visualizes the same narrative through a combination of 2D and 3D animation. In this section, I will focus on these two films in order to examine certain characteristics of pre-Third Age fan films – episodic focus, nontraditional filmmaking, and individual fan-producers’ interactions with canon and audience – and at the end provide additional examples of pre-Third Age fan films for further viewing.

Hitokage’s Music, for instance, exemplifies one common characteristic of pre-Third Age fan films in its fan-producer’s acute awareness of his own relationship to Tolkien’s work. In particular, Hitokage has emphasized how his experience with “a harmony from the every word of Ainulindalë” (personal communication, 30 Sept. 2015) led him to try and replicate “the atmosphere of the book into this [film]” (“Here’s the story”). This kind of awareness, a sense of privilege in shouldering a sacred trust, is often articulated in terms of Tolkien’s textual canon, and is more marked among pre-Third Age fan films than their Third Age counterparts. Where fan-producers of Third Age fan films must situate their work by acknowledging commercial rights as well as visual precedents established by commercial film, fan-producers of pre-Third Age fan films instead situate their work by identifying its precise source in Tolkien’s texts and reiterating their awareness of and respect for that textual source. It is not that the commercial work of Jackson and others (Bakshi, etc.) has cheapened the efforts of Third Age fan films: instead, it is more that Third Age fan films’ relationship to Tolkien’s work seem to be considered less strictly sacrosanct because their settings, characters, etc. have already been commercially adapted (and so often changed) elsewhere. Thanks to their commercial film precedents, then, Third Age fan films are thoughtfully respectful of Tolkien’s texts but rarely as carefully reverential of them as pre-Third Age fan films. For the same reason, delineations among fannish terms such as transformative, imitative, and affirmative are less easily applicable to pre-Third Age fan films because of this “sacred trust” mentality toward the

21 HitokageProduction’s Music of the Ainur: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzwjMUGcqnG
22 Willow Production’s Ainulindalë: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gy7a6yUc8zo
23 In undertaking this examination, I am particularly indebted to the fan-producers of Music and Ainulindalë, who generously agreed to email interviews discussing their respective films.
texts – but also because there is no monolithic film precedent to transform, imitate, or affirm in their place.

An additional motive for pre-Third Age fan films to stick close to Tolkien’s own narratives stems from the episodic and even inconsistent nature of their textual source(s): anything within his secondary world but published beyond The Hobbit or The Lord of the Rings is completely different in style and purpose. Where Tolkien called the former a fairy story (Carpenter 201) and the latter is often termed an epic or a novel-with-modifier (ex: “fantasy novel”), the collection of texts published in 1977 as The Silmarillion is more a mythic pre-history. In practical terms, these narratives are more concerned with a mythopoeic collection of lineages, anecdotes, and historical deeds than with the character advancement, unified narratives, or setting descriptions provided to some extent in both The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. Furthermore, within that print-and-ink text are included four separate narratives of different time periods, so that the descriptor “Silmarillion” can refer to either the physical text or to the third and largest of its four sections, Quenta Silmarillion, which deals with Fëanor’s Silmarils and all related stories. Then, to further complicate the difference between Third Age and pre-Third Age textual narratives, the latter are often fragmented and incomplete to the point of self-contradiction, due to their preparation and publication by Christopher Tolkien after his father’s death.

As a result of these many differences between pre-Third Age narratives and the more familiar Third Age, pre-Third Age fan films typically assume their audiences’ working knowledge of Tolkien’s more esoteric text as well as these audiences’ own “filling in the gaps” for what these films reference but do not visualize. This assumption of audience knowledge and participation can also be found throughout Hitokage’s Music, as when the film opens immediately with Hitokage’s narrative introduction of Eru as “the one who in Arda is called Ilúvatar” (Music 0:48-0:53). There is no accelerated or implied exposition to situate audiences, as we saw with the Third Age fan films: audiences are expected to know that Eru is the principal creator and supreme being of Tolkien’s cosmology, and that Arda is the created world that includes both the Blessed Lands and Middle-earth. Similarly, Hitokage neither names the individual Ainur nor explains their later role in the world: instead, he narrates pieces of Tolkien’s Ainulindalë word-for-word simply to say that the Ainur were “the Holy Ones, the offspring of his thought” (Music 0:57-1:02) and later to show Melkor’s presumption in adding to Eru’s Music. Here again, Hitokage presupposes that his

24 Here we can see a return to, and even an expansion on, Reid’s rebuttal to Schürer, where she maintains that “Schürer’s claim that ‘[critics] can only rely on readers being familiar with The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit, and often only in cinematic form’ (para.3) is completely and provably in error when it comes to academic criticism” (Reid par. 16). Indeed, audiences here are implicitly expected to bring a working knowledge of The Silmarillion to leisure viewing.
audience will recognize the opening passages and first half of Tolkien’s *Ainulindalë*, and will make the connection between the hooded figures’ song and the themes of Eru’s music.

Respect for Tolkien’s difficult and episodic textual canon, though, can still admit a remarkable range of different possibilities for translating pre-Third Age narratives to the audiovisual medium of film. Ultimately, pre-Third Age fan films are dealing with what Wolf Schmid identifies as the inevitable conflict of interest when film narratives must select and “concretize” only certain details originally present in verbal or textual narration. Where listening and reading audiences are encouraged to visualize the secondary world for themselves, films dictate both the auditory and the visual experience for audiences with concrete details that leave no space for “unfolding,” or personal expansion by individual audience members (Schmid 16-17). As we saw previously, audiences of Third Age fan films have already been exposed to Jackson’s audiovisual concretization of Tolkien’s Middle-earth, and thus are more concerned with whether fan-producers can match that concrete vision: audiences of pre-Third Age fan films, though, either lack prior concretization, or have been exposed to only partial, non-immersive forms – visually in terms of artwork from certain editions of the texts or from art by other fans, and/or audibly in terms of audiobooks or dramatizations.

With this in mind, Willow Production’s *Ainulindalë* offers a striking example of how pre-Third Age fan films can generate concrete visualizations. Although it proceeds from the same textual source as Hitokage’s *Music*, and both films are about the same length, Willow Production’s *Ainulindalë* uses different audio and visual elements in order to communicate larger consequences and cover a greater timespan. Where Hitokage visualizes the Ainur and concludes his *Music* before the creation of Arda, Willow Productions visualizes the Ainur and their actions as well as Arda in their *Ainulindalë*.

Differences in audio concretization are immediately noticeable with the film’s opening lines, which like Hitokage’s are also taken from Tolkien’s passage explaining how “There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Ilúvatar, and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught else was made” (*Ainulindalë* 0:35-0:52). Where Hitokage narrates his own voiceover, though, Willow Productions uses segments from Martin Shaw’s 1998 *Silmarillion* audiobook: in addition, an original soundtrack created by Far West Method Music plays throughout the film and Thomas Bergersen’s “Creation of Earth” can be heard in the final sequence. Differences in visual concretization are also immediately conspicuous: as Tolkien provides few descriptions of either characters or setting in his *Ainulindalë*, Willow Productions visualizes the Ainur as abstract wisps of light before they enter the world, and as humanoid figures of light when they enter it. Similarly, where Hitokage’s Melkor remains visually undistinguished from his brethren in order to emphasize *Music*’s
Eru, Willow Productions’ Melkor is visually distinguished from the other Ainur as one wisp moving away from its brethren, growing larger and glowing redder as it retreats from Eru (1:16), and later from the Valar as a fiery, shadowed silhouette set against their glowing blue figures. Willow Productions also concretizes visuals for Tolkien’s Ainulindalë narrative by rendering creation and the world in recognizable shapes. Eä, or the entirety of creation, is shown as galaxies in a portal at Eru’s hand, while Arda, or the world itself, becomes a planet amidst those galaxies that is covered in greenery by the Valar before Melkor’s arrival. Later too, conflict between the Valar and Melkor is visualized as actual battle between humanoid figures and destruction to the young planet.

Comparisons between Hitokage’s Music of the Ainur and Willow Productions’ Ainulindalë, though, also highlight the ways in which limited production capacity become intertwined with lack of filmic precedent for many pre-Third Age fan films, making them more distinctive and individualized efforts than Third Age counterparts working from Tolkien’s more well-known Hobbit or Lord of the Rings. Unlike Third Age fan films, where a principal fan-producer or fan-producer team is often able to coordinate the efforts of volunteers in specific roles (i.e. acting, costume and design, lighting/sound/cameras, and post-production), pre-Third Age fan films are typically created by just that principal fan-producer or team: this need for extra effort was emphasized by both fan-producers during interviews. To make Music “as a low budget or even no budget film director,” for instance, Hitokage reports that he created all of the costumes, played all the roles of both Eru and the Ainur, and used green screens upon which he later superimposed the final effects of lighting, text, and background (personal communication, 30 Sept. 2015). In practical terms, this entire film is the effort of a single fan, and its translation of Tolkien’s Ainulindalë is at once the literal transportation of Tolkien’s words to screen as narrative subtitles, and the visual translation of his non-descriptive creation story into concrete images that still demand audiences’ participation in filling out the details. Then, according to editor Caleb Rozario, Willow Productions’ Ainulindalë was created “using a mixture of live action footage and images, mixed with 2D and 3D animation. Most of the characters were real people, with their motion[s] digitally tracked [to] create movement for the animated characters that they represent” (personal communication, 28 Oct. 2015). Rozario notes that Willow Productions’ approach was influenced by the aesthetic appeal of making a cosmological narrative more abstract, but also because this combination of motion capture and animation let this team make this fan film “with an almost nonexistent budget, and a team of 4 or five people. . . And all of these people live in separate countries and have never met” (personal communication, 30 Oct. 2015).

Pre-Third Age fan films’ dealings with concretization, limited but creative filmmaking resources, and difficult textual canons all come full circle.
audience response. Viewers who comment on these films might focus on any one or combination of the three items noted above when praising or complaining about the film (if, of course, their comments are even relevant or non-spam). Comments on Hitokage’s *Music*, for instance, run the gamut from praise for the film to exchanges between commenters and Hitokage about Tolkien’s *Silmarillion* to comparisons between *Music* and Hitokage’s other work, mostly anime-focused videos.

Comments on Willow Productions’ *Ainulindalë* are more specific to the film itself, though, and demonstrate an intriguing pattern. Positive comments typically stress the commenter’s appreciation for the fan film as a unified experience that is variously “completely epic!” (bartek5207, Sept. 2015), “quite literally, breathtaking” (Lúthien Tinúviel, Sept. 2015), “absolutely awe-inspiring; a superb representation of Tolkien’s storytelling” (HodgePodge, Oct. 2015), or simply “Perfect” (57575756, Nov. 2015). Conversely, negative comments tend to focus primarily on the *Ainulindalë* fan film’s relationship to Tolkien’s *Ainulindalë*, pointing out canonical corrections such as “The children of Ilúvatar were born after the lamps. After the trees of Valinor were made their dew drops were used to make the stars in which the elves awoke... In Cuiviénen” (Daniel Valencia, Nov. 2015) or “The world was actually flat when it was made. It didn’t become spherical until after the second age [sic]. The elves were awaken [sic] by the kindling of the stars. The lamps were destroyed long before the elves awoke” (Joshua Hanenberg, Nov. 2015). Critical comments, though, often bridge the two poles by commending the fan-producers’ vision and efforts while also asking about some of their filmic choices, as in “Really stunning take on the Middle-earth creation story. . . Minor question: You showed the world as a globe but wasn’t Arda flat in the beginning? Or do we assume that the Elves simply believed it to be so in their legends? In any case, this was really cool!” (Pixis1, Nov. 2015). While all three types of comment do demonstrate a level of audience response to the film, the critical comments show the most engagement as these viewers consider and evaluate all three items – concretization, limited but creative filmmaking, and difficult textual canons – rather than just a single one.25

While Hitokage’s *Music of the Ainur* and Willow Productions’ *Ainulindalë* offer an excellent basis for examining shared characteristics of pre-Third Age fan films, though, interested audiences will find that other fan films can also offer remarkable examples of the ways in which individual effort, nontraditional filmmaking, selective audiences, and interactions with Tolkien’s difficult texts become interrelated to push against easy definitions of fan films. As a few

25 Interestingly too, these comments are also where the terms of “transformative,” “imitative,” and “affirmative” most closely come into play with pre-Third Age fan films. Each type of comment – universally positive, detailedly negative, or appreciatively critical – seems to privilege or respond to a different level of strict fidelity to Tolkien’s original text.
examples: Jose Luis Gana’s four half-hour *Silmarillion* fan films from 2013-2014\(^{26}\) employ a combination of textual and visual effects to emphasize the highlights of different Ages, while Jeremy Solomon’s July 2015 *Silmarillion Trilogy*\(^ {27}\) uses footage from multiple films – other than Jackson’s trilogies – to show the fan-producer’s idea of how a commercial film of Tolkien’s *Silmarillion* could be created. Finally, Andy Gilleand’s June 2015 *Shadow of Mordor*\(^ {28}\) is a fan film created from a combination of cut-scenes and interactive video game footage, and its narrative of the Noldorin ring-maker Celebimore derives from the 2014 video game published by Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment.

As a specific sub-category of Tolkien-derived fan production, though, pre-Third Age fan films offer a valuable reiteration of the idea that considering fan-producers’ effort and intentions generates the most effective and comprehensive definition of “fan film.” All of the pre-Third Age fan films considered in this section could be disputed as films for some reason: Hitokage’s *Music* for its nonprofessional production, both *Music* and Willow Production’s *Ainulindalë* for their short lengths, Solomon’s *Trilogy* for its use of commercially-produced footage, and Gana’s *Silmarillion* and Gilleand’s *Shadow* for their use of non-filmic and oftentimes even commercial footage. Considering the effort that went into their respective productions, though, will show that these fan-producers easily put as much thought and work into their productions: Hitokage arranged every aspect of his *Music*, Willow Productions coordinated its handful of volunteers from around the world and edited their footage in postproduction, and Gilleand spent almost a month both playing the video game and filming his playing (“Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor (The Movie)” par. 3).

**More than the Movies: Other Artifacts of Fan Film Culture**

As we have seen, fan films are a completely different type of production than their commercial counterparts, since these films are made primarily for the kudos of fannish audiences where commercial films are made primarily to generate cash, or revenue, for parent corporations. Despite this difference, though, fan films do share one important aspect with their commercial counterparts: neither type of film stands completely alone. With contemporary commercial films, potential viewers are offered a number of supporting materials that let them experience

---

\(^{26}\) Jose Luis Gana’s four *Silmarillion* films:
- *Ainulindalë*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95-sMY4BYBE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95-sMY4BYBE)
- *Valaquenta*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6_De2_TMpw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6_De2_TMpw)
- *First Age*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RE4CTah7zQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RE4CTah7zQ)
- *Second Age/Akallabeth*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zr_-AF5s7bo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zr_-AF5s7bo)

\(^{27}\) Jeremy Solomon’s *Silmarillion Concept Film*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0A-geMzb4E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0A-geMzb4E)

\(^{28}\) Andy Gilleand’s *Shadow of Mordor*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-sALT6s3mfI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-sALT6s3mfI)
some part of the film before and during its release: “sneak peeks” at early footage and casting decisions play to audience attention before more polished publicity is available, trailers offer sound bites to pique audience interest before the film is released, and soundtracks and physical merchandise allow audiences to claim stakes in some small part of the overall film experience. For commercial films, these additional artifacts all serve to increase the film’s chances of financial success: increased pre-film interest means greater publicity and more ticket sales at less cost to filmmakers, and merchandise sales are of course additional publicity and revenue in their own right.

In fan film culture, though, comparable artifacts typically exist as individual items rather than as support for actual fan films. While many of the fan films examined so far do have supporting materials – *Hope* and *Hunt* both have their own websites with teaser material and posters, and Willow Productions’ *Ainulindalë* has its own original soundtrack – fan screenplays, fancasts, fan trailers, and soundtracks are more often independent works intended to communicate their own free-standing narratives to fannish audiences. The major difference from their commercial counterparts is that these artifacts of fan film culture do not have, and will never have, an actual film referent, even though audiences are implicitly expected to approach them as if there were an upcoming film.

Despite these differences of purpose and independence, though, many artifacts of fan film culture still deal closely with commercial interests, which may take the form of using commercially-produced footage, offering mock tie-ins to Jackson’s film trilogies, and/or responding to perceived shortcomings of those trilogies. Where Third Age fan films had to defend any relationship to Tolkien’s texts or resemblance to Jackson’s films, though, other artifacts of fan film culture are small enough or far enough under the radar to forego such strict disclaimers: instead, most simply credit their sources and mention their noncommercial status once, in less legalistic language. Similarly, many of these non-fan film artifacts actually do not concern the Third Age, although this may be either to avoid competition with Jackson’s concretization or in order to create partial concretizations of less-explored Ages. At the same time, though, many artifacts of fan film culture are also very closely related to other types of fannish production: for many, in fact, the main difference stems from the fan-producer’s stated intention of emulating a precedent in commercial film culture, and from the expectation that fannish audiences will respond to the specific artifact differently because of that intention. With these characteristics in mind, then – intent to stand independent of any actual films, more casual treatment of commercial interests, and intense similarities to other types of fannish productions – I will consider some outstanding examples of what fan film culture looks like beyond its most visible example, fan films.
With fan screenplays, for instance, fan-producers don’t always intend to have the narrative in question made into a film: instead, they are often trying to make audiences aware of the many pitfalls and even downsides to such a project, and offering their own solutions – which they are well aware might not be feasible in a commercial environment. For the anonymous fan-producer of “The Silmarillion Series” (http://silmarillionseries.com/), for instance, after the end of the recent Hobbit trilogy “Many fans of Jackson’s movies want to see movies based on The Silmarillion, although anyone who knows the text could tell you a movie (or a trilogy) based on the book would be impossible” (“Introduction,” par. 1). “The Silmarillion Series” is a tremendous example of how a fan screenplay can be independent of any actual film, commercial or noncommercial, while also demanding audience participation and dealing with commercial interests. The anonymous fan-producer of “Series” plans out ten seasons that would cover the major events of The Silmarillion, The Hobbit, and The Lord of the Rings, as framed first by Maglor’s retelling and then by Elrond’s experience: each season, which opens in its own tab, is further divided into specific episodes.

It is in these planned episodes that audience participation comes into play, as the overall narrative is only vaguely sketched, and moreover, sketched in references that demand a solid working knowledge of Tolkien’s texts. For each planned episode, the fan-producer provides a contextualizing prologue and then a set of lists that each contain a location, the events that took place there, and sometimes a piece of art: from these lists and static images, audiences are left to finish drawing connections from their own knowledge of Tolkien’s text(s), and to visualize it or provide their own alternative arrangements. (Fig. 3)

Angband (Y.T. 1497)

- Morgoth returns to his seat in Angband, received by Sauron.
- Sauron informs Morgoth of the Sindar Elves that dwell in Doriath.
- Morgoth orders Sauron to prepare the army for attack.

Fig. 3: part of plan for “Season 1, Episode 8 – Thangorodrim”: here “The main focuses [sic] are Morgoth in Angband and Thingol in Doriath”
(screenshot by author)
Each planned episode then ends with a list of characters’ first appearances and/or deaths, a note on which of Tolkien’s work(s) is being referenced, and credits for any included artwork. No direct dialogue or stage directions are provided, again leaving that type of concrete visualization up to audiences – and ostensibly, to the hypothetical film.

Despite any screenplay’s insinuation of a potential film, though, the anonymous fan-producer of “Series” is very much aware of the technical and commercial implications for a *Silmarillion* film, and specifically maintains that “This is not a pitch . . . I do not wish [anyone] else to consider making this” (“The Silmarillion Series: About”). Audiences will find Jackson, Warner Bros., and HBO29 referenced for various filmmaking successes and pratfalls (“Introduction par. 2), but at the same time, will also see that the anonymous fan-producer spends an entire page specifying all the ways in which this studio-naming is just to give audiences references, and not a bid for any commercial rights:

– This is a not-for-profit website.
– I do not own any storylines, characters, images, music or videos used on this site. All credit goes to J.R.R. Tolkien, Christopher Tolkien and the artists listed on each page.
– This is a fan-made treatment of a possible TV series based on *The Silmarillion*.
– I am well aware of the rights situation.
– This is not a pitch.
– I do not wish Peter Jackson, Warner Bros, HBO or anyone else to consider making this. It is purely fan-made for fun.
(“The Silmarillion Series: About”)

Similar to fan screenplays, fancasts are also intended to stand separate from any existing or potential film, and they also have more obvious similarities to other types of fannish productions. Most noticeably, fancasts are visually similar to edits, or modified graphics in which the fan-producer uses images, textures, and/or text to visualize, re-visualize, or stylize some aspect of the source material. Where an edit often presumes a primary-world individual as a secondary-world character, though, a fancast is intended to cast a primary-world individual in a secondary-world role. Put differently: an edit may simply use a photograph of an actor or model to visualize a character, but a fancast will identify the actor or

29 Warner Bros and Jackson are mentioned specifically in terms of their work on Tolkien’s narratives; HBO is not. As a cable television network, HBO has been in the spotlight recently for *Game of Thrones*, its popular television adaptation of George R.R. Martin’s *Song of Ice and Fire* series. The fan-producer of “Series” acknowledges *Game’s* success as a televised fantasy series even if ultimately “I do not think the style of HBO or Game of Thrones suits Tolkien at all” (par. 1, emphasis mine).
model and then visually and/or textually explain the fan-producer’s “casting” choice.

Zorya’s *Silmarillion* fancast series ([http://zorya.tumblr.com/tagged/*silm](http://zorya.tumblr.com/tagged/*silm)) offers several conclusive examples of how fancasts reference but stand independent of fan films while remaining dependent on audience participation. Each of Zorya’s fancasts incorporates photographs or film stills of an actor or model and uses commercial artwork, fanart, other photographs, and/or textures above a quote from Tolkien’s texts to identify the character being cast. While the caption and quote are unambiguously informative, the actor or model’s photograph is selected to reinforce something about the character, and the additional visual material often retells a part of Tolkien’s narrative about that character.

For example, in a fancast for *Silmarillion* character Idril, Zorya has edited stills of her casting choice, actress Scarlett Johansson, from period films to highlight golden hair and vaguely historical dresses. Then a link in the original post identifies the fanartist who depicted Idril, Tuor, and young Eärendil in the lower lefthand corner, while audiences might recognize the upper right panel as John Howe’s “Fall of Gondolin” and the unidentified dark-haired man as a reference to Idril’s cousin Maeglin ([Fig. 4](#)). Without only minimal material specifically from Tolkien, then, Zorya references an entire narrative for the character of Idril for knowledgeable audiences willing to spend a little extra time considering her fancast.

---

30 Upper left from 2008’s *The Other Boleyn Girl*, lower right from 2006’s *The Prestige*. 
Fan soundtracks exhibit an even more obvious interplay between commercial origins and fannish audiences’ participation: where fancasts mix commercially- and noncommercially-produced materials, fan soundtracks repurpose and ask audiences to accept new meanings for commercially-produced music. In technical terms, fan soundtracks are virtually identical to fanmixes, which are fan-assembled collections of songs that the fan-producer associates with a character, character pairing, or event: much as with other artifacts of fan film culture, though, fan soundtracks are distinguished in terms of differing purpose. Unlike fanmixes’ focus on conveying unstructured impressions, though, fan soundtracks are structured to imply a specific narrative that exists elsewhere, much like a commercial film soundtrack outlines the narrative of its film.

These characteristics can be seen at play in Lodilou’s Feb 2015 “Rings of Power” (http://8tracks.com/lodilou/rings-of-power), a fan soundtrack that outlines
a cinematic narrative about the creation of the Rings of Power through commercially-produced music. In constructing an implied narrative that extends from Annatar’s arrival in Eregion to the downfall of Numenór and through the Last Alliance, Loudilou captions contemporary instrumental and electronic pieces with highlighted events: for example, the piece “Prologue” by Immediate is captioned “The Lord of Gifts in Eregion” and the piece “Illusions” by Thomas Bergerson is captioned “Downfall of Numenór. War of the Last Alliance.” With captions such as these, Loudilou concretizes only certain auditory portions of her implied narrative: the audiences of “Rings” are left to visualize their own ideas of how the selected music relates to the characters and events named in the captions, and what action(s) might take place during these musical pieces in the implied (but nonexistent) film.

Finally, unlike the previous artifacts of fan film culture, fan trailers take an extra step toward the familiar fan film by repurposing actual footage. Fan trailers’ roots in fannish production can be seen in their similarities to fanvids, which are music videos created by layering source footage and popular songs (Jenkin’s 225, Coppa and Walker par. 1). While their use of commercially-produced film footage and music is similar to that of fanvids, though, fan trailers differ for their focus on re-creating a familiar experience (the anticipation of a commercial film trailer) rather than on communicating a new impression of a familiar character, character pairing, or canon event. In pursuing this aim, fan trailers often incorporate meta-footage, such as titles and logos, in addition to film footage, and assume audience participation in both recognizing the referenced narratives and approaching the trailer itself as indicative of a larger treatment of those narratives that will be “coming soon.” For instance, TubeMastah’s December 2010 “Silmarillion Trailer” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RT9UcZPT2DU) presumes that audiences will approach it as if a precursor to an upcoming film, while also realizing that the film in question actually does not and will never exist.

Again, these complex assumptions deal closely with both audience participation and commercial concerns. To begin with, TubeMastah’s “Trailer” is obviously constructed to mimic the familiar commercial film trailer. After a familiar green-and-white preview screen, an unseen narrator provides a voiceover exposition of the creation of the world, and titles such as “But one of them turned to darkness” (0:56) for Melkor, and then “Fëanor, the most gifted of the Elves” (1:01), “waged a long and terrible war” (1:08), “to take back what was stolen” (1:17) set over footage visualizing these events. Further titles then situate “Trailers” itself by positioning it alongside established commercial interests —

31 On a lighter note, this opening screen also demonstrates TubeMastah’s definite awareness of the contestable space in which “Trailer” operates, as it claims that “The following preview has been approved for all audiences by the MPAA [Motion Picture Association of America] and Melkor.”
“New Line Cinema presents” (1:44) “A Film by Peter Jackson” (1:51) – and introducing upcoming footage as “from J.R.R. Tolkien’s epic masterpiece” (2:01), “comes the incredible story” (2:07), “of the heroic First Age of Middle-earth” (2:13). Audiences are then introduced to Turin, Fingolfin, Húrin, Tuor, Beren, Lúthien, Fingon, Morgoth, Maedhros, and Thorondor via their names and a few seconds’ footage of each character.

The kicker here is that footage and voiceovers alike originate from commercial sources, rather than from TubeMastah as a fan-producer. In “Trailers,” the initial voiceover of Tolkien’s Ainulindalë is from Martin Shaw’s audiobook of The Silmarillion, later voiceovers come from film and video game trailers (“About” par. 4), and of course all footage – including that of supposed characters – has been re-purposed from commercial sources. Instead, TubeMastah’s efforts as a fan-producer are to be found in the editing and re-assembly of these different commercial fragments into a larger, noncommercial whole, rather than in the production of new footage.

Interestingly, though, this very aspect of fan trailers – their unmistakable entanglement with existing commerciality – also seems to draw more interactive, and more vehement, audience participation than even fan films. “Trailer,” for instance, is followed by numerous comments reminiscent of the positive, negative, and critical types we saw with pre-Third Age fan films. Here too, positive comments usually stress overall appreciation for the trailer overall, while critical and negative comments draw more specifically from Tolkien’s texts.

In an additional twist, comments here and on many other Silmarillion-based fan trailers also devolve into debates concerning both Jackson’s work and Tolkien’s texts themselves – even after the fan-producers have specified the speculative, noncommercial nature of their work. The initial exchange on TubeMastah’s “Trailers,” for instance, quickly takes a turn for debate:

“Honestly, with how badly jackson botched LOTR I wouldnt want him to touch the masterpiece that is the silmarillion, with how much he took away just to add his own touch to it I would not want him to have the more nebulous Silmarillion to work with” (Jason Taylor, comment 2014)

“+Jason Taylor (calling the silmarillion a masterpiece) (saying peter jackson botched lotr) Dude, you are hilarious.

32 As of June 1, 2016, “Trailer” boasts 1534 comments, a relatively high ratio for an almost-six-year-old Youtube video with around 580k views.
The Silmarillion is entertaining to only, I repeat ONLY purist Tolkien fans, not that there’s anything wrong with that. But it doesn’t appeal to casual readers in the slightest. It also got negative reviews. And as for as the LOTR movies go, they’re adaptations, things HAVE to be taken out / changed. They’re great movies, perhaps the greatest in the fantasy genre” (4tado, comment 2014)

Succeeding commenters continue to interact with 4tado with increasing furor, debating claims that The Silmarillion is boring (NCC1776A, comment 2014; Thomas Peterlin, comment 2015), that it only received negative reviews (Silmarien Ingoldo, comment 2015), or that it is just like a cult classic (TubeMastah, comment 2014). In the meantime, other exchanges on “Trailers” discuss how any Silmarillion narrative couldn’t be made into a film at all (Christoph Kück, comment 2015; Mariko Moloney, comment 2015; Taxtro, comment 2015; others), how other filmmakers might have done better with Lord of the Rings than Jackson (Gumaro R. Villamil, comment 2015), or even what was the saddest storyline of Tolkien’s Silmarillion (Biene Marc, comment 2015).

Most interestingly of all, these fan-commenters are definitely conscious of the adaptation conflict that drive most of their questions, as when rio20d remarks “+4tado in my personal opinion Lotr movie is probably the best movie adaptation that Peter Jackson had taken, much better than what he did in the hobbit. I agree with you, it’s an adaptation, sometimes director does that because it is more suitable for movie viewers…” (rio20d, comment 2014, emphasis mine).

While some of these commentaries may seem silly or trivial – and the poor grammar of many commenters is no deterrent to this view – I will conclude this consideration of fan film culture with a return to some of our opening scholars. As we have seen, Neil D. Isaacs was worrying about the way Middle-earth encouraged “faddism and fannish, cultism and clubbism” to the detriment of scholarly activity as early as 1968 (“On the Possibilities of Writing Tolkien Criticism” 1), and more recently, scholarly criticism on Jackson’s films specifically has become so voluminous that Kristin Thompson calls it “a genre unto itself” (“Gollum Talks” 25). In content and function if not in style, how are fans’ conversations about The Silmarillion following “Trailers” that much different from any other contemporary conversation about Tolkien’s corpus? Fans and scholars alike have some stake in Tolkien’s secondary world, and by extension, all also have some stake in filmic and/or fannish visualizations of that beloved world. This holds true whether these visualizations are commercial, like Jackson’s trilogies, or noncommercial versions produced under the aegis of fan film culture – and also whether or not we can agree what exactly our stakes are,
who can or should defend them, and what precisely we are defending them against: each other?

**Conclusion: “a respectable ‘treatment’ of the book”**

The term “fan film” drags a great deal of baggage into any conversation, whether casual or critical, and many people bring up at least one of the following impressions of fan films:

- They’re “really bad” (amateurish)
- They’re dorky, esoteric, and/or pedantic
- They poke fun at their sources, and aren’t meant to be taken seriously

While I hope that I have been able to demonstrate the overgeneralizations inherent in these impressions, I would also argue that fan films and fan film culture as a whole reveal one fascinating way in which the medium of film has reshaped how contemporary readers approach and engage with literature. The possibility of filmic adaptations—and our ever-increasing exposure to them—seems to have readers thinking in terms of such adaptations even before they actually exist. Especially with the examples of pre-Third Age fan films and the non-filmic artifacts, it is easy to see how readers are actively plotting out the visualization of the narrative(s) they are consuming textually. Assigning the trappings of film to a textual narrative involves a very specific kind of visualization: rather than just imagining personal preferences for characters or settings, this type of visualization involves calculating resources and current cultural climate (i.e. he could never direct it, she could never play that role, that event could never be captured on film). Then, as mentioned earlier and throughout this article, there is also the parallel that I have proposed to Stanley Unwin’s 1958 aphorism of Tolkien-derived films being made for either “cash or kudos” – here seen in the inherent necessity that fan films and other artifacts of fan film culture are produced for love of their source rather than any chance of financial profit.

Thinking about fan films and fan film culture, then, is not as simple as looking for “good” things to watch, or arguing over whether Jackson’s trilogies are worth our time – or even dividing readers of Tolkien’s texts into fans on the one hand and scholars on the other. Instead, as fan films and fan film culture exist and operate in a noteworthy nexus of commercial and noncommercial interests, canonical debates, and audience response, discerning audiences will realize that fan films and commercial films are produced for entirely different reasons – and as a result, any changes that a film of either type makes to its textual source material are often made for a completely different reason.
Navigating these many demands is a complex task, and no matter fan-producers’ well-intentioned aims, there are many examples of fan film culture that are less polished than the few examined in this paper. There are fan trailers overwhelmed by comments for their poor quality, and even fan films that have been shut down by the Tolkien Estate, such as the 2013-2014 *Storm over Gondolin*. But even the enormous commercial success of Jackson’s most recent *Hobbit* trilogy cannot, and has not, stopped fan-producers who now have additional commercial visualizations to work around or even against. Instead, fan-producers explain that there are more compelling reasons than Unwin’s “cash,” as when filmmaker Hitokage maintains that fanworks can “fill the empty space that was left after the big movies” (personal communication, 30 Sept. 2015), or when artist Zach Doug explains that Studio Imbue has very specific reasons to create an animated fan film based on Tolkien’s *Hobbit* (*The Hobbit: Into the Fire*, [http://hobbitproject.tumblr.com/](http://hobbitproject.tumblr.com/)):

“It is extremely important to me and I’m sure to most fans of Tolkien’s works that we keep alive a near century-long tradition. This is passing the torch from generation to generation, allowing kids of newer and newer eras to enjoy this beloved story. And really, for everyone to see it again with fresh eyes. . . my ultimate goal is to see someone inspired to retell the story to yet another generation. I ultimately want to spread this story.” (personal communication, 5 Nov. 2015)

While these fan-producers often have (and share) their grievances with Jackson, the fan film culture centered around Tolkien’s work is much more than reactionary, or simply pandering to either Jackson’s or Tolkien’s visions of Arda. Instead, the fan-producer(s) of any fan film culture artifact take it upon themselves to share their visualization of Tolkien’s secondary world primarily for the joy of this sharing – and, so far from profiting by it, must often even take steps to protect their effort from removal by commercially-minded parties. Whether fan film culture explores, transforms, imitates, or affirms a narrative from Tolkien’s secondary world, then, the combination of effort and intention on the fan-producers’ parts makes the resulting artifact deserving of the appellation “translation,” as its relocation of Tolkien’s Arda from text to screen is only ever rewarded with the community’s kudos rather than the public’s cash.
Works Cited

Primary Sources:

  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qINwCRM8acM&

  http://huntforgollumfilm.github.io/website/updates.htm

  http://8tracks.com/lodilou/rings-of-power

  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzwjMUGcqng

  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gy7a6yUc8zo

  https://tolkieneditor.wordpress.com/

  http://silmarillionseries.com/

  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RT9UcZPT2DU


Secondary Sources:


http://huntforgollumfilm.github.io/website/about.htm

http://huntforgollumfilm.github.io/website/faq.html

http://hunt4gollum.blogspot.com/search/label/screenings

http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Peter-Jacksons-Lord-of-the-Rings#tab=summary


https://reason.com/archives/2008/07/18/remixing-television


Doug, Zach. Facebook message to author. 5 Nov. 2015.


Hitokage. “Re: Questions about Ainulindalë Fan Film.” Email to author. 30 Sept. 2015.


Rozario, Caleb. “Re: Mail Notification Fan Film.” Email to author. 28-30 Oct. 2015.


TolkienEditor. “I have recut Peter Jackson’s Hobbit trilogy into a single 4-hour film.” tolkieneditor.wordpress.com, 13 January 2015. https://tolkieneditor.wordpress.com/

