



## Thinking and theorising disappointment: a report from the World Hobbit Project

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For me they will always be the films that could be absolutely amazing but they weren't. ... I criticize these movies because I love them and I wanted them to be perfect because they could but they didn't. [Participant #11884, World Hobbit Project]

They had a chance to be AMAZING! and they didn't take it. Shame. [#26046]

An awful lot of viewers were pretty disappointed by their experience of the *Hobbit* film trilogy (Jackson, *An Unexpected Journey*; Jackson, *The Desolation of Smaug*; Jackson, *The Battle of the Five Armies*). Although the box office total was certainly high – most wanted to give it a full go – ratings were much lower. Rotten Tomatoes has critical ratings declining across the three films from 74% to 59%. A smaller but still significant drop happens in their audience ratings. The experience of disappointment has to be one of the most ordinary and widespread among audiences for all kinds of culture – yet it is, as far as I can see, one of the least thought about. Disappointment ranges, clearly, from passing “dohs” for a meal that isn't as good as taste-buds were prepared for, to full-scale let-downs when something dramatic – with long build-up, perhaps, and sky-high expectations – just isn't anywhere like as good as hoped. But this ordinariness hides complex processes and important implications. It isn't even clear what kinds of mental process are involved. One important social psychological theory links disappointment to appraisal, stressing that the negative emotion requires an associated evaluation – it both causes and colours it (see for instance Levine). Disappointment sits awkwardly with a number of contemporary conceptualisations of audiences. “Active audience” theories have little to say about it, since the disappointment can arise from “lie back and let it happen” modes as much as from engaged ones. It is clearly distant from “resistance” accounts, since disappointed audiences have evidently *gone looking* for something which fails to arrive (although it may bear some relation to the combination of “frustration and fascination” that Henry Jenkins (247) has long identified in fans' responses).

Disappointment is different from dislike or disapproval (although it can combine with them in particular cases). For a start, intense criticism and dismissal can be highly pleasurable – as Mark Kermode has hilariously demonstrated in his writings about the pleasures of the total put-down review (see Kermode). Public demonstrations of hatred and rejection can be the site of real pleasure (dissing makers, demonstrating critics' nous). It's hard to see any such possibilities of pleasure associated with disappointment. In fact that is not just absence of pleasure, but *denial of expected pleasures*, a real double whammy.

My particular interest happens to be in disappointment with films, but I know no reason to think that these are in principle different from those associated with other media and cultural experiences. There are many strong examples of disappointment with films, including the strong (if

still mixed) reactions against the fourth *Star Wars* film, *The Phantom Menace* (Lucas). That became very visible because of the public presence of *Star Wars* fandom. Reboots of superheroes have generated many such reactions. More mixed, but still easily exemplified, would be reactions of let-down to Ridley Scott's directorial follow-up to *Alien* (1979), *Prometheus* (2012). Much less noticed, but just as interesting in their own way, were the reactions against Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales* (2006) by many fans of his *Donnie Darko* (2001). Readers of this essay will no doubt have their own favourite examples to hand. Twice in my research career I have run headlong into this phenomenon. The first encounter was in my research (with Kate Brooks) into audience responses to *Judge Dredd* (Cannon, 1995 – see Barker and Brooks). For very many fans of the comic book source of Dredd, Sylvester Stallone's presentation of this iconic character was just horrible – but their telling of their dismay proved very revealing. This alerted me to a *methodological* advantage for audience researchers – that asking people to say what might have disappointed them brings into open view what they *hoped* would be the case, and thus their criteria of evaluation. For this reason in a series of subsequent projects I have tried to include a question about disappointment.

The second and more recent “hit” was of a different order. The 36,000 responses to the World Hobbit Project's (2011–2013) questionnaire disclosed a cascade of disappointments, a phenomenon which to this point no one in the research team has really tackled. The scale and density of the materials which this project gathered mean that in this essay I can attempt an overarching frame for this issue.

## Existing theory and research on disappointment

It took a while to locate the fields where such work had been done – and perhaps the most striking feature was the *high degree of separation* between fields that this revealed.<sup>1</sup> Questions, concepts, methods and findings only occasionally crossed over. There were, first, a number of isolated, random forays. So for example “disappointment” crops up in isolated reports on the (in)effectiveness of laboratory exercises in physics education (Zwickl et al); and on reverse migration (Cuecuecha). In a few cases, however, it was possible to identify emergent traditions, with distinctive questions, concepts and debates.

1. *Psychoanalytic approaches*. One of the most substantial pieces of work I had recommended to me was Ian Craib's book *The Importance of Disappointment*. Craib's book (which draws heavily on the work of Melanie Klein) was a substantial intervention into the fields of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, challenging what he saw as a tendency to devalue the worth of, for instance, grief at death – by developing scales for pathology, and measuring people's mourning against the supposed ‘right ways’ to grieve. Craib was effectively identifying early on the problems with ‘wellness’ theories and practices, and is a harbinger of later, stringent critiques of these (see for instance Kirkland; Cederström and Spicer; also DeGrandpre; Davies). Writing as a practising therapist, Craib illustrates the ways in which members of his groups experienced and responded to what they felt to be a *pressure* to deal with loss “properly”. Craib's point is clear: such therapies try to deny that life can be “disappointing”, harsh, and cruel.

A good deal of Craib's book is given over to thinking about the ways people have to work at constructions of their “self” in contemporary society. His argument is against theories and practices of therapy aimed at resolving conflicts which work with a “conception of the omnipotent and self-constructing self” (Craib, 132). Instead, he suggests, there is endemic internal conflict within

<sup>1</sup> Matt Hills, commenting on a draft of this essay, has suggested that this separateness may be part of the increasing “micro-specialisation” that characterises a great deal of academic enquiry. I fear he may be right.

people, between the “fragmented and isolated self” characteristic of mobile late modernity, and that impossible vision of a self-constructing identity (166). What emerges for me from Craib’s study is how deeply disappointment is rooted in the conditions of our lives – irrespective of whether his essentially psychoanalytic account is the most productive for thinking this.<sup>2</sup> And the *management* of disappointment is freighted with ideological elements. The *management of emotions*, and especially “negative” ones, has become a substantial business in its own right.

The main difficulties I have with this account are two-fold. First, while they constitute an interesting *defence of disappointment* as a necessary part of human life, they don’t easily support any detailed investigation – other than therapeutic – into the social role of disappointment (although I must admit that this conclusion is part-challenged by the recent rise of “psychosocial studies”: see for instance Whitehouse-Hart; Woodward; Wetherell, “Tears, Bubbles and Disappointment”). Second, precisely because of its psychoanalytic emphasis, with its search for roots in childhood and child/parent relations, there is a turn away from exploring the cultural and political functions of disappointment (apart from occasional applications to concrete situations, as for instance Clancy et al’s application to management motivation contexts).

2. *Behavioural Economics*. The largest body of work on disappointment has emerged from the major changes which took place in consumer and marketing theories in the 1990s. Part of this change was the rise of the notion of the “experience economy” (see Pine and Gilmore), that people spend not simply to acquire goods, but to express desire and find pleasure (Belk et al.) – and that this therefore encompasses things like holidays, sporting and cultural activities and the like, as much as shopping. Another was a shift in the ways in marketers understood brands, towards notions of “engagement”, and the attachments people can feel towards them (see for instance the American-based Advertising Research Foundation’s attempt at a definition of this). This led to a rising interest in what happens when people become disaffected, through unhappy experiences, with branded encounters – and, by implication, what might help *manage* them to stop consumer drift. This led to explorations of the differences between “disappointment” and “regret”. Researchers argued that regret could mean that the *consumer is partly to blame*. Problems were the outcome of some mistake on their part, the consequence of a risk they’d taken rather than with what they have acquired. Again, there were implications: how to implicate consumers, to make them feel guilt and responsibility, rather than attach blame. A steady flow of researches have tried to unpick the conditions under which people might feel the two emotions.<sup>3</sup>

3. *Utopian studies*. Consumer research has been happy to borrow concepts and approaches from other fields, and one such field has been that of utopian studies. For a great deal of its history, the study of utopias – large or small – has taken attachment to these to be positive things. But just occasionally, when particular “utopias” have evidently crashed, the question of people’s disappointment in them has surfaced. One such moment came when the philosopher Ernst Bloch – one of the early pre-eminent theorists of the value of ideal scenarios – had finally to admit that Stalinism (as particularly exemplified in East Germany) was anything but utopian. He had “escaped” to West Germany, and taken up a post at Tübingen University, where he gave an opening Address. His address asked the question: what happens when hope fails? But his answer was that it didn’t really fail – as when he writes (in his *Literary Essays*, p. 342) that “concrete hope does not

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<sup>2</sup> There are points in his book where plausible and wise comments on particular situations spill over into a kind of talk that I find both unpersuasive and unhelpful – for instance when he is talking about the challenges of passionate love, and he declares that such love necessarily also involves “hate” – the solution being to “employ rational abilities to stand back (but not avoid)” these powerful emotions (Craib, 176). This seems to me therapy-speak at its worst.

<sup>3</sup> See among many others the work by Zeelenberg and colleagues (e.g. Zeelenberg et al.; Yu and Dean; van Dijk et al.). And for a pretty open acknowledgement of the interventionist goals of this in the *Harvard Business Review*, see Haas.

surrender when setbacks occur: with a renegade spirit, it even gambles on whatever has been negated up to now ... True disappointment, in a way that is equally immanent, becomes wiser through injury". This is more declaration of faith than something of empirical help (for more on Bloch, see McManus).

Recently, though, consumer researchers have looked to bits of utopian theory to flesh out their understanding of people's motivations and emotions in consumption. McLaren and Brown for instance argue that:

utopianism is not just associated with impossible imaginings but rather that it has a crucial critical function enabling us to engage with and question reality. In particular, this critique was manifested in three major themes that emerged from the findings: consumer perceptions of the over-commercialisation of high street shopping; their fears over a loss of identity; and a nostalgic yearning for a return to tradition. (McLaren and Brown, 367)

This virtual co-option does point up the potential value of this area for thinking about disappointment. It is in the next fields that we can see more fully the value that can be gained.

4. *Fan studies*. The meteoric rise of fan studies from the early 1990s has seen a proliferation of theories and approaches – mostly, early on, concerned with the nature of fan pleasures and involvements. An early exception came from Will Brooker who, in his 2002 study of *Star Wars* fans, investigated the conflict between those pro- and anti-*The Phantom Menace*. Brooker nicely shows the ways in which this battle focused a good deal around the issue of who “owned” the *Star Wars* mythos. Defenders of the film awarded George Lucas creator's rights over its development. Critics saw the fictional universe as now belonging to the fan-world, who had validated it through their attachments. This emphasis on ownership battles has been interestingly extended by Lesley Goodman to look at debates over the meanings of authorship. (See also Sheffield and Merlo.) But some of these ideas have been nuanced by Richard McCulloch (forthcoming) in his study of Liverpool FC football fans' complaints about the club's fortunes – finding that some of the complaints are effectively “sponsored” by the club, rather than simply generated outside. But certainly the understanding of fans' disappointments is a rich site for ongoing exploration. Some of this can be seen to be emerging from explorations of “anti-fandom”, a complex set of phenomena found at work in the kinds of intense and angry debates which regularly proliferate on fan sites (on this see for instance Gray). But I would still want to argue that there are features to “disappointment” which differentiate it from other kinds of negative response.

5. *The sociology of expectations*. In a 2006 essay, Mads Borup and three colleagues introduced a Journal special issue on the role of scientific and technological innovation, and surveyed developments to this point. Mostly taking a constructivist approach (that meanings and understandings are an essential aspect of social processes), they examine how cycles of claims and promotion frequently result in failure and disappointment – as the increasing valency of science and technology development builds high hopes on possibilities of ‘breakthroughs’, in fields such as nano-technology, biomedicine, or robotics – leading to ‘alternating cycles of hype and disappointment’ (Borup et al., 291). They consider the role played in these cycles by localised “images of the future”, suggesting that these tend to be uplifted versions of the present – “now made better”, as it were. This gives shape to publicity drives, and also helps to manage uncertainties (what are the potentials? who should be trusted? how might the discoveries be developed? what funding should be invested?, and so on). I find real value in this emphasis on “generative” images of the future, and how they may work through specific, contextualised discourses of hope and change. But the expression “now made better” surely understates what happens. In work on the promises of nano-technology, for instance, several authors have noted the operation of expressions

such as “fulfilment of its potential” – suggesting an unfolding pathway of development, a destination that must be reached (see for instance Selin). This cautions that we may need to think carefully about the specific ways in which, in a very different field like “fantasy”, there may be implicit or implied future-promises.

6. *Ordinary language*. Finally, I want in particular to note the important work of a Dutch philosopher, Bas Levering. In two striking essays (“The language of disappointment”; “Disappointment in teacher-student relations”), Levering has approached “disappointment” through the lens of ordinary language. He uses the concept to make concrete how an “ordinary language” approach allows us to undertake a conceptual analysis of disappointment. He draws out the centrality of *expectations* which are frustrated, on issues which matter (“people are only disappointed in important things” Levering, “Disappointment in teacher-student relations”, 66). Using deliberately ordinary examples, he unravels the ways feelings and language are yoked together (for example asking, intriguingly, whether I can *feel*, but not *be* disappointed).

Levering’s essays, though clear and thoughtful, have a difficulty. With one exception – some passing remarks on the differences between being “disappointed”, and being “disillusioned” – he doesn’t fully follow his own strictures about considering the ordinary operations of “disappointment”. For there are in English a range of terms that, all slightly differently, address frustrated expectations. And a consideration of the differences among them reveals more about their conceptual logic. Consider the following (no doubt incomplete) list of semi-cognate expressions for “disappointment”:

Anti-climax	Discontented	Dissatisfied	Let down
Betrayed	Disenchanted	Exasperated	Nonplussed
Disabused	Disillusioned	Fed up with	Outraged
Disconcerted	Dismayed	Frustrated	Regretful

Each of these can be used in contexts where people wish to express disappointment (and some, of course, can be used in other contexts as well). But each one tends to trigger other associations. For instance, to be “nonplussed” is to add an element of bewilderment to disappointment – hinting that the speaker cannot make sense of what has happened. (“Disconcerted” holds something of the same – it suggests that the frustrating experience was not to be expected.) To be “disabused”, on the other hand, is to have illusions ironed out. To feel “regret”, meanwhile, hints at the speaker’s *knowingness*, that s/he may have “seen this coming”. To feel “betrayed” is to feel cheated by someone one had trusted, and who should have known better. And so on.

I would argue that there are at least four dimensions which can be activated in discourses around disappointment: *intensity* (eg, from “fed up” to “shock”); *expectedness* (from “regret” to “disconcertedness”); *recognition of causes* (from “let-down” to “nonplussed”); and *possibility of action* (from “disillusioned” to “discontented”). There may well be others.

From this literature review, what I want to carry forward in particular is a number of elements: that disappointment is a *dynamic* evaluation, consequent on the construction but then frustration of expectations; that because of this it is not simply a negative emotion. Rather it is a mobile combination of feelings and evaluations, its form and intensity potentially made available to researchers through the language of their articulation (relatedly, see Wetherell). In small or large ways it can turn risky but important images of a future, a form of “now made better or differently”. And disappointment is *particular*. It has features which separate it from other negative responses. It is worth mentioning here I Q Hunter’s opening up of what might be called “logics of boredom” in his argument for the potential redemptive qualities of cult classics: that people who adhere to “bad

films” like *Showgirls* (Verhoeven), or *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, can often be adopting transformative tactics for turning negative into complicated positive responses (see Hunter). This is quite different from what I believe is happening with disappointed responses to *The Hobbit* film trilogy.

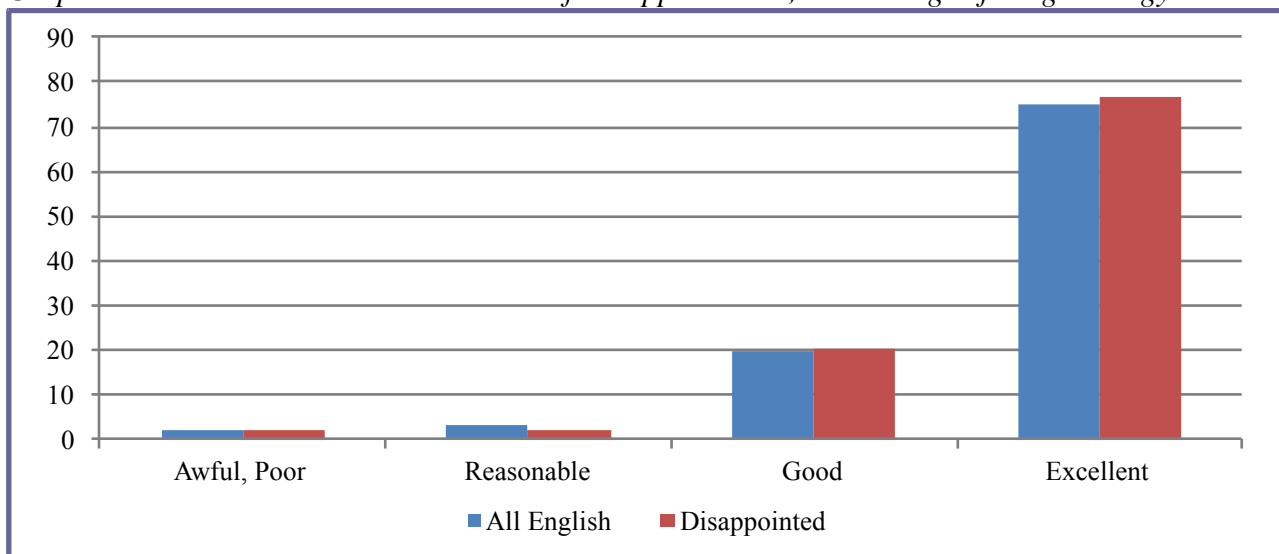
## Disappointment with *The Hobbit*

Peter Jackson has revealed in a new video that he “didn’t know what the hell he was doing” with *The Hobbit* movies. After the great success of the *Lord of the Rings* movies, *The Hobbit* was a complete let-down. (Naahar)

If you’ve already seen the first two *Hobbit* movies, you should absolutely stick it out and watch this one. Just remember to keep your expectations low and smoke a little twist of Hobbit herb to make the whole thing go down easier. (Newitz)

The Internet is still alive with critical commentaries on the *Hobbit* films, the vast majority contrasting them unfavourably with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Jackson). The extent to which the *Lord of the Rings* films provided the baseline for evaluating the *Hobbit* trilogy can be gleaned from the following: while 22.6% of our respondents had not read the book *The Hobbit*, only a miniscule 1.2% had not seen the *Rings* film trilogy. There can be little doubt that the general response to the *Hobbit* trilogy was one of let-down. Global box office receipts and IMDb ratings for the two trilogies alone tell a powerful story. Across the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, box office takings rose from \$887 to \$1141, while for the *Hobbit* trilogy they fell from \$1017 to \$955. Similarly, IMDb ratings on the first trilogy stayed high (8.8 for the first film, 8.9 for the third), while for the second trilogy they fall from 7.9 to 7.4). But lack of enthusiasm does not in itself indicate disappointment (let alone say anything about its causes). One Graph from our research project reveals more on this:

Graph 1: Relations between Declarations of Disappointment, and Ratings of Rings Trilogy.



Sample: all English-language respondents. Search terms and totals: “disappoint ...” [592], “let down” [123], “not as good as” [47]. Total = 760.

The almost exact fit between declarations of disappointment at the *Hobbit* and high praise for *The Lord of the Rings* is uncanny, and will return shortly in relation to some otherwise puzzling responses.<sup>4</sup>

The precise grounds given for disappointment were immensely varied. A Table of reasons, drawn from a sample of 100 responses, revealed the following:

*Table 1: Sample of grounds indicated for being disappointed with The Hobbit.*

Elements	Themes
The introduction and character of Tauriel...	The length and number of films...
Fili's & Kili's deaths...	Too much/poor CGI...
The introduction and character of Alfrid...	Too many battles...
The introduction and the character of Azog...	A lack of songs...
The depiction of the Goblins...	Dull music...
The giant 'worms'	Disrespect for the books...
Smaug's quick death...	Not appropriate for children...
Beorn's virtual absence...	The dwarves badly done...
Specific plot-holes (e.g. Thorin's funeral)	Lack of diversity...

But for each one of these positively asserted, others can be found which say things such as “I didn't mind Tauriel” or “I don't object that they changed things from the book”. This simultaneously indicates both a personal position *and* their awareness of a wide opinion to the contrary – a point which Matt Hills (forthcoming) has explored extensively, and to which I return shortly.

This showed too in people's preferences across the three film-parts. While overall the third film attracted the most criticism, it is still the case that quite a number varied from this, as these quotes show:

I found the first two disappointing in their theatrical versions, in pacing and character development. [#33744]

I was extremely excited for all three films and was extremely pleased with the first and the third (a tad disappointed by the second). [#17996]

But just knowing which elements or films provoked disappointment doesn't much advance our understanding of the phenomenon. For that, we need to attend to *how people expressed* themselves, discursively. If we do so, at least three tendencies become visible: (a) there are forms of expression which reveal how criteria of judgement are deployed, or, against what standards the films are being judged; (b) there are expressions which reveal how much disappointment is the *presumed* response. These two both show their roots in the ongoing public debates about the films, and in particular the ways in which this trilogy was being compared with the decade-earlier *Rings* trilogy. And this provides a tricky point of connection with the third (c), a kind of complaint which appears to show an *inconsistency* on the part of some respondents. This is a risky analytic position to take up, but a possible *solution* to the inconsistency is very revealing.

<sup>4</sup> One further indicator of the extent to which the *Rings* films were a template for judging the *Hobbit* comes from answers to our final questions, where we asked people to nominate their three favourite cultural experiences. *The Lord of the Rings* was named by 24% of all English-speaking respondents – more than six times as many as the next most mentioned (*Star Wars*).

(a) Consider the following illustrative answers to our “Any disappointment?” question:

Yes. I found the narrative exhausting. Too much action, too many climaxes, too much being saved in the nick of time. I wasn't invested in the risk because I didn't really believe there was any. I didn't really feel drawn to the characters. Also, seriously, this could have been 1 film. [#29594]

Adding the cringeworthylovestory. Even though adding a female elf was risky, I wasn't completely against it. But this romance was awkward and unbelievable. Legolas and Gimli were supposed to be the first close Elf-Dwarf friendship, and this took that away. Too much Legolas, waaaayyy too much Legolas! A cameo would have been great and fun for the fans, but this was ridiculous. Especially in the last movie. [#33842]

They were really, really overly long. It was totally unnecessary. AND! OK, Tauriel is a really cool and interesting addition, but could the filmmakers not come up with a more interesting story arc for a female character than ‘love triangle’? What about her struggle to be taken seriously as a warrior and archer? What about her defying authority and having to leave her home and risk disappointing her community? I mean, come on filmmakers! Girls are way more interesting than that! [#35343]

First two films you never truly believed the characters were in danger, the over-the-top stunt sequences (ie, falling unscathed down a cavern, barrel riding, an intelligent dragon not even causing any damage whatsoever). This was not the case in *LOTR*, where you truly believed their lives were at stake. [#9587]

A number of criteria are involved here. First, while Tolkien's book provides a background against which to consider changes, there is little purism. Rather, the question is whether changes and introductions are *proper* ones. And the measure of “properness” is the *relevance to people today*. OK, have Tauriel, but have her as a “proper contemporary woman”, facing and overcoming recognisable dilemmas. It is thus taken as given that the wall between the fantasy-world and ours is permeable. Aligned with that is the objection that while intertextual referencing (*Hobbit* to *Rings*) is fine, it needs to be controlled. The films must keep their own *integrity*. Then there is the complaint about endangeredness, which frequently couples with discontent with the role played by CGI – if digital manipulation is too evident, there is a loss of *seriousness*. If characters are not visibly at risk, emotional investment in their future is reduced. How can they be *cared about* if they cannot be harmed? The comparison with *Rings* is again important. That some sense of *jeopardy* must attach to the characters is a common complaint. This suggests that fantasy is for many seen to be governed by rules of a kind of “realism”.

(b) One striking feature of many responses in our huge database is the number that take disappointment as a for-granted starting point – whatever their personal views might be, as in these:

Obviously, compared to the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, they aren't as good. But still, they were good movies, were as close to the original work of Tolkien as the *LotR* adaptation was. [#21349]

Dominated by mediocrity. Could have been much stronger but were obviously dogged by creative apathy and corporate meddling. [#26351]

The use of words such as “obviously”, or “clearly”, or “unsurprisingly” marks out how, for many people, it was just “known” that they were not good enough. In the reverse direction, the numbers of respondents who found nothing disappointing about the films is almost vanishingly small.



Among 7662 English-language respondents, just 220 (2.9%) declared no disappointments.<sup>5</sup> And a number of these acknowledged that this was *in the teeth* of a perceived expectation, as here:

Nothing really disappointed me. I understand that some people may have been expecting *The Hobbit* films to be more similar to *The Lord of the Rings* series, but they are both made very differently, which I liked. [#1782]

Nothing disappointed me about the films, per se, but it was some of the fans' reactions. Some said that Peter did a bad job and they couldn't even come up with good arguments why he did a bad job. [#13204]

Nothing disappointed me about the films; it was clear they weren't meant to be close to the book and were just an interpretation. [#18880]

*How* such people came to be not disappointed turns out to be a mix of three predominant elements. Some – as above – simply insisted on accepting Jackson's judgement (rather like those defenders of George Lucas). A number took a very special course to which I return later. A third group played a tactical game, of knowing that disappointment was almost certain, but wanting to maximise their enjoyment:

I went in with unrealistically high expectations, so they were a little disappointing at first - but then I got to thinking, and I have decided to love them. [#25496]

I liked the characters enough to invest in them emotionally. Not as good as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, but great entertainment. Didn't match my experience of the book – but I see them as another expression of the Tolkien phenomenon – I'm able to divorce the two experiences. [#25945]

“Disappointment” became something *manageable*, over which a degree of *choice* could be exercised. Although it involves emotions, these are not the whole deal. Rather, as appraisal theory insists, these are emotions dependent upon committed evaluations. The above two respondents absolve the films by either by rethinking the investment involved, or by recategorising them. Tactical cognitive decisions have allowed them to manage their feelings.

(c) But if the above cases reveal a kind of successful tactical reframing, others reveal what can happen when a person *cannot* for some reason do this. Here are two critiques of the *Hobbit* films:

Well, what about ‘Why an original female character was used as a love interest and plot device?’ Also, I don't really want to use the word in a conversation about elves and dwarves ... but when one race is being glorified for something they literally weren't a part of, while the other race gets ignored and slaughtered in the story about their heroism and bravery, there's a word for that... [#13924]

I am a bit confused about the only 2 poc [*persons of colour*] I saw. One black woman and an Asian woman, I believe. I understand the general approach that everyone in Middle-earth is white but ... it felt odd. Look at *Game of Thrones*. What a representation. [#7652]

Taken on their own, these point towards a political critique of representations in the *Hobbit* trilogy. The difficulty with *simply* taking them in that way is another feature of these two respondents: both of them rated *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy “Excellent” even in retrospect (suggesting that the shift is not due simply to increased salience around debates about “race” and gender). Yet surely exactly

<sup>5</sup> Keyword search terms were \*Nothing\*, \*Not at all\*, and \*Not that I can think of\*, within answers to our question “Did anything disappoint you?”.

the same critique could be mounted of that trilogy, if not more strongly (even if tokenistically, the *Hobbit* films moved away from the insistent presentation of evil as black, and made moves to include more female characters). Given this additional rather puzzling conflict, how might we make sense of the deployment of these criteria in this case? For this, we need to take seriously the notion that “disappointment” is an inherently time-based response, and look back to the formative experience offered by *The Lord of the Rings*.

### ***The Lord of the Rings* as exceptional experience**

If *The Lord of the Rings* provided a significant template against which to measure *The Hobbit*, it is worth asking if there are any specific qualities in the responses to the earlier trilogy that might help account for the unusual features of disappointments with the later one. And I want to propose that it was in fact the loss of some other very particular experiences which the *Rings* films provided, that made the *Hobbit* films *blameable*. What that “lost” experience was, is to me indicated by the high levels of use, especially in people’s first answers, of languages of *astonishment*. Almost 1500 of the English-language respondents to our *Lord of the Rings* project<sup>6</sup>, in answering just one open question in our survey, used at least one – and often more than one – of a range of terms indicating that the experience had *outrun expectations* and had become *almost unsayable*, as here:

There really are no words that I can think of that describe this film. It is beyond words. Seeing it was like a spiritual experience for me. I left the theater in a daze. It wasn’t until almost 24 hours later that I could even gather my thoughts enough to give a coherent response to anyone who asked me how I liked it. I have never felt like this after seeing any other movie. [*Lord of the Rings* Participant #7882]

Consider also the fact that a fair number of answers to this question simply listed a number of these words, as here: “Amazed humbled scarified moved astounded grateful tired completed<sup>7</sup> happy sad blissful agony.” [*LotR* #4976] Something in the encounter with *The Lord of the Rings* on film outran easily available language. It was an unexpectedly intense experience, and as a result almost unsayable. It involved an unprecedented range of emotions and other response-elements. Therefore people did not immediately have the evaluative equipment, or the overt criteria, to make full sense of their experiences. They needed time, talk, introspection, and comparison with other experiences, which of course we could not readily capture in our survey snapshot.

In a 2009 essay on the role of *The Lord of the Rings* films as “spiritual journey”, I considered in detail one woman’s responses, reported to us in a long telephone interview. She told us that she had deliberately seen the final film twice: once with two female friends, where they had laughed and complained about the lack of viable female characters; and then a second time on her own, during which her relations with the film altered completely. Her criteria of evaluation shifted, from a combination of Tolkien-faithfulness and feminist objections, to one of commitment to the hard life choices made by Pippin, and best exemplified in one scene which she recalled in harrowing detail, ending “And I cried!”.

<sup>6</sup> Keyword search terms were: \*awe\*, \*dumbfound\*, \*staggered\*, \*overwhelm\*, \*wow\*, \*incredible\*, \*amaze\*, \*astonish\*, \*astound\*, \*humbled\*, \*beyond belief\*, addressed to English-language answers to Q2: “Can you tell us why you have given this rating?”.

<sup>7</sup> I have discussed in some detail the significance of the use of the word “completed” in an essay on the concept of “visualisation” (see Barker, “Envisaging ‘visualisation’”).

## Looking back from *The Hobbit*

Earlier I hinted at a third way in which some people declined to be disappointed. I return now to this. Almost by accident, something emerged from investigation of the *Hobbit* database which can throw light on this puzzle. Late in our questionnaire we asked people to tell us anything about themselves which might throw light on their other answers. In a light-touch first investigation of these, I stumbled across this answer:

I'm originally from Syria, I'm Arabic but my Mam is Russian. You can imagine the awful society there, I never felt like I belonged there or fit. I always loved the American cinema, and *The Lord of the Rings* was the main reason why, these movies were my only escape from my awful reality and the life I had in my home. Well let's just say it was getting beaten up from my crazy dad every day, and I watched the *LOTR* about a million times. Actually that's how I learned English, my favorite language. I memorized every scene and every word. I lived under this cruel unjust war for almost five years. You can only imagine going to work every day and risking your life just to eat and live under bombing & shooting every day. We left my crazy dad, and I'm now in Russia, thank god, but still I'm waiting for my mam to come :-( So the *Hobbit* movies were my only way out to step into another wonderful great world that Peter Jackson has created, so yes these movies had such an impact on my life. [#13508]

This edited version (the original is over 300 words) grounds this young woman's relationship with both *The Lord of the Rings* and *the Hobbit* films in a horrible, dangerous life-world. It would be easy to reduce this to the word "escape", given the last sentence of her answer, and that would not denigrate her involvement. But consider her answer to our question: "Are there any broader themes you would identify within the films?":

The honest friendship that is so rare in our time now, and the fact that every person no matter where he lives or how small he is can be brave and make a difference in the world.

Independently of me, a number of other researchers within our research network began to notice other answers similarly finding cultural and political themes (see for instance Hasebrink and Hasebrink; Hipfl and Kulterer; Mikhaylova et al.). Over a period I assembled a list of respondents making these kinds of wider connections, exemplified by comments such as these:

In the third part an issue appears that is surprisingly topical: the question how to deal with people in need who have lost everything and ask for help. In the film these are the people from Lake-town, in our presence these are the refugees from Syria and other areas of crisis. Europe should ask itself whether it, as the dwarfs, actually wants to remain seated on its treasure of gold, entrenched behind walls, or whether they should help these people as much as possible. [#2888]

I found one topic very interesting, which is also debated in the real world. In fact, in the film the dwarfs have been expelled and did not get any help from other 'tribes'. A highly topical issue is the refugees from Lampedusa who do not have a home either, and are seeking for asylum. In my view these two events are similar and make me think why in the film all parties help each other and fight together, while here the biggest part of the population keeps complaining about 'foreigners'. [#20880]

I am from a tribe called Yotvingians that was nearly destroyed and had to incorporate to a country nowadays called Lithuania. Lithuania itself was a huge empire during middle-ages and now we're a small country of 3 million people who managed to escape the Soviet Union and preserve our traditions and language which is one of the oldest living languages in the world. So yes I feel like Thorin – robbed of what belongs to me (us rather than me). [#9060]

Since these were located by some element of chance, I cannot be sure how many more there are likely to be – but with an emergent group of 40 it seemed worthwhile to see whether they deviated from the main corpus of responses in any particular ways. The results were startling, to say the least. A couple of small but still interesting tendencies, first. This group were slightly *younger* than our overall cohort (62% vs 52% in the 16-25 category) and more likely to nominate “Tolkien” (77% vs 70%) or “the books” (64% vs 52%) among their reasons for viewing the films. But these differences paled into insignificance when compared with discovering that 72% of this group (vs 35% overall) rated the films “Excellent”. This matched closely with one other wide discrepancy: answering our question about the role(s) they see fantasy playing, 69% of this group chose “Hopes and dreams for changing the world”, as against 35% for the overall cohort. Yet this group showed *less* interest in fantasy as a “genre” (38% vs 44%) than the total cohort.

What do these results suggest? This group was *not* disappointed. And an important part of the especial value they found was the films’ capacity to *address analogical real world situations*. “Fantasy” is valued as a medium through which difficult-to-think-or-speak situations and events can be addressed. This allowed them to bely any other concerns they may have had about the films, because of an overriding value they offered.

## Conclusions

What do these results permit us to say about the meaning, status and operations of disappointment? With all the cautions that have to accompany the complicated evidence I have called on here, the following points look right:

1. In relation specifically to *The Hobbit*, it is apparent that although disappointment was rampant, a high level of *good will* was in place when the films were released. People’s memories of *The Lord of the Rings* had led them to trust Peter Jackson to do his best with the adaptation. The concerns that sprang up and circulated (for example, over extending to three films, over the High Frame Rate, over the romance with the “female elf”) didn’t entirely deplete that good will. But – faced in the end with the films – very many people felt let down. There was a wide range of particular complaints and dislikes, as we have seen. But equally important was a sense of something larger having been lost, a sense of missed opportunity to repeat the “high” of *Lord of the Rings*.

Several options became available at this point. The most extreme was simply to stop going – perhaps, thereby, protecting more of the special magic of the *Rings* trilogy.<sup>8</sup> The second option was to blame. Everything that could be judged wrong, was wrong. Jackson, New Line Cinema should be ashamed. If only a different director ... If only greed hadn’t ruled ...<sup>9</sup> A third option was to

<sup>8</sup> “They completely failed to capture the magic of the book. And added in silly elements from the LOTR, which didn’t bring anything to the movie, it just dragged it out. The casting was awful, the makeup design on the dwarves stupid. A lot of the sequences looked like they were copied from LOTR. As far as I’m concerned it was a complete disaster, mainly because it was just plain boring. I couldn’t bring myself to go to the third one, life’s too short.” [#31138]

<sup>9</sup> “Greedy studio wanted to make more money so they divided very short kid’s book into three long films. Therefore most of the plot is made up. Worst thing about the Hobbit films is CGI. LOTR was made with love and precise care, while everything in The Hobbit is CGI from orcs, horses, buildings to country and even some characters. It all looks like a very shabby video sequence. There are no memorable quotes, scenes, music, poor acting. The fights with CGI orcs and CGI Legolas are not thrilling at all and they are way over the top. Sequences like barrels on the river or anything with Radagast are ridiculously bad. Basically what Jackson did this time is that he said ‘screw everything’ and just made another Beowulf film set in Tolkien’s

tactically downsize expectations. This was never going to be *The Lord of the Rings*, so take it for what it can be: a half-decent action movie, with some weird decisions and inconsistencies. A fourth option was to grit teeth, ignore the tide of argument, and insist that there *was* a continuity between the two trilogies. Other people just weren't looking at this in the right way. That continuity was provided by the focus on *small people*, and *small peoples*.

Our research doesn't provide any basis for saying how widespread each of these is. But it clearly shows how each operates.

2. In relation to fantasy more broadly, any statement of implications has to be particularly tentative. But the following are certainly compatible with what our research reveals. Cautiously, I spell these out as follows. First, fidelity to the original source does not have to be a major issue – enthusiasts *expect* to see stories brought up-to-date. But what *counts* as being “up-to-date” is a topic of debate.

Enthusiasts expect a *seriousness of purpose* in contemporary fantasy – which doesn't of course rule out clever moments of humour, playfulness, and referencing – and a sense of *riskiness* (not all victories will be easy, many will suffer and “all men must die”, in the scale of conflicts that alternative worlds involve). But at the same time characters – however deeply embedded and structured within the narratives of their fictional worlds – are going to be measured against the rules, codes and issues of our world. Be it gender, or race, kinds of motivation, or ways of behaving, fictional characters have to be *recognisable* in relation to our world. The dilemmas of “other worlds” must be comprehensible enough for audiences to associate with, even as they are played out in contexts and ways that look and feel vastly different.

3. What does it show, finally, about “disappointment” per se? At the beginning of this essay, I quickly surveyed five fields which had begun to theorise “disappointment”. I want briefly to consider the essay's implications for each of these.

I believe that our findings confirm and expand Bas Levering's epistemological account. Disappointment is inherently historical.<sup>10</sup> A present disappointment gets its meaning and force from a build-up of prior expectations and discursive frames. Detailed combinations of experiences, learning, hopes and wishes, publicity and promises encountered have to be processed. They have to generate a complicated template with evaluative criteria primed for the new cultural encounter.

Therefore disappointment is much more than just an emotion. It is the outcome of a sort of test failure. To the extent that a person may have been forewarned (by public circulation of leaks, gossip, debates, reviews, and the like – another aspect of the historical process), they can *decide* whether to lay aside their template, and operate with another. But there have to be strong countervailing reasons to do so. The wished-for response has to *matter* to a person, for it to become operative. And there has to be someone who could be *held responsible*. Accidental or over-determined failure will not spark evaluative templates into life in the same way.

Leaving aside the issue of psychoanalysis' general concepts, it is certainly pertinent to ask how people's strong reactions to particular features of *The Hobbit* may be rooted in their personal histories – as long as those histories are understood to be socially and historically constructed. To identify oneself as a “Yotvingian”, for instance, and to carry that into one's engagement with the films, is to carry a highly charged but particular measuring device. It remains to be seen whether psychoanalytic approaches can really deal with such particularities.

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universe. It's all slack, poor CGI, Hollywood blockbuster with no value. It's a shame that the same director made the LOTR masterpiece.” [#14738]

<sup>10</sup> This point has been extensively developed by Hills (forthcoming), in an examination of the ways fans of Dr Who create an emotional affiliation with “my Doctor” – who may not be the first they encounter, but who becomes the measure for all the other incarnations they may subsequently encounter.

Behavioural economics' desire to divide and manage emotions comes up sharply against the ways in which we have seen audience members *tactically navigate* their sense of disappointment. Are individuals willing to forgo annoyance for the sake of managed pleasure? I suspect that the issue at stake is the degree to which people are willing to *compartmentalise* their experience. If something is restricted in its implications, then impulses to blame or forgive, or to find fault in oneself, are easier to manage. What we see with *The Hobbit* is fluctuating degrees of evaluative separation vs penetration.

The utopian impulse is clearly strong in some viewers. And it clearly carries over for many from their experience of *The Lord of the Rings*. The phenomenon of "hope" in relation to the earlier trilogy is something I have addressed in an earlier (2015) essay. But it looks as if, for some at least, it is a relatively shapeless and easily dissolved gain – retreating from which leaves them hunting for the right criteria to apply.

Finally, in relation to the sociology of expectations, what seems most important is that the *Hobbit* films were so widely evaluated for their "continuity" with *The Lord of the Rings* – not by Tolkien's books in some purist sense, but by a sense of how this kind of fantasy might have renewed pertinence. At stake, then, is what the *genre* is perceived to be capable of. For a large proportion, this condemned the films, and created quite a lot of antagonism towards Peter Jackson and New Line Cinema. But this was not particularly the result of promises made by either of these parties. It was more the accumulated hope and hype of the earlier trilogy that "sank" *The Hobbit*.

"Disappointment" is a richly complex phenomenon, deserving of much more work than I have been able to give it here. I hope others will feel an impulse to tackle it from other angles.

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