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# How the Social Context is Expressed in the Film Adaptations of *the Hobbit*

Bachelor Thesis ENG2900

Bachelor's project in Lektorutdanning i Språkfag, MLSPRÅK

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June 2020



## **Summary**

Making a film adaptation of a novel is a process called medial transposition. The director and the writers face several challenges in this process. Which parts of the book are they going to transposition to the screen? What kind of adaptation should this be? What intentions motivate the making of an adaptation? These are questions that are important within the academic field of literary adaptations. In this paper discuss how Nichols' (2010) social context is expressed in two adaptations of Tolkien's classic *The Hobbit* from 1937. The 1977 Cartoon TV movie, and Peter Jackson's Trilogy (2012-2014). I also discuss how the different approaches in making these adaptations makes them different types of adaptations according to Geoffrey Wagner's three categories of adaptation. I am also discussing how social issues such as prejudice, stereotypes and racial discord is portrayed through the social context of the adaptations. The social commentary in these adaptations are expressed in how certain characters are designed and voiced, or through the addition of subplots and characters to address the issues in question.

## **Preface**

I would like to thank my supervisor Eli Løfaldli for her constructive feedback and giving me the necessary literature and the theoretical foundation to write this paper.

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## Introduction

Adaptations of literature to the big or small screen has become common through the years. Netflix released their TV series adaptation of Andrzej Sapkowski's book series *The Witcher* late 2019. Marvel's superhero movie *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) is based on the comics and is now according to Paste Magazine the highest grossing movie to date (2019). Furthermore, many of the biggest franchises in the movie and television media are adaptations of literary works. *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), *Harry Potter* (2001-2011), *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), *The Chronicles of Narnia* (2005-2010) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) are some examples of hit movie and television franchises from the last 25 years to spring from adaptations of literary works.

Adaptations of literature is a relatively new academic field. Traditionally, literature on screen has been, according to Cartmell and Whelehan (2007), considered too literal for film studies and too film-based for literary studies. Even though film adaptations have been subject to academic interest, little thought has been given to the textual transactions that occur in the process of adapting a text to the big screen (1).

Tolkien is one of the biggest names when talking about classics of English literature that has been subject to the process of medial transposition. Tolkien has written one of the best-selling and most influential book series to date: *The Lord of The Rings* is the most sold fantasy series to date, and his Middle Earth is a detailed world that has its own history, geography and languages with its own grammar. *The Lord of The Rings* has also been adapted into a very successful trilogy of movies directed by Peter Jackson, but other works by Tolkien has also been transposed to the big screen. The predecessor of the *Lord of The Rings*, *The Hobbit* has also been subject to medial transposition. *The Hobbit* has been adapted to the television/film media two times. The first was an animated TV movie made in 1977, the second being Jackson's follow-up to the massively successful *Lord of The Rings* trilogy.

The cartoon adaptation of the *Hobbit* was released in 1977, and it was directed by Jules Bass and Arthur Rankin Junior. It is an animated adaptation of Tolkien's novel, where Romeo Muller was the screenwriter who was responsible for bringing Tolkien's novel to the screen. It has a running time of 1 hour and 17 minutes and is listed as a TV movie on the site IMDB. The movie stars actors such as Orson Bean (Bilbo Baggins), Richard Boone (Smaug), John Huston (Gandalf) and Hans Conried (Thorin Oakenshield) for its vocal performances (IMDB, 2020). The Trilogy was released in a three-year period, with the first one *An Unexpected Journey* being released in 2012, *The Desolation of Smaug* in 2013, and *The Battle*

of *the Five Armies* in 2014. Actors such as Martin Freeman (Bilbo), Richard Armitage (Thorin Oakenshield) and Sir Ian McKellen (Gandalf) are some of the actors who star in the films.

In this paper I will discuss how issues related to the social context is represented in the two adaptations of the hobbit. I will give a brief presentation of the novel and each of the adaptations, commenting on which of Geoffrey Wagner's three categories of adaptation they fit into. I will also present the social context related issues and themes that are represented in the adaptations. In this paper I will give special attention to the portrayal of stereotypes, as well as the portrayal of racial issues and discord.

## **Theory and terms**

### **Bill Nichols formal and social context in cinema**

Nichols (2010) claims that a film relies on what he calls the two primary sources for its shape. A formal and a social context (13). The formal context involves the films nature in terms of medium-specific qualities. Examples of this can be the quality of the technology used in making the film, such as special effects, lighting, and sound mixing. After James Cameron's *Avatar* (2008) we also saw an increase in the amount of 3D films being made. Furthermore, the formal context includes expressive techniques such as editing and sound design, and how exemplary films in the genre of the film have influenced the production (Nichols 13). Naturally, the medium itself imposes some restrictions on how the film is produced. Making a cartoon or animated film will have different challenges as opposed to a live action film. Furthermore, the cartoon will have different strengths and weaknesses than the live action film. For example, when making a cartoon, it may be more economical to portray superficial or abstract phenomena, so the director may be more inclined to focus on these aspects than on the physical interaction in the world of the film. Furthermore, by animating a character from scratch, one might "detach" oneself from the real world, which may be in the directors' interest in certain genres, such as fantasy. An example of this can be seen in the adaptations of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843). In the animated adaptations, one might perceive Scrooge as Scrooge, not as Scrooge portrayed by Alistair Sim, Bill Murray, or Michael Caine (Wells 199).

While the formal context explains how the medium specific qualities of the film contributes to its shape, the social context involves social and historical problems, conflicts, issues and contradictions that may provide or influence the thematic focus of the story of the

film (Nichols 14). Examples of this might be topics such as slavery, the quality of a hero, revenge, jealousy, prejudice, stereotypes, or friendship. Many films share the same social topic, but the social context also involves how this topic is presented in the film and turn our attention beyond aesthetics and film technique (the formal context) and to issues that are not specific to the medium of film, but rather to issues that are characteristic of the times and culture in which the film appears (Nichols 14). Nichols compares the way revenge is portrayed in *Man on Fire* (Tony Scott, 2004) and in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. He claims that the ways and means of representing revenge differs greatly between the modern film and the Shakespearian play (14). The social context can also be linked to what is called *extra-cinematic factors*, which can be described as current trends and historical events, which are vital to film adaptations (Cartmell et al. 4).

### **Geoffrey Wagner's three Categories of Adaptation:**

Moving a story from one medium to another is a process called medial transposition. When performing medial transposition, there are several approaches to take, which in turn result in different types, or categories of adaptation. Geoffrey Wagner has suggested three different categories of adaptations: "Transposition" is an adaptation where a novel is given directly to a screen with a minimum of apparent interference. This is rare, as the challenges in making a film differs from the challenges of making a book. "Commentary" is where an original is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect. One reason for this could be if the film maker has a different intention for film than the author had with the book. "Analogy" is an adaptation which must represent a considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art (Wells 206). An example of the latter can be the transposition from the Sherlock Holmes novels to the BBC television series *Sherlock* (2010), which is a modern take on Sherlock Holmes, where almost every aspect of the adaptation except for the names of the main characters differs from Doyle's original series.

## ***The Hobbit* and the Nature of its Adaptations**

### **Tolkien's Influential Novel.**

*The Hobbit* is a children's book that was written by Tolkien and was first published in 1937. In *the Hobbit* we follow the adventure of the hobbit Bilbo Baggins, accompanied by the wizard Gandalf and the thirteen hobbits led by the Dwarven prince Thorin Oakenshield. Their mission is to reclaim the Dwarven city of Erebor and its vast hoard of treasure from the dragon Smaug. The company sets out and faces numerous challenges they must overcome. On their journey across Middle Earth they run into trolls, goblins, wolves and giant spiders. They have an incident with the Wood Elves of Mirkwood, befriend eagles, skin-changers, and the men of Laketown on the way. They eventually reach the Lonely Mountain, and the kingdom of Erebor. Bilbo and the dwarves clash with the dragons and join forces with the Wood Elves and the men of Lake Town and fight a war with the goblins.

### **The Hobbit (1997): Animated "Transposition" Adaptation.**

For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the 1977 animated adaptation as the *TV Movie*. If we are using Wagner's three categories of adaptation discussed above, the TV movie would fit into the category of "transposition", which is a novel given directly to the screen with a minimum of apparent interference (Wells 2007, p. 207). The *TV Movie* follows the same sequence of events as the novel, with little to no exploration of the various subplots. The language is very similar to the novel with some simplification and modernization for the contemporary audience. Several of the songs from the novel are also utilized in the score of the film. Some plot points are cut shorter or excluded entirely, but the *TV Movie* does not add anything to the tale from the novel, making it a medial transposition of *The Hobbit*.

### **The Hobbit Trilogy: Peter Jackson's Prequel to the *Lord of the Rings*.**

For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to Jackson's adaptation as *The Trilogy*. *The Trilogy* is directed by Peter Jackson, who saw success in his earlier Tolkien-based adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003). Jackson and his writers made several decisions when making *The Trilogy*, some of which were related to the formal context of the film. For example, the decision to shoot the film in 3D and in high framerate<sup>1</sup>, and his decision to expand on the subplots of Tolkien's novel, which will be discussed thoroughly below. The immediate difference between the *Trilogy* and the *TV Movie* adaptation is the running time. While the *TV Movie* spans one hour and seventeen minutes, Jackson's trilogy spans almost nine hours. If

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<sup>1</sup> High framerate shows the film in 48 frames per second rather than the more usual 24.



the TV movie falls under the category of transposition, Jackson's *Trilogy* fits into the category "commentary", which is where an original is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect (Wells 207). In *the Trilogy*, Jackson used the narrative structure of the novel, but expanded on the various subplots of the film. One example of this is the quest of Gandalf after he and the party separate before entering Mirkwood (Tolkien 173). In the novel, there is hardly any information on what Gandalf has been doing apart from a brief summary of a conversation between Gandalf and Elrond. Here they discussed how Gandalf and other sorcerers and wizards had driven the evil Necromancer out of his fortress in Dol Goldur (Tolkien 357). In the trilogy, Jackson devotes large portion of *The Desolation of Smaug* (2013) to this subplot, bringing back characters from Jackson's successful *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, such as Saruman (Christopher Lee) and Galadriel (Kate Blanchett) as well as introducing other characters from canon Tolkien lore, such as Radagast the Brown (Sylvester McCoy). This is one example of how Jackson brings something new to the story of *The Hobbit*, and puts his own twist on the adaptation of one of the world's most read children's books. He also introduces an Elf-Dwarf love plot, a political drama subplot in the city of Laketown, brings back Legolas from *The Lord of the Rings* and makes use of Tolkien lore to procure the film's main antagonist Azog (Manu Bennett). The exploration of the subplots of the *Hobbit* as well as the way Jackson uses characters from canon lore, allowed Jackson to make a 365-page book into nine hours of film. Jackson's additions of plot and character makes his adaptations easily distinguishable from the novel, hence it resembles a "commentary" type adaptation. Making the trilogy differ from the novel to such a degree that it functions on its own premises, independent of the novel. Some of his additions also serve as a connection between *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of The Rings*. One example of this is one of the scenes in the final film *The Battle of the Five Armies* (2014), the Elven King Thranduil (Lee Pace) sets up the meeting of Legolas and Aragorn, whose relationship were not explained in *The Lord of The Rings*. Morris Beja claimed that "what a film takes from a book matters; but so does what it brings to a book" (Cartmell et al. 5). In this regard, Jackson's trilogy brings a lot of its own to *the Hobbit* as a story, it expands on the established story, adding new plots, characters, and themes to the story.

## **The Social Context and the Adaptations of *the Hobbit***

### **American Global Position and Tribal Stereotypes in the *TV Movie***

In the following paragraphs, I am going to analyze and discuss how social context related issues related to race and stereotypes are expressed in the adaptations of *the Hobbit*. The issues I will discuss include how stereotypes of the wealthy, capitalistic “superpower” and tribal stereotypes are represented in the *TV Movie*. I will also discuss how Jackson’s *Trilogy* portrays racial discord, and seeks to combat the black-white dichotomy that has long been a criticism of Tolkien’s works.

The voice acting in the cartoon gives the viewer certain associations which may influence the impression one gets of the characters. Bilbo, Gandalf, Thorin, the dwarves and the vast majority of the characters speak RP<sup>2</sup> commonly known as BBC English. Given that this is a joint American Japanese production, this might be done to honor the novel’s British origins, and to avoid making it seem Americanized. Yet there is one character which breaks this pattern, and it is a rather important one: Smaug, the dragon speaks with a pronounced, noticeable American accent. This is especially noticeable during Bilbo’s encounter with the dragon in the TV movie. Seeing a small, frightened hobbit, speaking in RP with the large, dangerous, powerful dragon who speaks GA<sup>3</sup> makes the dialectical differences stand out. Naturally, this is because Smaug is voiced by Richard Boone, an American actor. But why was Smaug chosen to represent the American accent in the movie? Smaug’s accent may be connected to how the United States was perceived, or perhaps wanted to be perceived by the rest of the world. Smaug is large, powerful, and wealthy, which can also be said about the United States’ position at the time. The fact that Smaug is the only character in the TV movie to not speak some form of RP, sets him apart, and I think this is an important function of his having a different accent than the other characters. Given that Smaug is a dragon, it might have been done to set him apart as he is a different species. An explicit decision was made to make Smaug talk with an American accent. This would be a way of using different variations of the English language to denote difference between characters. This can also be seen in Disney’s adaption of *Peter Pan* (1953), where Peter’s American accent is used to represent the triumph of low culture over high culture, and the innocence of the youngest Darling, Michael (Cartmell 171). Smaug’s American accent brings up associations to American capitalism and wealthiness, as Smaug is a hoarder of gold and precious stones. Smaug is

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<sup>2</sup> RP=Received Pronunciation, the term use to describe Standard Southern British English (SSBE)

<sup>3</sup> GA=General American English accent.

instinctively drawn to gold, which might be a way to point to American greed. This might have been relevant as the TV movie was released just four years after OPEC 1, which put a lot of focus on the global position of the United States.

The TV movie had a drastically smaller budget than Jackson had when making his trilogy. It was also made over 30 years earlier, which influences how some of the creatures and characters are portrayed. Some of these differences can be ascribed to the formal context, as technology such as CGI, animation and special effects evolve and become more accessible, complex, and refined over time. Yet some of the differences can also be related to social and cultural issues, hence relating them to the social context discussed above.

One very significant difference is how certain of the “minorities” in Tolkien’s universe is portrayed in the TV movie. The Wood Elves are an especially interesting example of such a minority. Residing in Mirkwood, they capture Thorin and the rest of the dwarves and throw them in the dungeon (Tolkien 210-230). Tolkien was sparse in his description of the Wood Elves. He briefly describes the Elven king. The Elven king sits on a chair of carved wood, wearing a crown of berries and red leaves, wielding a scepter of carved oak (Tolkien 212). One gets the impression that the Wood Elves are an intelligent people in the novel, as they use magic to protect and conceal their palace (Tolkien 212). Yet they are also portrayed as protective, paranoid and to some degree xenophobic, as can be seen in the way they close their borders and refuse anyone to walk the woods without the king’s leave (Tolkien 212). They are skeptical of outsiders, as they do often not mingle with other “minorities”. An example of this is the way they magically disappear when Bilbo and the Dwarves try to approach them to beg for food at their feast in the forest (Tolkien 191). The elves thought they were attacked (Tolkien 208), showing that they are not accustomed to visitors, and are very suspicious by nature.

One can draw parallels to the isolated tribes of native people, and the animation style used in the *TV Movie* further strengthens this impression. They resemble older caricatures of native people. They occasionally react with hostility to strangers an example of this is the tribe which was involved in the killing of an American missionary in 2018 (The Guardian 2018). The Wood Elves in the TV movie appear as primitive people, with primate like arms and an equally primitive vocabulary. They also display a primate like walk, showing that the Wood Elves in the cinematic world of the TV movie are somewhat primitive people, who live isolated. With little contact to the outside world they are less developed and advanced when compared to the hobbits, dwarves, and men. Due to the way the Wood elves are portrayed through their forest dwelling, isolated origin, I would argue that the Wood Elves in the TV

movie can be seen as a stereotype of the isolated native tribes in the world. Thus making the way they are portrayed a way of expressing the social context of the adaptation.

This greatly contrasts the way the Wood Elves are portrayed in the Trilogy. The difference is in part due to the fact that the fact that Tolkien omitted from including any real description of the appearance of the Wood Elves. Furthermore, *The Lord of the Rings* has influenced the appearance of the elves. Since the Wood Elves of Mirkwood are represented through Legolas (Orlando Bloom) in *The Lord of the Rings*, it would not be constructive to reverse on the appearance of the Wood Elves in the Hobbit Trilogy. There are several reasons for this, for example: it would disrupt the continuity between the two trilogies, something Jackson would want to avoid as *the Hobbit* serves as a prequel to *the Lord of the Rings*.

### **Racial Issues and Minorities in *the Trilogy*:**

Like *the Lord of the Rings*, *the Hobbit* is an old novel, where old, and in some instances, outdated issues and viewpoints can be found. *The Trilogy* attempts to rectify the “racial issues” that has traditionally been part of the critique of Tolkien’s fantasy universe.

The relationship between elves and dwarves is a recurrent subject in Tolkien’s world, and was expanded in Jackson’s adaptation of *Lord of the Rings*. In my opinion, Jackson has dedicated even more of the *Hobbit Trilogy* to comment on how the issues between two “races” lead to only destruction, and that only by coexisting and tolerating each other, can true evil be destroyed. This is also one of the main themes of Tolkien’s novel. Yet Jackson has done several “interventions”, altering some characters traits and personalities, and changing or indeed making new plotlines in order to make the social issue “racial discord” one of the main themes of the movie. The issue of racial discord is a topic that has been under some stress in the time period between the *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* trilogy (2003-2013). The world witnessed several terrorist attacks, a new surge of the radical right wing in Europe and America, so one could argue that Jackson wanted to reinforce the message of coexisting and cooperation in his adaptation of *The Hobbit*. .

The relationship between elves and dwarves is not described as downright hostile in the novel, yet dwarves are naturally suspicious of everyone, and the Wood Elves, as mentioned earlier, are not fond of outsiders, especially ones walking in their woods (Tolkien 212). In the *trilogy* the relationship between the dwarves and elves can be described as very hostile indeed. Jackson adds a plot point placing the Wood Elves at Erebor during the attack of Smaug, where the Elvenking is unwilling to help the fleeing dwarves, thus planting a

strong feeling of enmity between Thorin (the heir to the dwarven throne) and the elves of Mirkwood. Jackson and his writers included several scenes to strengthen the feeling of hostility between Thorin and the elves in *The Trilogy*. One of these is the scene where Bilbo and the Dwarves arrive in Rivendell. In the novel, the dwarves arrive in Rivendell with little drama, and few remarks are made, other than Thorin being gruff in his speech to the elf welcoming them (Tolkien 68). In *the Trilogy*, Thorin is vehemently against stopping in Rivendell, and thinks the elves are going to attack them upon arrival. The dwarves also mistake Elrond's greeting for an insult, showing the deep suspicion of elves harbored by the dwarves. Why did they include this? One could argue that the initial hostility is used to set up the moment when the enmity between the two minorities are forgotten. This can be a scene in the romantic subplot between Kili and Tauriel, or the moment when the Wood Elves decide to help the dwarves to defeat Azog's army at Erebor. By raising the stakes of the racial discord between elves and dwarves, the resolution becomes that much more powerful, and the racial discord commentary is also strengthened.

In the *TV Movie* less emphasis is put on the problematic relationship between elves and dwarves. In part, the category of adaptation can be seen as an explanation of this. In a "transposition" adaptation, minimal changes are made when moving the story from book to screen. Another explanation might be that the screenwriter's (Romeo Muller) or directors' (Jules Bass & Arthur Rankin Junior) intentions did not include social commentary to the extent of Jackson's intentions when making *The Trilogy*. Different reasons motivate the making of an adaptation, be it financial, cultural, political, or personal (Leitch 250). The formal context of the *TV Movie* can also be an explanation, as the restriction of budget and run-time prevented the directors from including scenes contributing to this theme.

Despite its success, *the Lord of the Rings* has seen its share of criticism. One of the main criticisms of Tolkien's world has been how it is built on an old, outdated and in some cases even racist values and its separation between good and evil. The master-servant relationship between Frodo and Sam is an example of these outdated values. Another example is the evil east (Mordor) and the "good guy" west (Gondor, Rohan, Valinor). A black-white dichotomy is represented in the evil dark-skinned orcs and the virtuous pale-skinned elves and westerners (Hunter 158-159). The orcs are dark skinned, and are aided by the evil Easterlings, and Haradrim. The westerner "good guys" are heavily inspired by Saxon and Scandinavian lore and are predominately white men. Jackson and his writers introduced Azog (Manu Bennett) as the main antagonist of *the Trilogy*. Azog does not feature in the novel, but is connected to it, as his son Bolg is commanding the goblins in the battle of the five armies in

the novel. In the lore of Middle Earth, Azog swore to end the House of Durin, Thorin's family, thus connecting him to Thorin. In the trilogy, Azog is a large orc with pale skin who rides a white wolf, this is in contrast to the dark-skinned, filthy orcs we saw in *Lord of the Rings*. The orcs in general shows greater aesthetic variety, partially due to the use of CGI in combination with prosthetics and costumes, which can be tied to the formal context discussed earlier. This shows an effort to counter the traditional black/dark=evil trope that has been ongoing in Tolkien's universe, and further strengthens the Trilogy's social commentary on race and prejudice. It shows that Jackson and his writers were conscious about the racial criticism of *Lord of the Rings*, and made decisions to counter this in *The Trilogy*.

## **Conclusion**

This paper discussed how social context related issues are expressed in the two screen adaptations of *The Hobbit*. Nichols social context is expressed differently in these adaptations. In the *TV Movie*, the social context is expressed in the use of stereotypes, such as the design and voice acting of the Wood Elves, and the dialectical differences between Smaug and the other characters. In *the Trilogy*, Jackson and his writers added several subplots and characters to strengthen the tension between the elven and dwarven minorities to set up a bigger moment of resolve. The use of the white orc Azog as antagonist can be seen as an attempt to combat the classic black white/evil-good dichotomy that has been a traditional criticism of Tolkien and his world.

This paper also sought to discuss how the different approaches in making the adaptations of the hobbit result in different types of adaptations. When using Geoffrey Wagner's three categories of adaptations I argued that the 1977 cartoon TV movie is a "transposition" type adaptation, as it is moved to the screen with minimal changes to its structure and content. Peter Jackson's *Trilogy* being a "commentary" type adaptation, as the films add various subplots, characters, and expands on the plot already established in the novel.

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