Global flows and local identifications? 'The Lord of the Rings' and the cross-national reception of characters and genres

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On December 17, 2003, the third part of the film trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* premiered simultaneously in many countries around the world. “The Epic Continues” was the slogan accompanying the launch of *The Return of the King*. In our increasingly globalised world, comparative research has swiftly gained importance in the social sciences. Media and communication studies seems to be lagging behind when it comes to international comparative research projects. A few exceptions possibly counter this observation: a comparative research project on the reception of *Dallas* by Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, the Disney project of Janet Wasko and colleagues, a recently published volume on the diverse adaptations of *Big Brother*, and Anne Cooper-Chen's volume on global entertainment media. Still, given the fact that media present people with the most visible manifestations of globalisation, the by and large national orientation of communications and media research is rather surprising.

The launch of the third part of the *LotR* trilogy provided a unique opportunity to study the global reception of a blockbuster movie. The *LotR* project is a timely large-scale international comparative research project. The figures of the study are quite staggering: 24,739 respondents in more than 150 countries (including Antarctica, Vatican City, and several islands in the Southern Sea) took the effort to fill in the online questionnaire. What differences in reception of *LotR* can we trace and how can we explain them? We aim to answer this question by, first, analysing the recognition and appreciation of characters and genres in the quantitative part.
of the total data-set of the LotR project. Differences among audiences are often related to different appreciation of genres. Also the liking and disliking of characters will inform us about the interpretation of the movie. Our quantitative analysis thus takes genre classification and character preference as the basic indicators for its cross-national comparison. The leading question here is whether it is possible to find national patterns in the interpretation of the film. This quantitative analysis of the world data set will be followed by a qualitative analysis of character preferences around the world.

METHODS

In 24 out of the 150 participating countries, over 100 people filled out the survey (see table 8.1). This article will be limited to a comparison of responses from these 24 countries. The first question we want to address is to what extent the appreciation and interpretation of the third part of the LotR trilogy is connected to national background. In order to make this comparison, we will look at the appreciation ratings given by respondents, but also at two variables in the data set that we expect to reflect the interpretation of the film: favourite character and ascription of genre (or modality). The latter is the answer respondents chose (from a list of options) to describe the sort of story the film was according to them. Furthermore, we included in the conclusion the number of times that respondents saw the previous parts of the trilogy.

As table 8.1 shows, variations in appreciation of the film—the most obvious factor with which to compare respondents—are relatively small: appreciation was very high in all national samples. Even though cross-national differences are statistically significant, overall appreciation is so high that these differences nevertheless may not be very meaningful. Thus, selection of genre and favourite character are better ways to gauge national differences than are ratings. To establish the relative importance of nationality, we also looked at two independent variables that are very important in studies of media reception: gender and age. For these variables, too, we looked at relations with appreciation, modality choice, and favourite character.

The questionnaire measured the ascription of genre, or "modality," by asking the following question: "What sort of story is The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King according to you?" Respondents could choose up to three options from the following list: Allegory, Epic, Fairytale, Fantasy, Game world, Good vs. evil, Myth/legend, Quest, SFX film, Spiritual journey, Threatened homeland, War story. The question about the favourite character was an open question. For further statistical manipulation, this text variable was recoded into a series of dummy variables for each character.

To elucidate differences among countries, we have used not only variance analysis but also odds ratios (see below).

As table 8.1 shows, there are significant differences among between national samples. Actual cultural or national differences, however, ought not only to lead to differences and similarities across countries, but also result in patterns or clusters of similar countries. The notion of interpretable national or cultural differences implies that countries with comparable cultures, or shared histories, show cultural affinities. Thus, we might expect countries that are similar culturally or linguistically to resemble each other in their preferences for specific characters or modality choices. We also might expect certain combinations or characters and genres to be more prominent in countries that are culturally, linguistically, or geographically close. Such recurrent combinations would point to a specific patterning of interpretation of the film.

### Table 8.1: Appreciation of Lord of the Rings: Return of the King and Familiarity with Books and Earlier Parts of the Trilogy for Each National Sample, Ranked by Size of National Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Mean Rating*</th>
<th>SD Rating*</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Seen Part 1 More than Once (%)</th>
<th>Seen Part 2 More than Once (%)</th>
<th>N</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>4,744</td>
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<td>.658</td>
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<td>83</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>3,245</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
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<td>85</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>3,064</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>97</td>
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<td>73</td>
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<td><strong>1.40</strong></td>
<td><strong>.728</strong></td>
<td><strong>-</strong></td>
<td><strong>85.5</strong></td>
<td><strong>83</strong></td>
<td><strong>24,648</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 5-point scale, with 1= appreciate very much; 5= do not appreciate at all.
RESULTS: LOOKING FOR NATIONAL DIFFERENCES

DIFFERENCES IN APPRECIATION

As table 8.1 shows, the appreciation for the film was very high in all national samples. National differences in appreciation were statistically significant—which can be expected with a data set this size—but given the high rating these differences are not very meaningful. It is hard to discern one particular cultural or linguistic region in which the film was appreciated more than average. We could conclude, very provisionally, that the appreciation was even higher in countries belonging to the British Commonwealth and has a tendency to be lower in countries that are culturally relatively remote from British culture, such as Italy, France, Turkey, China, Greece, or Slovenia. But any such generalisation is countered by the fact that Chile and Mexico, definitely not Anglo-Saxon countries, show very high levels of appreciation, whereas appreciation was relatively low in Sweden, Germany, Denmark, and the United States.

The same goes for gender and age differences. These are significant but small, with high overall appreciation. Differences among age groups give no clear picture, although appreciation in the oldest group of informants, over seventy, is relatively low (1.82 on a scale from 1 = highest to 5 = lowest). Average appreciation of men and women (gender representation was almost balanced in the sample) was 1.45 and 1.35, respectively, suggesting that, contrary to the stereotype, women appear to like the film slightly more.

DIFFERENCES IN FAVOURITE CHARACTER

To understand national differences in a population of fans (or enthusiasts), it is more informative to look at variables that say something about the experience or interpretation of the movie. One way to do this is to look at national differences in respondents' favourite characters. There is extensive, mostly psychological, theory and research on the appreciation of fictional characters, for instance on processes of identification and parasocial relations. It may be possible to extend such theories to national or cultural differences.

A first analysis of the relationship between nationality and these two variables (modality and character) indicated a striking difference among countries. Table 8.2 shows so-called odds ratios, with The Netherlands as reference category. These represent the ratio between the chance that a Dutch respondent will make a certain choice (for example, naming Frodo as a favourite character) and the chance that respondents from other countries will choose the same option. If the odds are 1 in The Netherlands, the odds are 1.15 in the United States and .71 in Belgium. In other words, table 8.2 shows that, in comparison with The Netherlands, Frodo was more popular in the United States and less popular in Belgium.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Aragorn</th>
<th>Gandalf</th>
<th>Sam</th>
<th>Legolas</th>
<th>Gandalf</th>
<th>Frodo</th>
<th>Boromir</th>
<th>Arwen</th>
<th>Eowyn</th>
<th>Pippen</th>
<th>Merri</th>
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</table>

Table 8.2: Odds Ratios of Favourite Character. (Reference is The Netherlands. Data for Greece and China are not included because of the different alphabet.)
It turned out to be hard to deduce a clear pattern from these odds ratios. First of all, in their choices the Dutch do not show a clear resemblance with other countries. In their clear preference for the dwarf Gimli, the Dutch resemble the Danes and the Belgians: two nearby countries, which one would expect to resemble the Dutch. However, the hobbit character Sam was mentioned more often by Dutch than by Belgians, but Sam was much more popular in Denmark. The same goes for other culturally and linguistically kindred countries: sometimes there is great overlap, in other cases none at all.

What is most apparent from table 8.2 is the great variation in favourite characters chosen by respondents. Apart from the thirteen characters listed in the table, other less important characters were mentioned too, sometimes even characters who didn’t even appear in *The Return of the King,* such as the wizard Saruman, who only appears in parts 1 and 2 of the trilogy; and sometimes characters who do not appear in the film at all, such as Tom Bombadil, who only figures in the books. It was very rare for a character to be mentioned by more than 20 percent of respondents from any country. However, variations among countries are significant too: the British appear to like the loyal son Faramir; Turks are very enthusiastic about Arwen, the elf princess; and Spaniards, Swedes, and Argentians were relatively unimpressed with the elf Legolas, one of the most popular figures in the film.

A table like this is strikingly evocative, and some of the results ring true in an intuitive way. For instance, for the Dutch it is easy to imagine why our fellow countrymen would fall for the rather blunt jokester Gimli, or that Brits would be charmed by the hobbit characters Merry and Pippin, who in many ways are caricatures of old-fashioned rural British gents. In most cases, however, national preferences seem rather more mysterious: Why don’t the Swedes like Legolas as much as others, and why do the Turks like him so much? How to explain the great national variety in the preference for Aragorn, the dark handsome man who ends up becoming the Icing of the title?

By way of contrast, we briefly discuss some analysis of favourite character and gender and age. The differences were significant here, too, but this analysis shows differences that can be interpreted by means of concepts like identification or attraction. For instance, women mentioned female protagonists Arwen and Eowyn significantly more often than men (respectively 3 and 5 percent of female respondents, against 1 and 2 percent of males), and the two attractive male heroes Aragorn and Legolas (women: 25 percent and 19 percent; men: 16 percent and 9 percent). Men, on the other hand, preferred the heroic wizard Gandalf (18 percent versus 9 percent), the only one among the heroes who never appears to have emotions of any kind; the comic dwarf Gimli (6 versus 2 percent); and the ambiguous creature Gollum, also the most spectacular special effect of the film (9 versus 5 percent). Age differences can be interpreted relatively easily too: age is positively correlated with the mention of Gandalf, who obviously is the least youthful of the main characters, and faithful friend Sam. Young people often mentioned the two candid young hobbits Merry and Pippin, the elf princess Arwen and the people’s princess Eowyn, and the heroic young elf Legolas. For both these categories, well-known psychologically oriented explanations seem feasible: identification with people of similar age, gender, or living conditions, and sexual attraction and identification with romantic story lines, presumably mostly for the benefit of the female audience, who apparently had to be compensated for the battle scenes.

The more qualitative data from the *LotR* project, both in the answers to open questions in the survey and in the interviews that have been done in the various countries, might help to understand national “repertoires of evaluation,” as Michele Lamont calls culturally determined patterns of preferences and dislikes. She describes, for instance, how the French generally tend to evaluate things in terms of artistic quality, while Americans judge things rather in terms of morality.

Possibly, character preferences are connected with the ideological, psychological, and social interpretive frameworks as described by Liebes and Katz. On the basis of just the questionnaire, such preferences cannot be interpreted as such. In any case, more psychologically oriented concepts, which are useful for the interpretation of differences in gender and age difference, do not provide much insight into national differences. The idea of a “national psyche” or a “national character” does not, for the time being, appear to be the most useful approach for cross-national differences.

**DIIFERENCES IN GENRE ASCRIPTION**

The question about the modality, or “type of story,” is one of the most original contributions of the initiators of the *LotR* project. Although such a question has not, to our knowledge, been used before in media research, it seems feasible that there would be national specificities in relation with national storytelling traditions. For instance, many Danish respondents chose the “Fairy Tale” category, which may be connected with the famous Danish writer of fairy tales, Hans Christian Andersen.

As table 8.3 shows, cross-national differences in genre ascriptions (or “modalities”) are larger than differences in favourite character. Generally, deviations from the Dutch population (reference category = 1) are higher. In this case, too, it is not always easy to interpret this: What does it mean that the Dutch selected Quest and Spiritual journey more than others? How is one to interpret the fact that Dutch respondents were not particularly inclined to describe the film as “Epic” or “Special effects film”?

The question is, again, whether meaningful patterns can be discerned in national differences. This is complicated: countries that resemble each other in their choice for one modality are quite different in their selection of other modalities. As with character preferences, geographical or cultural closeness does not lead to clear patterns: The Netherlands in some way resembles Belgium, Germany, or Denmark, but not at all in other respects. The most frequent option, Epic, was relatively rare in all these countries, but least so in The Netherlands. The Belgians (mostly
Flemish, so Dutch speaking), and especially the Danes, often referred to LotR as "Fairytale," whereas the Germans rarely chose this qualification. "Threatened homeland" was an option often selected in Belgium, but less frequently in The Netherlands, and even less in Germany and Denmark. Neither was it possible to find a pattern for other culturally related countries, like the Mediterranean countries (Italy, France, Spain, possibly Slovenia, Greece, Turkey).

Language difference is likely to be significant in this part of the questionnaire: genre labels can have very different connotations in different countries. Moreover, genres do not always have a proper equivalent in all languages. In Dutch, for instance, the translation of fantasy we had to choose between fantasie—that is, "imagination"—and the English word fantasy, which only refers to the fictional genre, whereas the English term covers both. In this respect it is interesting to note that the Latin American countries do not show strong resemblances either: the neighbouring countries Argentina and Chile show strong contrasts. A shared language apparently does not automatically lead to similar genre ascriptions.

Responses from English-speaking countries tend to be similar, as table 8.3 illustrates. In almost all cases the odds ratios of the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand are close. A distinct exception is the label "Threatened homeland"—and it probably is not a coincidence that this is also the most politically charged category. The British were much less likely to select this genre than (especially) Americans, but also than New Zealanders, Canadians, and Australians. In this respect, language may be relevant: English is not only the language spoken in all these countries, but also the language of the book, the film, and the merchandise. "Epic," the label selected mostly in English-speaking countries, is also the term that was used in the advertising campaign, which was the same around the world: "The Epic Continues."

In contrast with the character choices, correlations between modalities and other background characteristics were not very strong: gender differences were statistically significant at times, differences were very small: men were somewhat more likely to select "Epic" and "War story," whereas women tended to choose "SFX film" and "Quest." The distribution across age groups shows no patterning at all.

**TEXTUAL INVOLVEMENT AND CULTURAL PROXIMITY**

On the basis of the descriptive analysis it is difficult to trace clear national differences: insofar as there are differences, these are not very systematic, and, moreover, they are hard to interpret. For this reason we have done cluster analysis to find patterns in groups of variables, in this case patterns of appreciation and interpretation of the film. Attempts to do such an analysis only on the basis of the gender and character variables led to very unstable and not very robust solutions, with about as many clusters as the variables used in the analysis. Nonlinear factor analysis (PRINCALS), another method for analyzing such data, did not yield very robust solutions either.
In the end we chose to do a cluster analysis that also included the number of times that someone had seen the previous two parts of the trilogy, considering that this also is a variable relevant to the experience of the film. This analysis led to a robust and rather simple two-cluster solution, with two clusters of roughly equal size (11,536 and 12,489 respondents). Table 8.4 presents an overview of these clusters, on the basis of the variables underlying this analysis. By far the most important distinguishing variable is the choice for the “Epic” genre. “Epic” was the modality chosen most frequently in the entire data set, selected by more than half of the respondents. The first cluster consists almost entirely of respondents selecting “Epic,” while the second cluster is made up almost exclusively from people who chose something other than “Epic.” All other modalities were chosen more often by respondents in cluster 2 than cluster 1.

As table 8.4 shows, the first cluster also shows more enthusiastic and devoted fans: the average appreciation is higher; respondents have, on average, seen the previous parts of the trilogy more often and on average also named more favourite characters. There are also some differences in character preferences: Sam, the loyal hobbit friend of the main character Frodo, was mentioned more in the first cluster; Legolas, Gimli, and Arwen were more popular in the second cluster, and there are differences, too, among the less prominent characters. Roughly the differences could be summarised as: respondents in the first cluster appear to prefer people and hobbit characters, and these are also the more “layered,” “round,” or “complex” characters. In the second cluster, respondents tend to prefer the more fantastic characters: elves and dwarfs.

On the whole, the decisive distinction between the two clusters seems to be the viewing position: the first cluster contains the more involved viewers. They follow the “preferred” reading of the film as “Epic” and this coincides with a more “layered” reading of the characters. In the second cluster we find a variety of readings and interpretation that seem to coincide with, on average, lower levels of involvement—even though the variety is large in this respect. For instance, this cluster also contains the group of respondents who chose the “Spiritual journey” modality, which is the label that comes with the highest degree of involvement and appreciation (compare chapter 9 in this volume).

This is confirmed in table 8.5, which shows that cluster 1 also contains the more dedicated readers. This table also shows the relation between the clusters and the various social background variables. This gives further support to the thought that cluster 1 contains the “standard” reading; the second cluster contains both the older and the very young respondents, and also more women than men—in other words, the audiences that diverge (relatively speaking) from the standard audience for a fantasy blockbuster like The Return of the King. In some cases, this divergent reading may be different from the standard reading, yet highly committed.

Table 8.4: Cluster Analyses of Rating, Modality Choice, Favourite Character, and Number of Viewings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average rating</th>
<th>Cluster 1</th>
<th>Cluster 2</th>
<th>% in Cluster 2*</th>
<th>All Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1 to 5, 1 = highest)</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>1.51**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seen part 1 more than once (in %)</td>
<td>93.0</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>44.2**</td>
<td>86.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seen part 2 more than once (in %)</td>
<td>89.0</td>
<td>75.8</td>
<td>44.0**</td>
<td>82.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modality choice (% of respondents in cluster choosing modality)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epic</td>
<td>99.7</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.3**</td>
<td>52.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good vs. evil</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>60.8**</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>61.6**</td>
<td>34.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myth</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>54.1**</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quest</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>58.9**</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFX film</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>54.0**</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allegory</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>65.6*</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairytale</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>75.9**</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War story</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>63.2**</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatened homeland</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>70.4**</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual journey</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>78.1**</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game world</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>61.6**</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean number of modalities named</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favourite character (% of respondents in cluster choosing character)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aragorn</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>43.8**</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frodo</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gandalf</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>44.9*</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legolas</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>53.6**</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galadriel/Smeagol</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gollum/Smeagol</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>53.1*</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pippin</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>38.5*</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eowyn</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>37.9**</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faramir</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>40.0**</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arwen</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>54.6**</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boromir</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>37.7**</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merry</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>33.4**</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean number of characters named</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>1.09**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 11,536 (48%) 12,489 (52%,6%) 24,747

*This column shows the percentage of respondents choosing a value for a specific variable (for example, "Epic" as genre) in cluster 2. The percentage of respondents with this value in cluster 2 therefore is 100 minus this number.

b Sum of percentages may be more than 100% because respondents could choose more than one option.

C Only shows percentages for countries with Romantic script.

p < .01

** p < .001
Table 8.5: Clusters and Social Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% of Variable in Cluster 2</th>
<th>Deviation of Mean Cluster 2 (in Standardised Values)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.K.</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>-15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>+16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>-3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>+9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>-11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>+8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>+2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>+3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>+9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>-2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>-1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>-0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>-2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>-2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>+1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>58.1</td>
<td>+2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>-3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>+0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>-2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>+0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>-2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>-1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>+0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>+1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>-1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>-5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>+5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;16</td>
<td>58.5</td>
<td>+7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-25</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>-1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>-4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>-0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>+1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>+1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;65</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>+2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never read books</td>
<td>67.3</td>
<td>+18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read books partly</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>+4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read books once</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>-1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read books more than once</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>-12.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The surprise in this table is that the clusters are related to cross-national differences, even though this is a rather rough divide. The first cluster is dominant in all English-language countries, most clearly so in the United Kingdom; in Greece (although not very significantly); and in the countries that can be summarised as “Latin”: France, Italy, Spain, and Latin America with the exception of Colombia. The second cluster is dominant in all other countries, from The Netherlands to Slovenia to China. These differences—shown in the table by standardised differences—from the mean—are significant, and rather large in some cases. It is important to note that representatives of both clusters are present in all countries. This, too, seems to support the interpretation of the clusters in terms of viewing position. It is hardly surprising that the intended reading of the film is dominant in the countries in which the language of film and book is spoken. More generally, the story as well as the genre are rooted, in many ways, in the Anglo-Saxon tradition: a British story, American production and film conventions, and a New Zealand setting and director. Despite the “Americanisation” of audiences, it is likely that audiences outside this sphere of influence would have a lesser involvement and a larger variety of alternative interpretations.

The dominance of this reading in the “Latin” countries may seem more mysterious. A possible explanation here is the relatively small response in many of these countries: maybe only the more devoted fans participated in these studies. Using the answers to the open questions, and the interview data of the various countries, differences between these clusters will be explored further.

To what extent can these results be interpreted as indicators for the prominence of nationality and the nation-state in media reception? On the one hand, the cluster analysis gives some support for previous studies, showing that shared culture, and specifically shared language, is an important factor in the appreciation of media products. However, this shared frame of reference seems to be a greater area/region than the nation-state: the English-speaking or Anglo-Saxon countries. Moreover, this shared culture seems to result in the following of the intended reading (Martin Barker and colleagues refer to “Epic” as the “modality of least resistance”), rather than the “negotiated” reading.

The second cluster is characterised by pluriformity and deviation from the mean: people, on average, seem less involved, and choose a wider variety of interpretations. This does not point to a very specific effect of the nation-state, but rather to a larger variety that is connected with cultural distance from the “centre” of global media culture. Interestingly, those close to the text seem to rely more on a preferred reading of the text, whereas those with a larger cultural distance from the trilogy employ a more diverse, possibly even resistant, reading. Cultural familiarity apparently does not necessarily feed a more critical, active mode of reception. But caution is needed here, as statistics does not tell us what people actually do with a certain media text. In the last part of this chapter we will therefore zoom in on how international audiences relate to the different characters of LotR.
READING THE CHARACTERS

In the first cluster, consisting of the more involved audiences, the hobbits (in particular the innocent and altruistic Sam), the human characters, and the divine wizard Gandalf are significantly more popular. The first cluster is highly involved in both the books and the film trilogy. In the second cluster, the more fantastic characters, elves and dwarves, characters moreover who are less crucial in the development of the plot, are more popular. The clusters indicate that audiences differ in their reading, but how do audiences read the characters? In other words, what repertoires of evaluation do they employ?

If we look at the first cluster, one striking characteristic in the answers of the respondents (those who opted for "Epic" as the first modality) is that these answers, first, are more elaborate and, second, often concern the trilogy or the film as a whole. Respondents in this cluster tend to choose favourite characters whose story is central to the plot and development of the story line, like Sam or Gandalf.

The popularity of Gandalf in this cluster can be related to his personal growth—the change from Gandalf the Grey into Gandalf the White—that is closely connected with the central plot of the trilogy. One American respondent explains why he likes Gandalf so much: "Gandalf. He had a huge on screen presence and captured my imagination. I often inwardly called on him to put things right for other characters" (male; "Epic," "Quest," "Threatened homeland"). The centrality of Gandalf—the one he inwardly calls upon to help out the other characters—to this man's experience of the film comes particularly to the forefront in his selection of the favourite scene of the movie, when he refers to the impressive change of Gandalf: "Gandalf being defeated in Fellowship of The Ring and falling into the fire below and then returning as Gandalf the White in the Two Towers. Simply because I found it moving—the former upset me and the latter cheered me!" A U.K. respondent refers to the godlike qualities of Gandalf: "Gandalf. He's a figure of godlike power who shows self-restraint wisdom humility endurance courage and love. I suspect he was Tolkien's projection of his ideal self. I remember reading his battle with the Balrog when I was thirteen and being devastated" (male; "Allegory," "Epic," "Myth/legend"). In one of the Dutch interviews, the godlike character of Gandalf is articulated as well; the resurrection of Gandalf is read as a sign of the religious entity that governs Middle-earth: "Somehow, there is kind of basic deity. Gandalf returns back to life and is told that new life is given to him. This is for sure a 'prime power', a 'deity' that gives him new life. The God of Goodness, so to say" (Vincent). A German respondent, however, points at the humanlike character of Gandalf, which facilitates audience identification with him: "Gandalf. Smart, wise, tranquil and humorous—and yet, still completely human" (female; "Epic"). Both Gandalf's growth during the course of events in the trilogy as well as his humanlike traits help explain his popularity in the first cluster; he is godlike, yet easier to identify with than a more outlandish Elf, and his personal growth mirrors the way the epic evolves.

For quite similar reasons, both the hobbits and some of the human characters, like Faramir and Boromir (but not Aragorn, who can be liked for a whole number of reasons), are significantly more popular in this cluster. One American respondent explains why he prefers Sam: "Sam became a favourite. He starts off so down to earth but by the time he is in Mordor he has become a true hero like Aragorn and Théoden. What's most amazing is that it is his friendship with Frodo that drives him" (male; "Epic," "Myth/legend"). The strong interconnection between the narrative and Sam's personal growth, with which the involved audience of cluster 1 so readily identifies, returns in the following account of a Spanish respondent: "My favourite character is Sam because he is the representation of unconditional friendship towards Frodo) and because he is a hobbit who passes from innocence about the world into an adult without corrupting himself and while preserving his soul/personality" (male; "Epic," "Fantasy," "SFX film"). Apart from personal growth, it's Sam's perseverance—another human trait—that explains his attractiveness: "Sam because he held the whole thing together he was faithful to the end and literally carried Frodo to Mt. Doom (U.K., male; "Epic," "Quest," "Good vs. evil"). Sam because he is the ultimate hero who never falters or fails, resists the ring and ultimately is the reason that the quest doesn't fail" (Germany, female; "Epic," "Quest," "Fantasy"). Sam, in these quotes, is often described as "the real hero" of the story, the character around whom the film revolves. Clearly, people who follow the preferred reading of the film would relate most easily to a character that is so central to the development of the story.

Hobbits, with their humanlike character yet devoid of evil, encourage identification too. This becomes clear from the following three respondents: "The hobbits because they are the ones that I most closely relate to. The other characters are the ones you look up to but you see the story through the eyes of Frodo Sam Pippin and Merry. They also make me feel good about myself" (U.K., female; "Epic," "Quest," "Good vs. evil"). "I most identified with Aragorn and Faramir. Even though not all favourite characters can be interpreted in terms of identification, this is the character that seems to invite personal identification more than any other in the film: "Faramir because I can relate to him and his story is one
of the most interesting” (U.K., female; “Epic,” “FaRytale,” “Myth/legend”). “Faramir. His character exhibited strength (letting the Ring go) and weakness (caving to his father’s demands) at the same time and that made him very human. In the end he was a brave and good person though” (U.K., female; “Epic,” “Fantasy”). “Faramir. His constant search for his father’s love and approval was very moving. He was easy to identify with!” (Denmark, female; “Epic,” “Good vs. evil,” “SFX film”).

When we move from the first to the second cluster, the answers of the respondents are both shorter and more divergent. More often people mention the name of the character without any further explanation. Also, many do not name any favourite character at all. In this cluster, respondents refer more often to the name of the actors rather than the characters; they use vague descriptions (“the dwarf cause he’s funny”) or ones like: “The helper of the one who has the Ring is very loyal and funny” (The Netherlands, male; “Fantasy,” “Quest,” “SFX film”). Respondents in this cluster rarely resort to the language of identification. Favourite characters in this cluster are elves and dwarfs, the first being a more fantastic character, the latter mostly a humorous one. Many praise the humor—for the highly involved audience of cluster 1 less attractive since they are so absorbed in the epic—of Gimli. He is funny, and sometimes he is actually lauded because his character takes you away from the story line. One Dutch respondent explains why she likes Gimli most: “I think his character is just great. He gave some humor to the film. Because the film doesn’t have a nice subject (I mean of course the war etc.)” (The Netherlands, female; “Fantasy,” “Myth/legend,” “Threatened homeland”). Favourite characters of the second cluster, unlike those of the first, are those that remain more or less the same throughout the trilogy. Humor, and beauty and mystique—important traits of dwarfs and Elves, respectively—do not require change, after all.

Whereas Gimli’s humor adds fun to the story, the elves add some outlandish beauty to it, in the words of an Italian respondent: “Legolas and the elvish race in general because of the characteristics they have” (Italy, male; “Fantasy,” “Spiritual journey”). Legolas is particularly liked, very often because of his looks; many refer to him as Orlando Bloom rather than Legolas. Probably the best summary, focusing on the physical attractiveness of the actor more than the character itself, comes from this female British respondent: “Legolas because he’s an elf and really hot” (U.K., female; “Good vs. evil”).

Aragorn is one of the characters that is chosen equally by respondents in the first and the second cluster, and that may be because he invites both types of reading: he is a round character, whose story is directly linked with the epic, but he also is a handsome man, and he gets nominated as a favourite character for both types of reasons.

Within the second cluster, there is a wider variety of degrees of commitment to the film and the genre, and even though in general people are less devoted, there are some who show a marked devotion, especially the people who chose “Spiritual journey.” In interviews with Dutch viewers, Elves were often referred to by respondents claiming a spiritual reading. Nel, one of the Dutch interviewees, talks about Arwen: “She was mythical in a way, and I felt, divine may not be the right word, but she comes with a certain task, she is sent. She comes to help the good, it is important, and also the way she is visualized is very special, something vague, mythical, dreamlike.” For David, another Dutch interviewee, Legolas is the Elf he likes best: “It’s almost spiritual, like all elves, their pure character represents... they are lighter and more honest, they are not necessarily more or less, but their character is very different, a whole different way of life. […] It gives a feeling there is more in this world than what we see. We actually live in a much larger whole, of which we do not know the boundaries.”

To conclude, audiences belonging to the first cluster, whose first choice of modality was “Epic,” show a strong involvement with the trilogy. Their involvement in the narrative structure propels a special liking for characters who, first, are quite like us, human, and, second, whose personal story is central to the narrative and somehow mirrors the plot. The less involved audience from the second cluster are not only less elaborate in their answers, they also show a special liking for the more fantastic Elves, since they are beautiful, and dwarfs, who add humour to the story. This group is more divergent in their readings and are more likely to refer to actors rather than characters and enjoy the special effects of the trilogy. The diversity within this cluster is strong and becomes particularly clear when we look at the audiences who opt for a more spiritual reading of the text. Their identification with the Elves comes from a general interest in spirituality rather than a necessary involvement with the trilogy as such.

**CONCLUSION: THE EPIC CONTINUES?**

*LotR* is a profoundly cosmopolitan media text that is increasingly detached from its assumed origin—the United Kingdom—also because of the particular production circumstances in which the United Kingdom, Hollywood, and New Zealand are involved. The text is deliberately detached from national and local contexts, which explains its transnational appeal. Our analysis shows that one can roughly distinguish two groups of viewers: those who are very involved with the standard reading both of the movie and the books, and those who employ a wide variety of readings of the film, which often is connected with less involvement with the film and the books. Interestingly, in particular the fans classify the movie as an “Epic” story, following the marketing rhetoric (“The Epic Continues”). This points to the paramount importance of the marketing of blockbusters like *LotR*.

More involvement with the books and the story surprisingly does not produce more oppositional or negotiated readings of the movie; on the contrary, those less involved seem to resist the dominant reading more. Cultural proximity plays a role here; these viewers are more often (yet not always) located outside the Anglo-Saxon world (for example, in China and Turkey). This finding counters fan studies, which
show how creative fans employ texts, with which they resist to, rather than with, dominant readings. In particular large-scale productions like *LotR* en by a carefully orchestrated marketing campaign and media hype, both of which reduce the potential polysemy of the text itself, a reduction that becomes parent from the fans' responses to the movie. *LotR* trilogy, set in a fictional fantasy world, based on the universal theme versus evil, enabled "Hollywood" (a blunt label indeed) to create a global e on an unprecedented scale. The *LotR* project has enabled us to study the interpretations and identifications such a global blockbuster generates. The of the world data set has shown that audiences of this film are indeed thor-globalised: the film is perceived and liked in many different ways by audi-worldwide. However, even though people vary widely in their appreciation and station of the film, we have found that locality or nationality does not deter-ow people perceive the film. Only in a very general sense can one say that ity matters to the liking of *LotR*: our analysis showed that the reading of 3 is linked with the audience's "distance from the centre." The further d from this centre, the more likely people are to diverge from the preferred , or "reading of least resistance." However, this "distance from the centre" can graphic—gender, age—as well as geographical.

**CHAPTER NINE**

The Functions of Fantasy

A Comparison of Audiences for *The Lord of the Rings* in Twelve Countries

MARTIN BARKER

The *Lord of the Rings* project was designed to discover the functions of film fantasy in the lives of different kinds of audiences; how audiences were prepared for the film by marketing, merchandising, publicity, and media coverage; and how a story like *LotR* plays out in different cultural contexts. In its design, it was intended to permit cross-country, thence cross-cultural, comparisons of responses, and to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the interplay between global media production and local responses. Our central questionnaire was designed to sort responses by country and language, among other measures. But what does it reveal about the ways in which national contexts frame or shape audiences' understandings of the film? Of the overall total, more than twenty thousand questionnaires were received from just twelve countries. This analysis is based on a comparison of these countries, since the data sets are large enough for these to permit complex investigations without the numbers becoming riskily small:

- United States (4,744 responses)
- The Netherlands (3,275)
- United Kingdom (3,115)
- Denmark (1,677)
- Spain (1,564)
- Belgium (1,378)
- Germany (1,161)