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1-1-2013

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Recommended Citation

Organ, Michael K.: 'Please Mr Frodo, is this New Zealand? Or Australia?'... 'No Sam, it's Middle-earth.' 2013, 56-61.

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Abstract

The exploitation of JRR Tolkien's Middle-earth by Tourism New Zealand following the success of Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings films and the release of the first part of The Hobbit has been met with accusations of cultural racism by Maori, misrepresentation by Pakeha and re-appropriation by independent British filmmakers, writes Michael Organ.

Keywords

earth, mr, please, frodo, this, zealand, australia, no, sam, middle

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Organ, M. K. 2013, "Please Mr Frodo, is this New Zealand? Or Australia?'... 'No Sam, it's Middle-earth.", Metro, no. 177 (July), pp. 56-61.

'Please Mr Frodo, is this New Zealand? Or Australia?' ... 'No Sam, it's Middle-earth.'

Peter Jackson and the appropriation of Tolkien's English mythology

The appropriation of J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth by Tourism New Zealand following the success of Peter Jackson's films of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the release of the first part of *The Hobbit* has been met with accusations of cultural racism by Maori, misrepresentation by Pakeha and re-appropriation by independent British filmmakers, writes **Michael Organ**.

When Lewis Carroll's Alice fell down a rabbit hole and awoke in a world of talking animals, rocking-horse flies and jabberwockies, she exclaimed 'Please, Ma'am, is this New Zealand? Or Australia?' In a similar manner the pint-sized heroes of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* trilogies may question their whereabouts following recent declarations that New Zealand is, in fact, Middle-earth. Why should this be?

In September 2012 Tourism New Zealand launched a '100% Middle-earth, 100% New Zealand' campaign, which rebranded the country as nothing less than J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth.¹ Shortly thereafter Air New Zealand – 'The airline of Middle-earth' – released a four-minute inflight video with a Tolkien theme, featuring flight crew and staff dressed in Middle-earth attire alongside a suited Peter Jackson.² Both

organisations sought to use publicity surrounding the release of the first part of *The Hobbit* trilogy to build on the more than NZ\$590 million generated locally as a result of Jackson's epic *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, originally released in 2001-3.³ International tourists and film and television production units were target audiences, with an estimated NZ\$1.5 billion to be generated by *The Hobbit*. The Tolkien movie franchise is a cash cow that has a significant impact on the New Zealand economy.

The appropriation of Tolkien's Middle-earth by Tourism New Zealand and, to a lesser extent, by Jackson's Wingnut Productions and Weta Digital, has antecedents dating back to the dawn of the NZ film industry. From 1917 through to the 1930s New Zealand cinema played a role in shaping that country's official tourism imagery.⁴ In an effort to attract tourism and foreign immigration film production units within the Department of Internal Affairs, the Tourism Department and later the Government Publicity Office presented the varied local landscape, depopulated and stripped of Maori or Pakeha (white European) identity.

The world in a nutshell

In 1934 *Romantic New Zealand* – the country's first feature-length sound film – introduced it as 'a world in a nutshell.' In a similar way Peter Jackson makes use of over 250 different New Zealand locations to present 'Middle-earth in a nutshell.'⁵ As Elijah 'Frodo' Wood pointed out: 'Every element of Middle-earth is contained in New Zealand. There are so many different geographical landscapes, mountains, woods, marshes, desert areas, rolling hills ... and the sea.'⁶ The sentiment is repeated in the 2012 tourism

campaign, with the official New Zealand website stating: 'The similarities between New Zealand and Middle-earth are remarkable. Bubbling brooks intersect with gentle waterfalls, snow-capped peaks cast shadows over lush forest valleys and ancient glaciers – frozen in time – cascade almost to the sea.'⁷

Jackson's films, like Tolkien's original text, feature landscape as character. Real locations are seamlessly mixed with digital renderings to create spectacular screen landscapes such as the cliff-side Rivendell and the ravaged, deforested plains of Isengard.

If there is a single image one can take from the Jackson films it is a sweeping panoramic view of the fellowship or party of dwarves traversing mountainous terrain and wide, open wooded plains. New Zealand is undoubtedly an ideal locale for replication of the lush, rolling hills of Tolkien's boyhood England and the rugged mountains of eastern Europe his Middle-earth is based on.

English writer Ian Wilson said of Tolkien that he was obsessed with heroes on quests towards mountains, and the Baggins' – Bilbo and Frodo – fit neatly into this category.⁸ Tolkien's traumatic experiences in the Swiss Alps during a walking tour of 1911 – where he encountered avalanches and near-death experiences as a result of wayward rocks and dangerous mountain paths – are transferred to Middle-earth locales in the original publications. They are also made dramatic use of by Jackson in the films, most notably in the struggle by Frodo and Sam towards Mount Doom and in the clash of rock monsters

during the travels of Bilbo Baggins and the company of dwarves through the Misty Mountains.

The recent antipodean appropriation of Tolkien's Middle-earth can be traced to the use of New Zealand by Hollywood studios for the popular television series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995-99) and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001). Following the success of *Hercules* and *Xena* (and to a lesser extent Jackson's own feature film *The Frighteners* [1996], where Wellington stands in for San Francisco) Hollywood was accepting of New Zealand's ability to recreate mythic landscapes. This in many ways replicated the role played by Italian studios during the 1950s and 1960s as seen in productions such as *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), featuring state-of-the-art special effects by Ray Harryhausen.

New Zealand's geographical diversity provides 'the world in a nutshell' and Jackson's productions have successfully presented this richly varied landscape as the hyper-realistic background to Tolkien's story of the Ring of Power.

The fantastic made real

Middle-earth is a fantasy realm.⁹ It is not real. Despite this, Tourism New Zealand has taken the step of transforming Jackson's filmic fantasy into reality with its 'Home of Middle-earth' promotional campaigns. Elements include, for example, redrawing the map of New Zealand in the Tolkien Middle-earth style and recreating Hobbiton. **One**

website features an interactive antique book in which a mouse click turns pages that identify New Zealand Middle-earth tourism localities.¹⁰ Commercial imperatives drive the campaign, but little thought is given to Tolkien's original conception of Middle-earth as English.

Comment [TC1]: Link in references?

Comment [MO2]: Reference added

J. R. R. Tolkien was an Oxford professor of philology and expert in the construction and usage of language.¹¹ From a young age he immersed himself in the written word and related history of his beloved England from Medieval times. Out of this he developed a mythology for England comprising an immensely complex world called Middle-earth. In it the adventures of Bilbo and Frodo Baggins took place during a brief period at the end of the Third Age.¹² Though based upon study of Nordic, Germanic and Icelandic legend and sagas, coupled with indigenous texts such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and *Pearl*, the result as seen in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* was very much of and for England, though with a significant northern European element. The stories evolved from texts such as *Beowulf*, the Nordic *Volsung Saga* and *Edda*, and the Germanic *Nibelungen*. The latter is best seen on the screen within Fritz Lang's 1922–4 two-part epic *Das Nibelungen*, produced by UFA and released internationally during 1924.

Tolkien's fantastical universe includes tales and legends of hobbits, elves, dwarves, ents, orcs, dragons and men. It filled a void that the author felt had existed since the Norman Conquest of 1066 resulted in the indigenous Anglo-Saxon mythology being 'all but strangled by the imposition of Latinate French culture.'¹³

Tolkien would most probably be aghast at the appropriation of his very English Middle-earth by a former British colony located on the opposite side of the globe; however, he did have a hand in the process by which it came to pass.

During 1966 the author sold the film production and distribution rights to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* to United Artists for 7.5% of future earnings. In 1976, following Tolkien's death in 1973, UA on-sold the rights of production – but not *The Hobbit* distribution – to Saul Zantz, subsequently trading as Tolkien Enterprises.¹⁴ This ultimately led to Hollywood's ownership of Tolkien's Middle-earth as seen on the screen.

Comment [TC3]: Reference?

Comment [MO4]: Reference added

Attempts to film Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* following its original publication in 1954–5 were patchy, due to the author's critical assessment of scripts presented to him. Forrest Ackerman and others prepared such a script in 1957 but Tolkien rejected it, while a decade later The Beatles showed interest and sought Stanley Kubrick as director.¹⁵ It was not until 1977 that a substantial production appeared, in the form of the Rankin Bass cartoon of *The Hobbit*. Featuring the booming voice of veteran Hollywood actor and director Sam Houston as Gandalf, this 70-minute ABC Television production was a notable and noble effort. However, its presentation of the landscape of Middle-earth was superficial and generic.

Comment [TC5]: References?

Comment [MO6]: Reference added

Ralph Bakshi's 1978 rotoscoped production of the first part of *The Lord of the Rings* was less successful artistically, though it drew US\$30 million at the box office and gave rise to a very light Rankin and Bass follow up entitled *The Return of the King*. This was soon forgotten. It was not until more than two decades later that Peter Jackson's successful interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* was released.

Upsetting the natives

The recent appropriation of Middle-earth by New Zealand has not occurred without comment.¹⁶ Concern has been expressed about the absence of Maori and Pakeha culture in the current tourism campaigns. The *Reading the Maps* blog and associated reader comments were especially scathing. Author Scott Hamilton highlighted the example of Hobbiton near Matamata in the North Island and the obliteration from the tourist landscape of the nearby historic Maori village of Peria.¹⁷ Founded in 1846, Peria brought Maori and European cultures and technologies together and was named after Berea, an ancient city which stood on the slopes of Mount Olympus. The model village was broken up around 1866 as a result of the devastation wrought by the Waikato War. It remains an unrestored archaeological site.

Comment [TC7]: And (when) was it restored? Or is it an archaeological site?

Comment [MO8]: Comment added re status.

The replacement of historic Peria by a mythical Hobbiton on the tourist maps is, according to *Reading the Maps* correspondents, an instance of 'fantasy racism.' Peria's abnegation and the institutionalisation of Jackson's movies is cited as 'further concretization of the white man as some sort of mythic heroic figure.' In this

Comment [TC9]: Was there criticism elsewhere? In mainstream media?

Comment [MO10]: Further reference to criticisms contained in following paragraph.

misrepresentation of the landscape and its history, 'the place of Sauron is taken by the business and political establishment of Pakeha **New Zealand.**'

Comment [TC11]: Add reference in endnotes

The backlash against the abasement of New Zealand to Hollywood production companies reached a peak in November 2012. When Massey University scientist Mike Joy criticised the portrayal of New Zealand as an environmental nirvana in an article published in the New York Times on 16 November the personal criticisms came thick and fast, as did those keen to support his statements.¹⁸ Accused of tourism industry sabotage, Joy was vilified in the press. Prime Minister John Key defended the \$10 million 100% Middle-earth campaign and his government's efforts to ensure *The Hobbit* was filmed in New Zealand, to the extent of changing local labour and immigration laws and subsidising the production to the extent of \$25 million in tax breaks.¹⁹ One expatriate was driven to write "People at home are frustrated at New Zealand's being marketed as Middle-earth at the expense of our own rich history and culture"²⁰ Such comments were common on the blogosphere in the lead up to the release of *The Hobbit*.

The generally muted response in England to Middle-earth's appropriation has nevertheless seen something of a fightback by independent filmmakers. During 2009 *Hunt for Gollum*, a 38-minute prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*, was produced by Independent Online Cinema with a budget of £3000.²¹ To circumvent litigation from Tolkien Enterprises, the Tolkien Estate and Warner Brothers, the film includes a substantial disclaimer.²² It was immediately made available freely on the internet and to date has seen over 12 million downloads. Also during that year the 71-minute long *Born of Hope* appeared. Once again **an independent production**, it was based on Tolkien's

Comment [TC12]: Have these films run into legal/rights issues w Jackson/the Tolkien estate? Could they have been made commercially or are those rights tied up?

Comment [MO13]: Issues addressed in paragraph – rights strictly controlled.

Middle-earth stories and tells the story of Aragon's parents.²³ Both can be said to bring Tolkien's work back home to England.

Tolkien's Middle-earth originally only existed in the mind of the author and within his writings. His vision goes beyond that which the British Isles alone can provide. New Zealand has been successfully utilised by Hollywood since the 1990s to replicate mythic landscapes and Peter Jackson has refined this to a superlative degree with *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. The action of local tourism authorities to transform a filmic fantasy into a theme-park reality, at the expense of indigenous history and culture, is rightly subject to critical assessment. New Zealand is not Middle-earth. It only exists as such when the lights go down and one of Peter Jackson's films lights up the screen. Then, and only then, is disbelief suspended and Tolkien's dream realised.

Michael Organ is a digital archivist at the University of Wollongong. He has published previously on the Australian release of Fritz Lang's Metropolis in 1928.

Endnotes

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Comment [TC14]: See <http://www.metromagazine.com.au/styleGuide.html> for our reference style

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- ⁶ Keating, op cit.
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- ¹⁶ 'Air New Zealand's Middle-earth marketing campaign is an embarrassment to the country', *The Diamondback: The University of Maryland's Independent Student Newspaper*, 9 December 2012, <<http://www.diamondbackonline.com>>, accessed 4 April 2013.
- ¹⁷ Scott Hamilton, 'From Peria to Hobbiton', *Reading the Maps*, 29 November 2012, <<http://readingthemap.blogspot.co.nz/2012/11/from-peria-to-hobbiton.html>>, accessed 20 March 2013.

¹⁸ Charles Henderson, 'New Zealand's Green Tourism push clashes with realities', *New York Times*, 16 November 2012; '100 Pure critic needs to be fair and accurate', *New Zealand Herald*, 26 November 2012; Chris Trotter, 'Welcome to Middle-earth', *Bowalley Road*, 27 November 2012, <<http://bowalleyroad.blogspot.com.au/2012/11/welcome-to-middle-earth.html>>, accessed 24 April 2013.

¹⁹ 'PM dismisses '100% Pure' criticism', *New Zealand Herald*, 26 November 2012.

²⁰ James Robinson, 'The last time I'll ever write about the Hobbit', 30 November 2012, <<http://www.stuff.co.nz>>, accessed 24 April 2013.

²¹ *The Hunt for Gollum*, <<http://www.thehuntforgollum.com>>, accessed 4 April 2013.

²² A detailed disclaimer is located on the Hunt for Gollum website.

<<http://www.thehuntforgollum.com/about.html>>, accessed 24 April 2013.

²³ *Born of Hope*, <<http://www.bornofhope.com>>, accessed 30 March 2013.