



## The Coming of the Kingdom; Mission and Middle-earth

Some reflections on the making of *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy

### Taking on a Commitment

'In those secrets we touch myth and confront universal issues, perhaps even draw new strength for our own lives' (Viggo Mortensen, *Aragorn*)

This is Viggo Mortensen talking about the experience of cinema going, suggesting that we are capable of being touched in some secret part of the self by experiencing a film. The experience can change us, challenge us with questions, make us think beyond ourselves, and give us strength. We should see cinema as much more than entertainment, but as something which can inspire our thoughts and move us deeply. The 'secrets' we are given by films can equip us for living. It is in this spirit, that, at the eleventh hour, Mortensen agreed to become Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*.

His commitment to the part and what it signified was absolute. Recruited at the last moment, after another actor was mis-cast, he arrived with a copy of the Nordic Sagas under his arm and deep in study of what one person might do in a drama of good and evil played out over many thousands of years. What is Aragorn's debt to history and tradition? What loyalty does he owe to the fellowship? What does leadership mean for him? What is the place of sacrifice, love, loyalty, obedience? Of all the actors, Mortensen was the one who insisted on carrying Aragorn's heavy (and dangerous) sword throughout. He also insisted on washing and mending his own costumes. Commitment to the part meant a complete commitment of behaviour: he remained Aragorn. In the scene with the dying Boromir in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Aragorn spontaneously took his vambraces as a sign of his commitment to deliver Gondor and to keep Boromir, even in death, as part of the Fellowship. Further, it was Mortensen, who at the completion of filming suggested that the members of the Fellowship join him in getting a tattoo (which he designed) to commemorate their experience of 'fellowship' together. The actors, going their different ways, were marked with the sign of their individual commitments to the vision.

*Does this resonate with what we think about the experience of worship?*

*How significant is our 'part' in God's cosmic drama?*

*What do we think about love, loyalty, sacrifice, obedience?*

*Do we show the same deep contemplation and commitment to being Christian, being seen and known as Christian?*

*What are the characteristics of our Fellowship?*

*What is the significance of being marked with the Sign?*





## The Vision and the Book

The making of *The Lord of the Rings* is characterised by the commitment of thousands of people to Peter Jackson's vision of Tolkien's book. Various people involved with the project have commented that he seemed to have a complete, overarching vision of the whole thing, laid out frame by frame in his head, even before he began. But this vision, nurtured by his setting it in his native New Zealand, was not set in stone and imposed on others. The testimony of those working with him to realise the vision, was that he was capable of drawing out of them work that was much better than their own pre-conceived ideas. The two main conceptual artists commented that Peter Jackson's challenge to them was especially stimulating: 'Peter is the real artist. The rest of us are merely attempting to realise his vision' (Alan Lee). Because of his enthusiasm, people would be challenged to do the impossible, and felt they wanted not to confront him with problems, but think creatively and come up with a solution. Workers on the production commented that he never criticised, but praised everything, but in a way that inspired them to do better. If he said something was 'good' they would know it wouldn't be right until it was 'excellent!'. He was also involved with everything, - every part of the project, right down to the music and the paring down of screen time in the cutting room. Another characteristic was his delight in the whole project: 'Constantly good natured and welcoming, he was always expecting to enjoy the day ahead. As a result we shared that expectation' (Ian McKellen). Ngila Dickson, the costume designer, commented that Peter Jackson's enthusiasm and interest generated more ideas and more work, but that all involved responded: 'everyone doing it for Peter! It's extraordinary!' 'Peter Jackson had invested his life in this project and I was honoured simply to pick up a spear and carry it as far as I could to help bring his vision to life' (George Marshall Ruge, Stunt Co-ordinator).

It is interesting too that the source book was seen as especially important. 'For writers and actors, it was wonderful that there was a 'bible' that could be appealed to'. 'We'd read the script to find out *what* was happening - we'd read the book to find out *why*'. Sean Astin (Sam) also referred to *The Lord of the Rings* as a Bible 'I treated the books as a Bible for the character and I used the screenplay as the map to understand the direction in which Peter, Fran and Philippa were taking us.' This meant going far beyond the usual components of a screenplay, to using Elvish as a language and to commissioning a calligrapher to hand write hundreds of documents with a quill, - including Bilbo's Red Book. Similarly, Howard Shore the composer, scoured *The Lord of the Rings* for musical references, beginning with the 'drums in the deep' in Moria and trying to remain faithful to the presence of music and song with use of choruses blended with the orchestration.

*How far do we spend time trying to discern God's vision for us?*

*How often do we refuse the energy of the vision by moaning to God about our problems rather than being inspired to find creative solutions?*

*Where might that inspiration come from?*

*How do we respond to a God who has invested his only Son's ( life and death) in the project of our salvation?*

*What will make us go beyond 'good' to strive for 'excellent'?*

*How far is the Bible a sourcebook for the screenplay of our lives?*

*How does the Bible inspire our creative efforts, the music of our lives?*





## Respecting the Environment

'There are incredible scenic vistas, but when you get down to the earth itself, every path has a destination, every rock has a history, every tree deserves the name it has. Look as hard as you like, more and more detail is always opening up. There's the macro in the micro.' (Chuck Schumann, Miniatures Director of Photography)

Using the extraordinary natural locations New Zealand has to offer enabled Peter Jackson to visualise more clearly how Middle Earth might come alive for the viewer, but also meant that everyone involved with the project had to think very hard about respect for the natural world, and conservation issues. Many of the locations were sacred to different Maori tribespeople, and their spiritual sensibilities could not be overlooked. The watchword became 'all that we ever leave behind are footprints' and for the most part it had to be ensured that there were none of those either. The project workers therefore had to carpet an entire mountainside (with real carpet) so that delicate moss would not be damaged. Bridges were carefully constructed across rivers so that fish would not be disturbed. An entire road was laid to allow vehicles access to parts of a mountain and when the filming was finished, the road was taken up again and every bit of soil and tussocks of grass laid back in its place. The gum emperor moth which comes to Gandalf on Orthanc, for animal welfare reasons, had to be nurtured carefully in a warm cupboard and released for the shot at exactly the right moment so that it could be returned to the wild with no disturbance to its life cycle. 150 horses had to be given rubber shoes at one shoeing by a team of farriers to ensure their welfare.

This environmental consciousness and care also came into the film. At one level, this meant a new understanding for everyone on the shoot of our relationship with weather. Everyone had to learn to cope with wind that ruined weeks of work on props, rain that washed away constructions, snow that smashed things under its weight, cold and chill that sapped the strength of the actors. Every word had to be lip-synched back on to the tape because of the amount of wind noise, but at the same time the sound effects people had to think extremely hard about the noise created by the environment in a way that audiences take for granted. It was not just a matter of getting a New Zealand rugby crowd to roar and cheer for the battle scenes, but the matter of imagining and recreating echoes from stone, different wind noise, the splash of every orc in a puddle, flapping of fabrics in a gale, leaves rustling, feathers moving through air- a whole creation of different sounds, which the audience will only notice at a subliminal level. This also included, thinking about the exact nature and quality of silence. This meant different aspects of the natural world had to be investigated for their ability to add up to fantastical noises. The cave troll noises are mostly walrus, for example. Moreover, the nature and texture of the natural world had to be recreated extensively to build Tolkien's kingdom. Stone had to be investigated to recreate it in Styrofoam. 'Mud' had to be manufactured in enormous quantities with the right colour, texture, stickiness and gloopiness. Also, because Peter Jackson wanted a 'painterly' look to the scenic shots, light had to be researched, so that different 'sun' effects could be created with carefully controlled amounts of smoke and to make sure that there were no overlapping shadows. The most atmospheric 'sun' effects were called 'God-rays'.

Animals and plants became a speciality of the Weta Workshop. 40 dead horses had to be constructed, - because in battle, horses die too. Moreover, the enormous amount of work on huge artificial trees (indistinguishable, except for their size from real ones) and on the miniature forest of Fangorn (fashioned from gorse bushes) required careful attention to the way plant life grows, is nurtured and dies. It required millions of silk leaves, many carefully veined and painted to reflect seasonal variations. It was felt that this careful attention had to be paid or it would not be possible to mirror





Tolkien's concerns about damage to the natural world that war and industrialisation can produce. So in the book, Gandalf and Rohan cannot prevail without their horses, Aragorn cannot heal without his plants, Merry and Pippin are useless without the Ents.

*How far do we think about the sacredness of the creation and of our responsibility to care for the environment?*

*Are we careful to leave nothing but footprints when we make use of different environments?*

*Do we respect the weather, the lifecycles of creatures, the way plant life grows? Can we learn anything of God from this?*

*Is our delight in creation purely intellectual or do we ever pay attention to the gloopiness of mud, the veins of leaves?*

*Do it matter if horses die too?*

*Does it matter if irrecoverable forests are torn up to fuel our progress?*

## Being Human

Another aspect of work on *The Lord of the Rings* was having to think about what makes humans human and how to show that other beings in the story were not. This happens on two levels, in the realisation of creatures who are 'super' human, such as the Elves and those who are 'sub' human, such as orcs. Orlando Bloom, for example, talks about the difficulty of playing a character who is over a thousand years old, set apart from human history, part of the fellowship and yet somehow beyond it. Arwen's character changed, because, although she was first developed as a warrior princess, this made her too 'human' and she only worked as a muse-like person, a source of otherworldly strength, in contrast to Eowyn. Yet, because she makes a choice for the human world, Arwen had to be modelled as one who might become human, so it is a significant moment when the branch scratches her cheek. Similarly, Weta had to deal with getting across the twisting and mutilating of creatures into orcs and Uruk-Hai, dramatically encaptured in the birthing of Lurtz from his fluid filled sac under the earth. Elves are like angels, tall, ethereal, wise, prayerful, praising and lamenting in song, despairing of the weakness and fallibility of human kind. Orcs are twisted parodies of humans, with no redeeming virtues.

Weta had to think hard about how to show how a person who has turned to evil could be revealed to an audience. With Saruman they left Christopher Lee's dark eyebrows and strands of dark hair running through the white of his beard to suggest darkness running through his whiter than white appearance: he is not what he seems. With Grima, they accentuated the asymmetry of the actor's face, thickening one eyelid and putting a cloudy contact lens in the other. They made his hair greasy and added suggestions of skin disease, before finally shaving off his eyebrows. The visual signals were all meant to convey 'wrongness' so that the audience has to ask what is 'wrong' with the person. Similarly, the exorcism and healing of Theoden by Gandalf is accompanied by a visual transformation from an old broken man with bedraggled hair, sunken eyes and liver spots to an active and determined warrior and king. With Aragorn, the kingliness is veiled, but those that have eyes to see can recognise him for who he truly is, although to the blind, he looks nothing more than a care-worn Ranger. Elsewhere, the costume designers have also had to think about different signals given by different beings. Saruman, Gandalf, Galadriel and Eowyn all wear white, but in each case, the design and choice of fabric tells us different things about who they are.

Even more interesting is the portrayal by Andy Serkis of the digitally produced creature Gollum. Serkis plays him as an addict, whose fix is the Ring, saying of him, 'Gollum is the dark side of humanity, but I tried to look at him in a non-judgmental way – not as a snivelling, evil wretch, but from the point of





view of 'there but for the Grace of God go I'. The digital character is reproduced almost naked, gangrel and grovelling, but whose inner last grains of goodness are shared with us in his internal dialogues and whose possibility for salvation is seen only by Frodo, whose eyes have been opened by Gandalf. His nakedness refuses us other visual clues, and we have to interpret, as Serkis does, what is going on in his heart.

*How often do we think about what it means to be human?*

*What is particular about being human and particular about human history?*

*What does it mean to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ? What is the role of the face in knowing and relating to people, witnessing among others?*

*How do our concepts of 'wrongness' relate to what we think about sin and evil?*

*How easily do we make judgements about others without knowing what is in their hearts?*

### **Craft and utility**

Movie-making is often entirely about illusion. What appears real is one-sided, buildings are made of plasterboard and Styrofoam. Special effects and digital imaging add characters and detail. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is no different in this respect, and different parts of the movie are created from digital effects and from photographing miniatures and identical sets at different scales. Otherwise, ingenious solutions have been devised for complex problems, for example, the silvery lines of Durin's door are made from the material used for cats' eyes on the road. Beyond this, however, there is a contribution to building Aragorn's Kingdom in Middle Earth which goes far beyond utility and which demonstrates the desire on the part of everyone working on the project to realise the vision as completely as possible, to create a world which people could be encouraged to think might actually exist. For example, expert glass-blowers were employed to make delicate elven glassware and vessels. Rug makers wove exquisite rugs to medieval designs. Coopers were asked to make proper barrels, wheelwrights to make wheels, boat builders to make elf boats, - 'we never spared any detail simply because it was difficult'. Meduseld was properly thatched when the project bought a 10 acre field of wheat, harvested, stooked it and brought it to the location. The design and execution of the doorknob at Bag End provoked hours of debate.

The dedication to making an imagined world a reality went far beyond what was necessary for the movie. For example, the complex interlocking bolt system for the heavy doors of Meduseld, was designed, lovingly built, installed and worked perfectly, but was never filmed. The horse motif of Rohan was added to the *inside* of Bernard Hill's breastplate so that it would be the last thing he saw as he transformed himself into Theoden. The master jeweller who made the one ring (in many versions) died and left it to his son to carry on the work, of which he felt immensely privileged and proud. Gandalf's robes were made by seamstresses in Indonesia, complete with stains, holes and tears. Bilbo's pockets were filled with stones to give the sense that they were actually baggy from use. 10,000 arrows were hand fletched and dyed. Thousands of elf ears were made, lasting only a few days before they melted. What is interesting is that people were encouraged, - and responded- into making props, costumes, buildings, forests and arrows to the best of their ability, even if what they produced would never actually appear in the film. Many have commented that the urge to cut corners, leave bits of the job unfinished, leave untidiness to airbrushing just would not do for this project. If they did, that would be just the part where Peter Jackson would actually want a close up. People often went





without sleep, or gave up their day jobs to serve the vision, even if this meant working to the last possible second. People were still throwing party glitter on to wet walls in the Glittering Caves as the film crew arrived.

*Do we always do our very best for God?*

*Do we only do our best if we are guaranteed a shot in the movie?*

*What do our God-given talents and abilities count for in the big picture?*

*How far does our witness depend on authenticity?*

*Where are people being duped by an illusion of the Christian faith?*

*Where are we tempted to cut corners in mission?*

### **Good and Evil, Betrayal and Sacrifice**

'When you are doing a battle, there are a hundred stories within the one story'.

Tolkien's vision requires the understanding of hand to hand fighting which we have forgotten about in our era of weapons of mass destruction which so occupy us now. The battle for Middle Earth is personal and heroic, full of different stories, as each person journeys to an uncertain future. Alliances are meaningful, not a matter of telephone conversations, but of Elwing walking into Helm's deep with a new decision changing the stories of the elves beside him, even as others are walking away to another life altogether. The different strands of the stories, demonstrate how the fellowship holds together spiritually, even when the members' journey paths are so different. Boromir's death is meaningful, not least in Frodo's treatment by Faramir. The film attempts to show us how these different but simultaneous narratives act cumulatively to determine how good can come out of evil, - the evil that is carried about Frodo's neck and which emanates from the Eye. There are questions of continuity beyond making sure that everything is in place (including how clean or dirty people should be) from shot to shot.

The interweaving of visual narrative further forces us to think hard about how a 'fellowship' tasked with a duty, deals with the forces that can make it break or snap. Throughout The Two Towers, we are taunted with the possibility that Arwen may betray her love for Aragorn, - that Aragorn may betray her for Eowyn, that Saruman the betrayer may succeed in breaking down all that is good and true and which holds fast. Yet the narratives are also used to show that good can come out of seeming evil, and events, no matter how hopeless can be changed and transformed. Gandalf returns from death and hell. We see him naked, then clothed and in his right mind, sent back to continue his purpose.

*What are the connections between the various parts of our fellowship?*

*What do we really think about the contribution of the communion of saints?*

*How do we witness to the times good comes from evil?*

*How do we make sense of the multiple narratives of Christian witness?*

*How do we deal with those things which undermine fellowship and distract us from following Christ?*

