

The Triumph of Spectacle

BY RALPH C. WOOD

Though Peter Jackson and his huge company of film-wrights resort more to spectacle than complexity, they may inadvertently establish the wry truth of the wag's saying that "The world is divided into two halves: those who have read *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*—and those who will eventually read it."

Perhaps the most obvious accomplishment of Peter Jackson's cinematic rendering of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is to have turned thousands of moviegoers into new Tolkienian readers. They will now have the chance to discover, in perusing the monumental 1200-page work, that a single word can be worth a thousand pictures. Movies form images for us; novels require us to imagine them for ourselves. Tolkien's narrative is so lengthy, his plot so complex, his characters so fully developed, his scenes so convincingly realized, that an act of considerable imaginative discipline is required for the mastering of this epic novel.

Students sometimes confess that their reading of *The Lord of the Rings* is the largest mental accomplishment of their lives. It contains so many layers of moral and religious richness that readers who first encounter Tolkien at age eight will still be reading him at age eighty. Jackson's three massively successful movies, though they occasionally probe Tolkien's ethical and spiritual depths, elicit no such repeated returns, at least for this viewer. Yet the one-time-only quality of Jackson's films may not reveal his failure as filmmaker so much as it discloses, I suspect, the limits that are inherent in his medium.

There are many things to commend in Jackson's epic effort. The first of the films, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New Line Cinema, 2001), opens with a splendid fifteen-minute recapitulation of the lengthy story concerning the

One Ring of power—how it was crafted by the demonic Sauron in order to rule over all the Free Peoples of the earth, and yet how it has come surprisingly into the possession of an obscure hobbit named Bilbo Baggins. So are many of the novel's scenes magnificently realized. The New Zealand scenery evokes the fantastically real world of Tolkien's Middle-earth, and the tunnelly hobbit-homes are finely rendered.

Jackson's special effects—whether in the brilliance of Gandalf's magical fireworks or the hideousness of the fiend called the Balrog—are also well done. Audiences are ap-

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propriately chilled by the Ringwraiths, the corrupted men whose bodies have been consumed by their submission to Sauron, leaving them as ghostly creatures who can still strike terror and wreak horror. The awful workings of Saruman's underground factory for the fashioning of the Uruk-Hai—a wicked Hitlerian

hybrid of orcs and men—are so well portrayed that they might have been borrowed from the fantastic, diabolical imagery of Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516). Yet the loveliness of the elven realm called Lorien is akin to the beauty of a Burne-Jones painting or stained glass window.

Many of Tolkien's characters are excellently portrayed. Sir Ian McKellan is a splendid Gandalf, the wry wizard who serves as guide and guardian for the Company of Nine Walkers who have been charged with the task of destroying the one ruling Ring. He is not only hoary and wise, but also shrewd and witty. Sean Bean also enacts a convincing Boromir, the brave warrior whose courage undoes him because he tries to seize the Ring from Frodo in order to wield it against Sauron. He makes appropriate penance for his sin by slaying as many orcs as he can, and he dies amidst a scene of deeply religious forgiveness pronounced by Aragorn, the rightly returning king who is well dramatized by Viggo Mortensen.

Jackson's depiction of Gollum is his real cinematic triumph. Gollum's long possession of the Ring has virtually devoured him, as Tolkien reveals that iniquity is always negating and destructive. Evil cannot bring anything true and real into being; it can only twist and pervert, wither and waste the good. The movie-Gollum is at once an emaciated old man with only a few strands of hair stringing down over his face, while at the same time being almost an infant in his childish greed, so that his loincloth might well be his diaper.

Though Gollum's movements and voice were both enacted by Andy Serkis, the shrunken hobbit's physical features were digitally realized, and it is his artificial eyes that haunt us long after the movies have finished. They reveal the remnant of hobbitic humanity that remains despite Gollum's long life of total self-absorption. And in his periodic quarrels with himself, as he ponders the doing of either good or evil, we are made to see that Gollum is not a monster but a brother, one of our own kind.

The most compelling scenes in the three movies have less to do with characters than with armies. For it is in the epic battle scenes at Helm's Deep and again in Pelennor Fields that Jackson displays the drastic new power of computer-created images to seem more real than even the most faithful documentaries. The assaults of the frightful orcs and wargs and Uruk-Hai, the deafening shrieks of the winged Nazgûl, the giant oliphaunts with their deadly swaggering tusks and their huge wooden towers manned by dozens of archers—all remain terrifying in their lifelikeness. Jackson also succeeds in convincing us that Aragorn really has resuscitated the Sleeping Dead, those unfaithful men who once broke their promises to defend the good but who, brought back from their graves, are able to atone for their earlier betrayals by fighting valiantly against the forces of Sauron.

These digital triumphs are examples of what Aristotle called *spectacle*—an excitation of the visual senses that should enhance moral and religious insight, not obliterate it. Aristotle regarded spectacle as the last and least of drama's essential elements—a crowd-pleasing device that mustn't dominate the play's central moral and spiritual conflict. Jackson not only allows spectacle to overwhelm the agonizing inward conflict that lies at the center of Tolkien's book, but seems deliberately to have done so. With each succeeding movie, Jackson turns Tolkien's slow-paced narrative into eye-assaulting action-driven films. The book almost always favors near encounters and narrow escapes over pitched battles, whereas the movies revel in brutal and bloody warfare.

Tolkien describes the actual combat at Helm's Deep, for example, with a sparing minimalism that downplays the head-severing violence and gore—while Jackson turns the book's ten-page account into a thirty-minute climax of the second movie. Yet, even if at too great a length, Jackson catches the unbowed heroism of Tolkien's courageous Company. With dauntless valor they fight against enemies who are far more numerous and unthinkably more vicious. Jackson's cinematic mastery captures both the virile strength and the exceptional virtue of Tolkien's small band of warriors. They display the death-defying gallantry that Tolkien admired in ancient heroic cultures and that he used as a model in writing *The Lord of the Rings*.

For all of their virtues, Jackson's films largely fail to fathom the moral and spiritual depths of Tolkien's work. Though they finely capture the outward battle between the forces of good and evil, they do not disclose the

dread subtlety of evil. Consider Saruman, Gandalf's fellow wizard. In the movie Peter Lee portrays him as an utterly sinister, wholly despicable creature from the very start, whereas the book reveals him to be a once-noble wizard whom Gandalf had held in great respect.

Tolkien's Saruman is an almost tragic instance of good gone wrong, a figure who wants to bring order to the world's chaos and thus to make alliance with the demonic Sauron for the sake of an allegedly benevolent despotism. Tolkien thus discloses what Jackson obscures—the desire of evil to corrupt virtues far more than to prey on vices. Boromir's stout-hearted bravery is the source of his undoing, even as the wizard Gandalf is threatened by his compassion, and the elven-queen Galadriel by her beauty. Such moral and religious profundities are largely absent from the films.

Their chief flaw, however, lies in Jackson's version of the two hobbits, Frodo and Sam. Perhaps to win over the millions of movie-going teenagers, he depicts them as raw youths rather than Tolkien's middle-aged fellows. Technical ingenuity has enabled Jackson to shrink the size of these hairy-footed halflings, but he mistakenly equates smallness of size with adolescence of character. When the film's boy-hobbits order a pint of beer, for instance, one expects the bartender to demand their IDs. It's no surprise that they are seldom shown smoking their beloved pipeweed, an activity revered by reflective men, not mere boys.

Frodo is fifty when he embarks on the Quest. Even among the long-lived hobbits, he is a full-grown creature, not a teenager. Jackson's authentically adult characters—Boromir and Aragorn, Gimli the dwarf and Legolas the elf—often command more cinematic interest than Frodo and Sam, even though these two dearest of hobbit-friends are meant to occupy the moral core of Tolkien's story.

The wonder of Tolkien's epic lies in the remarkable gap between the hobbits' small bodily bulk and their nascent maturity of character. It is undeniably true that children are drawn to the hobbits because of their diminutive size, but it is truer still that we keep reading Tolkien's trilogy as adults because the hobbits' struggles are our own. Like the other nobodies of this world, we remain at one with the hobbits in being summoned to resist—if not defeat—the enormous forces of evil. Tolkien demonstrates that, against the craft and power of the demonic, our one hope lies in refusing the policies of the wicked—in repudiating their terroristic tactics by surrendering all coercive force, so that our weakness might become our strength.

Suffice it to observe a single example of Jackson's failure in this all-important regard: the depiction of the hero himself. Whereas Tolkien's Frodo is transcendently summoned against his will to destroy the Ring—only later affirming his mysterious election—Jackson's Frodo volunteers in good Boy Scout fashion to lead the Company. Thus does the film miss the deeply providential character, not only of Frodo's original calling, but also of the entire Quest. Jackson's opacity to the Holy becomes especially evident at

the novel's climactic scene when, at the end of his arduous journey, Frodo arrives at Mount Doom, there to cast the Ring back into the melting volcanic fires where it was originally forged.

Tolkien surprises his readers by having this most heroic of all hobbits ultimately overwhelmed by the coercive power evil. Even in his utmost act of resistance against the Dark Lord, Frodo becomes his virtual puppet. Sauron overtakes Frodo's very voice, making him defiantly refuse to destroy the Ring, as he thrusts it onto his own finger instead. Against all secular optimism about freedom of choice in the face of utter evil, Tolkien shows (like Paul in Romans 7) that the human will can be bent over against its own best desires. Our only hope lies, it follows, in a transcendent goodness that can break the death-grip of evil.

Tolkien ever so subtly discloses the operations of this beneficent Power. After he has bitten the deadly band from Frodo's hand, Gollum topples into the molten lava while dancing his jig of false joy. Though it destroys much good in the process, Tolkien teaches, evil finally destroys itself. Tolkien's world is Christian in the precise Pauline sense: in all things, even in the most sinister wickedness, a providential power is at work to bring about the good.

Jackson fails to give us this tragically defeated and providentially redeemed Frodo. Instead, he has Frodo wrestle the Ring-seizing Gollum to the ground, until they both tumble over the volcanic brink. But of course Frodo clings valiantly to a ledge, as Sam tugs him back to safety, while Gollum plummets with the Ring into the river of fire. It's as if Frodo had succeeded—when the fundamental fact is that he failed, and yet that the Quest succeeds in spite of his failure. In Tolkien, even if not in Jackson, the real Lord of the Rings is not Sauron but Ilúvatar, the God who rules over Middle-earth.

Despite these flaws that are perhaps endemic to a medium whose stress is on the outward rather the inward, we must be grateful to Peter Jackson and his huge company of film-wrights for their cinematic version of Tolkien's great book. Though they have resorted more to spectacle than complexity, they may have inadvertently established the wry truth of the wag's saying that "The world is divided into two halves: those who have read *The Lord of the Rings*—and those who will eventually read it."



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