Tolkien: The Man Behind the Myth

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Abstract
This paper explores Dome Karukoski's *Tolkien* (2019), a biopic portraying the formative years of the renowned fantasy author. The movie is discussed in connection with Humphrey Carpenter's 1977 biography, aptly considered as a nodal point in the rhizomatic network of the Tolkien phenomenon. The fortune of Tolkien in the media landscape is investigated in terms of cultural dynamics and intermedial exchange, of appropriation and adaptation, and of commodification and *mediatisation*. This is done by reconstructing its most salient features and phases, with an eye to safeguarding two distinct but interrelated interests: on the one hand, literary legacy and on the other, financial gains. The case study offers a glimpse into several key issues, most notably the narrative shape given in this biopic to the connections between the life and works of a celebrity writer, the difficulty of presenting them on screen, the ideological interpretation of omissions and additions and, ultimately, the wavering relationship between the man and his myth – between Tolkien and the cultural meanings attached to his name.

Key-words: Tolkien, biopic, Dome Karukoski, Humphrey Carpenter, biography, celebrity writer.

1. From biography to biopic

In the prefatory notes to his celebrated biography of J.R.R. Tolkien – the only authorised account written by someone who had actually met the biographee and been granted access to his personal papers – Carpenter recalls how

> Tolkien himself did not entirely approve of biography. Or rather, he disliked its use as a form of literary criticism. 'One of my strongest opinions,' he once wrote, 'is that investigation of an author's biography is an entirely vain and false approach to his works.' Yet he was undoubtedly aware

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> that the remarkable popularity of his fiction made it highly likely that a biography would be written after his death; and indeed he appears to have made some preparations for this himself, for in the last years of his life he annotated a number of old letters and papers with explanatory notes or other comments. (Carpenter 2016: 9)

Therefore, the biographer concludes, "it may be hoped that this book would not be entirely foreign to his wishes" (p. 9). The large number of annotations Tolkien purposely wrote on his papers were aimed at suggesting how the emergence of most literary themes and forms could be traced back to the writer's past existence, often even minutely associated with specific events. Anecdotal records were thus to provide material for a new, posthumous kind of storytelling. Tolkien was deliberately giving his largely popular audience the most seemingly appropriate food for thought.

In the second part of Carpenter's biography, devoted to *1892-1916: Early years* – the same period covered by the biopic – nearly every single detail may be read as an anticipation of *The Lord of the Rings*' main features and characters. Chapter 1, *Bloemfontein*, is filled with such recollections. Affectionate fans of the saga will surely consider the African tarantula baby Tolkien stumbles on in one of his first walks as a direct inspiration for the giant spider Shelob (p. 27), and the "deep love of trees" he develops in his infancy as a prefiguration of the wise and ancient race of the Ents (p. 27). Tolkien's mother's playful remark "Baby does look like such a fairy when he's *very* much dressed-up in white frills and white shoes […] [;] when he's very much *un*dressed I think he looks more of an elf still" (p. 27) is self-explanatory. As readers move on, chapter after chapter – and years go by – the relatedness of biographic details to later works of fiction becomes even more explicit. Young Tolkien develops an interest in language – both in terms of history and structure – which he will then cultivate through his studies. He also invents his own private languages, the childish "Animalic" first (p. 56) and, later on, the Finnish-based "Quenya or High-elven" (p. 86), in which he starts writing poems, feeling "that it […] [needs] a 'history' to support it" (p. 108).

If Tolkien's juvenile poetry contains "the seed of his mythology" (p. 110), single incidents and personal situations will further contribute to develop the most famous fantasy trilogy ever written,

by providing tips for its setting and characterisation. Between the ages of four and eight, Ronald and his younger brother Hilary spend their happiest years roaming the countryside of Worcestershire, which will then offer a model for the hobbits' *Shire*. In 1911, while in Switzerland, the young Tolkien buys a postcard representing *Der Beggeist* – a mountain spirit portrayed as an old man with a white beard […], a wide-brimmed round hat and […] a long cloak" – later identified as the "origin of Gandalf" (p. 76). Sam Gamgee, Frodo's most trusted friend and helper, "is indeed a reflexion of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen […] [known] in the 1914 war" (p. 114). As for his immortal Elf-maidens, Tolkien draws inspiration from his wife Edith – he will later have the name Lúthien engraved on her gravestone.

Broader and repeated references are also made in the biography to Tolkien's Catholic faith, to his belonging to a brotherhood of schoolmates and friends – described as aspiring artists and poets – and to his brief but traumatic war experience, all of which have become the matter of much scholarly interest. In Carpenter's book, the investigation of the author's life is therefore designed precisely to provide an "approach to his works" (Carpenter 2016: 9), and Tolkien is surely complicit in the project. The biographical work is grounded on a *contradictio in terminis*, for Tolkien warns against using such books as keys to his own writings – while at the same time promoting exactly that line of reading.

Now, the choice of mentioning this biography before dealing with the biopic may sound strange, so a few words are required to back it up. The movie covers exactly eight chapters of the book, corresponding to part II, and finishes right when the next part, *1917-1925: The Making of a Mythology*, begins; so one might say that Carpenter's work plausibly holds a prominent place among the sources of information used to develop the script – it may be inferred that screenwriters David Gleeson and Stephen Beresford have read it, although it was never clearly stated. And yet, that is not really the point. Hutcheon 2013: 12) maintains that, instead of privileging "or at least […] [giving] priority (and therefore, implicitly, value) to what is always called the 'source' text or the 'original'", it must be acknowledged that "multiple versions exist laterally, not vertically". In Douglas Lanier's formulation, the Deleuzian-Guattarian rhizome, a "horizontal, decentered

multiplicity" partaking of the "emphasis upon becoming and difference", stands for the figuration of a development not governed by any teleology, "a mutuality of change between otherwise unconnected elements" (Lanier 2014: 27-8). So, whether the 2019 biopic relies on this specific hypotext or not, Carpenter's biography represents a focal node in the open-ended, dynamic, rhizomatic "process of appropriation which actively creates, rather than passively decodes" (p. 25) the cultural object.

Moreover, the biographer's initial warning about Tolkien's disapproval of biographies (and, by extension, of biopics) lays the foundation for a critically updated research agenda, if seen through the lens of postmodern self-reflexive irony. The underlying assumption can easily be guessed: the life story of a famous writer is liable to engender undesirable confusion between fantasy and reality, between fictional characters and the man whose pen actually carved them. Tolkien's complaint, however, sounds like feigned outrage when set against the backdrop of the real world. Celebrities know that their private lives are constantly exposed to public attention, so they must be prepared for biographical intrusions of different kinds.

This is all much in line with the assumptions of contemporary celebrity studies, even the more so in the context of the *mediatisation* of culture and society (Hepp 2013). As Graeme Turner puts it,

> While the development of the star turned the individual into a commodity to be marketed and traded with greater freedom and flexibility by the industry, it also gave that star[s] access to a new kind of power. They could now construct a relationship with their audience that was independent of the vehicles in which they appeared. With this shift, the individual star[s] had a personal and professional interest in promoting themselves – and not just the latest product in which they had played a role – through the media. (Turner 2014: 15)

Modern celebrities are "overwhelmingly a product of media representation" and must therefore undergo, willingly or not, a process of *celebritisation* which "crosses the boundary between the public and the private worlds, preferring the personal, […] or 'veridical' self […] as the privileged object of revelation" (p. 8). The private-public dichotomy underpinning similar lines of argument arouses false expectations; for, traditionally, the private self is taken

to be true (namely good), while the public self is considered false (namely bad). Rather than judged on these premises, *mediatised* celebrities should be approached irrespective of the private-public split and, mostly, of any subsequent axiological orientation. In so far as they are given higher visibility, and consequently higher importance by and through the media, celebrities become *media people* (Couldry 2003) and thus share the same intrinsic inauthenticity of contemporary popular culture. Celebrities can even sometimes be seen as the human equivalent of the *pseudo-events*, "fabricated for the media and evaluated in terms of the scale and effectiveness of their media visibility" (Turner 2014: 5). Being the result of "the processes through which cultural identity is negotiated and formed", *media people* are entirely dependent on "the representational strategies employed by the media in their treatment" (p. 4).

Karukoski's biopic *Tolkien* is a perfect case study for dealing with such issues. Even if it is probably too soon to take stock – the film premiered in London on April 29, 2019, but its first Italian screening only occurred on September 26 – reviews often harp on its blunt unfaithfulness. Some reviewers even came to suggest a list of more authentic or reliable readings on the subject, with Carpenter's biography ranking first. However, no allusion has been made so far to the fact that all the readings in the list, including that biography, could be equally labelled as post-authentic *mediatisation*, located in a rhizomatic network of interactions. And, accordingly, the biopic may not be considered "so much [as] a film about a life as it is a film about competing and intersecting discourses, with the life itself being simply one of those discourses that is transformed by the work of the others" (Man 2000: vi).

2. The Tolkien phenomenon

Quite unexpectedly, Tolkien – a philologist, medievalist and Oxford academic – achieved enormous worldwide success as the author of a fantasy trilogy he had in fact started writing for his own children, John Francis, Michael, Christopher, and Priscilla. Christopher himself became his chief collaborator: as a child, he had been asked to highlight inconsistencies in the stories; as a boy, he typed the stories up, contributed to the editing process and drew the maps for *The Lord of the Rings*; after his father's death, he became his

literary executor, giving a final shape to a long list of posthumous works, mostly unfinished. A member of the Inklings – the literary discussion group set up by his father and C.S. Lewis, among others – Christopher graduated from Oxford, where he had, of course, read Old English, Middle English, Old Norse and the related literatures. He had begun "to make a name for himself as a philologist and medievalist" (Honegger 2006) as well as working as a lecturer and a tutor in the same university.

When J.R.R. Tolkien died, however, Christopher abandoned his career. From that moment on, he devoted his life to the project of making Tolkien's writings accessible to a wide public, while expressing his perplexity about such popularisations as Peter Jackson's movies. He lamented "the chasm between the beauty and seriousness of the work, and what it has become", adding that "the commercialization has reduced the aesthetic and philosophical impact of the creation to nothing" (Tolkien 2012). His father had sold the *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* movie rights during his lifetime, for financial reasons; Christopher, who was the director of both the Tolkien Estate and the Tolkien Trust, never agreed to do that again for any other work.

From that moment on, the Tolkien phenomenon has taken the shape of a branched-chained sequence of appropriations and adaptations, alternatively missed or fulfilled (Desmet and Iyengar 2015). Thomas Cartelli (1999: 15) states that "appropriations generally work for the interest of the appropriator and against the interest of the work or author being appropriated […][; while] adaptations […] have more of a 'tributary' relationship to the original, 'feeding off' the latter's 'fame or prestige'"; in this case, however, it is not always easy to spot the difference. This is clearly a contentious issue, for the films unquestionably prompted millions of people to read the original trilogy as well as Christopher's newly published books, which in turn increased the demand for new motion pictures.

Moreover, "the history of the Tolkien Estate versus Tolkien adaptations has been messy for years, especially with […] [the] lawsuit […] against Warner Bros" (Salemme 2019). The Estate and the book publisher HarperCollins claimed that unauthorised exploitation and merchandising of characters from Tolkien's books in digital gambling and video games had caused irreparable harm to Tolkien's reputation. In 2015, however, the Court of Appeals

decided that Tolkien's heirs had breached contract and that they could be sued for suing. In 2017 the $80 million lawsuit was settled, and a Warner Bros spokesperson declared to *The Hollywood Reporter*: "The parties are pleased that they have amicably resolved this matter and look forward to working together in the future" (Gardner 2017).

In the same year, 93-year-old Christopher Tolkien resigned from the Estate. It was the end of an era in which cultural legacy and financial gains, though bound up together, had been handled separately. On November 13 it was announced that the television rights for *The Lord of the Rings* had been sold to Amazon. A multi-season TV series is due for release in 2021, on the 20th anniversary of Jackson's first movie of the saga. The story, being developed by JD Payne and Patrick McKay, with *Game of Thrones* writer and co-executive producer Bryan Cogman, will be set in Middle-earth before the events of the trilogy take place, so the potential for additional spin-off series seems high. Sharon Tal Yguado, head of scripted series for Amazon Studios at the time, said: "We are honored to be working with the Tolkien Estate and Trust, HarperCollins and New Line [cinema]" (Gonzalez 2017), which confirms that an unprecedented and mutually profitable collaboration era had just started.

Amazon's announcement raised expectations which could not be promptly met, and Karukoski's biopic – which the Tolkien Estate immediately disowned – is obviously a response to this renewed interest and huge demand. The biopic shifts focus from the books to the author, in order to uncover the man behind the myth (Shippey 2000: 161-225), by providing what the leading actor Nicholas Hoult described as "a really respectful version of […] [Tolkien's] younger life and what inspired him" (Leadbeater 2019). The fact that Tolkien's great-grandson made a brief appearance in the movie as a World War I soldier, Hoult notes, means that, at least in principle, the family were not against the biopic. Karukoski explained that the Estate's "statement wasn't hostile at all […], it felt more like, 'please, journalists, don't call us'" (Pearson 2019); he also admitted that "there was a benefit to their distance during filming", so he could work without taking the risk of "servicing them" (Salemme 2019). The director insisted that the movie was not intended to gratify or satisfy any specific need or expectation. When asked in

an interview whether "the extent of […] [Tolkien's] fame and the intensity of his fans […] [had added] any extra pressure", since "a significant percentage of […] [them had] done their own research into the events of his real life", Karukoski answered:

> Yes and no. When you're making a film about an icon that's so important for people […], you assume […] correctly. What I did for the research period was to meet different levels of fans, […] different experts. […] You find people saying totally different opinions […]. So the answer is, yes there's pressure, but the answer is also no, because you can't please everybody. (Pearson 2019)

Karukoski, a Tolkien fan himself, had his own expectations. In the past he used to think of Tolkien as someone who would be sitting with "C.S. Lewis in the Eagle and Child [pub in Oxford] smoking a pipe, drinking a pint and […] debating elves" (Gurd 2019). Yet, when he read David Gleeson's and Stephen Beresford's script with every intention of turning it down – he had just finished *Tom of Finland* and did not want to do another biopic – he had "the revelation […] that […] [it was] actually a cinematic, epic story: the story of the youth and the inspiration… well, now, okay, […] *not* a biopic" (Gurd 2019). To him it was not a story about someone else's life: it dealt with his own and, possibly, with everybody's feelings – the constant human desire to find a place, to experience social belonging, and the woefully abrupt destruction wreaked by the war, either literally or metaphorically. In Karukoski's view, this is also what Tolkien's fantasy is about: the dragon Fafnir, for instance, "is a mythological creature that represents your biggest fear […] [of] losing your friends and […] love" (Leadbeater 2019). That is why Karukoski wanted moviegoers "to go into the emotions, into what the character is feeling"; emotional material should be seen as "inspiration and […] sketches of a painting that […] [Tolkien] later uses", so the film had to be "intertwined with […] [that] and […] [not] just as a fantasy element in an action sequence" (Leadbeater 2019).

Karukoski's claim that his approach has nothing to do with biopics may of course be questioned; Moulin, for instance, writes that in such movies "analytical or interpretative discourse […] is carried out allegorically, by means of what T. S. Eliot called an

'objective correlative': 'a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion'" (2016: 8). But, whatever the case, this is not what audiences seem to get from the movie; at least, this is not the way it has so far been interpreted in subsequent reviews, which happen to be, at their best, lukewarm. Karukoski had his own Tolkien in mind, yet it was impossible to disregard the most influential representations in the pre-existing rhizomatic "web of adaptations, allusions and (re)productions" (Lanier 2014: 9). Nobody, not even the scriptwriters and the director, could disregard them. Therefore, the movie was seen to confirm the notion that every aspect of the saga is grounded in biographical details, just as Carpenter's biography had led people to expect.

The film trailer is revealing in this respect. We hear the voices of actors Lily Collins (Tolkien's future wife) and Nicholas Hoult (J.R.R. Tolkien). Collins asks for a story, and Hoult replies: "It's a story about journeys. The journeys we take to prove ourselves. It's about inventions. It's about potent magic. Magic beyond anything anyone has ever felt before. It's about what it means to love and to be loved. It's about courage. It's about fellowship". As the actors speak, a roundup of episodes illustrates each part of Tolkien's juvenile story, or rather of his subsequent myth, up to the iconic climax, as golden capital letters of the writer's surname revolve around the O – a perfect ring – and then align to compose the word "Tolkien". Karukoski knew that it would be more difficult to present "the emotional growth of the character" in the trailer than in the longer, and more "slowly building" film (Leadbeater 2019). Here the man and the myth become one and the same, his formative youth being only an anticipation of his later writings.

Many reviewers found Karukoski's teleology flawed and unconvincing. Bibbiani (2009) defined the biopic as a "ceaseless parade of foreshadowing, suggesting that every microscopic part of J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy novels was based on a specific, real-life event [, which] […] reduces everyone Tolkien knew to supporting players in someone else's shameless 'great man' narrative". Moreover,

> One of the most frustrating things about *Tolkien* is that the film doesn't seem to be about the creation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* — it looks like it's about the creation of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*. […] The significance of Tolkien's life is not that it inspired six action movies;

> it's that he wrote some of the most beautiful books in the English language. The overwhelming emphasis on connecting the biopic *Tolkien* to a bunch of blockbusters with more mainstream appeal seems calculated to the point of total insincerity. (Bibbiani 2009)

In the film, the battlegrounds are actually haunted by strangely prophetic visions: "explosions take the shape of the Balrog, flamethrowers turn into dragons, and Sauron himself looms in the distance" (Bibbiani 2009). If, for Karukoski, such images were supposed to take on a wider emotional significance, on the visual level they suggest a straightforward and easy equation. Jackson's films, in turn, can be seen as "a starting place as much as an end product of adaptation" (Hunter 2007: 154); being "a compendium of allusions both to earlier versions of the novel and to widely disseminated interpretations of it", they "ultimately inhabit generic and intertextual worlds well beyond Tolkien" (p. 160). The most palpable analogy between the biopics and the *Lord of the Rings* movies, then, is that they both address the "devoted fans of the books", in the hope that customer loyalty may prompt readers to look "forward to the films as a way of continuing the experience of the books and validating their devotion to them" (p. 157). So, as far as *Tolkien* is concerned, the real problem is not how accurate the picture of life is, but what versions of celebrity are implicit in the cinematic depiction, as well as in its critical assessments.

It has been noted that "the movie takes several liberties, changing up events or downplaying key moments from Tolkien's story" (Bacon 2019). The film opens in the trenches of the Somme, where a feverish young lieutenant Tolkien is desperately looking for his dear friend Geoffrey, with the help of his batman, conveniently named Sam; the narrative flow is then mostly developed through flashbacks. There are hints to the happy years spent in rural England, to the bleak atmosphere of Birmingham, to Tolkien's mother reading mythological tales, to her illness and death. Under the guardianship of a Catholic priest, Father Francis, Ronald is then sent with his brother to Mrs. Faulkner's boarding house, where he meets his future wife Edith, a fellow orphan.

The film conveys a heritage-like visual portrayal of actual biographical spaces: the vitally colourful countryside and the squalidly grey urban environment conflate in the dim interiors

of the Birmingham rooming house, where dusky William Morris wallpaper provides a stylish indoor sight of the natural world. The tones become lighter in the following part and, particularly, after Ronald's arrival at Oxford, a place which represents "the end of a dark era to him" so that in the movie, from then on, "fittingly, the light gets in" (Edelbaum 2019). As Karukoski explained, most of the original places no longer exist: industrial Birmingham "was bombed and [irreparably] altered" (Edelbaum 2019), and Barrow's tea-rooms were moved to a new location in the 1960s. So "the production [was] set in Liverpool, Manchester, and Oxford (the historic university […] [playing] itself)" (Edelbaum 2019); the latter viewed as the quintessential English university and, of course, as an icon of Englishness (Soares 1999). Both the director and production designer Grant Montgomery see the recreated settings as "part of a love letter from the writer's memory": "Whether in a boarding house or Ronald's favorite tea room, these settings represent the cozy, elegiac dampness one associates with early 20th century England houses" (Edelbaum 2019).

The movie has been described as "largely accurate in its representation of the T.C.B.S" (Bacon 2019), the all-male *Tea Club, Barrovian Society* which Tolkien founded at King Edward's School with Geoffrey Bache Smith, Christopher Wiseman, and Robert Gibson. Their friendship would last until World War I, when Robert and Geoffrey died – the latter killed just after he had sent a moving farewell letter to Tolkien, who convinced Geoffrey's reluctant mother to publish her son's poetry with his own foreword. The biopic has also been praised for "young Tolkien's prewar ecstatic conversion to the world of philology at Oxford, with Derek Jacobi's sharp-tongued professor telling him to write a 5,000-word essay on the Norse influence on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* before teatime" (Bradshaw 2019).

Tolkien's troubled love affair with the pianist Edith – who in the film presses him into mythopoeia and even suggests the idea of the ring via Wagner – is also given ample space. In order to go to Oxford Tolkien needed a scholarship, so Father Francis forced him to forsake his Protestant girlfriend, at least until he would be of age, by which time, however, she was already engaged to someone else. Reviewers pointed out several inaccuracies in this part, and at least two blatant omissions: there is no reference to the fact that Ronald

induced Edith to convert to Catholicism and that their marriage took place before he left for the war.

As far as religion is concerned, the film does not even mention that Tolkien's mother had become a Catholic after her husband's death and that her family had ostracised her for that. Also, "there is no indication that […] [Tolkien] served Mass daily as a boy or ever even entered a Catholic church" (Bois 2019). Catholicism, usually regarded as a distinctive trait of Tolkien's life and work, is here treated "as if it was some afterthought, a brief passing blurb in his life that played little to no role whatsoever" (Bois 2019). This noteworthy ellipsis is brought about for clearly ideological reasons. If Tolkien's religious beliefs and conservative views had been emphasised, they would have made him unfit for a biopic "in the deluxe mode of BBC realism […] identified with Miramax-style Anglophilia"; so the movie purposely followed "a liberal agenda", presenting "his private imagination […] [as] unrelated to any specific belief system; Edith […] [as] a budding feminist; and his Platonic friendship with Geoffrey […] [as an indication of] open-minded sexual solidarity" (White 2019).

Moreover, as is typical of heritage films, the reference to locational and historical icons of Englishness could also be seen as a strategy for "selling […] [the film] (back) to British audiences as US success[…]" (Monk 1995: 118); so the appeal of cultural heritage may be exploited "as part of the enterprise of marketing […] Britain's past (or rather, highly constructed and selective images of it) as a commodity" (p. 116). This may also be the reason why, in most posters, Karukoski's credit is entirely omitted: only the names of Hoult and Collins – both English-born – are on display. Yet *Tolkien* has clearly a multiple cultural origin, due to its American production, Irish and English screenwriters, Finnish director and mainly British actors. One might account for this project in terms reminiscent of the debate on heritage films in the nineties: "However much these films appear to incarnate 'Englishness', they are at the same time films in which 'Englishness' is blatantly a *construct*, a product of cross-cultural masquerade, intrinsically impure" (p. 120).

While important details concerning religion have been overlooked, several crucial events related to the war have been artfully added. Thomas Bacon (2019) wrote that "the Battle of the Somme did impact Tolkien (but he wasn't near death)"; neither did

he venture to risk his life in an attempt to find Geoffrey on the front line, nor did he know a foot soldier named Sam. Tolkien did not rush to join the army: he deferred enlisting until he had graduated; then, rather unheroically, he developed trench fever and was sent home, never found fit to fight since.

In the biopic, Tolkien becomes a sort of heroic war-novelist, someone who can be expected, at a later stage, to deal with war trauma in his works. This is not something altogether new for an audience already familiar with his involvement in the Battle of the Somme and with the fact that "Tolkien's [...] maverick voice expresses aspects of the war experience neglected by his contemporaries" (Garth 2003: 287). The movie effectively portrays the horrors and the carnage of the Great War, and the atrocious conditions of trench warfare, but it is difficult to accept that the exhausted young officer crawling on his hands and knees through the trenches, then running across the battlefield for the sake of the supreme value of human friendship is in fact just a premonition of Frodo Baggins striving to reach Mount Doom and destroy the One Ring. Besides, this "Frodo-centric" structure is just another legacy of Jackson's movies, which transformed an acentric – and not even remotely cinematic – literary trilogy into "a sequential character-driven quest narrative (albeit a quest to dispose of rather than discover something)" (Hunter 2007: 163).

It is no surprise that the juxtaposition between the man and the hobbit has been considered incongruous. The war scenes are stuffed with references to British War Poets, such as the gas and "thick green light" of Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est* (1918). The fiery monsters looming in the distance – the incongruous intrusion of Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* imagery – may then be interpreted as the delirious visions of a shell-shocked soldier. As a matter of fact, highbrow literary critics have taught us that the two cultural myths alluded here are utterly incompatible: on the one hand, the mythology of War Poets and, later, of Modernists, roughly identified by Pound's catch-phrase "Make it new!; on the other, that of fantasists, led by Tolkien, under the slogan – one may say – "Make it old". As I.Q. Hunter puts it,

> The "official" line on Tolkien remains a toxic mix of contempt for his Catholicism and conservative politics, disapproval of the fantasy genre as

a deviation from the true path of modernism, and snobbish distaste for Tolkien's readership, who are typically constructed as childish, regressed, and nerdish devotees of escapism. (Hunter 2007: 155-56)

Recent critical studies, however, have started questioning these assumptions. Simone Bonechi maintains that:

Tolkien and the War Poets […] start from similar backgrounds. They are restless young men, feeling the tensions of their times (the gradual encroachment of the countryside by the expanding cities, the levelling preponderance of the industrial *Machine*, the loss of values and beauty, and the problems of a changing society). They strive to solve these issues […] by re-establishing the right values through the recovery of a plainer and more immediate language and, finally, by following antithetical artistic paths from all that had come before, opposing the inner and the irrational to the rigid and philistine Victorian positivism. (Bonechi 2019: 209)

Brian Attebery (2014: 42) even proposes "looking at early-twentieth century fantasy as not an anachronistic alternative to Modernism but as one of its important manifestations"; fantasy may thus "at times be best analysed as a residual component, at others as emergent, but in both cases [should be seen] as part and parcel of the era, partaking fully in its cultural convulsions". After all, Jonathan Dollimore insists that "subordinate, marginal, or dissident elements […] [can also] appropriate dominant discourses and likewise transform them in the process" (Dollimore and Sinfield 1985: 12). Modernist reworking of myth could then apply to Tolkien as well as – or rather better than – to Joyce.

One may wonder whether the screenwriters and director of the biopic were aware of this turn in current scholarship and intentionally tried to conflate the two things. Be that as it may, it is clear that the already mentioned Hollywood liberal agenda could not provide the sophisticated means needed to abridge a still very much perceived cultural distance – not in this movie, not now or, maybe, not yet.

3. Conclusion

Pace Karukoski's *Tolkien* is in fact a biopic, a genre at times ungenerously accused of falling short both as a *bio* – for not being

truthful enough – and as a *pic* – for failing to be cinematically engaging (Cheshire 2015: 10). Of all subjects, writers are possibly the ones that directors find more "difficult to convey on screen"; so, "there has been a tendency to downplay the actual act of writing and […] either draw […] parallels between what they write about and their lives, or how events serve as inspiration for their emotional inner life and its transfer to the written page" (p. 49).

Reviews of *Tolkien* lodge similar objections. Yet, in that respect, Carpenter's successful biography does not differ much from the film. The issue at stake is not, of course, comparing and contrasting different media; the notion of the supposed "inferiority of film to print as a medium for history" (Moulin 2016: 5) has long been refuted, by Robert A. Rosenstone (1988, 2006) and Hayden White (1975, 1988, 2010) among others.

Carpenter's book which, like all successful biographies, blends "the verifiable information of research with a narrative imagination" (Benton [2009] 2015: 37), was published more than 40 years ago, at a time when fidelity and authorisation were seen as "powerful means for ranking rival adaptations" (Lanier 2014: 26). It comes as no surprise then that it should have been taken as the ultimate standard of truth by at least two generations of Tolkienians. The recently issued film, on the other hand, is the outcome of an age of postfidelity and intermediality: an age in which, nonetheless, some biopics are still "relying on linearity and an accumulation of facts to provide a strong logical thread and sense of progress" (Vidal 2014: 5). The similarity between the two cultural products, then, may very well be more apparent than substantial.

Both make use of the "'rags-to-riches' myth of the individual imposing himself against all odds at the end of an unflinching fight against adversity, to finally make a significant contribution to the life and history of the national, and universal community" (Moulin 2016: 3); but each must be addressed as a context-sensitive construct, providing its own specific version of celebrity within the given framework, or paradigm. Largely created by their consumers and usually confirmatory of dominant ideology (Rojek 2001), celebrities can only be investigated through their representations, both ideologically and discursively constructed.

Karukoski's movie is then just the last link in a nonlinear chain made of rings and lords, fathers and sons, authors and audiences,

and more. If it is true that "a biopic is a mythic expression in which several textual and contextual factors often play a part" (Man 2000: v), this film weaves the threads of old and new myths into the story of a myth-maker like Tolkien. It deals with a journey which starts from the real person of the writer, crosses the field of his artistic production and may even stretch out to envision prequels, sequels and, broadly speaking, all kinds of spin-offs. Or perhaps, as far as *Tolkien* is concerned, the journey may go the other way: from the texts to the self, and back. Until the next ring of the chain.

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