"Straight Outta Mordor"
Race as the Monstrous Other in Contemporary Fantasy Film

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Abstract English

In fantasy films, the race of orcs is traditionally used as an endless supply of enemies. The following master’s thesis explores the racial codings of orcs and how their representation relates to modern discourses of racism. It approaches the issue through a comparison of Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003) and David Ayer’s *Bright* (2017). A theoretical section analyzes the characteristics of fantasy as a genre. Based on Brian Attebery (1992), it positions Peter Jackson’s trilogy as a pivotal text within the genre of fantasy film. Its racial configurations are explored using theories based on Helen Young (2015), Richard Dyer (1997), and Edward Said (1979). The analysis concludes that Jackson’s uncritical treatment of racialized enemies helps to enforce a genre culture that generally considers whiteness as the norm for heroes and racial Otherness as the norm for enemies. Through his dehumanized depiction of orcs as irredeemable villains, romanticized images of war become possible, a sentiment which reflects US American discourse on the War on Terror in the early 2000’s. Heavily inspired by Jackson’s films, *Bright* aims to reverse the configurations of Self and Other by presenting an orc protagonist. However, the film fails to create a coherent concept of race and racism within its secondary world. While presented as an extension to the discourse of police violence in the US, *Bright* enforces an allegorical reading that foregrounds race as a biological fact and therefore undermines any productive altercation with the issue of racism. This shows that the use of orcs in fantasy conjures a racial essentialism that complicates the possibility to critically approach sensitive issues such as race.

Abstract Deutsch


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What is Fantasy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Components of the Fantastic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1. Sub-Creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2. Recovery, Escape, and Consolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3. Characterization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The Politics of Fantasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1. Allegory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Defining the Genre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1. Fantasy as “Fuzzy Set”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2. Commercial Fantasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Fantasy on Screen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1. Peter Jackson’s <em>Lord of the Rings</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2. Blockbuster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The Fantasy of Race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1. Race in Fantasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2. Fantasy and Racial Essentialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. The Status of Whiteness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1. Medievalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2. Neomedievalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3. Orientalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. The Politics of Monsters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1. Orcs in Fantasy Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2. Racial Monsters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Race in Peter Jackson’s <em>The Lord of the Rings</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1. Racial Essentialism in Middle Earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Peter Jackson’s Orcs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Introduction

In fantasy film, the impossible becomes reality. In times of SFX prosthetics and CGI animation, dragons, elves, orcs, dwarves, and wars of epic proportions can turn from words on a page to images on a screen. Not bound by the restrictions of reality, fantasy can unfold its imaginative power to create completely new worlds with new creatures, civilizations, cultures, and wondrous magic. But while the premise of the genre allows for a sheer infinite variety, audiences will soon discover that many works of fantasy center around the same idea: a white, pseudo-European society with patriarchal structures and a plot that often revolves around conservative themes such as the protection of a kingdom. If people of color are portrayed at all—some will say that their existence is not realistic because fantasy is set in ‘the medieval times’—they are mostly portrayed as savage, evil, or a threat to be defeated. Moreover, fantasy has the tendency to portray worlds inhabited by different races, a concept which is usually treated as biological fact. This often leads to problematic depictions of good and evil, which usually peak in the portrayal of the orcs, a fantasy race that is known for its savage cruelty. Often, these monsters are coded in a way that unambiguously reminds of colonialist depictions of non-white cultures.

The most influential visual depictions of orcs originate from Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, consisting of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Two Towers* (2002), and *The Return of the King* (2003). While the films were massively successful, they constructed a worrying image of the orcs as dark-skinned savages that were effectively contrasted with the white heroes of Middle Earth. These images have ever since been repeated, often without a critical examination of their codings. For years, the category of the evil, dark, and savage orc was hardly questioned within the genre, until the end of 2017, when Netflix released its first independently produced blockbuster *Bright*. The film starring Will Smith and Joel Edgerton follows two police officers in a version of modern-day Los Angeles in which humans, elves, orcs, and other fantasy races share the urban living space. *Bright* breaks with the traditions of the genre by portraying an orc (Edgerton) and an African American man (Smith) as their protagonists, exploring topics of race, racism, and police violence within a fantasy world. However, the film’s perspective also poses a number of questions. Most central is its position as an extension of the racial discourse within the US. Can a fantasy film successfully create an allegory of anti-black police violence by depicting it as anti-orc police violence, or is the
comparison trivializing the issue, maybe even comparing people of color to literal monsters? And if it is just a fantasy film, do these questions even matter?

While fantasy films are first and foremost a source of entertainment, it would be ignorant to ignore the power film holds when it comes to how the world and its inhabitants are perceived. Studies claim that the cinematic medium is a severe influence on the way, race relations in the United States are understood (Hughey 546f). When the worlds that are constructed for escapist purposes repeat images of the defeat of racialized enemies, they shine a light on the underlying discourse of race in the real world. Motivated by the constant recreation of racially loaded depictions of Otherness within the monsters of fantasy, this thesis aims to explore the racial coding of the race of orcs in contemporary fantasy film.

To establish a basis for discussion, the first section will set out to explain the workings of fantasy as a genre and the process of fantastic worldbuilding. It is dedicated to the question of how a genre that is not restricted by reality can be productively defined and what influences and characteristics fantasy texts share. Moreover, it explores fantasy film in relation to its status as a commercial product.

The second section of the paper then examines the issue of race and how it is represented in fantasy. To enable a discussion, the concept of race and its history, effect, and relevance within society is explained first. Based on this follows an analysis about how these ideas are translated into fantasy and how fantasy races differ from the real world. Moreover, the chapter explains the concept of whiteness in fantasy and how its depictions are influenced by habits of (neo)medievalism and orientalism. Eventually, the chapter concludes with the question of how fantastic monsters are situated in this discourse and how the orcs as endless supply of enemies came into being.

The third section introduces the empirical half of this thesis. It explores the question of how race is represented within the monsters of Peter Jackson’s trilogy. It explores its influences, its worldbuilding and the way in which orcs are situated within a dichotomy of Self versus Other. Furthermore, it looks into the relationship between Middle Earth and New Zealand and the underlying colonial discourse that influenced the casting decisions of the movie. Moreover, it reveals how the coding of the film bears relevance to the socio-political climate of the early 2000’s and how this influences the
reading of Tolkien’s texts in order to make it applicable for modern discourses of war, nationalism, and identity.

Finally, the last section of the thesis is dedicated to an in-depth analysis of the racial configurations of *Bright*. It first explores *Bright*’s unique position within the market space, as well as its relation to its predecessors: is *Bright* creating a new sub-genre of fantasy by combining Tolkienian fantasy with the structures of a buddy cop film, or does it conform to the expectations of the genre? Then follows a critical examination of how *Bright* produces (and aims to produce) an allegory for racism through the use of fantasy races. Is it possible to effectively present a statement about racial discrimination in the real world, where race is imagined, with the aid of a fantasy world, in which race is real?

2. What is Fantasy?

Fantasy as a genre is difficult to define. The term *fantasy* itself derives from the Latin “phantasticus”, which evolved from the Greek form “φανταστικός”, denoting something that is imaginary, fictional, or unreal (Jackson 13). According to this definition, every work of fiction would qualify as fantasy, as fiction is inherently not real. But there appears to be an unspoken, yet universal consensus about what fantasy is. At any time, most bookstores, videogame shops, or cinemas offer at least one product branded as ‘fantasy’. But this availability obscures the boundaries of the genre even further. A plethora of disparate works fill the shelves under a similar branding, making it increasingly difficult to define where fantasy begins and where it ends. The following chapter aims to delineate these boundaries and explain how the genre can be applied in a productive way.

Even though the idea of a European medieval fantasy— with castles, knights, dragons, and sorcerers—appears to be a common marker for the genre, fantasy is not an exclusively European invention. Instead, fantastic texts can be found in cultures all over the world, from China to Egypt, Persia to ancient Rome and Greece, and often serve as a basis for myths, tales, and legends that pervade the respective cultures (Matthews 2). Supposedly, the first recorded fantastic tales were magical stories from early Egypt, dating to about 2000 B.C.E. (ibid.). Yet these tales, while using the fantastic mode, were not constitutive of a coherent fantastic genre (Attebery “Stories” 23). Instead, in Western culture, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) is generally recognized as the foundation of
modern fantasy (Rutledge 237). With Shelley as a starting point, fantasy has developed into “one of the most prominent genres in twenty-first-century Western popular culture” (Young “Habits” 1). Yet, it still utilizes many of the classic structures, archetypes, and motifs from its ancestors in myth, legend, fable, folk-tale, and romance (Swinfen 2). While this further contributes to the confusion around the genre’s boundaries, it also shows its versatility; the fantastic includes the possibilities to explore various structures and stories and has been a crucial part of human storytelling for millennia.

But if fantasy is so versatile, how can it possibly be delineated as a genre? While there are a plethora of different approaches, there appears to be a consensus about the essential unreality of the genre. Brian Attebery, who heavily influenced academic research of the fantastic, describes fantasy as “one degree more fictional than fiction” (“Stories” 21). Therefore, not all fiction is fantasy, even though all fiction is inherently unreal. Fantasy does not aim to recreate the real world—instead, it intentionally violates what the author and readers know to be natural laws (Attebery “Tradition” 2). This violation is what Armitt describes as “(im)possibilities lying ‘beyond the horizon’”, the horizon describing what is known as fact and law of the natural world (214). For Colin Manlove, it is crucial how the audience perceives the unreal world. He defines fantasy as a fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms. (1) The impossible worlds of fantasy therefore appear strange at the beginning but invite the reader in and make the unreal seem real. What lies beyond the horizon of the possible is not necessarily defined by one mode; instead, it might include different sub-genres, from high fantasy to cyberpunk (Armitt 214). What differentiates fantasy from science-fiction, however, is the former’s focus on impossibility; while science fiction aims to describe fantastic and utterly unreal worlds that might come true if technology evolves in a certain way, fantasy usually displays the entirely impossible (Simpson 19; Mendelsohn/James 3). Unfortunately, these distinctions, however appealing in their absoluteness, are often misleading; after all, the world of Star Wars (1977) is hardly more likely to come true than Middle Earth. Therefore, an aspect appears to be the temporal orientation; while science fiction is perceived as the possible future, fantasy, with its castles and kings, often takes inspiration from the unchangeable past (Mendelsohn xxi). But, as the subject of this
paper will illustrate, not all fantasy is set in the Middle Ages; the delineation between the genres often appears to be a choice the producer and dependent on how the product is marketed.

While fantasy is removed from reality, it stands in relation to it. Rosemary Jackson claims that fantasy “takes the real and breaks it” (20). For something to be fantastic, it has to be contrasted with the real. The fantastic therefore stands as a response to literary mimesis and realism, as for something to be perceived as unreality, reality needs to be established in the first place (Mendelsohn/James 7). Attebery claims that fantasy even “depends on mimesis for its effectiveness”—in order to fully experience the wonders of the fantastic, it must have a “point of contact” with reality, even if this point of contact is simply the language in which the tale is told (“Strategies” 4). Ann Swinfen adds to the argument that the connection to reality is necessary to make the audience care for the events within the text (76). For example, this could relate to the structures of morals and ethics within the world: it would technically be possible to create a fantasy world in which murder and rape are socially accepted, but it would be near impossible for audiences to develop compassion and sympathy for characters committing these crimes. As this example illustrates, fantasy does not transcend the primary reality, instead, it rather reorganizes for its audiences to re-discover (Jackson 8; Attebery “Tradition” 36). Attebery claims that as soon as the audience finds themselves in a fantastic setting, they start searching for the familiar (“Strategies” 67). Fantasy, then, is a useful tool for reflection, as well as a playing field to test different constellations of society, culture, and humanity.

3. Components of the Fantastic

In the past, a great deal of academic effort has been dedicated to the distinction of the genre, but the plurality of the concept makes it difficult to apply traditional methods. Fantasy is not defined by form or style, by length or themes. It includes a variety of writing, some of which is rather lighthearted and some of which is set in more somber tones, corresponding to a diverse readership, ranging from children to adults. But what, then, makes fantasy fantastic? According to Jackson, the value of fantasy as a genre lies in its “resistance to definition” and its “‘free-floating’ and escapist qualities” (1).
Fantastic theory in academic spaces itself is a rather new field; in 1939, J.R.R. Tolkien began to pave the way for future critical fantasy studies with his influential lecture *On Fairy Stories*, which, at the time, was often disregarded due to Tolkien’s heavy religious influences (Attebery “Strategies” 18). 27 years later, Rose Zimbardo and Neil Isaacs published *Tolkien and the Critics* (1968), a collection of essays which is considered the first major publication within the field (ibid.).

Today, Tolkien’s lecture is regarded “one of the earliest, clearest, and most influential critical descriptions of fantasy” (Matthews 57). According to Tolkien, what constitutes a fairy story—a term that has been later equated with fantasy (Northrup 816)—is a tale that takes place in what he calls “Faërie”, the land in which elves and fairies reside:

Faërie contains many things besides elves and fay, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky: and the earth, and all things that are in it: three and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted (Tolkien “Fairy Stories” 38).

This idea of a fairyland is nowadays known as a “secondary world”, a place beyond the possible which operates according to its own internal organization (Northrup 815). According to Tolkien, these worlds may contain magic but under the condition that this magic is naturalized: “if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself” (“Fairy Stories” 39). Fantasy, therefore, can include magic but it does not have to. What is crucial, however, is that it takes its own construct of a secondary reality seriously and provides a meaningful organization within the new world.

3.1 Sub-Creation

For Tolkien, the fantastic is inherently tied to language. He claims that the author’s ability to produce unreality starts with language, a progress that he famously terms “sub-creation”:

We may put a deadly green upon a man’s face and produce a horror; we may make the rare and terrible blue moon to shine; or we may cause woods to spring with silver leaves and rams to wear fleeces of gold, and put hot fire into the belly of the cold worm. But in such “fantasy,” as it is called, new form is made: Faërie begins. Man becomes sub-creator. (Tolkien “Fairie Stories” 49)
Language allows a writer to present things in a way that they are not and through this act they create a new, fantastic world in which the words become a fictional reality. In combination with a sense of “strangeness and wonder”, this “freedom from the domination of observed ‘fact’” is Tolkien’s definition of fantasy (ibid.). In a secondary world technically, anything is possible. The characters and their experiences are not limited to their affordances in reality—people can fly, breathe underwater, cast magic, talk to animals, turn into animals, and even become gods (Attebery “Strategies” 3). This amount of unreality can occur in various degrees; in some instances, the creations might still be familiar, as it is the case with the race of Men in Middle Earth, who are human in their form, culture, life span, and abilities, yet they live in a fantastic secondary world. But the same world is also home to fantastic creatures like the Valar and Maiar who, like Sauron, are not bound to one form and are strange and incomprehensible. Within a complete secondary world fantasy like Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), from now on abbreviated as *LotR*, both seem equally real because Middle Earth constitutes its own reality in which Balrogs and sorcerers are as acceptable as humans and horses. That is the freedom fantasy entails.

While fantasy permits a great deal of artistic freedom, not everything is acceptable to the reader. While fantasy does not require an explanation in terms of primary world science or history, fantastic secondary worlds are no zones of creative anarchy. Instead, “fantasy sets up worlds that genuinely exist beyond the horizon” (Amitt 8). These words should be organized according to consistent principles that are to be understood by the audience (Attebery “Tradition” 2). For example, Peter Jackson’s decision to depict Sauron in the form of a giant eye is acceptable within the logics of the world. It would not, however, be acceptable for Samwise Gamgee to shapeshift in a similar fashion, as this kind of power is not accessible to hobbits. Attebery writes: “Fantasy is a game of sorts, and it demands that one play whole-hearted, accepting for the moment all rules and turns of the game” (ibid.). In order to keep the unreality of fantasy believable, the inner rules of the secondary world must be adhered to.

Sub-creation, if done right, results in an effect Tolkien calls “Enchantment” (“Fairy Stories” 73). Enchantment, he argues, arises out of a skillfully crafted secondary world, “which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose” (ibid. 73).
Enchantment, then, describes a sense of immersion within the fantastic world. This concept is what is referred to as “secondary belief” or “literary belief” (Northrup 823; Swinfen 5; Tolkien “Fairy Stories” 60). Secondary belief presumes that in order to be successful, sub-creation has to induce a level of understanding, a “secondary realism” within the fantastic world (Swinfen 5). Tolkien calls this a “willingful suspension of disbelief”, the act of rejecting factual knowledge and fully accepting the internal logics of the secondary world (“Fairy Stories” 60). For Tolkien, this level of organic sub-creation is the essence of the joy a reader derives from fantasy:

The peculiar quality of the “joy” in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the undying reality or truth. It is not only a “consolation” for the sorrow of this world, but a satisfaction, and an answer to that question, “Is it true?” The answer to this question that I gave at first was (quite rightly): “If you have built your little world well, yes: it is true in that world. (“On Fairy Stories” 88)

It is then the job of a fantasy author to convince their readers that the world they’ve built is in fact a functional place within the boundaries of their imagination. In contrast to other related genres, fantasy does not aim to “unsettle” or disturb the reader by reinventing the real world, instead it aims to create a new removed reality (Baker 439). This aspect differentiates fantastic sub-creation from the technique of defamiliarization (Northrup 823). Contrary to the negative reputation of the genre, successful sub-creation is not an easy endeavor; the creation of secondary belief takes time, effort and skill in order to be convincing (Swinfen 99). This might also explain the divide between ‘good’ and ‘trashy’ fantasy; fantastic sub-creation takes effort and care, and secondary belief can be broken more easily that it is established. If it is induced correctly, however, it is a powerful tool and grants the writer “complete artistic freedom, within his self-constructed framework” (ibid. 76). It is important to note that secondary worlds do not need to be explicitly removed from the real world. Instead, many successful fantasies, J.K. Rowlings Harry Potter (1997) being the most popular example, are set in worlds within reality. They use an already existing framework and expand it with new sets of rules about magic, species, life and death. Whether the setting is completely new or based on reality, the aim of sub-creation remains to make the resulting secondary world appear organic.

3.2. Recovery, Escape and Consolation
According to Tolkien, fantasy tales primarily offer three benefits: recovery, escape, and consolation (“Fairy Stories” 67). Recovery is a process that takes place through the enchantment in the secondary world. Tolkien describes it as “a re-gaining—regaining of a clear view” (ibid. 77). Through the estrangement that is experienced in the unfamiliar world, the reader should be able to return to the primary world with a restored perspective (ibid.). For example, reading about Ents in *LotR* should make a reader experience real trees with a renewed sense of wonder.

Escape describes the full immersion within a fantastic world—an aspect that has often been heavily criticized (ibid 79). Tolkien himself is aware of this problem, but rejects escapism as a negative feature of fantasy:

> I have claimed that Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them, it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which “Escape” is now so often used: a tone for which the uses of the word outside literary criticism give no warrant at all. In what the misusers are fond of calling Real Life, Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic. (ibid. 79)

For Tolkien, escape is not necessarily negative; especially when the real world is full of “progressive things like factories, or the machine-guns and bombs that appear to be their most natural and inevitable, dare we say ‘inexorable’ products” (Tolkien 85). Escape, then, constitutes a temporary, yet wholesome diversion for the mind.

For Tolkien, in escape lies consolation, the Happy Ending, which he describes as the “highest function” of the fairy-story (ibid. 85). He calls this effect the *eucatastrophe*, the fantastic counterpart to the catastrophe in Drama (ibid. 85). For Tolkien, fantasy leads the reader to escape into a secondary world in order to regain their view on the magic of reality and ends with a joyous conclusion. For him, this setup is fantasy’s biggest strength: “I think, not a lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent.” (ibid. 69).

Through recovery, escape and consolation rises the sensation of wonder, which is one of the “central” features of fantasy texts (Manlove 7). It can be generated by the unfamiliar and new as well as through the recovery of the familiar (Attebery “Strategies” 128). Often, wonder is also created by the plot itself; by following the fairy tale model, whose premise is a more or less happy ending, audiences tend to feel safe in their
knowledge that even through hardship, things will eventually work out right (ibid). Even upon seeing or reading *LotR* for the first time, audiences will unlikely assume that Sauron’s victory is ever really imminent. Of course, it would be possible for a fantastic tale to end in a negative outcome, for Sauron to succeed, for the Balrog to kill Gandalf, and Shelob to devour Frodo, but the effect of such a story would be horror, instead of wonder (ibid.). According to Northrup, wonder allows the reader two kinds of escape; on the one hand from negative emotions within reality, such as pain and grief in the pure sense of recovery, and moreover also as an escape from the (creative) limitations of reality to broaden the mental horizon (829). Tolkien claims that anchored in this appeal is the human’s desire for what he calls “the Great Escape”—temporarily escaping death (“On Fairy Stories” 85). This, of course, does not negate death and sorrow within the narrative, but while single characters might suffer a tragic faith, “it denies […] universal final defeat” (ibid). While certain characters might die, and the elves leave Middle Earth, the continent still flourishes under Aragorn’s rule, and the evil of Sauron remains defeated. This, of course, is not an unbreakable rule or condition for fantasy—there are instances of fantasy that break free from Tolkien’s ideal, such as Erick Rücker Eddison’s *The Worm Ouroboros* (1922), in which the defeat of a demon army leaves a void that can only be filled through the demon’s return, resulting in a never-ending war. Tolkien’s model, however, is the more popularized one. While his ideal, therefore, does not need to be a general rule, it has been often reproduced within the genre and has become one of its most reliable staples.

3.3. Characterization

Beside its specific worldbuilding, fantasy often also shows a unique approach to characterization. C.S. Lewis once said about the difference between traditional characterization and Tolkien’s characters that

> [m]uch that in a realistic work would be done by “character delineation” is here done simply by making the character an elf, a dwarf, or a hobbit. The imagined beings have their insides on the outside; they are visible souls (15).

Looking at Tolkien’s characters, these claims easily become apparent; most visible is the figure of Gandalf, who visually transforms from the Grey into the White through his
rebirth after the battle with the demon Balrog. But, as Attebery points out, it is slightly misleading to assume that visual cues are simply character traits; rather, they often serve as role markers (“Strategies” 72). This can be observed in Jackson’s movies. An example of this can be seen in the role King Theodén, who at first, when under Saruman’s influence, is shown as a decrepit zombie under the evil sorcerer’s influence (Two Towers 17:00). His function here is clear to the viewer; Theodén is a mindless puppet, under the Saruman’s spell. When Gandalf exorcises Saruman from Theodén’s body, the king changes in appearance; he now stands tall, his white hair turns to blonde, and he grows visibly more powerful as he resumes his position as the king of Rohan (ibid. 53:30). The visible changes the character undergoes serve as a distinct marker for the audience to understand and acknowledge his changing roles. Like in fairytales, fantasy characters often function as roles, more than they do as persons—the hero has their function in the text, as does the damsel in distress, the villain, and the mentor (Attebery “Strategies” 72). However, this is not necessarily true for all fantasies; Attebery distinguishes between two common modes of characterization, some of which imitate a realistic person, while the other focuses on the character’s function within the story (ibid. 73). Sometimes, these types might change throughout the story. When analyzing characters, their visual coding can therefore often be a helpful tool to infer their roles within the narrative, as well as their character or moral disposition.

4. The Politics of Fantasy

As the previous chapters have shown, fantasy is a playful activity and it allows its audience to momentarily distance themselves from and, in the process, reevaluate reality. Then why would a paper like this be necessary in the first place? Attebery states that fantasy holds “the potential […] to generate powerful symbols” (“Stories” 21). While this potential is not necessarily realized in every fantastic text, fantasy, like myths and dreams, can use symbols in order to “tell the truths that the conscious mind cannot grasp or fears to face” (ibid.). Fantasy can therefore be used to speak about fraught issues, use seemingly neutral secondary worlds to act out certain problems and subconsciously raise awareness for them. The inclusion of fantastic elements such as elves, dragons, or magic creates a “rhetorical distance” that allows the audience to evaluate proposed problems from an
unbiased perspective (Young “Habits” 2). Because fantasy is not myth, it does not speak from a point of “cultural authority” but remains a playful activity and an escapist form of entertainment (Attebery “Stories” 21). This allows for different voices within the genre and has the potential to present problematic issues like sexism, racism, immigration, globalization, or capitalism out of their context in order to present their harm in isolation. However, this is not always a productive practice because it can tend to trivialize serious problems by removing them from their real impact. The text might not be taken seriously at all, as people can choose to disregard fantasy as just that: fantastic entertainment with no relevance for the real world.

The second major way in which fantasy relates to politics is through the ways in which fantastic worlds are constructed. Ann Swinfen claims that “[a]ll serious fantasy is deeply rooted in human experience and is relevant to human living” (231). The way fantastic worlds are imagined reflects on what the author regards as important. Moreover, fantasy has always had a tendency to reflect the problematic issues of its time (Jahrhaus and Neuhaus 7). For Tolkien, such issues might have been industrialization; in 2017, Bright reflected issues like police violence and racism. In this context, how worlds are framed reveals an underlying ideology. As much as secondary worlds are rooted in the primary reality, ideology in fantasy is rooted in ideology of the real world. For this reason, Rosemary Jackson strongly advises against an isolated analysis of fantasy:

Like any other text, a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context. Though it might struggle against the limits of this context, often being articulated upon that very struggle, it cannot be understood in isolation from it. The forms taken by any particular fantastic text are determined by a number of forces which intersect and interact in different ways in each individual work. Recognition of these forces involves placing authors in relation to historical, social, economic, political and sexual determinants, as well as to a literary tradition of fantasy, and makes it impossible to accept a reading of this kind of literature which places it somehow mysteriously ‘outside’ time altogether. (Jackson 3)

The worlds, fantasy creates, are then in some form or other influenced by real world ideologies. Choices such as who is a hero and who is a villain, who is in power and who searches for it, who wins and who loses, who lives and dies matter because they reflect ideological stances, fears, and dreams in the primary reality. A critical analysis of popular fantasy texts therefore has the power to reveal the anxieties and hopes of its time.
4.1. Allegory

The ideological potential of fantasy suggests an allegorical reading. An allegory denotes “[a] narrative communicating simultaneously on two levels, the surface plot and the symbolic meaning” (Armitt 213). From allegory two meanings can be extracted: the story within itself, as well as the story in relation to the primary reality. This form of narrative is very common in religious tales, as well as fables (ibid.). But if fantasy reflects ideologies and problems from the real world, is all fantasy allegorical? J. R.R. Tolkien disagrees. In a preface of *LotR*, he wrote:

I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think many confuse ‘applicability’ with ‘allegory’; but the other resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author. (quoted in Hunter 31).

For Tolkien, the joy of fantasy lies in the successful sub-creation and the enchantment this brings to both author and reader; to call his invented secondary world an allegory is then, for him, an oversimplification, reducing his creation to a one-dimensional meaning. Some scholars agree with this: Lin Carter writes that while it is easy to mistake *LotR* for an allegory at first glance, it is “a romance, pure and simple” (66). According to him, “Tolkien is merely telling a story, and it has no overtones of symbolic meaning at all” (ibid.). Of course, this statement is ripe with an uncomfortable conclusiveness. To state that Tolkien’s fantasy—or any fantasy at that—has no “symbolic meaning” in the primary reality is simply untrue. As Swinfen observes, fantasy is “a form of multivalent writing” and therefore “naturally makes considerable use of allegory and symbolism” (100). Fantasy, then, carries heavy symbolic potential. Even though Tolkien explicitly spoke against it, many of his readers interpreted *LotR* as an allegory for the second world war (Mendelsohn/James 48). Its allegorical reading is even accepted among scholars. W.A. Senior wrote:

To those detractors of fantasy who would seek asylum in the inaccurate and simplistic charge that fantasy does not deal with the real world and simply reasserts some lost nostalgic past which has nothing to do with us, I can only point to the blasted and wasted landscape outside Mordor in Tolkien’s *Lord of the*
Rings, a place which has its source in the horrendous devastation of the Somme and the casualty list of some 55,000 British soldiers on July 1, 1916.” (Senior 1)

This passage quite emotionally places Tolkien’s novel in a historic context. Senior not just compares the events to WW1, but explicitly states a day, a year, and the number of killed soldiers. This is not an isolated incident: according to Hunter, Tolkien’s audience has often found comfort in relating LotR to “either historical, psychological, political, or religious events in the real world” (31). Does this make it an allegory? While the possibility for a purely allegorical interpretation exists, these readings can end up in very contradictory results (Hunter 1). As Colin Manlove explains, LotR could equally be interpreted as “support of passive resistance and idealism on one hand and of draft-dodging and drugs on the other” (157). Fantasy can be allegorical, but instead of seeing it as an allegory, it is more helpful to approach it as applicable for a number of concepts. Therefore, when analyzing fantasy, both perspectives have to be taken into consideration: first, what ideologies the author included and secondly, how they can be applied to the sociopolitical reality outside it.

5. Types

Fantasy can appear in a variety of different structures. To organize the various texts, Mendelsohn offers a distinction between different archetypes of fantasy plots. She suggests that fantasies can be divided into four essential types: the portal-quest fantasy, the immersive fantasy, the intrusive fantasy, and the liminal fantasy (Mendelsohn xiv).

In the first type, the portal and quest fantasy, the audience is “invited” into the fantastic (ibid). Its origins are said to lie in religious tales as well as fairy tales and Arthurian romance (ibid. 3). In portal-quest fantasies, the audience “enters” the fantastic world through a portal. Sometimes this portal can be literal, as it is the case in C.S. Lewis’ The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (1950), in which children enter the fantasy land of Narnia through a portal hidden in a wardrobe (ibid. xix). However, the portal can also be rather metaphorical, which is the case in classic quest-fantasies such as LotR; here, although the audience follows the story through the eyes of Frodo, a resident of Middle Earth, the quest to destroy the Ring forces Frodo to leave what is familiar and enter a foreign world of adventure and wonder (ibid. 67). The quest is one of the most popular
recurring tropes in literature. According to W.H. Auden, it traditionally consists of six steps:

1. A precious Object and/or Person to be found and possessed or married.
2. A long Journey to find it, for its whereabouts are not originally known to the seekers.
3. A hero. The precious Object cannot be found by anybody, but the one person who possesses the right qualities of breeding or character.
4. A Test or series of Tests by which the unworthy are screened out, and the hero revealed.
5. The Guardians of the Object who must be overcome before it can be won. They may be simply a further test of the hero’s arete, or they may be malignant in themselves.
6. The Helpers who with their knowledge and magical powers assist the hero and but for whom he would never succeed. They may appear in human or in animal form. (42-44)

This outline unambiguously applies to Frodo’s journey, even though he does not search for an object, but to destroy it (Mendelsohn 30). These types of fantasy are often characterized by a linear storyline which follows the hero along during his journey to complete his goal (ibid. xix). Often, the tale becomes noticeably stranger, the further the hero progresses (ibid.). In *LotR*, this is emphasized through language; while place names within the Shire appear endearingly English, Frodo encounters increasingly strange names and words during his journey; starting from Welsh sounding names such as Bree, he meets people with foreign names such as Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas and discovers places such as Amon Sû, Lothórien and Moria (Salo 28). The further Frodo advances into Mordor, the more unfamiliar and terrifying the scenery becomes. Often, quest fantasies are also narratives in a so-called “club-story mode”, in which a group of friends undergo a journey together that somewhat isolates them from the rest of the world, for example the Fellowship of the Ring (ibid. 7). Due to the universality of the quest plot, many fantasy texts, such as *LotR* belong to the portal quest type.

While the audiences of portal-quest fantasies navigate a strange world, immersive fantasies invite the audiences directly into the secondary reality, setting up “a set of assumptions” that is shared with the audience, as if the fantastic setting was their normal reality (ibid. xxf). Here, the protagonist does not explore the world like Frodo and his friends, but merely lives in it and the audience is left to explore it as if sitting “on the
protagonist’s shoulder.” While *LotR*’s immersive worldbuilding would suggest it being an immersive fantasy, it is in fact not—at least not from the moment, in which Frodo leaves the shire. Instead, *Bright* qualifies as an immersive fantasy, because it follows the daily routine of two police officers for whom the wonders of the fantastic have become a mundane occurrence. As Mendelsohn points out, immersive secondary worlds are very often found in science fiction, as well as fantasy franchises which border on science fiction but are set in archaic worlds (ibid. Xxi).

In the third type, intrusion fantasy, the tales are originally set in a seemingly mimetic world, until a fantastic element enters, sometimes forceful, as the “bringer of chaos” (ibid. xiv). Examples for intrusion fantasy would be the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), in which monsters and vampires frequently disturb the peace in the fictional American town Sunnyville.

Finally, the last type suggested by Mendelsohn are liminal fantasies in which fantastic elements linger on the edge of a normal world without explanation or exploration. An example for this is the family comedy *Freaky Friday* (2003) in which a Chinese restaurant owner casts a magic spell on a mother and daughter, causing them to switch bodies. Here, magic is not a normal part of the world—the audience realizes that the spell is impossible, hesitates to believe it, but is never offered an explanation. Instead, the characters eventually end up breaking the curse and return to their normal lives without seeking an explanation for the paranormal inference.

6. **Defining the Genre**

While Tolkien paved the way for a critical approach in the study of the fantastic, many opinions followed his lead. For many, Tzvetan Todorov and his influential work *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1975), in which he explores the fantastic as a form of hesitation on the side of the reader, similar to Mendelsohn’s liminal fantasy, marks a crucial point in the history of critical theory (Northrup 841). Todorov was considered the first to introduce a formalist/structuralist approach to the fantastic (ibid.). However, this framework necessarily anchors the fantastic in the real; secondary worlds such as Tolkien’s Middle Earth are then automatically excluded (ibid. 815).
Therefore, while Todorov’s theory undoubtedly heavily influenced the study of the fantastic, his framework proves too restrictive to be applied to the following paper. Instead, it will be based on what proves to be one of the most universally applicable theories in contemporary fantastic studies: Brian Attebery’s “fuzzy set”-approach to the fantastic.

6.1. Fantasy as “Fuzzy Set”

Attebery’s framework is based on the assumption that fantasy is not just one singular entity, but a concept comprised of two aspects: a formula and a mode (“Strategies” 1). This approach proves to be effective because it distances itself from attempts of strict delineation, which might be applicable to a selected body of texts but proves to be problematic when applied to the large variety within the field of the fantastic. This is why Attebery’s model has been regarded one of “the most influential and useful approaches” to fantasy (Young “Habits” 2).

The fantastic mode is what Attebery describes as “all literary manifestations of the imagination’s ability to soar above the merely possible” (“Strategies” 2). This is also called “non-mimetic writing” (Young “Habits” 2). Non-mimetic writing encompasses all literary works that are set in a secondary world (ibid.). Through the incorporation of a fantastic element such as magic, the fantastic mode “constructs [a] rhetorical distance between one [world] and the other” (ibid.). While this escapism allows the readers to temporarily free themselves from the issues of the real world, it also provides an opportunity to reassess these conflicts from a different angle (ibid.). Fantasy as a mode is therefore not only defined by the non-mimetic properties of the worldbuilding but also by its direct effect on the audience.

While the fantastic mode allows for infinite variation in practice, fantasy as a formula imposes a more rigid set of restrictions on the genre. In its formulaic aspect, fantasy is “essentially a commercial product” (Attebery “Strategies” 2). While this is not necessarily a value judgment, it positions fantasy both in a context of literary and commercial production (ibid.). It suggests that in order to be accepted and successful, the genre has to subscribe to what Attebery calls the “consistency and predictability” of the
commercial discourse within which it appears (ibid.). This stands in direct contrast to the theoretical freedom that the idea of non-mimetic writing suggests (ibid.). On one hand, a writer is free to imagine an entirely new world, but to be acknowledged as a work of fantasy it must also conform to the ideas that critics and consumers have about the genre.

Formulaic fantasy is “a mass-produced supplier of wish fulfillment” (ibid. 1) and relates to the myriad of commercial fantasy products available. It might also be an explanation for the disparity in the reception of fantasy, in which some view fantasy as a deeply stimulating, intellectual activity, while others simply disregard it as fanciful escapism. It appears to be a conflict of interests, as many theorists consider autonomous works of art—texts that are created for “their own sake”—more valuable than works that have been created for or result in a high commercial success and appeal to popular tastes (Young “Habits” 3). Mode and formula, then, present two extreme poles of the fantastic. Attebery’s model combines both, which allows his approach to encompass the entirety of the genre.

In order to describe both mode and formula, Attebery suggests a “fuzzy set” of fantasy (“Strategies” 12). Within a fuzzy set, the author’s and reader’s expectations about what qualifies as fantasy literature is mostly based on precedent works within the genre (ibid.). In the center of the set lie the most expectable key texts, significant and fundamental contributions to the genre, for example *LotR* (ibid.). Its worldbuilding of a pseudo-medieval society with magic, dragons, dwarfs, and elves has merged into the genre expectations for fantasy and has become a model and inspiration for other writers (Caroll 13). Within the genre, the central works of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis are also often called “high fantasy” (Higgin 11), a name that already suggests its focal position. Through this almost universal acceptance within the genre, high fantasy such as *LotR* has shaped the popular opinion of what fantasy is (Attebery “Strategies” 14). Regardless of what die-hard Tolkien fans would like to assert, this not purely reflecting Tolkien’s talent or the perceived value of the work, but rather the extreme popularity of Tolkien’s books which created the concept of fantasy as a genre to which other writers could be assigned to (ibid.). This explains the everlasting obsession with Tolkien as the pivotal fantasy. While it is incorrect to claim that Tolkien invented fantasy, his contributions clearly shaped the perception of the genre. But while the center of the fantastic is clearly defined, its boundaries often remain unclear (Young “Habits” 2). Here, the ‘fuzziness’ comes into
play; a text might be situated closer or further away from the center, might approach the border to other genres such as science fiction, yet still remain part of the overall family of fantasy (Attebery “Strategies” 12). For many texts, their place within the genre might depend on how they are positioned by their producers. In an academic analysis, Attebery’s model proves to be helpful because an examination of the conventions of key texts provides insight into what is expected and accepted within the genre.

The strength of Attebery’s model lies in its simplicity. He claims, “[t]he simpler the definition, the more room it leaves for subclassification and evaluation” (“Tradition” 3). Today, Attebery’s fuzzy set approach appears to be among the more widely accepted ones and is considered the most practical approach to the genre, in which personal “ideological filters” can be applied, dependent on the respective field of interest (Mendelsohn xiii). One problematic aspect of the model, however, is the question of which opinion regarding the central texts weights the most (Young “Habits” 2). Should the model be organized around Tolkien’s commercial success with *LotR*, or rather around his historic forerunners from ancient history? While this question is still up for discussion, solutions have been suggested, for example by Farah Mendelsohn, who recommends to approach fantasy not as one single fuzzy set, but a number of interlinked smaller fuzzy sets (Mendelsohn xvii). While this approach allows for more variety in analysis, the following paper will consider J.R.R. Tolkien’s *LotR* as the focal text and accepted center of the fantastic genre within contemporary popular culture.

### 6.2. Commercial Fantasy

As introduced in chapter 4, fantasy is not just a literary genre, but a considerable “commercial product” (Attebery “Strategies” 2). With Tolkien’s *LotR* as a precursor, the fantasy genre fully unfolded its power as a market force in the 1970’s and 1980’s (Young “Habits” 99). The success of fantasy prevailed throughout the years. A look at the currently top-grossing movies worldwide reveals a field dominated by fantasy and science fiction (Box Office Mojo). Chasing the success of his *LotR* movies, Peter Jackson extended *The Hobbit* into three blockbuster movies—*The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012), *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* (2013), and *The Hobbit: The Battle
of the Five Armies (2014)—and HBO’s Game of Thrones has become a pop culture staple. And while the series is currently approaching its last season, fans do not need to fear; the network HBO has already ordered not one but five spin-off series set in George R.R. Martin’s world (Friedman). Simultaneously, Amazon has ordered a new LotR spin-off series set in Middle Earth, expected to premier between 2020 and 2021 (Hastings). Meanwhile, Netflix appears to approach a more modern take on fantasy with franchises such as Bright (2017), Shadowhunters (2016-present), or Stranger Things (2016-present).

And it is not just on screen—Tolkien’s LotR novels have never been out of print and still lead nearly every poll of most influential and most loved books within the UK (Mendelsohn/James 1). In videogames, fantasy is a force to be reckoned with; with over 20 million units sold, Bethesda’s Skyrim (2011) is still among the most successful videogames of all time and has been released on six different platforms and additionally as virtual reality version (Peckham; Plunkett). Nintendo’s Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild has almost singlehandedly propelled the company’s handheld console Nintendo Switch to international success after previous attempts at launching similar platforms had failed (Hern). Outside gaming technology, podcasts and internet shows such as The Adventure Zone (2014-) and Critical Role (2015-) helped to bring back tabletop games like Dungeons and Dragons (1974-present), from now on called D&D, and turned them from geekdom to a socially acceptable leisure activity (Jahromi). These examples are just a select few, but they clearly illustrate how fantasy is a considerable market force. This market, as Brian Attebery observes, has the tendency to enforce the reproduction of formulaic fantasy (“Strategies” 10). This formula is usually straight-forward and predictable in a way that it can be easily reproduced in literature, film, videogames and table-top games, where players spin their own fantasy tale by (re)combining story elements (ibid). The “recipe” for traditional fantasy stories Attebery suggests goes as follows:

Take a vaguely medieval world. Add a problem, something more or less ecological, and a prophecy for solving it.

Introduce one villain with no particular characteristics except a nearly all-powerful badness. Give him or her a convenient blind spot.

Pour in enough mythological creatures and nonhuman races to fill out a number of secondary episodes: fighting a dragon, riding a winged horse, stopping
overnight with the elves (who really should organize themselves into a bed-and-breakfast association).

To the above mixture add one naïve and ordinary hero who will prove to be the prophesied savior; give him a comic sidekick and a wise old advisor who can rescue him from time to time and explain the plot.

Keep stirring until the whole thing congeals. ("Strategies" 10)

While this direct description might be exaggerated for comic effect, it still holds true for more than just one of the aforementioned examples. Moreover, it is a market filled with spin-offs, series, sequels and prequels of all kinds, a constant reusing of the same materials, the same worlds, sometimes even the same characters. For a genre which allows for absolute creative freedom, commercial fantasy appears to be surprisingly averse to change or creative risks of any kind. This is one of the pitfalls of commercial success; Mendelsohn observes that “a fantasy succeeds when the literary techniques employed are most appropriate to the reader expectations of that category of fantasy” (xiii). With reader expectations of the genre being based on that fuzzy set of texts that belong or border on belonging to the field, it is hardly surprising that the same, more central structures are constantly reproduced. The lack of innovative fantasy is hardly the problem; instead, publishers and production companies are set on promoting what they know that sell and those things they know will be accepted by the audience. And while the artistic merit of such a circle of reproduction might be up for discussion, it certainly does reveal current popular tastes, desires, and the cultural values of a time (Attebery “Strategies” 9). Analyzing the commercial side of the genre—fantasy as a formula—then can be a useful tool in order to reveal ideological assumptions of both producers and audiences.

7. Fantasy on Screen

When speaking about fantasy as a product, fantastic films and TV shows appear at the forefront. As mentioned above, fantasy is a massive market force for contemporary film and a staple for both cinemas and streaming services alike. Surprisingly, J.R.R. Tolkien himself was originally opposed to the idea of translating fantastic tales to screen. In his lecture “On Fairy Stories”, he claims:
In human art Fantasy is a thing best left to words, to true literature. In painting, for instance, the visible presentation of the fantastic image is technically too easy; the hand tends to outrun the mind, even to overthrow it. Silliness or morbidity are frequent results. [...] Drama is naturally hostile to Fantasy. Fantasy, even of the simplest kind, hardly ever succeeds in Drama, when that is presented as it should be, visibly and audibly acted. Fantastic forms are not to be counterfeited. Men dressed up as talking animals may achieve buffoonery or mimicry, but they do not achieve Fantasy. (70f)

Ironically, it was Peter Jackson’s adaption of *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), in the following denoted as *Fellowship*, which transformed fantasy cinema from a niche genre into a box office success (Mikos et. Al. 89). But how is it that Tolkien’s assessment was so far off from the reality of fantasy movies in the 21st century? One aspect that has to be kept in mind is that Tolkien, at the time of writing his lecture had no reason to assume which dimensions cinema technology would reach in the early 00s. When he talks about “silliness or morbidity” (“Fairy-Stories” 70), he must have been imaging hand-made costumes and stage make-up, not a fully CGI animated Smaug, seamlessly rolling over his mountain of gold in *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* (2013). And truly, a part of its commercial success, fantasy appears to owe to technological advancements in special FX and CGI (Mendelsohn/James 214). They have made possible what has been a quite literal fantasy for a long time; they’ve brought Middle Earth, Westeros and Co. to life without making it appear ridiculous or counterfeited. In this regard, Peter Jackson’s *LotR* trilogy paved the way for new fantasy movies, in the same way in which Tolkien once revolutionized the literary genre.

### 7.1. Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings*

If J.R.R. Tolkien was the author who made fantasy respectable for a Western audience, a similar thing can be said about Peter Jackson and the genre of the fantasy film. Half a century after Tolkien’s book was first published, Jackson made a massive impact on modern culture and cinema by introducing millions of people—some readers of Tolkien but most of them presumably not—to the world of Middle Earth (Purtill ix). To this day, they still rank among the highest grossing movies worldwide, accompanied by the three *The Hobbit* films, which followed 10 years later to catch up with the original success of
the films (Box Office Mojo). While a new *LotR* TV series is in the makings, it is yet to be seen whether Jackson will be involved (Hastings).

The cinematic trilogy, consisting of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Lord of the Rings: Two Towers* (2002), and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003) are considered a milestone in movie history on several grounds: they were the first film trilogy to be shot in one run and then released in three consecutive years (Mikos et.al. 9). Moreover, the movies were screened in over 50 countries within an overall time frame of no more than four months apart (ibid.). The overall production cost of Jackson’s trilogy accounted for 281 million USD, with half of it being used solely for marketing purposes (ibid.). These facts are even more impressive considering the state of the field at the time of production when cinematic fantasy had been a widely disregarded as a genre and harshly scorned by critics (Thompson 46). But this did not daunt New Zealand director Jackson, who actively searched out to direct a fantasy film:

I guess what had meant a lot to me personally is that I am working in a genre that I have loved since I was a kid, I have always wanted to make a fantasy film. That genre is not really popular and the studios don’t really like it anymore. The best thing about this for me is that it has put me in the position of showing Hollywood studios that fantasy can be successful at the box office if it is done in a certain way. (quoted in Thompson 2003a 46)

Jackson set out not just to make a successful fantasy film, but to turn the genre from ‘trash’ to prestige and in many ways he succeeded. For this endeavor, Tolkien’s books proved to be the perfect material. While many fantasy films at the turn of the century, such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (2000), delved deep into the realm of geekdom, *LotR* was already a more prestigious material to start with because people wanted to love the films in the same way they had loved their literary predecessors (Thompsons 53). But on the other hand, the pre-established popularity of Tolkien’s novel also proved to be a challenge for the production. After the release of *Fellowship*, a number of Tolkien-fans were obsessed with critiquing the film for its “appearance of authenticity and what one can only call, for a lack of a better term, historicity” (Salo 23). Many of Tolkien’s fans were confident to be able to distinguish authenticity in *LotR*, to be able to identify correct stage design, costume and architecture, assumptions which were mostly based on Tolkien’s inspiration from central European history and northern mythology (ibid). Yet, Jackson accomplished the unlikely: due the enormous amount of effort, money and, undoubtably,
personal passion, he managed to channel what was perceived an authentic essence of Middle Earth (Thompson 48). Moreover, he managed to please the traditional fans, while simultaneously untangle Tolkien’s richly detailed world and making it more accessible for new viewers (ibid.). This can be most observed in two aspects; first, Jackson’s rewriting of female characters into more prominent roles carrying more agency and a move towards a more psychological and emotional portrayal of the characters by blending epic long shots with emotional close ups (Mikos et. al. 93; 96). This resulted in a movie with such an aesthetic and emotional appeal that the audiences were inclined to ignore any logical errors discrepancies in the plot (ibid. 109). Jackson managed to prepare the material in a way that was able to strike a nerve with the audience, cementing it as the ground-breaking fantasy epos in cinema history. What he created fundamentally changed the fantasy film genre, bringing it to the forefront of box office successes and multi-million-dollar franchises.

7.2. Blockbuster

Peter Jackson’s *LotR* is not only crucial in its significance for the fantastic film genre, but furthermore stands out as a powerful example of a blockbuster. The term, which derived from the name of a bomb which was able to bust an entire block of buildings, was introduced into Hollywood film culture in the 1950s and denotes movies which far exceed the normal scale of production costs, as well as box-office results (Mikos et.al. 19). Blockbusters often follow a similar, predictable scheme, most certainly, because they are a big financial investment and producers want to ensure their success by sticking to what they know works for international audiences. Usually, blockbusters revolve around a topic with substantial impact, such as the end of the world, unmeasurable evil, destruction of entire towns, cities, countries, if not planets, with a traditionally male hero on a mission to save the day (Mikos et.al 23). It is a playing field for archetypal plots, heroes, and villains alike, which is why some consider them cinematic extensions of fairy tales (ibid.). This suggests fantasy as an especially fitting genre for blockbusters. In order to ensure financial success above 100 million USD, production companies often follow a set of strategies, including the casting of popular actors, the heavy inclusion of action-adventure elements within the plot, the possibility for further spin offs and prequels/sequels, as well
as a tactical positioning in relevant cinemas all over the world, opening weekends close to big holidays (preferably Christmas), as well as a active marketing strategy (ibid. 20). Most blockbusters belong to the action, science fiction, and, following Jackson’s impact, fantasy genre, probably because they on one hand allow for much visual effects, as well as the possibility of including a variety of different genre elements (ibid. 27). They are often characterized by a massive effort of special FX and CGI, which make them visually and aesthetically interesting for their audiences (ibid. 25). Their main audience are usually considered young men, however, to extend their reach, producers tend to include romantic subplots to appeal to women (ibid. 26). These conventions illustrate how blockbusters are very much confined to normative, conservative Hollywood politics. Here, artistic integrity and creativity must often take the backseat to well-established formulas as the financial risk is considered too high to abandon prefabricated formulas.

Peter Jackson’s *LotR* trilogy counts as a milestone within blockbuster history due to their production and release process (Mikos et.al. 19). The films were shot in one go but they were released over the Christmas holidays over three consecutive years from 2001-03. While the casting took some risks in choosing then unknown faces for the roles of Frodo, Aragorn and Legolas (all of which were catapulted into superstardom overnight), they included enough prestigious actors such as Cate Blanchett, Sir Ian McKellen and Christopher Lee to draw in audiences. Moreover, Jackson combined various genre elements (ibid 97). For example, the love story between Arwen and Aragorn contributes as romance element, fights with the Balrog, the Watcher in the Water, and Shelob add elements of horror and monster cinema, while the banter between Legolas and Gimli almost reminds of a buddy-cop adventure (ibid 27). Through these techniques, Jackson manages to accommodate a wide audience (ibid.). This also illustrates how *LotR* managed to escape the negative connotations of fantasy: Jackson utilized the blockbuster conventions in order to make fantasy cinema socially acceptable.

One aspect of the blockbuster genre, however, would turn out problematic for Jackson. Traditionally, Blockbusters are not conceptualized as standalone films and should instead reserve the possibility of a future continuation for, ideally, sequels, prequels and spin-offs ad infinitum (Mikos et.al 21). Based on Tolkien’s novel in which all central characters leave Middle Earth at the end, Jackson’s trilogy allowed for little flexibility in this regard (Thompson 46). While this was originally of little concern to the
producers, who had taken a risk by producing the films already, their position changed in the face of Jackson’s massive success (ibid). A decade after *Fellowship* was published, the producers appeared to have overcome their problem; Jackson was again hired in order to direct *The Hobbit*, and even though this time the literary model comprised only one short book, the studio once again released the films as trilogy consecutively from 2012-14, this time extending instead of shortening the original material. And the production of *LotR* material has not yet ceased. As mentioned above, now, in the age of streaming services and on demand TV shows, Amazon Prime was employed to produce a five-season long *LotR* TV show. What was once a risk for producers resulted in what is going to be over thirty years of Middle Earth on screen, with no foreseeable end. Jackson’s trilogy is therefore not just a crucial milestone within the fantasy film genre, but moreover a landmark in Blockbuster history.

8. The Fantasy of Race

After outlining fantasy as a genre in the first section of this paper, the following chapters will explore fantasy’s relation to race. However, to offer a coherent analysis, the topic of race has to be defined first. While the conception of different human races appears to be a ‘common knowledge’ deeply ingrained in Western consciousness, it is a difficult, multi-layered, and ultimately unscientific concept. It first arose in the eighteenth century as a form of classifying animals, but this scientific innocence, albeit often still claimed, was lost when Western scholars began to use their racial system to describe the varieties of human difference (Dyer 19; Banton 58; Farber 29). It is crucial to establish that these systems are essentially unscientific because in contrast to biological races, humans of any skin color can interbreed, which creates an infinite variation that is impossible to classify, let alone organize into a list of human biological races (Banton 54.). However, racial theories were never intended as a scientific classification but to establish a sense of hierarchy between humans with the main purpose of justifying the colonization of people of color by the Western world (AAA; Young “Habits 8; Farber 29). Whenever the pseudo-scientific approach to race failed, it was usually enforced with religious ideology, especially the myth of the Great Chain of Being, which implied a natural hierarchy among the creatures on earth ordained by god or nature (AAA). Based on this background,
Maulana Karenga defines racism as “a system of denial and deformation of the history and humanity of Third World people (people of color) and their right to freedom based exclusively or primarily on the specious concept of race” (211). While many of the pseudo-scientific theories of the eighteenth century regarding the body, health and sexuality have died down over the centuries, the idea of race has unfortunately prevailed until today. In recent history, it found a tragic application in the atrocities of the holocaust, when 11 million people were killed in the name of white superiority (AAA). Yet today, many white people hold up the belief that we live in what is called a “post-race” society (Young “Habits” 81). The idea of “post-race” describes a modern myth according to which racial discrimination is no longer a meaningful aspect of everyday life (ibid.). While inequalities remain to exist, defenders of the post-race myth claim that they are not caused by political and social injustices regarding race, but instead result from “cultural deficiencies” and personal failings of people of color (ibid.; Bonilla-Silva/Dietrich 101;191). Post-race is therefore not to be confused with anti-racism; instead, it simply denies systemic inequalities and enforces the idea that people of color are genetically predisposed to be less successful than whites.

But while the idea of a “post-race” society is a harmful sentiment, it does not always stem from a racist intent but is often caused by an essential misunderstanding about what modern day racism means. Racism today is not comparable to the practices of the Jim Crow-Era, which is why it is easy to assume that racism does not exist anymore—a phenomenon that Eduardo Bonilla-Silva titled “color-blind racism” (Bonilla-Silva/Dietrich 191). Color-blind racism expresses the lack of acknowledgment within white communities regarding their own privilege through their “abstract liberalism, cultural racism, [and the] minimization of racism”, which causes any explanations of inequality to turn into a “one-way street without exits” (Bonilla-Silva/Dietrich 192). These approaches essentially fail to realize that racism manifests in two forms which depend on and enforce each other: overt and covert racism (Stokely/Hamilton 112). Overt racism is also called individual racism and denotes what most people nowadays understand as racist: violent acts from individuals against other individuals caused by differences in skin color (ibid.). Overt racism is visible, personal, and universally regarded as vicious—it is a white man beating up a black man and calling him the N-word. Overt racism is, moreover, also easily disregarded as personal failings:
a white person who beats a black person is a racist and therefore evil. If another white person has never beaten a black person and never felt the urge to beat a black person, they are therefore not racist and not evil. However, racism is not as easily generalized. A focus on the overt expressions of racism tends to erase racism as systemic oppression, what Stokely and Hamilton call covert or institutional racism (ibid.). Institutional racism is less visual and less direct, yet it is no less harmful to the lives of people of color (ibid.). It relies on the active and pervasive operation of anti-black attitudes and practices. A sense of superior group position prevails: whites are “better” than blacks; therefore blacks should be subordinated to whites. (112)

Institutional racism can be found in every aspect of society; it prevails media representation, education, and politics. But due to the color-blind racism and the idea of a post-race society, it often gets ignored or minimized, especially when it regards reputable or beloved offenders like the police, politicians, or mainstream media (ibid.). The manifestations of institutional racism are, moreover, not always direct attacks against people of color. Instead, they can take the form of everyday racialization, “the social processes that actively construct and reconstruct race and ‘racial difference’ as having self-evident meaning” (McLaughlin 163). Through racialization, the myths surrounding the idea of race keep being repeated within the discourses of Western society, making them relevant to the way in which society organizes itself. This phenomenon is what Bonilla-Silva calls “racial grammar”:

[R]acial domination generates a grammar that helps reproduce the "racial order" as just the way things are. Racial grammar helps accomplish this task by shaping in significant ways how we see or do not see, how we frame, and even what we feel about race-related matters. Racial grammar, I argue, is a distillate of racial ideology and, hence, of white supremacy. (“Racial Grammar” 1)

This shows that even non-violent radicalizations are not as innocent as they might seem because they have a harmful effect on the people who do not possess the superior position of being white. While in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, people might have gotten their ideals about racial difference from pseudo-science, in modern times, the mass media has become a “major purveyor” of racialization, enforcing the superior position of whiteness (Monson 51). While it often presents itself as such, the media is not neutral and does not stand outside racialization. Instead, it is produced by mainly white people who further shape the racial grammar of our everyday lives (McLaughlin 164). While media
images present a skewed reality which centers around white lives, they are taken to be neutral, which further normalizes the racial grammar the West lives by (Monson 51). It is then a crucial task of media criticism to unveil the ways in which racialization is enforced within the coding of popular books, films, and music.

### 8.1. Race in Fantasy

While racialization pervades all Western media, fantasy has an especially troubled relationship with race. Like fantasy, race too is a “discursive formation” that is shaped by the dominant cultures and political influences (Young “Habits” 6). This makes race one of the central myths in Western life:

> The idea of race is one of the most persistent and seductive fictions of the twenty-first century. The belief that human populations can be divided up into discrete ‘races’ with identifiable characteristics is an enduring myth, not yet fully displaced by the plethora of scientific reports and detailed research undertaken in the social sciences, arts, and humanities that vigorously proclaim otherwise. (Nayak 141)

The mythic nature of race might explain why it is such a common staple of fantasy, a genre that tends to pick up on popular myths and reframes them. But the myth of race is essentially a myth of superiority, hierarchy, and domination; “racial differentiation only serves the purpose of justifying oppression and superexploitation” (Jenness 309). When this myth is then replicated in secondary worlds, it has the dangerous potential to enforce their significance, to turn myth into reality by presenting worlds that are organized around the principle of different, often warring races. Nayak claims that “[s]o called racial ‘characteristics’ are […] only given meaning as they unfold in the act of representation” (141). If fantasy takes the concept of racial differences and represents them as biological fact, it presents racial differences as real. This representation is especially problematic if it is presented from a white perspective. Attebery writes:

> [A] single text can represent one thing to a cognitive majority and quite another to a cognitive minority. One reader’s literal truth is another’s symbolic fiction. Yet writers who speak from the position of a cognitive minority are more aware of the majority than the other way around-another variation on the principle that the oppressed are obliged to understand oppressors better than they themselves are understood. (Attebery “Stories” 174)
There is often an inherent power imbalance when talking about race; the dominant group always has more influence and power to assert their opinion while the minority groups are often hardly listened to. When a fantasy author describes a society that is based on racial differences, they are never speaking from an ideologically neutral position. Given the predominance of white male authors within fantasy, it is problematic to take their views on race and equality as universal experiences (Young “Habits” 11). It is not to say a white person cannot or should not talk about race, but when they insert themselves into the discourse, their voice can tend to drown out the indigenous voices whose lives are affected by the issue.

Of course, it might seem extreme to compare the evils of racism to the lighthearted banter between Legolas and Gimli in *LotR* (Attebery “Race” 335). However, as the previous chapter illustrated, the myth of race has a long and dark history that runs deep into the foundations of Western society. As Attebery claims: “the historical links between fantasy and nationalism should keep us wary of assuming that any racializing of the imagination can remain innocent” (ibid). The concept of race carries too heavy connotations, especially when it is presented as fact. Race and fantasy, then, have an inherently problematic, yet interesting relationship that provides a rich ground for analysis.

### 8.2. Fantasy and Racial Essentialism

In the previous chapter, the concept of race and its influence on fantasy has been explored. However, when talking about race within a fantastic world, the concepts often differs from the way it is used in the real world. Within fantasy a variety of ‘races’ such as elves, orcs, hobbits and humans can be encountered. To do so, fantasy presumes a willingness to accept the idea that races can be clearly divided and differentiated. This is an ideology that is heavily influenced by the thinking of colonialism, which relied on race-based hierarchies for justification (Epp 8; Young “Habits” 114). Within fantasy, however, the “racial logics” of colonialism are often reproduced without referencing their problematic origins within the real world (Young “Habits” 43). The defining difference between real world racialization and race in fantasy is that while in the real world, race is a social construct, in fantasy it is undeniably real. Often, the societies of fantasy lands are
organized around the idea of different races that coexist in the same world. This is what is called a race-based society, a social system that is organized on the principle of racial essentialism (Monson 49). Racial essentialism describes an ideology according to which race is an essential aspect to a person’s nature and their abilities (Monson 54). For example, in Middle Earth, many characters are representative of their respective races: “to know Gimli would be to know all dwarves.” (Kim 885). This view is enforced in Jackson’s movies which uses racial essentialism to condense the complexity of the literary original without spending too much time on exposition. Especially within the Fellowship, each character seems to represent their respective race; Gimli the dwarves, Legolas the elves, Gandalf the sorcerers, Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin the hobbits and Aragorn and Boromir represent the weaknesses and strengths of men. Moreover, Middle Earth’s entire society is based on racial difference. It is not a world of cosmopolitanism in which all races live together in harmony. Instead, they are largely separated from each other, with each race doing what they do best without much of cultural exchange; elves do not mingle with dwarves and hobbits do not visit the cities of men. But while this race-based society is presented as a quaint ideal, racial essentialism is one of the most central mechanisms to retain systemic discrimination and inequality within the real world (Young “Habits” 16, Monson 50ff). Fantasy, therefore, often sets a problematic model when it comes to races, suggesting that the world would be a better place if ‘races’ would be divided in their isolated cultures—an image that mostly presumes a white European culture at the center.

But this yields an essential problem: while in the real world, ‘racial’ differences are inherently cultural, man-made, in LOTR, they are unmistakably real. In fact, ents and elves, orcs and humans are probably not even best described as different races, but rather denote different species (Langer 82). Yet, within the genre of fantasy there appears to be a general consent about the usage of the term race to denote different groups of beings (Monson 53). Notably, race in fantasy does not mean the same thing as it does in reality—the racial relations within fantasy do not even have to be negative, but often mark the respective races as “simply different” from each other (Attebery “Race” 334). Yet a term so loaded with ideology cannot be simply used devoid of its connotations, even though it is in a secondary world (Monson 53). Monson claims: “the very use of the word race (rather than species) is significant as it simultaneously draws upon and reinforces the
preconceived notions of a race-based society” (ibid.). Jessica Langer calls race in fantasy an “invented sink category” that cannot be separated from its connotations of “intellectual, emotional, cultural, and other differences based on relatively minor human phenotypical variation” (82). The use of race within fantasy is therefore not only harmful because it imports the real-life connotations with the word into the secondary world, but also because it enforces the perception that race is based on real, tangible differences. It blurs the boundaries between the real and the unreal and, due to its repeated and constant use within a genre that is on the forefront of commercial production and reaches a massive audience, solidifies the idea of race as a real category of human difference within the popular imagination. This naturalization of “the imaginary of race” is one important cornerstone in the continuation of racist thought (Brah 72). This is especially problematic because the current state of the world unfortunately still largely corresponds with the definition of a race-based society, because even though race is not real, society behaves like it is (Monson 53). Often, the racial essentialism of fantasy might not even be (re)produced with malicious intentions because it is a central feature of many pivotal fantasy texts such as *LotR* and is therefore often understood as a central feature of fantasy itself. Yet, its uncritical reproduction serves the normalization of racial essentialism and the idea that races are fundamentally real, different from each other, and should be separated for the wellbeing of society.

9. The Status of Whiteness

Discussions about fantasy and race appear to be first and foremost focused on the representation of people of color within fantasy books, films, and games. Richard Dyer writes: “to talk about race is to talk about all races except white” (1). This ranges from everyday experiences over media representations to academia, suggesting that whiteness itself is not a marker of racial discourse (ibid.). However, to fully understand how fantasy worlds construct race, its representation of whiteness needs to be considered. Generally, most mainstream fantasy worlds are largely Eurocentric (Young “Habits 1). Copying the social structures from Western society and history, works within the genre often reproduce colonial power relations and tend to regard whiteness as a default setting for human life (ibid 1; 42). This is what Helen Young calls fantasy’s “habits of Whiteness”
a convention that emerged with the rising popularity of fantasy during the twentieth century and still informs the genre until today (ibid. 34). This acceptance of whiteness as the norm is a problematic feature that is not just exclusive to fantasy but reflects the tradition within Western media production. David Oh claims that “The most prominent feature of whiteness as a racial identity is that it is unmarked and invisible” and through that invisibility, whiteness automatically inherits a position of dominance (354). By considering whiteness as the norm, fantasy enforces the view that white people are ‘just people’, while people of color are put into the position of the perpetual Other (Dyer 1). This is on one hand due to the racial grammar, but also enabled through the white control over mainstream media and their need to market towards white audiences. As Richard Dyer observes, a disproportional section of the media is controlled by white people which aim to speak for all of humanity yet construct it according to their own image (3). Their attempts to include non-white perspectives might even be genuine, however, it is hardly ever free of the notion that white is the norm and anything else is an act of forceful representation, a sort of ‘seasoning’ that can be added but does not necessarily need to do be. For whiteness to remain in an invisible position, other identities are constantly stereotyped in order to construct them as tangibly different, which heightens the perception that whiteness itself has “no content” (ibid; 9). White people are allowed to be just human, while people of color are caught in a plethora of stereotypes which are often produced and reproduced within the media.

Within fantasy, the predominance of whiteness is largely informed by its central texts. As Helen Young observes, many of the authors that are considered most influential within the genre, such as J.R.R Tolkien, Robert E. Howard, C.S. Lewis and H.P. Lovecraft, were white men who wrote about white men for white men, a hegemony that was not further disputed during their time (11;15). And while those most central writers might not be the best, the most important, or the most representative of the genre today, they helped to create fantasy as a space for colonialist nostalgia (Young “Habits” 15). Through the “constant repetition and replication of pop cultural paradigms”, those racial configurations have become the norm (Langer 98). Of course, this is not to mean that more diverse fantasy does not exist; it is however very poorly represented within the commercial sector and is often disregarded as “ethnic”, assuming that fantasy from the perspective of a writer of color is automatically less relevant to white audiences (Young
In recent history, the most central debate about the habits of whiteness in fantasy took place online in 2006, after readers and fellow fantasy writers criticized the cultural appropriation in the representation of dark-skinned characters in Elizabeth Bear’s fantasy novel *Blood and Iron* (2006) (ibid 161f). The debate is known as “The Great Cultural Appropriation Debate of Doom” or, most commonly, “RaceFail 09” and included a large number of writers and fans alike who fought over the question of how people of color can, should, and should not be represented (ibid.). While this debate did not end in one unambiguous agreement it did bring awareness about fantasy’s problem with race into the genre space. But while current efforts often attempt to diversify the genre, its habits are not easily broken. Until today, the images of fantastic worlds are strongly influenced by two factors that essentially relate to the ubiquity of whiteness: (neo)medievalism and orientalism.

### 9.1. Medievalism

For many, fantasy is essentially related to the Middle Ages; or rather, an imagined, mythic version of the Middle Ages. Many films, books, and games are set in a pseudo-medieval world that is predominantly inhabited by white people (Young “Habits” 64). The allure for the medieval reflects a nostalgic sentimentality of the twenty-first century (Caroll i). Novels that take place in a medieval setting provide an escape from the troubles of modern-day society and express “a yearning for a simpler time, or just the justification and foundation of contemporary politics and traditions” (ibid. iii). But while this medieval escapism might appear innocent in theory, in practice, it has been heavily criticized for its tendency to be used as a justification for uncritical approaches to issues such as racism.

Medievalism as a concept in literature and the arts describes an imaginary return to the Middle Ages (Simpson 13). While it is still a rather new field of academic research and not all definitions are universally accepted, it is generally considered a reframing of medieval material in a way which reflects “social, political, religious, and other considerations of the artist, philosopher, or critic in question.” (Caroll 8; 45). Even though medievalism often implies an escape from the modern sociopolitical landscape, it can therefore not be considered apolitical. Rather, the exclusion of certain elements, such as ethnic diversity, has the potential to reflect the author’s and reader’s ideology.
Medievalism moreover often includes “a wish for a place of authenticity”, meaning it positions itself as a historically accurate representation of the Middle Ages (Simpson 13). However, the imaginary worlds remain fictional and their representation of the medieval remains imaginary (ibid.). While medievalism usually does not include fantastic elements such as dragons, elves, or magic, its approaches to the past are considered influential to the workings of fantasy as a genre. (Simpson 14; Caroll iii).

Medievalism often becomes problematic through its portrayal of racial configurations. In popular culture, the Middle Ages are often anachronistically portrayed as exclusively white spaces (Young “Habits” 12). If medievalist works portray other cultures, it is often according to orientalist traditions:

Medievalism and neomedievalism as genres often perpetuate a discourse that identifies the West as the self and marginalizes the non-Western racial other. In the process of reconfiguring the historical/imaginary Middle Ages to address the issues of their current milieu, creators of these works (un)consciously perpetuate tropes of civilized and savage races. (ibid. 18)

In medievalism, the point of identification for the reader is almost always white. Even though the Other might be considered fascinating, they remain uncivilized in comparison to the Western society. This is particularly troubling in the context of escapism because it insinuates a need to escape from a world with ethnic diversity into a predominantly white society.

9.2. Neomedievalism

While many fantasy works are informed by medievalism, they are not technically medievalist but rather belong to neomedievalism. This concept of is a newer result of the medievalist discourse (Caroll 9). While medievalism strives for a perceived authenticity of the Middle Ages, neomedievalism approaches the problem of accuracy through what Simpson calls an “act of simulation and commodification” (15). This allows neomedievalist media more freedom of expression as it is less bound to the idea of historical accuracy. When medievalism is seen as an expression of the longing for the past, neomedievalism is its recreation (ibid. 12). It presents what Simpson calls “an escape into the trappings of the culture and literature of the Middle Ages through representations
of its cultural tropes of magic, fantastic creatures, and chivalry (12). This inclusion of fantastic elements makes neomedievalism an important component for fantasy literature (Caroll 13). Instead of focusing on the (pseudo)historic aspects of medievalism, neomedievalism can be seen as a creative practice that brings the past and the present closer together by mixing popular culture and fantastic elements with imagery of the Middle Ages (ibid. 17). While medievalism is an important inspiration for works such as *LotR*, they are ultimately neomedievalist in nature. This is also the case for fantasy literature such as *A Game of Thrones* (1996), which prides itself as being a historically accurate depiction of the lifestyle in the Middle Ages (Caroll 23). In interviews, author George R.R. Martin mourned the lack of a realistic depiction of the Middle Ages in fantasy literature, insinuating a perceived intellectual superiority of his own works due to their depiction of the past (ibid.). Martin claims that, in contrast to his works, many fantasy novels present “sensibilities [that] were those of 20th century Americans” (quoted in ibid. 24f). But not even drawing inspiration from historical events can make a neomedievalist work of fiction historically accurate. Veronica Orthenberg claims:

> Accuracy cannot exist even when most of the factual information is as appropriate as it is possible to make it. This is because generally the writer’s perception of the period is overruled, indeed has to be left out, in order to make the book palatable and interesting to readers. It almost inevitably means projecting twentieth-century attitudes and moral issues onto medieval characters. (192)

This means that even though fans might consider George R.R. Martin’s writing as more historically accurate than Tolkien’s *LotR*, it is still fictional to the same degree. Because neomedievalism is a depiction of secondary worlds, any perception of neomedievalist fiction as historically accurate representations of the Middle Ages remains a fallacy. Shiloh Caroll points out:

> [N]eomedievalism is a postmodern version of medievalism, the product of purposeful inaccuracies that reimagine the Middle Ages by commenting on medievalist views of the Middle Ages rather than attempting to recreate the Middle Ages. (9)

This means that neomedievalist worlds are not based on what happened in the Middle Ages but add popular conceptions about what could have happened in the Middle Ages. It does not matter whether the material is presented as realist or romantic, because in any case, its main function is the entertainment of the readers. Here, the imprecision of the
term Middle Ages suggests a wide, unspecified timeframe that allows for much interpretation (Simpson 13). Authors can, therefore, pick and choose what they need in order to create their own worlds.

However, the freedom that neomedievalism provides often leads to disputes about what is allowed within the medievalist frames. Fans and popular culture in general tend to construct fantasy as an ambiguously historical world that on one hand is clearly unreal and does not need to adhere to the restrictions of reality, but on the other hand is perceived as historical and therefore must reject modern sensibilities, such as “political correctness”. This form of ideology is called “restorative nostalgia”, a form of nostalgia which is not perceived as nostalgic, but historically accurate (Young “Habits” 81). This restorative nostalgia often mirrors the ideologies of a post-race society, yet turning it into the other extreme, a setup which Young has called a “pre-race utopia” (81). While in a post-race society, the uncomfortable issue of race does not need to be addressed any longer, in a pre-race society, such as it is often presented in fantasy, it does not need to be addressed ‘yet’, as if whiteness ever existed in a ‘pure’ and ‘undisturbed’ state. It is then the ultimate affirmation of white normativity. Moreover, this type of nostalgia also makes clear for whom the texts are produced (ibid. 82). They are worlds created for white readers by white authors and their nostalgic pre-race secondary worlds. When the race of men in Middle Earth, for example, is entirely consistent of white people, a black audience member is denied their humanity.

Therefore, while neomedievalism is a creative and playful practice, it is not free of ideology. The choices that make up a fantasy world often reflect the norms and values of the world the author lives in (Young “Habits” 16). While expressions of ideology are not necessarily a sign of bad intentions, they must be questioned when they dominate the discourse within a genre. For example, a white heterosexual male author is bound to see the world from a different perspective and naturally prioritizes different issues than a homosexual woman of color. But when the perspective of the white male author is perceived as the norm for fantasy as a whole and the voices of other writers are marginalized, problematic constellations of power within the genre space arise.
9.3. Orientalism

While whiteness is generally treated as the norm, some fantasy texts do portray people of color. However, this is not always a positive representation. For example, in Jackson’s *LotR* trilogy, the Southrons and Easterlings, two evil races who fight along the orcs on Sauron’s side, are presented as largely brown men. The portrayal of villains and evil races as dark-skinned is not uncommon in fantasy. It is based on the concept of orientalism, which was coined by Edward Said in his groundbreaking work *Orientalism* (1979). According to Said, European culture creates a sense of Self by contrasting itself with the oriental Other as its dark and mysterious counterpart (3). The Orient itself is, much like the idea of race itself, an “European invention” and has been used as a place to project Europe’s deepest fears and secret desires (ibid. 1). These formations have been one of the central concepts of colonialism, in which the colonizer inherits the position of the Self and the colonized the position of the Other (Epp 11). Through its problematic relationship with medievalism, historicity and nostalgia, fantasy tends to recreate orientalist discourses. Orientalism and the perceived whiteness of medievalism work together to create an image of the white Self in contrast to an oppositional non-white Other (Simpson 12f). Helen Young claims that “[o]rientalist Eurocentric discourses and colonialist ideologies have been present in the Fantasy genre for as long as it has existed” (Young “Habits” 115). Many of the worlds within fantasy are not only inspired by but structured through colonialist thought and “imperialist nostalgia” (ibid. 12). Often, the races that represent the good side are coded as white and European while the races that are evil or at least in a way unfamiliar and mysterious are dark-skinned (Young “Habits” 43). Moreover, usually the white races are portrayed a civilized, while the non-white cultures are generally portrayed as savage, which has been one of the main justifications of colonialism (Simpson 18). This habit reflects the orientalist custom of portraying enemies as wild, barbaric, unintelligent, sadistic, and often sexually threatening (Allahar 340). In fantasy, this often transcends the boundaries of humanity, when the enemies are represented in a non-human form as dark humanoids, such as the orcs in *LotR* (Simpson ix). But instead of making the orientalist coding less offensive, this dehumanization of the racial Other also reflects colonialist and white supremacist discourse (Daniels 37f). Therefore, both humanized and non-humanized dark enemy hordes are a problematic
image that is rooted in orientalism and creates the impression of a white Self as central point of identification in fantasy.

For a long time since the genre of fantasy gained traction within the Western world, its ties to colonialism and imperialism have simply been ignored, which is common for the treatment of such issues within Western society (Young “Habits” 12). Yet, even though it can be claimed that fantasy is just a game at best and mindless entertainment at worst, its genre conventions are highly problematic as the constant repetition of colonialist and orientalist discourse “silences the voices of the colonized, rendering them spoken for and about”, instead of having them speak for themselves (ibid. 116). This is also reflected in the fact, that until today, voices of writers of color, or even actors of color within fantasy films, are “significantly marginalized” (ibid. 12). Yet, this does not mean that fantasy must be forever caught in these conventions. The freedom within the genre opens the possibility for writers to explore new terrain and leave the colonialist influences behind. While many works still reproduce these problematic conventions, it is necessary to point out that during the current movement within the genre, more and more authors have started to try to break the habits of colonialism and imperialism within the genre (“Habits” 124). But because the most central works of fantasy are still deeply rooted within these ideologies, it appears to be a long way to fully shed them and leave them behind.

10. The Politics of Monsters

Discourses about Self and Other often reveal the fears and desires within a society. Within fantasy, these discussions are often connected with the representation of monsters. Monsters are not just a crucial aspect of fantasy tales, but of the human experience. David Gilmore writes: “The mind needs monsters. Monsters embody all that is dangerous and horrible in the human imagination. Since earliest times, people have invented fantasy creatures on which their fears could safely settle.” (1) He even uses the term ‘fantasy’ in his description—monsters and fantasy are inherently connected, mainly because monsters themselves are essentially unreal; they are figments of the human imagination but in contrast to general fantasy, in which wonder and recovery make for a pleasing experience, the monsters hide in the darkest parts of the imagination and often embody that what
humans fear the most. The idea of monsters appears to be as old as humanity itself; in ancient times, the term *monstrum* referred to “that which reveals, that which warns, a glyph in search of a hierophant” (ibid. 9). In ancient Rome, *monstra* were a crucial element of their religion and were considered “warnings or omens of the will of the gods” (ibid.). Already in ancient times, monsters were considered “part of a semiotic culture of divination, metaphors, messages, indications of deeper meaning or inspiration” (ibid.). Today, the first association with the word has changed. If one hears the word *monster*, they might be inclined to think of ghosts, vampires, ghouls, or other beasts that lurk in the dark, but the overall function remains similar. Monsters are representations of the threat a culture fears and, in return, an analysis of its monsters is a powerful tool to reveal substantial truths about said culture (Stymeist 395; Cohen 3). Moreover, monsters function as markers of normality (Stymeist 403). By transgressing the boundaries of “all that is good, right, necessary and proper”, their “abnormality” is far from being accidental—instead, they often quite literally function as a negative example and highlight the values of a culture by breaching them (ibid). Therefore, monsters might also be fascinating to the human mind because they are placed outside the limits of the possible and can embody secret desires (Gilmore 12). In their appearance, monsters are mostly considered ugly—Tolkien himself observed that “to us evil and ugliness seem indissolubly allied.” (“Fairy Stories” 83). Monsters can be “deformed, amoral unsocialized to the point of inhumanness” and through that, they symbolize all threats to prevailing order within a society (Gilmore 14). This illustrates how monsters are created to be just that; monstrous. They can never be part of the society they haunt because are created to embody its fears, limits, and what lies beyond.

Given the importance of race in the construction of a Western identity, it is hardly surprising that many monsters reflect those ideas. Starting from the classical period until the now, many of the Western monsters are strongly influenced by the ideas, fears and paranoia about race (Cohen 10). Already upon first contact with dark-skinned people, white people began to search for explanations for the difference in coloring. These ideas were “quickly moralized”; a sense of right and wrong was attached to them and because white explorers never doubted their own position as the righteous one, Africans were depicted as evil, their skin “scorched by sin and vice rather than the sun”, a symbol for “the fires of hell” and “demonic provenance” (Cohen 10). This view prevailed long during
the ages and was eventually used to justify slavery in the US (Allahar 341). But these practices were not exclusively reserved for Africans; in Medieval France, crusades against Muslims were often justified by “transforming [them] into demonic caricatures whose menacing lack of humanity was readable from their bestial attributes” (Cohen 8). The West repeated this strategy to fit whatever Other they were trying to extinguish; Jews, Mongols, Africans, Arabs; presenting non-white peoples as monsters or demonic entities enforced the proliferation of racism in the West (Young “Habits” 88). During the nineteenth century, when European colonialism and imperialism was at its highest point, monsters of the Gothic began to haunt the West and once more, they were strongly infused with racial paranoia (ibid). In contemporary popular culture, monsters such as vampires, zombies, ghosts, aliens, etc. have become a commonplace embodiment of “fears around gender, sexuality, class, and politics” (ibid.). Analyzing monsters is then a useful tool to expose underlying anxieties, fears and concerns. By looking at what is out of the normal, the normal can be defined. Monsters function as signs and if they are consistently reproduced within a society, they point to its current fears.

10.1. Orcs in Fantasy Media

One of the most prominent monsters within fantasy is the race of orcs. The origins of the name *orc* are unclear, yet it occasionally appears throughout history. It might be related to the Latin term *Orcus*, which is another name for the Latin god of the underworld, also known as Pluto, and furthermore a synonym for ‘death’ and the underworld itself (Latin-Dictionary). From it derives the French word *orgre*, a humanoid fiend that regularly occurs in fairy tales (Gasque 162). In the English usage, the term *orcneas* appears in *Beowulf*, describing what is most likely undead spirits (Rearick 870f). Moreover, it also stands in association with the word *orca*, denoting a whale or sea monster (Merriam-Webster; Oxford Dictionaries). It was Tolkien, however, who first introduced the word *orc* to fantasy and started a tradition that continues until today (Young “Habits” 89). Considering Tolkien’s central position within the genre, it is hardly surprising that orcs have become the stock for fantasy monsters. Through the years, the fictional race became a stand-in for fantasy’s weaknesses and a “distinctive marker” of the genre (ibid. 88).
Orcs differ from other elements of fantasy, such as dragons, magic, elves and dwarves through their inherent monstrosity (Young “Habits” 88). While all other races have the potential to be good or evil, orcs were always conceptualized as monsters (ibid.). Their status is enforced through three recurring markers; their skin color, their inhuman strength, and their tendency for violence (ibid. 93). While Tolkien’s orcs were originally smaller creatures, they have grown in the public imagination ever since and are now usually imagined as tall and “hypermuscled—often hypermasculine” bodies (ibid. 95). Part of this might be because taller orcs proved to be more effective monsters and rather matched the anxieties of the times. However, a part of their transformation might also be due to their use in *D&D*, where they were first featured in 1975 as a monstrous beast race outside Tolkien’s Middle Earth (ibid. 90). Until today, orcs are part of the *D&D* lore. In the latest edition, they are described as “savage raiders and pillagers with stooped postures, low foreheads, and pig-like faces with prominent lower canines that resemble a boar’s tusks” (Dungeons and Dragons “Orcs”). These monstrous creatures are accompanied by the so-called half-orcs, orc-human hybrids that can be selected as avatars (Dungeons and Dragons “Half-Orc”). Today, orcs can be encountered in a variety of fantasy novels, films and games. They usually represent their designated role as the monster, yet some works try to change the habits of the genre. The most noticeable so far are Mary Gentle’s *Grunts!* (1992), which was the first book with orc protagonists, Stan Nicolls’ multi-book series *Orcs* (1999-2000), which focuses on the adventures of orc protagonists, as well as Terry Pratchett’s *Unseen Academicals* (2009), which has is one of the very few examples in which violence and aggression is not displayed as an inherent trait of orcs (Young “Habits” 91ff). In movies, the most prominent portrayals of orcs stem from Peter Jackson’s imagination. Aside from *LotR* and *The Hobbit*, there are few instances of orcs on screen. In the splatter action movie *Orcs!* (2011), orcs that closely resemble Peter Jackson’s vision invade the modern world at a national park. The most prominent movie to feature orcs aside from Jackson’s films is *Warcraft* (2016), the film adaption to the famous fantasy MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) *World of Warcraft* (2004). In *Warcraft*, orcs invade the homeland of the human species, however, they are not displayed as inherently evil, but act under a spell. The movie is dedicated to finding a more or less peaceful solution instead of mindlessly killing the orcs without remorse. *Warcraft* is also the only fantasy film that features not just one
but two orc character as likable protagonists, but still repeats problematic stereotypes, for example by portraying the African American actress Paula Patton in as the orc woman Garona with green body paint in a bikini made of fur and leather. In 2017, Netflix tied to humanize the orcs in their Blockbuster *Bright*, in which fantasy creatures live alongside humans in the urban place of contemporary Los Angeles.

A reason why there are so comparatively little movies about orcs might be the fact that they are not easily realized on screen; they require SFX and CGI and if they are done on a smaller budget, they quickly turn from terrifying into ridiculous, for example in *Orcs!*, where the monsters basically resemble muscular man in black paint with helmets concealing their faces. Even in films with bigger budgets, such as *Warcraft*, the design can border on the absurd. Orcs are therefore more suited for the literary; in books, authors can use their words in whatever way they want to describe their orcs without being restricted to concerns about visualization. The genre in which orcs appear to be most prominent, however, is that of (video) games. Following the success of the pen and paper RPG *D&D*, the table top games *Warhammer Fantasy* (1983) and *Warhammer 40 000* (1987) followed by introducing more orcs into the genre. While at this time the creatures were still analogue—tiny miniatures that could be moved across the board—it already showed the suitability of the fantastic monsters to be used as cannon fodder within games. When videogames were on the rise, these conventions were transported to the new medium. Today, there are countless videogames that feature orcs; most of them in the role of the mindless, barbaric monster that can be slain over and over again. Some of them belong to the *LotR* franchise; *Shadow of War* (2017) and *Shadow of Mordor* (2014) stand out in this regard, first of which has been titled an “open-world colonial simulator” in the popular Youtube series *Honest Game Trailers* (Smosh Games 3:48). But not all games replicate these problematic racial hierarchies. While orcs are almost always in some way or another brutal, barbaric, and somewhat violent, there are various games which try to explore the conflicts from a different perspective. Most outstanding in this regard is the RPG *Of Orcs and Men* (2012), a game with “strong environmentalist” influences in which orcs fight for freedom against “a tyrannical human empire” and one of the few games in which the player is forced to play as an orc (Young “Habits” 91). In many fantasy RPGs and MMORPGs, in which players are connected to each other via the internet, orcs often are an option for the player avatar. Those RPGs include titles such as *World of Warcraft,*
the *Elder Scrolls* series (1994-present), *Warhammer* (1983), or *Neverwinter* (2013), an MMORPG based on *D&D*. But while these games often toy with the idea of humanizing orcs, they still mostly confirm the traditional codings of the genre. However, the tendency to feature orcs in video games and tabletop RPGs shows a tendency to use the monstrous race as a point of identification. Helen Young claims that “orc bodies—rendered digital flesh or merely imagined—are potential sites of pleasurable intimacy with Otherness […].” (“Habits” 107). With orcs being a visual representation of the Other, videogames can open up a possibility for (white) players to temporarily slip across the boundary.

### 10.2. Racial Monsters

As ultimate monsters of fantasy, orcs cannot be considered without analyzing them from a racial perspective. Helen Young claims that “orcs are always racial monsters, even on the occasions that they also intersect with other identify [sic] constructs” (“Habits” 88). There is no separating orcs from the racial anxieties they represent. Since their creation in Tolkien’s Middle Earth, their dark and muscular bodies have represented racial discourses and Western anxieties about the Other, embody racist stereotypes and fears of miscegenation (ibid. 89). Their descriptions are often rife with colonial ideas about race, darkness and the Other, often include animal comparisons, a common technique in colonialist discourses for the dehumanization of people of color, especially regarding Blackness (ibid. 95). However, when descriptions of orcs reference real life cultures, it is often in a vague form. Even though orcs are often compared to non-white cultures, it is usually done in a non-specific way (Young “Habits” 97). For example, in *World of Warcraft*, where the race of the Trolls corresponds to Jamaican culture, and the culture of the Tauren to Native American culture, orcs have no clear counterparts in the real world. Instead, they represent a hotchpotch of colonialist stereotypes against people of color (Langer 92). But these unspecific references and the resulting racial caricatures work to reinforce the racist stereotype even further (Young “Habits” 99). One of the major racist stereotypes associated with Orcs is the idea of a horde. In hardly any text, an orc comes alone—they always appear in large numbers and while a single orc might not pose a massive threat, their strength comes through their masses. This directly corresponds to one of the images used in white supremacist discourse: fueling the anxieties over a racial
war, white supremacists have used the term “dark hordes” repeatedly to refer to people of color (Daniels 37f). The fact that this image is still among the most prominent associated with orcs within the fantasy genre illustrates how the idea of dark-skinned hordes overrunning the West still appears to be a deeply anchored anxiety within Western society. Orcs are then a personified exaggeration of the “dichotomy between West and East as Self and Other” (Young “Habits” 25). They are not only monsters but are instead deeply rooted in colonialist discourse.

It is, however, important to notice that while some habits of the representation of orcs are currently being changed; Warcraft attempted to humanize, even sexualize their orc protagonists, Bright uses orcs in a metaphor against police violence and various RPGs allow their players to slip into the role of the orcs. Nevertheless, the traditions of the genre are hard to overcome, and it often appears impossible to portray an inherently racialized monster in a non-offensive way. Helen Young states that “[r]acial logics, which connect physical and non-physical attributes to biology—are, moreover, almost without exception, deployed in representation of orcs, whether they are enemies or protagonists in the narrative” (“Habits” 96). The orc is therefore inseparable from its heavy burden of colonial fears and it is difficult for any representation of the monstrous race to exist without these unpleasant associations.

11. Race in Peter Jackson’s The Lord of the Rings

The world of LotR is the pivotal race-based society in fantasy; it is organized around the principle of racial essentialism. While Tolkien’s literary work has been mostly defended against the accusations of racism (cf. Rearick), Peter Jackson’s films have often been criticized for their portrayal of race (cf. Kim, Young “Habits”, Epp). This difference in perception might be due to the finality of the way in which film presents the racial coding from Tolkien’s text (Kim 876). Reading a novel, it depends on the reader to imagine the races; in a visual medium like film, Jackson must decide what orcs and elves look like. It is therefore no excuse that Jackson did not invent Middle Earth, because he created its visual representation. The films are not simply an illustration of the novel but texts in their own right and should be considered as such. However, it must also be added that many of the problematic aspects of the racial essentialism in Jackson are also existent in
Tolkien’s novel (Young “Habits” 23). Unfortunately, it seems to be a tendency within academic circles to focus on Jackson’s failings and disregarding Tolkien’s (cf. Rearick). It appears to be an unproductive habit among Tolkien’s admirers to firmly reject accusations of racism. Hope Rogers points out that Tolkien’s critics “too come repeatedly [come] to a single conclusion, that Tolkien, far from being racist, promotes intercultural interaction and friendship” (69). The truth might be more ambiguous than that; while 

*LotR* does express a fondness for interracial friendship, it does not erase its problems with race, patriarchy, monarchy, and colonialism. To acknowledge the one does not erase the other. Unfortunately, “historicizing” an author has been and continues to be one of the major techniques to reject any criticism when it comes to problematic elements (Young “Habits” 32). Race in Tolkien, then, cannot be discussed because it was influenced by the thinking of another time and is no longer relevant to the present. By denying a critical opinion about race and politics in Tolkien because he lived in a different time, the idea of a post-race society in which racism no longer effects people is enforced. Discussions about these issues often derail into fights about whether Tolkien was racist or not, when ultimately, it does not matter. How the material is perceived and reproduced in the here and now does. And being such a central work within the genre, Tolkien is caught in a constant circle of reproduction. It is, therefore, crucial for the genre to face their demons and examine their own habits in order to change them, not just find new excuses and defenses. It is not about calling a single person racist or handling racism as a character flaw. Kim observes:

> To simply place blame, labeling someone or something as racist, may not necessarily constitute an interesting and productive project, but neither does simply identifying moments of representative instability, as so many postmodernist readings do, and locating redemptive and political potential in disruptions of discourse. What we have to do is understand how and why certain kinds of culturally created racial codings are used, and how they function within larger contexts. (Kim 884)

It is therefore necessary to remove a discussion from the question whether someone was racist or not. As Kim states: “the entire discourse of blame, premised on the idea that racism is solely a personal failing expressed in representation and discourse, limits our understanding of how racialization works”. Discussion about Tolkien’s, Jackson’s or Ayer’s personal views do not change the coding of their texts. To foster a productive discussion, it is necessary to move away from the idea of racism as a character flaw and
accept a view of racism as an institutionalized power that underlies many of the cultural products of the West. To talk about racism in *LotR* is then not an attempt to discredit or ‘bash’ the work, the author, the fans, or any creative effort inspired by it, but is to acknowledge and improve the genre for future generations. There is much to be said about this issue, however, this would be the focus of a paper. For the following analysis, Jackson’s movies are central—not because they are less respected than Tolkien’s writing, but because of their central position as fantasy film and the influence with which they have affected succeeding film productions within the genre.

### 11.1. Racial Essentialism in Middle Earth

Based on Tolkien’s novel, Jackson’s portrayal of Middle Earth is built on the idea of a land inhabited by different races with different cultures, strengths and weaknesses. The fundamental differences between the most central races are explained in the first scene of *Fellowship*, when the elven woman Galadriel explains the premise of the films:

> It began with the forging of the Great Rings. Three were given to the elves: immortal, wisest and fairest of all beings. Seven to the dwarf-lords: great miners and craftsmen of the mountain halls. And nine… nine rings were gifted to the race of men who, above all, desire power. For within these rings was bound the strength and will to govern each race. (0:00:50)

This setup instantly suggests an order within the inhabitants of Middle Earth: the elves are situated at the top of the chain, followed by the craftsmen of the dwarves and eventually by the men, who appear rather weak in comparison, as their main defining feature is their hunger for power. This organization conforms to the idea of a Great Chain of Being (Zimbardo 101). It has often been discussed whether the Great Chain of Being in Middle Earth works as a hierarchy, whether its creatures and inhabitants can be classified from most to least valuable (Kocher 80). While such an organization appears to be problematic as it enforces colonial thought, its prominence within the order of Middle Earth can hardly be denied (ibid.). Especially the visual coding of the race of elves and their high ranking within the chain is problematic. Jackson’s elves such as Galadriel, Arwen, Elrond, and Legolas are tall and pale and often portrayed surrounded in a white glow, for example when Arwen rescues Frodo after he is wounded fighting off the Nazgûl and she beckons Frodo to “come back to the light” (1:05:03). Her brightness is not just
metaphorical but a physical, transcendent quality that sets her off against the protruding darkness in the world. Of course, this brightness is not directly linked to racist ideologies but rather presented as an essential dichotomy between light and darkness. However, the intensity with which Jackson transfers the metaphor of brightness equating purity and darkness equating evil onto the visual representations of the characters is bound to conjure the idea of an essential color coding.

According to Galadriel’s monologue, the next step in the Great Chain of Being of Middle Earth are the dwarves. In Jackson’s trilogy, the dwarves take over a rather negligible role. Gimli is the only significant living dwarf the audience encounters. There is much to be said about the dwarves and their coding in the novels, which has been identified as distinctly Jewish (cf. Vink). However, little of that translates to Jackson’s films, where similarities have been removed by Gimli’s strong Welsh accent (Salo 32). The dwarves, then, appear rather British than Jewish. While this on one hand prevents a problematic caricature of Jews, it is also remarkable that anything that could be considered a potential Other has been adapted into a more white, Christian, Eurocentric coding. Aside from that, not much about dwarf culture can be deduced from Jackson’s representation. All ideas about the race must be inferred from Gimli alone, which is a prime example of racial essentialism.

The first race the audience is introduced to—one that is not mentioned in Galadriel’s opening—are the hobbits. Hobbits are a quaint people that remind the viewer of an “idealized version of rural English culture” (Monson 54). They, too, are exclusively white skinned and live isolated from the rest of Middle Earth. In their peaceful idyll of the Shire, they do not even realize the doom that Sauron threatens to bring. Jackson removed any references to Sauron’s or Saruman’s power extending to the Shire, keeping it detached from the politics of Middle Earth. The romantic retreat of Hobbiton therefore stands in contrast to the war-torn world of men which struggles to defend themselves from the dark hordes threatening their civilization. It appears to be an idealized version of white rural normativity and a whimsical wish-fulfillment of medievalist dreams.

While the protagonist Frodo, as well as a majority of the Fellowship, are hobbits, the most central race within Jackson’s films is the race of men. Inspired by neomedeival visions, they are presented as a proto-European ancestral race (Higgin 11). As any other
of the ‘good’ races, they are presented as light-skinned and a striking majority of them, especially the inhabitants of Rohan, are blonde. Because they are most familiar, they serve as the point of identification for the viewer and present an illusion of an original white Western civilization. Jackson explicitly enforced a focus on the race of men and a majority of the trilogy is dedicated to the politics of mankind, who defend themselves against the intruding hordes of orcs (Salo 26). In the end, Aragorn is crowned king and the Age of Men dawns upon Middle Earth.

The society Jackson presents is not one of racial collaboration or multicultural exchange. Even among friendly races such as the dwarves, elves, hobbits and men, cultural boundaries cannot be overcome; a hobbit always remains a hobbit and a man remains a man. Those who cross the confines of their cultures such as Arwen, Legolas, Gimli, or Bilbo remain exceptions to the rule. Any racial intermixing appears to be frowned upon—not even the relationship between Arwen and Aragorn is presented in a positive light because even though they marry and have children, Arwen is forced to sacrifice her culture and accept an eternity in grief and isolation after the end of Aragorn’s mortal life (cf. Rogers). Moreover, there appears to be a lack of empathy across the races; it is almost close to a miracle when Lórien sends their archers to the aid of Helm’s Deep (Two Towers 1:59:35) and until the Fellowship is forced to take the route through the Mines of Moria, nobody—not even Gimli himself—knew of the slaughter of the dwarves for what must have been decades, judging by the state of their corpses (Fellowship 1:41:10). This emphasizes the racial divide and the state of isolation the different races, even different cultures within a race, live in. In Jackson’s Middle Earth, each man, elf, dwarf, and hobbit stands for their own and not even the threat of total destruction through Sauron’s armies is enough to unite the races to fight together.

Yet, claiming that there is no multicultural collaboration in LotR is obviously neglecting the premise of the Fellowship of the Ring. Within the Fellowship, emissaries of the central races work together to overcome Sauron’s growing control over Middle Earth. The Fellowship deliberately consists of one or more characters of each race (Kocher 79; Grabner 57). This suggests that one race alone would not have been able to achieve the destruction of the ring—some even go so far as to argue that every character and every race represents one part of the whole, and in combination, they equate the abilities of one “complete human being” (Purtill 59). But whatever subtleties Tolkien is
able to express in his writing are lost in Jackson’s film; eventually, it is Frodo’s and Sam’s actions that get the Ring destroyed and the idea of cooperation between the races to defeat Sauron falls flat. Jackson’s films are not based on the idea of cosmopolitanism but racial essentialism, suggesting that cultures must be isolated to be preserved. Criticism of this constellation, in Tolkien as well as Jackson, has caused many heated discussions amongst scholars. In his emotional justification of *LotR* as an English myth, Elwin Fairburn calls criticism of the racially essentialist order of Middle Earth “predictable politically correct knee-jerkings” and praises Tolkien’s stance as “values [that] are the antithesis of modern ‘Americo-cosmopolitanism’” (81f). Others have been quick to point out that Tolkien’s choices “repeatedly demonstrate problems and losses that accompany diversity in the real world and the imperfections of even the best efforts to find solutions” (Rogers 69f). However, while Tolkien’s effort in creating a multidimensional portrayal of the coexistence of various races within one fantastic universe would be enough material for another paper, none such sentiment exists in Jackson’s movies. The audience encounters the races as separated from each other, reluctant to help, and downright ignorant of the tragedies that befall their neighbors. They are visually and culturally distinct and there is no prospect of change on the horizon. Jackson chose to enforce Tolkien’s outdated constructs of racial essentialism and further enforced its impact to create a universe in which a white race of men is ultimately left to dominate the world.

12. Peter Jackson’s Orcs

While the premise of Jackson’s films is based in racial essentialism, the race which illustrates the weakness of this approach most is that of the orcs. To start an in-depth discussion about the problems that arise through the way they are represented, several distinctions must be clarified. While orcs are clearly differentiable from any other inhabitant of Middle Earth, there are some confusions surrounding the typology within the race. The first obvious distinction is between regular orcs and Uruk-hai. Orcs are mostly slightly smaller than humans with skin tones ranging from greenish grey to dark grey. They seem shrewd but not intelligent, speak the common tongue, and appear to be a natural species of Middle Earth. The second type of orcs in Middle Earth are the so-called Uruk-hai. They are bred in Isengard under Saruman’s supervision, even though it
is not clear how the breeding process takes place. Gandalf claims that “by foul craft, Saruman has crossed orcs with goblin-men.” (Fellowship 1:16:18). While this would suggest a biological process, the Uruk-hai are shown ‘hatching’ from the mud in Isengard as fully formed creatures (ibid. 1:03:23;). This directly matches the racial slur of “mud people” that is used in white supremacist discourse to disparage people of color (Daniels 69). Visually, the Uruk-Hai are tall, black-skinned, and often don what reminds of tribal markings, even though they logically cannot have a culture as they appear to be science experiments or clones. They have coarse, black hair that has often been called out for its visual likeness with dreadlocks (Kim 877). While the orcs are rather unmarked in their resemblance to real life cultures, the Uruk-hai combine a number of racist stereotypes.

From the original trilogy to the Hobbit prequels, three distinct types or tribes of orcs can be observed. In LotR, the audience encounters the Morgul orcs, who are born and raised in Mordor; the Isengard orcs under Saruman’s control; as well as the Moria orcs, who live in the abandoned mines of Moria. The Morgul orcs appear to be slightly taller and more militant. They are organized fighters and soldiers, as exemplified by their leader Gothmog. The Isengard Orcs are Saruman’s minions and help him breed the Uruk-hai. They are wicked creatures who enjoy serving their master due to their innately evil character. Finally, the Moria orcs appear to be the smallest breed. They are seen swarming the Fellowship in the mines, a scene in which they resemble animals living in the darkness (Fellowship 1:55:40). The Moria orcs moreover seem to be most distant from Sauron’s or Saruman’s orders—it appears as if they were living inside the cave for a long time until they are awakened by Pippin. Yet, there is no further explanation to any of the orc cultures within the films. In the Hobbit trilogy, Jackson furthermore introduces the Gundabad orcs, who are led by Azog the Defiler, who serves as main villain of the prequels. In contrast to the orcs in LotR, the Gundabad orcs appear taller, better organized, and with a stronger mind of their own. Azog’s physique reminds of that of an Uruk-hai rather than a smaller orc. Yet again, there is a lack of explanation about how the orc clans differ within the world. This indeterminateness is helpful for the producers, as it allows them to project almost anything onto the orcs without having to struggle with explanations. This is the advantage of the orc as enemy; they can be everything at once without being anything specific, a vaguely defined category of evil creatures that can be deployed whenever an opposing force is needed.
12.1. Orc Origins

Through the art of fantastic sub-creation, even creatures like orcs should be explained as a part of the organic secondary world that is created. Given their completely evil nature, however, it is difficult to make sense of how the rotten creatures fit into the workings of Middle Earth. In Fellowship, Saruman briefly explains the origin of the orcs:

Do you know how the orcs first came into being? They were elves once. Taken by the Dark Powers. Tortured and mutilated. A ruined and terrible form of life… and now, perfected. My fighting Uruk-hai (2:14:19).

This suggests that the orcs, like as the Uruk-hai, were artificially created even though this is not explained any further. Saruman’s explanation moreover does not answer the question how orcs persist as a race. Even if his creation myth is taken for face value, it would imply that the orcs have procreated since. Yet, there are no orc women shown on screen, let alone any children. It is only during The Hobbit, when Bolg is introduced as Azog’s natural son, when the audience first witnesses any evidence that orcs organically reproduce. While Robert Tally points out that there is additional lore in Tolkien’s writing that suggests that orcs reproduce sexually and are able to interbreed with other races, nothing of this is ever translated onto screen (Tally 19). Every orc shown is middle aged and male, even Azog and Bolg appear to be around the same age and have similar fighting experience, even though they are father and son.

The orcs masculinity conforms to the traditions of the genre. Young points out that this portrayal of orcs as exclusively masculine is a common habit for fantasy: wherever orcs appear, they are depicted as male warriors (“Habits” 95). This might be because the beauty ideals for women forbid to present female characters as ugly and savage. It is noticeable how in Warcraft, the male orc protagonist Durotan is mostly CGI animated, hypermuscled with a massive jaw and fangs, while Garona, the female orc, is simply a half-naked woman with green makeup, a beautiful face, and tiny fangs, first appearing in a torn leather bikini. The ugliness of orcs apparently cannot be combined with the ideals of female beauty and therefore even the few examples of female orc representations are sexualized. Orcs are mostly masculine and the way their bodies are framed corresponds with white anxieties about male people of color as a threat to their
society (ibid.). Interestingly, however, the orcs or Uruk-hai in Jackson never attempt any acts of sexual violence, even though their portrayal is hypermasculine. It appears as if Jackson distanced his orcs from any kind of sexuality; even in their creation, the Uruk-hai are shown emerging as fully developed men from the ground. Saruman then appears like the larger-scale Frankenstein of *LotR*, essential to the creation and reproduction of the entire race (Armitt 79). The purpose of his creation is clear. In *Two Towers*, Aragorn exclaims: “It is an army bred for a single purpose: to destroy the world of men” (1:48:21). This is a distinctly modern idea. James Davis points out that the idea of genetic engineering had not existed when Tolkien wrote his book (58). Instead, the hatching of the fully formed Uruk-hai reminds of something out of a science fiction or horror film, rather than fantasy. It is a simple technique to deny the enemies any form of humanity; they are not a fully formed culture, they have no past and no future, do not fight for what they believe in, have no loved ones, no mothers or children but exist purely for the purpose of being evil; of being slaughtered by the heroes of the story.

12.2. Skin Color and Hierarchy

Orcs are easily distinguished from the other inhabitants of Middle Earth through the color of their skin. This problem is not attributable to Jackson alone; in Tolkien’s text, the skin of the orcs is described as “swart” (*LotR* 441). However, while the text has to be imagined, the film has a way to “foreground skin color” as an undeniable fact (Young “Habits” 94). While most of the regular orcs have greyish-greenish skin, the Uruk-hai are unambiguously dark-skinned. Moreover, their skin appears often to be speckled, in a way which reminds of the skin condition Vitiligo. Throughout the films, an unfortunate hierarchy between these light-skinned and dark-skinned orcs is established. During a scene in Isengard, the audience witnesses the smaller, light-skinned orcs helping Saruman to breed the Uruk-hai, who are passively waiting for instruction. The lighter skinned orcs examine the freshly hatched Uruks, mustering them for their usefulness and strength, in a scene that uncomfortably reminds of a person inspecting their slaves (*Two Towers* 14:39). These associations with Uruk-hai and slavery are repeated throughout the movie, for example when Legolas exclaims “They’ve run as if the very whips of their masters were behind them!” (*Two Towers* 19:15). Repeatedly, the discrepancy between the Uruks
and the lighter skinned orcs is illustrated through their behavior. For example, when a band of orcs and Uruks take Merry and Pippin captive, a fight breaks after the orcs suggest eating the hobbits to overcome a food shortage, but the Uruks refuse to harm their captives because it would go against Saruman’s orders (20:15 TT). Here, the orcs show to possess more initiative. They do not hesitate to put their own needs first and care more about their profits than the plans of their leaders. In contrast, the Uruks are strictly following instruction, unable to resist Saruman’s orders, which positions them as less autonomous than orcs. Yet, the Uruks present a more fearsome enemy then the orcs do; in Two Towers, Gimli observes that they are “no rabble of mindless orcs. These are Uruk-hai. Their armor is thick and their shields broad” (1:49:07). In contrast to the orcs, the Uruks are bred for war. It is a troubling image especially in its connotations with their status as slaves to Saruman. They do not even choose their side in the war but simply follow the instructions of their quite literally white master.

The color hierarchy among orcs is completed through the use of pale orcs as leaders in both trilogies. In the prequels, Jackson famously introduced the character of Azog, The Pale Orc, also known as Azog the Defiler, an albino orc who leads a band of soldiers and fights on Saurons side. Azog and his son Bolg have corpse-pale skin, which in Azog’s case even earned him his moniker. While these breaks with the stereotype of presenting monsters and villains with dark skin, it is still problematic because Azog and Bolg exist in relation to darker skinned orcs and are both far superior to them. They are smart to the point of repeatedly outwitting the protagonists, are tactical thinkers, sadists, and intellectually more developed than regular orcs. A similar coding can be observed in the character Gothmog, the disfigured orc captain in Return of the King who leads the armies in the battle of the fields of Pelennor. Noticeably, Azog, Bolg, and Gothmog are among the very few orcs who have actual names. The only Uruk with a name is Lurz, who Jackson originally created to “humanize” the dark side in Fellowship (Epp 65f). But while Gothmog, Azog, and Bolg all are presented as characters with agency, the black-skinned Lurtz remains a grunting racial caricature, hardly speaking and mindlessly carrying out orders of his master. It is not surprising that these characters drastically differ in skin tones. Jackson not only presents light and dark as a metaphor for good and evil but also structures the hierarchies amongst the orcs according to racist stereotypes about dark skin.
12.3. The Nature of Evil

The creation of orcs and Uruk-hai as genetically engineered creatures invites questions about their evil nature. As Kocher observes, “genetics cannot breed innately evil wills, or good ones either—only wills which can develop into one or the other as they are employed” (69). Why, then, are the Orcs and Uruk-hai portrayed as innately evil? Tally observes that even though Tolkien has a tendency of separating good and evil, the finality with which his orcs are unredeemable remains surprising. Since the release of Tolkien’s novel, this issue has often been addressed by critics as well as fans (Young “Cosmopolitanism” 357; Kocher 68). It is a troubling notion because “it imperils the doctrine that underpins the moral structure of the epic, that every intelligent being has a will capable of choosing between good and evil” (68). An explanation for this might be that the orcs themselves should not be seen as humanoid creatures such as dwarves and elves, but literal demons, a form of lesser Maiar under Sauron’s control (Tally 21). This, however, is just an unconfirmed theory. Moreover, it does not fit Tolkien’s antimanchaenistic worldview, which rejects the distinction between inherently good and inherently evil forces on earth (Kocher 68). In his books, Tolkien not even presented Sauron as naturally evil but as a result of his own choices (ibid.). Still, the orcs, as presented in Jackson’s films, are quite simply bad creatures. Kocher claims that even though orcs are never redeemed, “it would go against the grain of the whole to dismiss them as ultimately irredeemable” (70). The explanation for their evil deeds then lies in the indoctrination they have undergone at the hands of Sauron and Saruman:

The explanation of orc behavior, then seems to be that Sauron (and Saruman) has carefully trained them to be what they are, continuing the training begun by Morgoth. Close under his thumb in Mordor, they have been educated to brutality and their social patterns set in a mold which will perpetuate it and its cognate qualities in the generations to come. They have acquired the same delight in torture that Sauron feels, and he has added a nice taste in cannibalism. Yet he seems also to have inculcated in these coarse combative creatures a firm loyalty to himself that they never question, a loyalty that would be reckoned a virtue if turned in a better direction. They have evidently been taught also that the elves are rebels—against Sauron as their rightful lord, of course. The Uruk-hai at Helm’s Deep are courageous fighters, and even have achieved considerable esprit de corps. In short, there is an orc point of view about things which it is possible to understand, even to pity. The poor brutes are so plainly the toys of a mightier
will than theirs. The have been conditioned to will whatever Sauron wills. (ibid. 69)

This observation is especially interesting because it claims that the orcs, while serving evil, share a similar concept of right and wrong as the other races do. This is illustrated during a scene in *Return of the King*, when an orc and an Uruk-hai fight over Frodo’s elven shirt. During the dispute, the orc draws his blade but the Uruk-hai eventually overpowers him, throwing him into a room full of other Uruks, yelling “The scum tried to knife me! Kill him!” (2:18:2). This scene shows several things; first of all, the orcs and Uruk-hai value the beauty of elven craft. The Uruk explicitly wants to claim the “shiny shirt” for himself (ibid.). Moreover, he is offended by the fact that the orc tries to stab him and the other Uruk-hai punish this act of betrayal by attacking the orc (ibid.). Orcs and Uruk-hai might have a strong tendency for violence, yet they share the same universal concept of beauty, loyalty, and treason. This strongly speaks against a reading of orcs as demonic entities because they do not approve of immoral behavior. But why are they then not redeemable? After all, Gollum, who is transformed by the influence of the Ring, is a pitiful creature and King Théoden is instantly redeemed once Gandalf casts out Sauron’s influence from his mind (*Two Towers* 17:00). Yet, there is no such sentiment when it comes to orcs; they always remain the perpetual villain and through that, attempts at providing background information ultimately fail to hit their mark. Orcs can only be sustained as villains if they are irredeemably evil and remain that way. Jackson explicitly removes any attempts of humanizing the orcs from Tolkien’s texts, presenting them “a strict good/evil binary” (Epp 64f). Salo points out that by focusing on the orcs as an unredeemable enemy, Jackson aims to avoid sensitive subjects and questions of nationalism and morality (26). However, a closer look at the influences of colonial thought within the film, as well as the positioning as the orcs as racial Other invalidate this approach. At first glance their coding can easily be confused as a symbol for Tolkien’s anti-industrialism. But in Jackson’s films, human cities like Gondor are clean and bright, a beacon of culture in contrast to the untamed nature surrounding it. They are not a symbol of nature but of civilization: the threat of the orcs then does not symbolize the expulsion of nature through technology. Instead, they are visual representations of the Western anxieties of destruction and chaos brought upon them through hordes of barbaric, dark-skinned men who threaten to destroy their civilization. By making the orcs
irredeemable, Jackson erases any possibility of a peaceful solution, allowing for the audience to enjoy the slaughter of orcs without moral objections.

12.4. Violence and War

While the dehumanization of orcs might appear unethical at best, it does serve a purpose within the tale. To tell a story about war is to tell a story about two sides; usually soldiers themselves are not personally evil but are dispatched by mighty regimes to kill each other; this is the tragedy of war. If a war story, then, presents its heroes gloriously slaughtering their way through enemy lines, it is usually not far from propaganda. This problem can be easily solved, though, if the enemies are no longer human; if they are the personified evil and each of them just exists for the sole purpose to kill without remorse, when a peaceful solution is impossible, the killing of the enemy can be enjoyed without any moral objections. This is the case of the orcs in *LotR*. They serve as “a broadly understood enemy class” that functions as “an endless source of enemies to fight” for the heroes of the story (Tally 21). James Obertino writes:

> While no one among the free peoples in Tolkien ever urges the annihilation of all Orcs or says that the only good Orc is a dead Orc, nevertheless, the horsemen of Gondor act from the unspoken premise that annihilation of this enemy is best, as do the Elves in Lorien and the Woses in their forest when they kill to the last Orc. The Orcs are so disgusting and savage, cruel in the extreme even to each other, that sympathy for them is impossible. Orcs are a completely debased Other […]. (127)

The orcs are not an equal enemy. There is no possibility of making peace; as long as the orcs live, there will be a threat to the race of men. Therefore, the only logical conclusion for the heroes is to kill the orcs with the same remorselessness as the orcs show towards them. At the battle of Helms Deep, Aragorn exclaims: “Show them no mercy for you shall receive none!” (*Two Towers*, 2:03:14). There is no tragedy in killing orcs, instead Jackson rather frames it as a sport. In *Fellowship*, Aragorn calls to his friends: “Let us hunt some orc!” to which Gimli enthusiastically cheers in reply (2:43:27). If the orcs were a human enemy, no character would be able to call for their slaughter and still be conceived as a hero. Tally writes:

> As a practical matter, however, it is easier to fight and to cheer on the fighters if one can be convinced that the other side is irredeemably evil. The demonization
of the enemy, in the hawkish rhetoric of war and in the seemingly escapist genre of fantasy, might also be said to validate the most atrocious views. (22)

The orcs therefore must be irredeemable because if they were not, any action taken against them would have to be considered from a moral point of view. For the heroes to remain heroes, their enemies must be innumerable and inhumane so their slaughter is not perceived as murder. At the end of Fellowship, the Uruk-hai fight the Fellowship and even though they are muscular, tall warriors bred for the one specific purpose of war, they are slaughtered by the dozen, even by inexperienced hobbits such as Frodo, Merry, and Pippin (2:25:00). While the hobbits appear as a merry, innocent bunch, they do not hesitate to kill Uruks. It reminds of a videogame in which enemies are killed for skill points; it is framed as a thrilling, visually enjoyable episode when countless tall, black-skinned, scantily clad warriors fall against the blades of the exclusively white male band of heroes. But the problematic portrayal of killing orcs eventually peaks when Legolas and Gimli bond over who can kill more enemies. The competition starts at the battle of Helms Deep:

Gimli: “Legolas! Two already!”
Legolas [laughing]: “I’m on 17!”
Gimli: “Uh? I’ll have no pointy-ear outscoring me!” (2:07:39)

Gimli subsequently attacks an orc near him, effectively castrating it. The orc is letting out a high-pitched screech and presses its hands against his genitals in a manner of comic relief (ibid.). The competition between the two is especially questionable because it functions as a form of conquering their racial differences: Legolas and Gimli, an elf and a dwarf, overcome their distrust of each other and bond over the act of slaughtering orcs together. This carries on through the final battle in Return of the King, when Gimli faces the hordes of orcs, announcing: “There’s plenty for the both of us. May the best dwarf win!” (2:10:51). A similar behavior if the heroes were to face off against (white) humans would be unacceptable. Yet in these scenes, the orcs function as the unspecified Other, a threat big enough to unify the distinctly white races against personal differences to defend their values of civilization.

There is just one scene in Two Towers which briefly reverts the perspective. When Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli meet the Riders of Rohan in search of Merry and Pippin, who have been taken prisoners by a band of orcs, the riders bring bad news: they have
raided the orc camp and killed everyone in sight. When the heroes arrive at the campsite, the aftermath of the battle suddenly turns into a horrifying sight. The second the audience assumes that the pyre includes the corpses of the two hobbits, the steaming pile of burned bodies turns into a mass grave and suddenly, the actions of the Rohirrim appear brutal and ruthless; why would they kill everyone in the camp without asking questions? The illusion holds up for a few moments until the heroes discover tracks leading away from the battle, concluding that the hobbits survived. A sigh of relief; the corpses are orcs alone and the pyre goes back to being a merely functional tool in order to dispose of the dead enemies (26:40). This scene opens an unsettling perspective for a second, offers a glimpse into the inconclusive logic behind the orcs as irredeemable enemies. Yet, it is never enough for a casual viewer to effectively question the goodness of the heroes and the righteousness of their deeds. Slaughtering the orcs, then, is what makes the heroes heroic. It is how Aragorn proves his capability of ruling Gondor. It is how the hobbits prove their courage and how Legolas and Gimli overcome their prejudices of each other’s respective races. Jackson’s film presents LotR as a story about the restoration and conservation of traditional power structures and the orcs are a necessary tool to justify that view.

At times, the framing of the battle scenes then conjures the idea of ‘war porn’, enabling the viewers to peek into the horrors of war without a moral dilemma as the slaughter is undoubtedly the righteous choice. The idea of heroism and war is often enforced throughout the movies; the right choice is not to choose the ways of diplomacy or a policy of détente, but to pick up a sword and stab the enemy to death. This is illustrated in Two Towers when Aragorn gives a motivational talk to an unexperienced boy—a literal child—who is scared to face the oncoming armies (1:57:50), as well as in Return of the King, when Eowyn campaigns for Merry’s right to join the battle of Pelennor fields: “Why should Merry be left behind? He has as much cause to go to war as you. Why can he not fight for those he loves?” (1:12:18). This is especially interesting because Eowyn, who eventually kills the Witch King, can be constructed as a feminist icon of Middle Earth. Yet Eowyn does not fight for her rights within the socio-political context of the world, but campaigns for the ability to kill like a man in the war against racialized enemies. In portraying a fantastic war of epic proportions, LotR glorifies war by removing human compassion through the dehumanization of the enemies, which ultimately ignores the tragedy of war and trivializes it for entertainment purposes.
12.5. Casting Choices

The coding of orcs as people of color can not only be observed through their racist visualization, but also through the casting choices. As Helen Young points out, it is a usual practice for fantasy films to have all major roles played by white actors—a problem that speaks for Hollywood as a whole (“Habits” 53). However, what is worth pointing out is the fact that in Jackson’s LotR not only all good characters are portrayed by white actors, but many of the orcs and Uruk-hai, as well as various other villains, where played by Maori and Pacific Islanders (ibid; Kim 877). Most central is the Maori actor Lawrence Makoare, who plays the roles of Lurtz, the Witch King, and the (albeit white) orcs Gothmog and Bolg (imdb). While Makoare is never recognizable under layers of SFX makeup and prosthetics, it remains a troubling trend for a film to habitually cast people of color for the roles of evil and dehumanized characters. According to Kim, this decision is based in two main reasons: first, Makoare has often been typecast for the role of the villain, yet, this does not explain the remaining actors and stunt-men of color that have been cast as evil characters (880f). This suggests the uncomfortable reality that to the casting directors, the Maori actors must have appeared “natural” for the roles of the big, dark skinned savages (ibid.). Due to the film being shot in New Zealand, Maori actors were also more readily available to fill the large supply of roles, but there is not a single dark-skinned actor among the inhabitants of Gondor or Rohan. This becomes uncomfortably apparent during the attack on Helm’s Deep in Two Towers, where the camera pans across the terrified faces of blonde, blue eyed and pale women, fearfully clutching their blonde, blue-eyes, and pale children while outside, masses of dark bodies are trying to break into the keep (2:02:44). A controversy on the set of The Hobbit shows that this is not a coincidence. During the casting of the prequels, a British-Pakistani woman was refused a role as an extra in the films because the casting agent was specifically looking for “fair-skinned” actors (Goh 278). In what is likely an attempt to disperse the accusations, in The Hobbit: Battle of the Five Armies, two non-white extras are shown: at 0:17:30, a man who appears to be of Pacific Islander descent is among a human mob and at 0:41:04, an Asian woman is shown tending to the wounded. However, two shots hardly compensate for six movies worth of racially problematic codings.
Voices against these accusations of racism could likely argue that white people are the logical choice for Middle Earth and the inclusion of non-white actors would introduce questions of race that extend the scope of Tolkien’s imagination. However, in a fantasy setting everything is possible. The idea that the choice of white actors is ethnically neutral moreover enforces the notion that whiteness is the norm for humanity. Creating a visual representation of Middle Earth was a decision, and Jackson decided that it had to be a world in which the good people were white and the villains dark skinned. Moreover, claiming the appropriateness of European culture as a visualization of Middle Earth ignores the fact that many aspects within the films are inspired by non-white cultures. Kristin Thompson points out that the movie heavily borrows from the traditions of Japanese and Chinese material arts films, as can be observed in Legolas’ Kung-Fu fighting style (49). Moreover, Gandalf’s transformation into Gandalf the White is visually strongly influenced by the “white-bearded monk […] figure in kung fu films” (ibid. 52). Apparently, actor Ian McKellen was even “told to use the term ‘samurai’ in relation to his transformed character” in press interviews (ibid. 51). Also, it has been pointed out that the Rohirrim, the riders of Rohan, are not to be confused with pre-Conquest English cultures, as they were never known to be horse-breeders or particularly skilled riders (Salo 34). Instead, the Rohirrim rather remind of ancient Mongol cultures (ibid.). None of these choices appear to have been noted as ‘historically inaccurate’ or caused any offense with the audiences. It appears the problems only arise if people of color become visibly represented and ‘disturb’ the image of a pre-race civilization.

12.6. *LotR* and New Zealand

New Zealand as setting for Middle Earth has caused a number of ethical problems. In the West, the choice has been often praised; Mikos. et.al describe the island as the ideal setting for Tolkien, as it resembles European topography (106). They call it “eine etwas surreale Version von Europa”, a slightly surreal version of Europe (ibid.). But while it is true that *LotR* has raised international awareness for New Zealand’s beauty, this attention also comes with a price. On one hand, Jackson managed to considerably boost the island’s tourism and has given way too many new jobs and even companies, but on the other hand, it also created issues of “Maori landownership and stewardship” (Goh 265; 278). One of
the main problems arising is a phenomenon called “misrecognition”, in which the landscape of Middle Earth is superimposed over the actual landscape of New Zealand in the popular imagination. Sites are stripped of their cultural and historical context because visitors want to see them as part of the fantastic world Jackson created (ibid. 277f). For example, Matamata, where Hobbiton was set, now markets itself as such and has taken over “Hobbiton” as its unofficial name (ibid.). This can lead to ethical conflicts, for example with Mount Ngauruhoe, a sacred site for the Iwi tribe who unsuccessfully protested Jackson’s filming when he used the Mountain as the setting for Mount Doom (ibid. 278). The treatment of New Zealand and Maori culture is moreover problematic considering the country’s history of colonization. As a former colony, the country still struggles with “economic, racial, and cultural problems” (Kim 890). While New Zealand prides itself as a progressive country, issues of race and racism are still relevant to the island’s society (ibid.). Especially when it comes to media representation, Maori are often portrayed as having a poor moral and social ethic, to be opportunistic, prone to live in crowded and dirty environments and likely to handle their land irresponsibly (Alia/Bull 20). Disturbingly, these prejudices fit Jackson’s visualization of orc society. This is especially troubling since Jackson himself is a white New Zealander and therefore not a stranger to these issues. Kim notices that this portrayal of criminal Maori and the Uruk-hai/orcs share various “inward and outward similarities”, such as “brown skin, thick, wiry, black, almost dreadlocked hair, facial tattoos, a hulking physique, and an implacable, primordial desire to destroy (white) people” (877). This negative representation of Maori in New Zealand media is moreover usually focused on men (Alia/Bull 23). This again is reflected in the visualization of the orcs, which are presented as entirely male, even though the existence of familial relations. This illustrates how the choice of Maori actors as orcs is not just a trivial convenience for the filmmakers but based in a history of colonialism and racist practices against Pacific Islanders.

13. The Oriental Enemy

While the majority of Jackson’s orientalist coding of enemies focuses on orcs, it also transcends onto the representation of human enemies. While Sauron’s human allies do not have a lot of screen time and are hardly explained within the context of the film, they
are peak examples of orientalism. This is illustrated through their names alone: the dark-skinned men that join Sauron’s side are called Easterlings and Haradrim, or Southrons. Both names are heavily associated with their geographical locations and are in direct opposition to the men of the West. Of course, the Easterlings and Southrons were not Jackson’s inventions, yet the visual depictions of their cultures on screen, as well as their lack of redeemability was. As Jonathan Epp points out, even though the Easterlings and Southrons are portrayed as villains in Tolkien’s novel, their humanity is recognized and after the war, a diplomatic solution is sought out (72). In Jackson’s film, however, no such humanization occurs. The audience first encounters the Easterlings in Two Towers, a film that was released during a time of rising islamophobia in the US, following the attacks on the World Trade Center. According to David Goldberg, after 9/11, “one-third of people polled in the United States responded that all Arab Americans ought to be interned as a bulwark against potential terrorism” (100). Jackson’s movie confirms these anxieties with an unambiguously orientalist coding of the Easterlings and Southrons—noticeably two separate cultures, yet both of them are hardly visually distinguishable. In Two Towers, the Southrons are first introduced through a close-up of a soldier. His face is obscured by a helmet, but his dark skin and black eye makeup is the clearly visible focus of the shot (44:36). This confirms with traditional images of orientalism, as popularized by films such as Lawrence of Arabia (1962). On the audio commentary, the cast members comment on these choices: Elijah Wood (Frodo) jokingly points out that "soldiers do wear eyeliner. I just wanted to point that out. They do", to which Andy Serkins (Gollum) replies "Easterlings particularly" (quoted in Kim 899). The eye-makeup is feminizing the oriental men, portraying them as a threat to the heteronormative standards of Western society. It serves as marker of their status as Other, especially in contrast with the masculine warriors of Gondor and Rohan. They are fetishized as sexually deviant, blending the male with the female in a way that elicits a humorous response from the actors.

The Southrons are introduced in a scene shortly after, yet their coding is strikingly similar. The only difference appears to be that while the Easterlings appear more militant in their uniforms, the Southrons are rather portrayed like a group of oriental bandits. This can be observed when they are first encountered by Frodo, Sam, and Gollum in the
mountainside. They are a group of young, brown skinned men, wearing headgears that look distinctly like Middle Eastern keffiyehs. Gollum explains to the hobbits:

Frodo: “Who are they?”

Gollum: “Wicked Men. Servants of Sauron. They are called to Mordor. The Dark One is gathering all armies to him. It won’t be long now. He will soon be ready.”

Sam: “Ready to do what?”

Gollum: “To make his war. The last war that will cover all the world in shadow.”

(1:10:08)

Jackson’s coding enforce a reading of the Southrons as terrorists; outside and inside of the narrative. The visual representation of the men leaves no question to their evil—“wicked”—nature and suggests their extinction is necessary for the safety of the West, an image that unfortunately corresponds with Islamophobic ideologies in reality. Like the orcs, the Southrons and Easterlings are not shown any amount of humanity or mercy during the battle scenes. During his endeavor to beat Gimli in their competition in Return of the King, Legolas climbs one of the Oliphaunts, the Southron’s large war elephants, and seamlessly transitions from shooting orcs into shooting Southron enemies without hesitation, still counting his kills (2:13:10). The deaths of the men do not matter to him; they are simply bodies to shoot in an opportunity to show off martial art tricks. This invalidates David Salo’s claim about how Jackson uses the orcs to avoid racial discourse (cf. 26). On the contrary, through the combination of non-human with human enemies, the Southrons and Easterlings are further dehumanized and the reading of orcs as racial other is enforced. Jackson offers no further explanations to why these oriental men are gathering to attack Minas Tirith, yet, they are easily accepted as part of Sauron’s hordes because their looks conform with the coding that was already established through the orcs and solidify the representation of all enemies as racial Other.

13.1. From Neomedievalism to Neocolonialism

The coding of enemies as dark-skinned and distinctly oriental makes a political reading of Jackson’s films unavoidable, especially considering their time of release in the early 2000s. As explained, the fear of ‘dark hordes’ has been a prevailing image in racist discourse from the Middle Ages until modern times (Young “Habits” 101; Dyer 26). In
contemporary politics, the imagery of a “flood” of dark skinned immigrants has become a standard in the repertoire of conservative politicians (Dyer 26). In the fantasy genre, the image has been reproduced so often that the term ‘orcing’ was coined based on the dark orc hordes threatening the human realms. (Young “Habits” 180). Orcs, then, transcend the boundaries from simplified colonial anxieties to modern-day “monsters of migration”, a fantastic personification of “fears about integrity of boarders, the supposed failure of multiculturalism, and fear of immigration” (Young “Habits” 101). Jackson’s _LotR_ is central for these debates. For its excessive use of white versus black imagery, it has been said to “amplify a ‘fear of a black planet’” (Shapiro). This is further troubling as Jackson admitted being inspired by the movie _Zulu_ (1964), in which a small group of British soldiers defended their garrison against a horde of Zulu warriors in South Africa (Kim 877f). In the audio commentary of _Two Towers_, he claims that “_Zulu_ was always in the back of my mind when I was thinking about Helm's Deep” (ibid.). This shows in the stark racial imageries of the second film which romanticizes a group of white, blonde warriors standing off to a savage black horde. While _LotR_ is a fantasy film, its coding of race, nationality, and other can therefore not simply be accepted as neomedieval escapism.

In today’s political climate, these images are still powerful tools to further a discourse against the Middle East and Islam, also known as the War on Terror. Even though Jackson’s film is set in a medieval world, the images still enforce a reading that fuses “older racial anxiety […] with a current fear and hatred” (Shapiro). Journalist John Yatt wrote in his review on the film:

Perhaps Dubya's war on terror is making me a bit uneasy, or maybe it's just good old-fashioned Guardian-reading imperial guilt, but there was something about watching a bunch of pale faces setting off into the east to hack some guys with dark faces into little bits that made me feel a little queasy.

And truly, the use of racial imagery, heroism, and grand language reminds of the rhetoric with which former US President George W. “Dubya” Bush promoted his war in the Middle East in the early 2000’s. Standing out is _Two Towers_ which was released about a year after the attacks of 9/11 during a time in which American anti-Islamism was heavily on the rise. Epp claims: “The cinematic adaptation of Tolkien's work accepts the colonization of the mind and uses it to justify the current wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and beyond” (21). Deliberately or not, Jackson’s images stroke a chord with the political
climate in the United States. While this is somewhat coincidental, as the films had already been shot before 9/11, Jackson’s “anticipation of Otherness in the film coincides with the diametrically opposed rhetoric of the war-on-terror” (ibid. 62). This becomes most visible through the fact that the movie has served right-wing platforms as a justification for their ideology. For example, one of the writers for an US conservative news outlet claimed:

The trilogy explores the nature of individual heroism in the midst of an epic clash of civilisations [sic], one that pits freedom-loving peoples of the West against merciless totalitarians from the East. As Frodo and Sam make their way across the bleak, hostile land of Mordor to destroy the Ring of Power, their companions in the West rally a coalition of tribes to wage war against Sauron's minions living among them. We are fortunate to have these books in the present moment, to give us hope and a reason to dig in for the long fight ahead. (Quoted in Hari)

Jackson’s framing of West and East enables an easy reading of Tolkien’s material as supporting a nationalistic cause and what was once called a “mythology for England” (Fairburn 82) turns into a myth for xenophobia. This was further enforced when actor John Rhys-Davies, who plays the dwarf Gimli in the films, raised eyebrows with his statements on the cultural importance of Tolkien’s (and Jackson’s) messages. In an interview with World magazine he stated:

I think that Tolkien says that some generations will be challenged and if they do not rise to meet that challenge they will lose their civilization. That does have a real resonance with me.... What is unconscionable is that too many of your fellow journalists do not understand how precarious Western civilization is.... The abolition of slavery comes from Western democracy. True Democracy comes from our Greco-Judeo-Christian-Western experience. If we lose these things, then this is a catastrophe for the world. And if it just means replacement of one genetic stock with another genetic stock, I don't think that matters too much. But if it involves the replacement of Western civilization with different cultural values then it's something we really ought to discuss because ... I am for dead white male culture! If Tolkien's got a message, it's that sometimes you've got to stand up and fight for what you believe in. (Coffin)

In his views, the actor enforces what Epps calls a “neo-colonial reading”; a “return to the hegemonic values necessary for the covert aims of colonization” (18). By highlighting the apparent achievements of the West, the East is established as a threat to culture and civilization. Suddenly, Tolkien’s quaint fantasy turns into a tool for propaganda to preserve white supremacy. By uncritically transferring of Middle Earth’s race-based society to screen, creating the orcs as a racialized enemy class, and presenting Southrons and Easterlings as orientalist threat, the message of multicultural collaboration within the
Fellowship of the Ring is overshadowed. Jackson made fantasy cinema into a box office success, yet he did so by positioning the genre into a discourse of race, colonialism, and white supremacy, enforcing the idea that fantasy is inherently linked to conservative neomedievalism. Published in America during a time of crisis, war, and rising nationalism, the straightforward images of white heroes fighting off dark hordes to save civilization might have been one of the deciding factors why Jackson’s trilogy struck a chord with its audiences. Due to LotR’s central position within the genre, this enabled a reproduction of those ideologies.

14. Netflix’s Bright: A Fantasy Blockbuster on Demand

Since its first success, Lord of the Rings has served as inspiration for many fantasy films. It would probably even be difficult to find a fantasy film producer within the Western world who has not, in some way or another, been influenced or inspired by Jackson’s influential trilogy; such is the nature of the genre. But while the conventions of fantasy film have often been repeated, some have also sparked the desire to change the rules, for example through the invention of orc protagonists (Young “Habits” 100). One of these films is the Netflix blockbuster Bright, which was released on December 22, 2017. In Bright, traditional high fantasy conventions are mixed with structures of the buddy cop genre. The film follows the adventures of two LAPD officers, the human Daryl Ward (Will Smith) and the first orc police officer, Nick Jakoby (Joel Edgerton), who are part of a prophecy to prevent the return of the ominous Dark Lord. In a world in which fantasy creatures such as elves and orcs live alongside humans in modern day Los Angeles, an elven cult called the Inferni plans to bring back the Dark Lord from his banishment. To do so, they must forge three magic wands, the most powerful items within the universe. However, only a so-called Bright, a person with specific magical powers, can touch a wand without bursting into flames. When Ward and Jakoby are called to an assignment, they come across the Inferni’s lair where they find Tikka, an elven woman who stole the wand from Leilah, the leader of the Inferni. Ward and Jakoby suddenly become the target of various villains, such as the Inferni, human gangsters, orc gangsters and the LAPD itself, who all want the wand for their own purposes. They are forced to flee and fulfill their part of an unspecified prophecy to save the world. Ultimately, Ward is revealed a
Bright himself and uses the wand to destroy Leilah. Eventually, Ward and Jakoby are redeemed as police officers and the world is save again.

*Bright* especially stands out within the genre because it openly uses the racial configurations of the Tolkienian tradition to create a statement about contemporary racial issues such as discrimination and police violence. Furthermore, it breaks the conventions of the genre through its unconventional protagonists. It not only centers the narrative around an orc character, which is very uncommon in fantasy film, but also focus on Daryl Ward as a black protagonist. *Bright* breaks with the traditions established in Jackson’s trilogy, in which actors of color tend to play roles of non-human characters by casting Edgerton, a white man, in the role of Jakoby and Smith in the role of Ward.

Moreover, *Bright* made film history as the first fully independent blockbuster produced and published by the streaming service Netflix (Shaw). In many ways, *Bright* perfectly fits the blockbuster scheme; it deals with grand topics, such as the destruction of the world, in a similar way as presented in Jackson’s trilogy. It also clearly belongs to an action-bound genre, as illustrated by a number of wild shootouts and magic fights. Moreover, heavy use of SFX and CGI brings the fantastic aspects to life and makes the movie visually appealing. As their big name, Netflix signed up superstar Will Smith to play one of the two protagonists of the movie. Being a hybrid in general, *Bright* combines two rather distant genres, creating potential interest for many audiences. With a release date two days before Christmas, Netflix furthermore reproduces the traditional blockbuster strategy. The only vast difference to recent blockbusters is the fact that *Bright* was not released in cinemas. Instead, subscribers of the platform were able to see the film from the day of its release from the comfort of their home. This means that success for *Bright* cannot be measured with traditional strategies such as the box-office revenues, as those do not exist. However, this can also be an advantage. Netflix does not depend on box office numbers; watching the movie out of curiosity does not cost a subscriber money, which essentially increases the film’s reach. This shows by its views: *Bright* was watched by 11 million people in the first three days of its release in the United States alone (Rose). Moreover, it is noticeable how half a year after its premier, the film has a rare perfect five star rating on Netflix, the platform that is controlled by the film’s producers. While this suggests a massive success with its audiences, its reception with the critics was mixed: most of them rejected the film, calling it “embarrassing” and “the worst movie of 2017”
(Lawrence). This is not to say that Netflix altered their reviews, however, by controlling the platform the film is published, the company is in a unique position of power. This is illustrated by the fact that Netflix ordered a sequel (Shaw). Considering their blockbuster strategy, further expansions to the franchise are likely to be produced in the future.

While *Bright* was not traditionally published, Netflix put traditional blockbuster efforts into the marketing of the movie, including a panel at Comic Con, various interviews and an opening at the Regency Village Theatre, where Will Smith’s *Independence Day* (1996) had premiered over two decades earlier (Shaw; Thorne). *Bright* not only combines two popular genres, but also two overall types of movies; on the one hand it is independent from the box-Offices, on the other hand it is still a massive commercial production. Actor Édgar Ramírez, who plays the Magic Task Force officer Kandomere, explains that while *Bright* is made with “all the toys”, the process of filming felt like working on an indie movie (Thorne). Will Smith moreover stated that this process is especially suited for projects like *Bright*, which “you couldn’t really make anywhere else” because it is a “R-rated, violent, $100 million dollar movie … no other studio is making that” (ibid.). For movie producer Bryan Unkeless, filming *Bright* with Netflix was like “to be on the front lines with a place that feels like the future” and that “The [Netflix offices feel] like the central nervous system of the industry right now” (Shaw). Only time will tell if these statements are true and streaming services will be able to establish a blockbuster market of their own. However, due to its unique position in the marketplace that allows for more variation because it is not restricted by the risk of box office failure, *Bright* is interesting material for analysis. In many ways, *Bright* appears to be the antithesis of Jackson’s *LotR*; it is set in an urban space instead of the grand nature of Middle Earth, focuses on the struggle of minorities, instead of establishing a patriarchal order, and portrays an orc as its hero instead of a villain, as well as a black character as a protagonist instead of a sidekick. But is the film successful in establishing a new form of fantasy that advances the discussion of race within the genre?

15. *Bright* and Genre: Urban Fantasy and Beyond

As a hybrid between a traditional fantasy film and a buddy cop action movie, *Bright* appears to be uniquely positioned outside the genre expectations. Will Smith claimed that
his first reaction to the script was that he found it “bizarre” (Washington). So, what is *Bright* and how does it relate to the conventions of fantasy films—does it break, redefine or confirm to them? The following chapter will explore these questions in detail.

When looking for an explanation of *Bright’s* genre, the sub-genre of urban fantasy suggests itself. Sub-genres themselves are common in fantasy, and as Attebery observes, they “regularly emerge, merge, or disintegrate” (“Strategies” 126). But while many of these new genres remain niche, urban fantasy has been said to be the one sub-genre that has the power to “reshape the genre most significantly” (ibid). It has also often been called “low fantasy”, “real world fantasy”, and “modern fantasy”—Attebery prefers the name “indigenous fantasy” because “this is fantasy that is, like an indigenous species, adapted to and reflective of its native environment” (ibid. 126;129). However, it can be argued that this name is misleading as it can be easily confused with fantasy from indigenous cultures, which is also a sub-genre that exists. For the following paper, therefore, the term “urban fantasy” will be used.

What discerns urban fantasy from the more traditional Tolkenian-style, or high fantasy, is its use of seemingly real settings which are infused with fantastic elements such as magic or fantasy creatures like elves, dragons, or orcs (ibid. 126). Urban fantasy completely rejects the “medievalist mode” and instead builds a fantastic realm within reality (Young “Habits” 104). This type of worldbuilding complicates the idea of a secondary world and Tolkien’s sub-creation, as it does not create a new world but merges fantastic elements with the real. Attebery writes:

> The choice to write indigenous rather than Tolkienian fantasy involves making two simultaneous and incompatible assertions: first, that the story takes place in the ordinary world accessible to our senses, and, second, that this world contains—contrary to all sensory evidence—magical beings, supernatural forces, and a balancing principle that makes fairy tale endings not only possible but obligatory. (“Strategies” 129)

Instead of creating a new world in which everything is possible and new rules must be created, urban fantasy is challenged with combining the existing rules with impossible elements. This discrepancy is what Attebery calls “the gap” and it “reflects our different ways of knowing and responding to the world, the magical and scientific dimensions of thought and language”, as well as “the less evident gulf between story and history, our two ways of organizing time and placing ourselves within it” (ibid.). It is therefore,
arguably more difficult for urban fantasy to create immersion, as the audience already has a preset knowledge about how the world works. The text must convince them to replace some of this knowledge with the fantastic, yet without fully rejecting the workings of reality. To maintain a sense of reality, urban fantasy is therefore often pressed to produce some forms of explanations for the magical. Often, these elements are presented as strange. Urban fantasy worlds often are intrusive fantasies, in which the fantastic element invades the existing world, for example in series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, in which the life of a high school girl is regularly threatened from invading demons and vampires. However, the most common form of urban fantasy appears to be the form of portal fantasies, in which the protagonists—often humans with hidden magical powers—discover a second world full of magic that is hidden in plain sight. Examples for this include *Grimm* (2011-2017), *Once upon a Time* (2011-2018), *Stranger Things* (2016-), *Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017), *Teen Wolf* (2011-2017), and many more.

As the name implies, urban fantasy often is set within a city, which stands in contact with the fantastic (Young “Habits” 141). This setting brings new challenges to the genre, but also comes with new possibilities. Young writes:

Tolkien and his followers turned to the medieval in search of authentic identity, while Urban Fantasy also looks to the past in search of identity, but brings that past forward into the present, populating the streets of small towns and cities with the beings of folklore and mythology. (Young “Habits” 141)

Urban fantasy can therefore be useful to explore a further spectrum of topics and moves away from the often-static representations of nationality, sexuality and race. Instead, it opens a wider spectrum, allowing for discussions about “migrancy, slavery, and national myth-making”, which are often represented in physical forms “as the magic, gods, and monsters of folklore in modern cities, suburbs, and small towns” (ibid 12). While this opens opportunities for more diverse representations, unfortunately, the majority of urban fantasy films and TV series remain predominantly white, reflecting Hollywood traditions (Young “Habits” 143). However, in recent times, a tendency to represent more diverse casts in urban fantasy arose; shows like *Sleepy Hollow* (2013-2017) or *American Gods* (2017-present) showed an increased trend to include more characters of color in central roles.
Urban fantasy is in many respects a more modern type of fantasy that is often concerned with bringing a force of order into a world of chaos. It often prefers protagonists that can “create meaning from chaos and disorder”, such as policemen, detectives, PI’s, etc. (Young “Habits” 142). This can also be observed in Bright, where both protagonists are police officers. Even though the police are not presented as unequivocally good, Ward and Jakoby remain to represent a position in which they attempt to order reality and protect the world from chaotically evil energies.

Bright largely matches the requirements for an urban fantasy film: it is set in an urban space, takes on sensitive issues relevant to modern times, and portrays its protagonists as agents of order. It only differs slightly in its type; even though it follows the traditional quest-plot, it would rather qualify as an immersive fantasy because the world in all its strangeness is already familiar to both protagonists from the beginning. For Ward and Jakoby, humans, elves, and orcs are part of their everyday job and so they do not pay attention to the particularities of the world. There is no introduction into the world either—unlike, for example, Harry Potter who visits the world of wizards for the first time and is a stranger to the magical as much as the audience, in Bright, the fantastic is presented as mundane and the audience must actively look for explanations of how the world is organized. In that sense, Bright breaks with genre conventions but simultaneously makes it more difficult for the audience to understand the workings of its secondary world.

The effectiveness of this strategy remains up for debate. While Bright features all the elements of an interesting fantasy world, the lack of explanations leaves the viewer left with a sense of dissatisfaction. The only two aspects of the fantastic society explained are the fact that the elves are “running the world” (12:41) and that the orcs live in ghettos and represent the bottom of society. Yet, there is no real explanation about the role the humans play in this society; given that Jakoby is the only orc within the LAPD and all the other police officers are human, it can be assumed that the they present a middle ground, yet many humans are also shown in the ghettos of L.A. Given that the protagonist Ward appears to be antipathetic to the fantasy creatures, a better explanation of who the other races are and how they relate to humanity would have been productive. The immersive style therefore rather counteracts the immersion within the film world. The audience is teased with snippets of worldbuilding, for example during a detour through
the elf district (12:41), an orc den (1:17:46), or by the image of a dragon flying over Los Angeles at night (52:07), but these impressions remain impulses and fail to produce wonder and the acceptance of the unreal. Through the fast pace of the movie, the audience is not left with enough time to process the fantastic and the fact that most of the plot takes place at nighttime makes it difficult to visually orientate in the world. This is, of course, a technique through which the producers reserve themselves a number of liberties for potential sequels or spin-offs, as nothing is explained and etched in stone yet; they are still able to mold a world to fit any future projects they want to tackle. For the blockbuster approach, this is a clear advantage because it allows for a number of future spin-offs while still reserving creative freedom. This, however, seems to contradict the process of sub-creation and might explain why there is an apprehension to accept the world as it is presented; up to the end of the film, the audience still looks for explanations and is left unsatisfied. It is not to be said that immersive urban fantasy cannot be done, but by denying the viewer information, the producers are heavily relying on the acceptance of the Tolkienian structures as a basis for the world. This creates the impression that Bright is strongly based on its forerunners within the genre, rather than creating its own, independent fantasy.

15.1. Buddy Cop Action Elements in Bright

The character constellation—two policemen from different backgrounds that are forced to work together to solve a problem—also suggests that Bright belongs to the genre of so-called buddy-cop movies. These films emerged during the 1980’s, during a similar time as urban fantasy, when action developed as Hollywood’s top selling genre (Brown). In buddy cop movies, fast paced action sequences are combined with the dynamic of two antithetical partners who are forced to work together (Brown; Gates 85). Even though the partnership is often initially unwanted by one or both characters, they overcome their differences throughout the movie and “develop a genuine respect for each other’s character” (Brown). Considering these aspects, Bright is strongly influenced by buddy cop movies. While Jakoby is thrilled to be with his human partner, the first half of the film is devoted to Ward’s dislike of Jakoby and attempts to get rid of his orc partner. This leads up to the crucial moment at 40:23, when the corrupt police officers force Ward to
decide between killing Jakoby, or to be killed himself. Even though Ward despises Jakoby, he chooses to stand by his side and instead of killing him, turns around and shoots the corrupt police officers instead. From this scene forward, Jakoby and Ward are bound to each other and are forced to work together.

Brown claims that the buddy cop genre “reconciles disparate American ideological self-images”. Through the mis-matched partners, different images of what it means to be “American” are forced to approach each other and by overcoming their differences, a metaphor for accepting “the anthropological ‘other’” within American society is created, accepting the “conflicting values that the characters represent” (Brown). The different partners can represent different categories such as “old and young”, “spoiled and hardened”, “military and civilian”, and often different ethnicities (Oh 350, Brown). Therefore, buddy cop movies serve as a Hollywood-friendly metaphor for overcoming prejudices. But, of course, these messages of diversity and understanding must be taken with a grain of salt. Most dominantly, because one of the reasons why biracial buddy-pairings in action movies are successful is the fact that Hollywood is reluctant to put people of color in leading roles out of fear to lose white audiences (Gates 84). This is a practice that is also common in urban fantasy TV and film. As Helen Young points out, “[a]verting the Apocalypse always requires not just the presence but the active participation of a White person” (“Habits” 145). As mentioned before, while Bright’s protagonists consist of the traditional pairing of an actor of color and a white actor, they break the habits of representation by making Edgerton unrecognizable under prosthetics while Smith plays the role of the human officer. This is on one hand possible because Netflix is independent from box office pressures, however, Will Smith is a massive superstar while Edgerton is not. While the constellation is unexpected and breaking with racist casting traditions, it must be pointed out that casting Will Smith is a major selling point for the film and that he is one of the few African American actors that have been repeatedly cast as blockbuster protagonists. While Bright then strays from the traditions of buddy cop constellations, their casting choices can hardly be considered a risk.
15.2. Combining Genres

What remains is the question of how *Bright* manages to combine both genres, the urban fantasy with the buddy cop. Is it rather a buddy-cop action movie or a fantasy film? How can these two very different genres be combined—and is *Bright* successful doing so?

*Bright’s* premise is quite straightforward: “fantasy creatures living in modern-day Los Angeles” (Rose). In a promotional interview, Will Smith described the idea as following:

You know, it’s funny, it’s really difficult. We all read it and we loved it, and we were like, yeah, we wanna make it, right? But I guess the best way that I can describe it, imagine *Training Day*, right? The energy of *Training Day*, David wrote *Training Day*. [...] So it’s like the energy of *Training Day* meets *Lord of the Rings*. [audience laughs] So like, imagine like *Lord of the Rings* was 4,000 years ago. But then the creatures came forward into present day, and now we’re in gritty, grimy, present-day Los Angeles. But there’s orcs and stuff running around. (Team Coco 1:46:)

This statement is based on the interesting premise that *LotR* “was 4000 years ago” (ibid). The world of *Bright* is seen as a natural progression of the Tolkienian medievalism in high fantasy. While this is obviously not a correct statement, as *LotR* is not a depiction of the past, but a secondary world that set in a pre-industrial society, it illustrates how traditional fantasy is perceived within the popular imagination. It furthermore assumes a certain knowledge of Tolkienian fantasy to orientate in *Bright’s* world, given that the immersive style of the movie does not explain much to the viewer. The idea behind *Bright* is to present a natural development from a medieval past into a fantastic future. The buddy-cop elements then appear to serve as a structure, while the worldbuilding is based on fantasy. At first glance, this would mean that *Bright* took a fantasy-based world and infused it with a buddy cop action plot. However, a closer look at the material makes clear that this is not the case. Instead, many of the plot elements are borrowed from the Tolkienian tradition.

*Bright’s* strong Tolkienian influence can be observed on first hand by the fact that writer Max Landis dedicated his script not only to the director David Ayer, but to none other than J.R.R. Tolkien himself (Film Companion 0:07). Actor Joel Edgerton furthermore claimed in an interview:
When you get a bunch of familiar aspects and smash them together, the fusion of that can be an original thing. The characters are borrowed in a way from Tolkien. The world, as it’s really depicted, is borrowed from David Ayer’s… not David Ayer, but LA itself and David Ayer’s relationship with that LA, LAPD, South Central world. And when you smash them together… so it feels unique but it’s a unique thing that’s born out of the fusion of familiar stuff. (FilmIsNow 7:31)

The declaration of *Bright* as a fully original creation, while openly being inspired, if not to say copied from Tolkien, appears to be an interesting habit within the crew. This sentiment is surprising, given the fact that *Bright* is not a reinvention of the wheel. While the urban space is a traditional marker of the buddy cop movie (Brown) and appears to be antithetical to the high fantasy of Tolkien, urban fantasy has existed as a genre for as long as buddy cop movies have. *Bright* fails to acknowledge that it is not creating a new genre but contributing to an existing one. This shows a lack of experience with and involvement in the fantastic.

While the plot appears to be influenced by the buddy cop structure, *Bright* quite traditionally conforms to the conventions of quest fantasy. According to Attebery, the structure of *LotR* is that of a traditional fairy tale: the heroes are tested, cross a threshold, are aided by the supernatural, confronted by an absolute evil, fight said evil, win, and, eventually, return to home where a new order is established thanks to them (“Strategies” 15). *Bright* follows this model: it starts with Ward as a reluctant hero and Jakoby as his co-protagonist who is struggling for acceptance in the world. They both cross a threshold when Tikka exposes them to the Wand, *Bright*’s equivalent to the Ring in *LotR*. When Jakoby is shot at the orc den, Tikka uses her magic abilities to aid them and brings him back to life, similar to when Frodo is saved by Arwen after being fatally wounded by the Ring Wraiths (*Fellowship* 1:05:03). Ultimately, they are confronted by Leilah, fight her, and win. The world returns to normal but has simultaneously changed, as Jakoby, the once scorned outsider, is now accepted not only by the most influential orc gang of LA, but also by the LAPD which awards him for his bravery. While *Bright* includes the buddy cop character constellation, it still reproduces traditional fairy tale and fantasy structures.

This is further enforced by the use of predetermination: Ward and Jakoby do not choose their fate but are part of a prophecy. The film even starts with a screen saying: “Only a Bright can control the power of the Wand – The Great Prophecy 7:15” (0:30).
This theme is later often repeated, for example when Ward and Jakoby arrest a man, who proceeds to tell Jakoby in Orkish:

I have a message from the Shield of Light. Remember the old ways. Remember what you are. […] Remember your traditions. Only clan ways can save you. The prophecy has chosen you. The man with you is blessed. (22:38:).

The idea of a prophecy prevails throughout the entire movie, yet the prophecy is never fully revealed; it is not a real element of the plot, but a part of the fantastic world in the same way as elves and orcs are. *Bright* handles a prophecy as an accessory to fantasy yet fails to purposefully put it to action. Attebery points out that the tradition of copying Tolkien “has produced some literary nightmares of the first order” within the genre (“Tradition” 155). According to him, the reason why so many Tolkien imitators fail is based on a misunderstanding of the source text: “To attempt to copy Tolkien is necessarily to misread, to mistake the mechanics of his tale for the substance.” (ibid., 155). This can be observed in the way in which *Bright* handles prophecy; it is taken as an element of the fantastic yet it remains unspecified; there is no explanation as to what the prophecy is, how it works, and what part Ward and Jakoby play in it. If more thought went into it—after all, scriptwriter Landis claimed that he had “gone […] embarrassing full J.R.R. Tolkien on this” (Collider Video 3:10)—it has been cut from the final version of the movie. What remains is a prophecy that works as an opt-out for all necessary explanations, yet leaves the audience hanging in their desire for closure. Moreover, it lessens the impact of the hero’s decisions because the idea of a prophecy cancels out their free will. If they are just following a prophecy, are their choices really heroic or already laid out by greater powers? While *Bright* makes attempt to approach the issue satirically, to make a great prophecy into a mundane thing and play with the conventions of the genre, the film takes itself too seriously to allow such a reading. The dark tone and high stakes counteract an ironic reading of the prophecy, even during scenes in which Smith points at his bloody face and claims “this is not a prophecy face” (1:30:42). *Bright* attempts to pick up elements from fantasy plots, combines them with the gritty style of a cop drama, and injects it with the energy of a buddy cop action movie, but somewhere between those lines, the essence of any of the influences gets lost. When asked about the rating of the movie, Mark Landis promised a dark and bloody film: “It’s LAPD officers! We’re not cutting corners! This isn’t fucking Frodo!” (Collider Videos 2:54). This underlines a crucial misunderstanding of *LotR* and its substance, mistaking it for a children’s tale.
Tolkien himself even vehemently rejected mistaking fantasy as a genre for children ("Fairy Stories" 57f). In truth, Frodo is far from being a sweet children’s tale character. He fights against orcs and Ring Wraiths, undergoes a harrowing transformation, and is carrying the burden of sacrifice to avoid Sauron’s return to power. To read this tale as a simple story about a prophecy underlines a crucial misunderstanding about the workings of LotR, which clearly shows in the execution of Bright’s writing. This has also been a recurring point of criticism amongst reviewers. For example, Devan Coggan from Entertainment Weekly writes:

Genre mashups can be fun! In theory, the idea of a gritty police drama set in a modern-day America where orcs, elves, and humans coexist could be enjoyable! As a general rule, for a genre mashup to succeed, a film has to get at least one of those genres right. Netflix’s Bright, which bills itself as part buddy-cop movie, part lavish fantasy, does neither justice, resulting in lazy nonsense that’s too silly to be good and too self-serious to be any fun […]. There are hints of a larger, more interesting world here — at one point a dragon drifts over the L.A. skyline — but Bright is more interested in its surface-level racial metaphors and B-movie fantasy tropes, and the whole thing feels like half-hearted fan fiction dreamed up after watching The Lord of the Rings for the first time. There’s a MacGuffin to be found, a prophecy to be fulfilled, and some mysterious, boring dark lord to thwart. Bright’s female characters are especially half-baked, and Fry’s Tikka is essentially a babbling redux of Milla Jovovich in The Fifth Element or less interesting Summer Glau in Firefly. Even the production design is uninspired: You’d think that a story with strange creatures and secret societies would warrant some clever visual world-building, but despite its name, Bright takes place almost entirely in dimly lit, abandoned buildings. Oh, and why not throw in a strip club shootout, too, because a movie with orcs, elves, and magic can’t think of a more innovative place to set an action scene?

Bright misunderstands the elements of traditional secondary world fantasy—such as fantastic races, prophecies, magical objects, and heroes—for its substance. The producers present Bright as a combination of lighthearted fantasy with gritty cop action, failing to realize that fantasy is not an essentially light-hearted genre to begin with. Elements such as racial conflicts, prophecies, and death-defying magic are handled like mere throwaway lines without the necessary explanation and depth to create the wonder fantasy thrives off. In combination with the immersive fantasy style that results from the buddy cop influences—following two cops during their workday out of which bigger complications arise—the result is rather confusing. In wanting to combine two popular genres to create something of epic proportions, Bright misses the mark and the result is neither of both.

Before the movie was released, Landis claimed that he wanted Bright to be his “Star
“Wars” (Collider Videos 3:38), and maybe that is where the problem of the film lies. By adapting popular elements from successful films such as *LotR*, it tries to replicate their sense of grandness without actually doing the work necessary to create the wonder and willing disbelief that successful fantasy requires. Therefore, it could be argued that *Bright* is not so much a hybrid between buddy cop action and fantasy film but instead it is rather an urban fantasy film with buddy cop influences, even though it fails to acknowledge itself as such. Through this discrepancy and *Bright*’s insistence on creating a wholly new genre, it loses credibility as a fantasy film.

### 16. Racial Essentialism in *Bright*

The most central feature of *Bright* is its open racial essentialism. The world of *Bright* is based around the idea of a race-based society in all its cruelties. With a worldbuilding that is largely based on *LotR*, it aims to challenge the popular opinion about races in fantasy films. While various races are hinted at, the only three that are presented are humans, orcs and elves. These three are situated according to the Great Chain of Being in Middle Earth. As actress Noomi Rapace, who plays the villain Leilah, explains: “Elves are on top of the food chain. We are the highest… we’re like the crown.” (Los Angeles Times 2:55). The humans appear to be a step below the elves—or even several, as there appears to be a vast distance between the gated elf residences and the human parts of the city, all of which range from lower middle class to ghettos. Even though one of the protagonists is human, *Bright* lacks any explanation of how humans are positioned within the Great Chain of Being of their universe. What can be inferred is that they are situated below the elves but above the orcs. Moreover, they are in a relative position of power as they appear to largely control the executive branch of the state. On the lowest end of the spectrum are the orcs: they are delegated to low-level jobs and live in ghettos, the target of scorn of both humans and elves. But what is perceived as a natural order in *LotR*, *Bright* aims to challenge by presenting it as a cruel metaphor for the racial grammar of the real world. A conversation between the two Magic Task Force officers Kandomere, an elf, and Montehugh, a human, reveals the distribution of opportunities within *Bright*’s world:

- Kandomere: An orc with a badge. Incredible.
- Montehugh: That’s some shit you don’t see every day. Like an elf with a mop. (26:32)
In *Bright*, orcs are relegated to low-income jobs; when they are not presented as gangsters, they are shown as sanitation workers (2:07) or as chauffeurs (13:18), serving the higher races within the world. The premise largely conforms with what is expected of a fantasy word, however by taking the swords out of the orc’s hands and replacing them with mops, *Bright* humanizes the race. The orcs are not more sentient than in *LotR*, where they are also able of speaking the common tongue and have a sense of self, even though the framing of the film barely humanizes them. *Bright* recognizes the problems of *LotR*’s racial essentialist society and transforms them into a modern metaphor of racial inequalities in present day Los Angeles. However, it appears incredibly offensive to just present people of color as literal orcs and rich white people as elves. To translate the metaphor into modern day society is a challenge and it is debatable whether *Bright* negotiated it successfully. To answer this question, the following two subchapters offer an analysis of the position of the elves, as well as the orcs in the film.

16.1. The Elves

At first glance, the visual representations of the elves race largely corresponds with the traditions of fantasy. They are visualized as tall, slim, light-skinned, and often blonde, but a closer look reveals that despite bleach blonde hair and pale makeup, a large proportion of the elves are portrayed by actors of color. While Leilah (Noomi Rapace) and Tikka (Lucy Fry), two white women, are both blonde and extremely pale skinned, the Magic Task Force officer Kandomere, who is played by the Venezuelan actor Édgar Ramírez, has tan skinned and bluish hair. Moreover, one of Leilah’s followers, Tien, is played by Vietnamese actress Veronica Ngo and the other, Serafin, by the Native American actor Alex Meraz. This representation shows an attempt at diversifying the common representations of elves and removing them from their associations with absolute whiteness. However, it is only Kandomere who is shown in a position of agency. Both Tien and Serafin do not speak and are simply relegated to the role of mute, vaguely threatening minions. *Bright* can therefore hardly be praised for its diversity. While the elves are not entirely as white and European-looking as they are in *LotR*, it is not necessarily an improvement to relegate actors of color to non-speaking roles of mute villains. While *Bright* at first glance aims to question the whiteness of *LotR*, it repeats its
habits at another front: while *LotR* dehumanizes evil orcs that are played by actors of color, *Bright* dehumanizes evil elves that are also played by actors of color. It appears as if even when producers aim to challenge the racist codings within the genre, they still lack the ability to present monsters without reverting to orientalist stereotypes.

The leader of the evil elves is Leilah, a tall, blonde and pale elf woman. Leilah as the villain is interesting not only from the perspective of race, but because at first glance, she does not adhere to the role of a classic fantasy villain. This position is reserved for the mysterious yet ultimately powerless Dark Lord, who is often referenced, yet never explained. He is not nearly as frightening as Sauron, who is shown to possess immense powers. Instead, he is just a concept, a fantasy trope, as if the words “Dark Lord” alone are enough to strike fear into the hearts of the genre-savvy audience. Instead, almost the opposite occurs: absolutes such as ‘Dark Lord’ appear ironic, an empty threat more than any actual menace. In *Bright*, the Dark Lord is not the villain—his emissary Leilah is. By choosing Leilah as the villain, Ayer appears to break the traditional division of light representing good and dark representing evil. Instead, an African American man and an orc must stop a white elf, played by a European woman. Leilah is as white as she can get: Her hair is blonde and her skin sickly pale, more like that of a vampire than an elf. Her elven accent reminds vaguely of Eastern European languages. Moreover, it has been mentioned that actress Noomi Rapace “bears a more than passing resemblance” to the current first daughter Ivanka Trump. Leilah is not a villain that comes from outer boundaries of Western society, but from its inside. While this not necessarily matches the tradition for fantasy villains, it very much follows the conventions of the buddy cop movie. There, villains are traditionally “civilized”, “well organized, well dressed, rich, and successful”, “megalomaniacs who feel that they are above the laws that govern the common man, and, because of their wealth and/or governmental position, they usually are. They are the fictional equivalent of the Kennedys and Helmsleys and Trumps” (Brown). They often stand for “all that is wrong with civilization” (ibid). In this regard, Leilah who even visually resembles Ivanka Trump, is the perfect match to bring together the fantasy world with the conventions of the buddy cop movie. Her vaguely European accent also fits the scheme. She might be white but is not traditionally American. Oh points out that the villains of buddy cop movies often come from a British or French background, which are those European countries which are “most associated with the
colonial construction of the Orient” (354). This is chosen in order to present a white person as evil without insulting American sensibilities (ibid). Leilah might be white, but she is not American. She is the amalgamation of postcolonial nightmares, white, powerful, megalomaniac, and on a quest to restore an old-world order of total domination.

The elves combine a number of contrasting influences; they are white, but not always, they control America but are not coded as American, they are the most influential class in the world, yet are still represented as Other. Through the immersive style, the audience is not offered any explanations, which results in an unclear perspective on elf culture. Moreover, while Bright positions itself as challenging the racial essentialism of fantasy, it does not actually explore the position of the elves critically. Leilah might be evil but she does not represent elves as a whole. It is never mentioned why elves wield so much power and why (or if) this should be changed, let alone offer a solution to the unequal distribution of wealth within the world. The audience not even has the possibility to become acquainted with elf culture and make their own judgments about the weaknesses of a race-based fantasy society. What is left is a vague upper class and meaningless truisms about an inherently skewed distribution of power without actually challenging issues of oppression, capitalism, or inequality.

16.2. The Orcs

Bright’s orcs very much remind of the presentations of Uruk-hai in Jackson’s trilogy; they are tall, muscular and broad, have tusks, and their skin is colored in a mixture of pink and dark bluish-grey in patterns that remind of the skin condition Vitiligo. While the Uruk-hai are unambiguously dark, the pink hues in the skin of Bright’s orcs contrasts a reading of them as distinctly black. Yet, the orcs are first and foremost presented as the target of racial discrimination. The racial tensions within the movie world are introduced from the beginning, when the song “Broken People” by Logic & Rag’n’Bone Man is playing over a montage of various graffiti within the city. They show slogans such as “In the beginning God created all races equal but Elves are more equal” (0:30), followed up by several images, such as a picture of a white skinned, blonde elf holding up a human figure over a fallen orc with the words: “They hold you up to keep us down” (1:30). These images establish the racial order of the world in which the movie is set in. The graffiti
also introduce a discourse of police violence against orcs. They read: “Orc Killer L.A.P.D” (0:30) or show depictions of police violence against orcs with the words “curse the police” (2:05). These are contrasted with anti-orc graffiti, such as “Pig Skin” (0:30), which is later introduced as a slur against orcs, or “No Orcs” (1:26). One illustration shows an elf woman taking a picture of herself with her mobile phone with the lettering sELFie on her shirt, while in the background, an orc is beaten up by an LAPD officer (1:41). Orcs are the target of police violence and are left behind in a world run by elves and inhabited by humans. The metaphor for police violence against black Americans is clearly established. However, this image is highly problematic, as it quite literally presents black Americans as a monstrous race. While the orcs are not visually coded as black, the setup of the narrative leaves no doubt about their metaphorical representation of racially discriminated minorities.

_Bright_ borrows most of their worldbuilding from Tolkienian fantasy, which has the advantage that the audience already has a preconceived notion about the workings of the secondary world the film takes place in. However, this also leads to some complications, especially in those instances when _Bright_ introduces unique ideas, yet fails to explain them due to their immersive perspective. For example, one wall shows a picture of orcs in what appears to be military gear with the words: “Orcs fight for you… Who fights for us?” (0:52). This would suggest that orcs traditionally work as soldiers in the military, a role that indeed makes sense considering their use as soldiers in _LotR_ (O’Neil). However, this idea is never repeated within the film again. Instead, all orcs are shown as gangsters or working in low-income jobs, with Jakoby being the only exception. Moreover, it complicates the idea of systemic police violence against orcs, because the orcs would be a part of the military themselves. Here, the need to present orcs as the oppressed racial other collides with attempts of incorporating unique ideas and building a functional world. This is especially confusing regarding the role of orcs in relation to the mysterious Dark Lord: during the graffiti sequence, the Dark Lord is presented as a light haired, light-skinned elf man (1:04; 1:53), yet, as already explained, the orcs are positioned in opposition to the elves. However, they also seem to be minions of the Dark Lord. In one painting, “FOGTEETH”, the name of an orc gang, is spelled out beneath the warning “Darklord will Return” (1:53). Later, in a scene where Jakoby and Ward arrest a man on the streets, he claims:
The Army of Nine Races fought shoulder to shoulder to give you the world you neglect! 2,000 years ago, we fought with swords and arrows... and now the Dark One returns to reclaim orc hearts! (20:25).

It appears that during a past conflict, humans, elves and seven other, yet unnamed races fought against the Dark Lord, an evil elf who was the commander of orc armies. But it is not orcs who want the Dark Lord to return, but elves, the so-called Inferni led by Leilah. The orcs instead worship an ancient hero named Jirak. Jakoby explains to Ward:

Jirak was unblooded like me. An orc that nobody cared about. He... He united the Nine Armies, and they defeated the Dark Lord. He was a farmer who changed the world. They raised their blades to him. He was blooded in that very moment. He fulfilled a great prophecy, Ward. (1:30:42)

If Jirak, an orc, defeated the Dark Lord and united the Nine Armies, why would the orcs be associated with the Dark Lord to begin with? A painting during the graffiti sequence shows a depiction of the orc hero with the words “Jirak Lives”, one of the very few insights into orc culture the movie allows (1:26). While the orcs are set up as minions of the Dark Lord, as is usually their place within fantasy texts, they actually worship the hero who defeated the Dark Lord. Yet, Jakoby tells Ward that “Orcs chose the wrong side a long time ago and they’ve been paying for it ever since” (1:06:27). This does not make sense, as during the entirety of the film, no single orc is shown worshipping the Dark Lord—instead, the elves do. It would be possible to present a society in which the orcs are falsely accused of supporting the wrong side, but this does not appear to be the case in Bright. While the movie sets up the theme of racial discrimination, the issues are hardly ever repeated, let alone resolved during the narrative. Instead, the film appears to be a patchwork of fantasy tropes that lead up to a logical fallacy based on the uncritical repetition of Tolkienian traditions. The Dark Lord appears to be a Saruman-like figure, a white man who controlled the orcs. While this image is not only problematic due to its racist coding—the idea that the race coded as non-white is in need of a white leader—it does not tie in with the rest of the narrative. If the elves controlled the orcs and an orc hero defeated the Dark Lord, there is no reason why the orcs would be the scorned race within society. Of course, this could be explained as a trick of the elves, but no such discourse is introduced. Instead, as the examples above show, the film presents the orcs as being at fault for their fate by being prone to evil. In combination with the repetitions of unambiguous metaphors for racial discrimination in the real world, the lack of coherence within Bright eventually appears as a threadbare background to halfheartedly
justify the film’s true aim: to present orcs as the racial Other, which allows to tell stories about race-based societies without appearing racist in a real-world context.

17. Straight Outta Mordor: Orcs as Metaphor

*Bright* hardly leaves any doubts about its use of orcs as a metaphor for minorities in America. Yet, it can be difficult to pinpoint what they aim to represent. The first image of an orc that is shown during the graffiti sequence is a man wearing an oversized sports jersey and a cap, looking like the stereotypical image of a ‘gangsta’ leaning up against a spray-painted wall (1:26). This is further enforced when Jakoby and Ward meet other orcs for the first time. The men wear football jerseys over their hoodies—a later scene clarifies that orcs do not play basketball because they are too “slow” and “heavy” and are therefore more suited for the NFL, a prime example of racial essentialism (24:23)—durags, caps, beanies, and big chains around their necks. When Ward halts the car, he addresses them with “What’s up, Homies?” (17:35) and even though Ward is black, his belligerent tone reminds of a white officer talking down to black youth. This association is furthermore emphasized by the connection between orcs and police violence, which has been a pressing issue for black Americans and gained substantial media attention during the last couple of years. Moreover, the film associates orcs with themes of segregation and slavery: During the graffiti sequence, the camera shows a road sign reading “Elves only”, a distinct reference the to “whites only” signs of the segregation area. Later, a human gangster tells Jakoby to “listen to your master”, referring to Ward (46:33). Within the story world, there is no reference of orcs being slaves to humans in the past, therefore this line appears to be blending the boundaries between the real world and the secondary world, resulting in a portrayal of orcs as an amalgamation of prejudices and stereotypes, a patchwork of black American culture in the US.

But black Americans are not the only community orcs aim to represent. Instead, they are also influenced by Hispanic culture. During the graffiti sequence, shop signs for bail bonds are shown, with what appears to be Orcish lettering and “We speak Orc” underneath (1:41), which not only immediately associates orcs with crime, but also conjures the association with US businesses advertising that they speak Spanish. Shortly after, an orc graffiti is shown on a building that says “CENTRO COMUNICARIO DE
“ORC” in Spanish (1:5), even though Spanish is not the orc’s language. Yet, these choices are repeated throughout the movie, furthering association with the Hispanic communities and their linguistic differences to white America. The metaphor is finally cemented when the leader of the Fogteeth gang reveals his background to Ward and Jakoby:

You know… I’m not from here. I grew up in Miami. Great orc communities there, strong orc communities. We’d have block parties with dwarves and humans. It was fucking fun, man. I wasn’t in the game then. I was a bus driver. Then I moved to LA. Fucking City of Angels, right? Listen, I would really appreciate it if you gave me the respect of looking at me when I’m talking to you. I get here and see how broke the system is. Orcs caught between the police and the gangsters. Elves making money off us. So I organize my community. We got our own thing now. (1:17:40)

Currently, 70 per cent of Miami’s population consists of Hispanics (NAHJ). The reference to the city and its “great” and “strong orc communities” is therefore hard to read as anything other than a reference to the city’s Hispanic population. To fulfill all prejudices, orcs are also associated with religious minorities. During a scene, Jakoby explains that he doesn’t eat “cow-flesh” (0:10:11), which reminds of Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish customs which prohibit the consumption of certain meats. The portrayal of orc culture is a hotchpotch of stereotypes about minority cultures within the US, combining them into one literal monster, making the audience uncomfortably aware of the fact that orcs have always been a racial Other, forcibly foregrounding the coding of Jackson’s films.

However, while Bright’s intentions might have come from a seemingly progressive point of view, the attempt to present orcs as metaphor for minority cultures has not been received well. A reviewer wrote:

It would be one thing if the racial analogies were at least well established and consistent, but they’re muddled at best. Are the orcs stand-ins for African-Americans, as they’re often portrayed in the film, or are they Latinos? Or are they urban white hardcore punk kids? Juggalos, perhaps? It sounds like a weird question to ask, and one that really shouldn’t matter, but the film forces you to think about it almost every other scene. Complicating things is that some of the worst stereotypes of all those groups are also present in the thinly sketched human characters. The only thing in Bright that’s scarier than the ninja elves are “homies,” and the frequency with which the term is used throughout the film. (O’Neil)

By trying to raise awareness for the problems of race within the genre, Bright seems to forget that the association between real life cultures and orcs as their own separate
biological race is an extremely problematic idea. While Jackson’s approach was not subtle in the first place, *Bright* takes the underlying coding and makes it unambiguously clear. On one hand it is a callout for the fantasy tradition, a reminder that orcs have always been the racial Other and that the desire to see them destroyed is a colonial fantasy. But simultaneously, it takes real world minority cultures and mashes them up in one literally monstrous race. *Bright* in no way critically examines its own worldbuilding; it is utterly unironic, takes itself seriously, and through that manifests a vision in which minority cultures in the US are in the most literal sense possible dehumanized. Moreover, *Bright* also raises uncomfortable questions about the justification of marginalization because its ghettos are not only inhabited by orcs, but also by people of color. This suggests that, like the orcs, people of color are also naturally prone to criminality and therefore belong in the ghetto. By mixing these elements, the film complicates its own premise to a point of offensiveness that cannot be redeemed simply by its intentions to be progressive.

17.1. The Orc Protagonist

While *Bright* reproduces many traditional tropes of fantasy, it strays from the conventions by making an orc one of its protagonists. The influence of the buddy cop movie appears to be fitting for that choice; it allows the introduction of a racially othered protagonist without losing the normative point of identification, which is provided by his partner Ward. However, it is not Ward who is the more likable character out of the two. Instead, it is the orc Jakoby who is the most sympathetic out of most of all the characters. A reviewer wrote: “As the well-intentioned Jakoby, Edgerton is actually fairly charming under all the prosthetics and makeup, and despite the film’s nonsensical plot, you can’t help but root for his big-hearted orc” (Coggan). Even though Jakoby’s exterior reminds of the fearsome Uruk-hai from *LotR*, Ayer presents him as a friendly, utterly nonthreatening, and gentle character who fails to fit into the world of the orcs as much as that of the humans and the police.

The relationship between Ward and Jakoby is based on Jakoby’s admiration contrasted with Ward’s disdain for him. When they first ride to work together, their unbalanced relationship becomes clear. When Jakoby claims he can read human’s emotions off their faces, Ward meets him with dislike and ridicule:
Ward: Show me another human face. What’s another one we make?
Jakoby: Oh, uh… [makes a face]
Ward: What’s that face?
Jakoby: Human who doesn’t get any more pancakes
Ward: We do like our pancakes, for real
Jakoby: I got lot of ‘em
Ward: You got a lot?
Jakoby: I got a lot of them.
Ward [smiling]: Show me the face an Orc makes when he just shut the fuck up, and don’t say shit and just drive to work.
Jakoby: [looks visibly hurt]
Ward: Yeah! That’s it! That’s it! Oh, you got that one! (11:40)

This scene illustrates that while Jakoby genuinely attempts to bond with his partner, whom he admires, Ward only treats him with cruel jokes and disrespect. Still, Jakoby, contrary to the stereotypes of the aggressive and cruel orcs, takes every attack against his person with a sad smile and without a single word of objection. From Wards bullying to other police officers showing him warrants of other orcs, asking whether they are related (16:08), or sticking a “kick me” sign on his back (17:22), Jakoby remains friendly to a fault. When the other officers openly laugh at him and he just turns around with a confused “be safe, guys!” (17:22), he almost appears too good-hearted to be true. His friendliness and naivete appears to be more than just an admirable character trait; all his interactions with other police officers feel uncomfortably sadistic, while Jakoby takes the abuse like a lamb at the slaughter. The orc is not just friendly, he is socially inept, appears almost child-like in his attempts to orientate through the world of humans and orcs alike. These problems are a reoccurring issue for Jakoby. At the end of the movie, when the Magic Task Force officers question both heroes on their hospital beds, Jakoby is eager to tell them the story, stammers excitedly and stumbles over his words, unable to express himself in an intelligible matter (1:46:21). He is completely overwhelmed and unable to process—eventually, Ward has to take over. While Jakoby claims he is able to read human faces during the scene at 11:40, he is actually unable to read any situation or to insert himself into conversations or social interactions. While this might be interpreted as an inherent trait of his race, none of the other orcs do seem to experience the same issues.
They appear neither particularly dim, nor awkward and are definitely not prone to take abuse from humans. Nick Jakoby is the exception to the rule, different from humans but not a typical orc. Through this he is presented as appealing and sympathetic to the audience.

What is maybe most surprising is Jakoby’s unwavering belief in authority and the police. Even after three police officers plotted to murder him in cold blood, his first instinct remains to call the police for backup. On one hand this unconditional obedience is in line with the representation of orcs as mindless soldiers, carrying out the orders of their leaders. On the other hand, in one brief moment of honesty, Jakoby explains to Ward why he is so dedicated to his police work: “Being a cop is all I’ve got. Right now, I’m still a cop, and if I die tonight, I’ll be a cop forever. I’ll be a… I’ll be a hero forever.” (1:06:27) These associations between the police and heroism are in stark contrast with the premise that the LAPD is essentially corrupt and racist, as established in the graffiti sequence. Jakoby has no reason to believe in the police or to think that being a police officer makes him a hero. Slowly, Jakoby’s loyalty becomes problematic; even if he is not part of the orc society—he is “unblooded”, which means that he is not initiated into any of the orc gangs—joining an institution dedicated to the violent oppression of orcs appears an almost traitorous act. Even though Jakoby experiences the racist practices of the LAPD every day, he still holds up the belief about an essentially heroic police force. Through his naive, yet upstanding nature he corresponds with the trope of the “noble savage”, a way to display people of color as primitive, yet of possessing an innate moral goodness (Alia/Bull 2). This trope is highly problematic, as it serves as a justification for the erasure of indigenous cultures and their forced assimilation into Western culture (ibid. 3). Jakoby does not stand for the orcs as a misunderstood race: he is an exception to the rule, too good to be accepted in his culture. As the only ‘good’ orc, Jakoby is far removed from his roots. This is a common habit for the representation of people of color in buddy cop movies, who are generally portrayed as out of touch with their own culture and community and stand in contrast to the supposed “inherent criminality” that is stereotypically associated with minority cultures (Oh 353). Jakoby perfectly fits this trope. Him being out of touch with orc culture is repeatedly emphasized throughout the film. Whenever they meet other orcs, they behave hostile towards him and call him a “traitor” (57:17). At one point, he tells Ward: “I can’t go to prison. They’ll skin me alive”
(1:13:59), a remark that again reinforces the idea that prison is full of orcs. But the orc’s distrust is not entirely unjustified. When Ward makes Jakoby watch a scene in which two orcs are getting brutalized by the police, Jakoby remains unfazed:

   Ward: I need to know if you’re a cop first… or an orc first. I need to hear you say it.
   
   Jakoby: Ward, I… I wanted to be a cop since I was a little kid. I am nothing else. My badge means more to me than the air I breathe. So don’t question me. (19:20)

While Jakoby is definitely not pro-police violence, he does not stand up against it either. Throughout the entire movie, Jakoby remains a policeman first and orc second. Ward’s approval appears to be more important to him than any recognition to his own culture. There is no reconnecting to his community, even though he eventually becomes “blooded” by the Fogteeth gang after being raised from the death and recognized as part of the prophecy. In the end, Jakoby gets what he wants most: the recognition by the police who honors him for his service. While the graffiti sequence in the beginning of the movie lets the audience believe that Bright is a film about police violence and racial discrimination, it is not. The only type of discrimination that is frowned upon is that against Jakoby, who tries his best to assimilate as much as possible and is therefore portrayed as sympathetic. No cultural conflicts are ever explored, let alone resolved. What remains is the image of the noble savage who manages to gain respect from his oppressors while the violence against other orcs appears to be justified and even necessary to keep the order within a race-based society at work.

18. Racism in Fantasy

Racism is a central aspect of Bright. Within the racially essentialist society, discrimination of ‘lower’ races is a common experience and the audience witnesses it first hand at the treatment of Jakoby, most importantly through his partner, Daryl Ward. Will Smith himself described his role as “a black police officer that’s racist against orcs”, a character that he very much enjoyed (Thorne). In an interview, he stated:

   The character is a police officer… he is an African American police officer. But he’s working with the first orc on the force. […] But the flip of the racial perspectives in the movie is really spectacular. I enjoyed playing the officer who’s essentially a part of the system and now trying to keep the new guy down, keep
the orcs… you know… on the flip side of the whole racial divide. It was very funny. It was really really great to be racist toward an orc. (Entertainment Weekly 2:44)

Ward as protagonist enforces Bright’s aim at creating a metaphor for US-Americas racial configurations through the lens of a fantasy film. As Attebery suggests, the racial dimension of fantastic worlds can be used to explore the workings of the world (“Race” 334). By making Ward racist, Bright attempts to shift the perspective of racism in the real world. This, however, is a problematic endeavor for a number of reasons.

Ward’s racism is illustrated through several scenes in which he displays a negative attitude towards his partner Jakoby and orcs in general. When Jakoby picks him up for work from his house, Ward's reaction shows his disdain for his partner:

Jakoby: Hey, hey! Hey partner, ready to get back to work? All healed up?
Ward: What the hell are you doing at my house…? Why are you at my house? Why are you on my lawn? (7:25)

Ward does not want Jakoby to be associated with him—not even to pick him up for work. While at first glance, Wards reaction to Jakoby showing up at his house might seem extreme—and extremely racist—the context of the scene must be considered. Wards biggest priority is to keep his family save and make it through the last five years of his employment before he is eligible to retire (4:50). He has just recovered from a shooting, which takes place in the first scene of the film, when a nameless orc criminal shoots him without provocation (2:42). While the scene is never explained throughout the movie, it can be inferred that the attack could have been a reaction to Jakoby becoming the first orcish police officer. Jakoby draws a lot of attention to him and Ward does not want this kind of attention associated with his family. Moreover, while Ward is admittedly hostile towards Jakoby, he is not a raging orc-hater, as a conversation with his daughter Sophia reveals:

Sophia: “Are you in trouble?”
Ward: “Am I in trouble? What your mother say to you?”
Sophia: “Mom said that Nick got you in trouble because orcs are dumb.”
Ward: That’s not true all right? orcs are not dumb. Just, uh…. All of the races are… are different. Okay? And just ‘cause they’re different doesn’t mean anybody’s smarter or dumber, you know, better or worse than anybody. Alright? It’s just, just… You know, everybody’s just trying to get along and-and… have a good life.” (6:59)
This scene illustrates that Ward knows racist prejudice is wrong. Ward’s problem with the orcs cannot be simply equated with racial issues in the real world. His disdain towards orcs is more of a speciesism, as their differences are not a social construct but real and except for Jakoby, who is an outlier, orcs are presented as violent criminals. Ward is not trying to be racist but is literally from another race. Even during a heated discussion with his colleagues at work, Ward remains reluctant to take up an open position against orcs, even though this situation would invite for it:

Officer 1: “Meanwhile that Orc fuck is still out there because Jakoby chose clan blood over badge.
Ward: “Or the motherfucker just got away!”
Officer 2: He got away because Jakoby let him. What happens next. What happens next time this pig motherfucker makes a cop suck-start his fucking 12-gauge? Only this time, it’s Brown, or it’s Hicks, or it’s fucking me! How you gonna feel, Ward? Cause that shit is on you!
[…]
Ward: Hey, look, I got a dude in my car, the whole world is watching, all right? I didn’t ask for it, I don’t want it, but I don’t get a vote.
Officer 2: And what happens if they hire more? You know what they say. Once with the Dark Lord, always with the Dark Lord. They chose evil!
Ward: Here’s the thing I can’t understand. How do a bunch of dudes who can barely remember their baby mama’s birthday have beef with a whole race over some shit that happened 2,000 years ago? (14:31)

Considering this characterization, it is surprising how Smith pushed the perspective of Ward as racist in many interviews. His view suggests that racism is, in fact, based on real differences and that living with different ‘races’ comes with a struggle that has to be overcome. In an interview, Smith furthermore claimed that as an actor, he gained insight into the minds of racists by playing the role of Daryl Ward. He says:

It was really interesting for me racist character, right? In our movie, the elves represent the top, they represent the haves and the orcs represent the bottom of society, the have nots. And the humans are squeezed in the middle. So for me, as an African American police officer being racist against the orcs it was interesting. Sort of what… the understanding from me that developed out of that is all of the isms, racism and sexism and nationalism… all of the isms are a result of a desire for comparative superiority. Everybody wants to feel comparatively superior and then whatever part of you wants to feel superior is the ism that you take on. And it was interesting… for the first time in my life I could see racism and sexism and nationalism coming from a space of fear and insecurity and ignorance if it was
playing this role, it just became that much clear to me, the source of the problems. (Rajeev Masand 2:24)

Yet Ward does not appear to be racist from the position of superiority. His inability to accept Jakoby cannot simply be presented as the same racism that occurs in reality. The racism of Bright is not the same as racism in the real world because the orcs and humans are biologically distinct species that do not carry the same colonial history as the concept of race does in reality. Bright’s approach ultimately trivializes racism by putting Ward, a character of color, into the role of the perpetrator. It removes racism from its essential nature—the oppression of non-white people to establish white superiority—and turns it into something else entirely: a form of bullying and overt abuse that is based on misunderstandings of real, genetic differences between biological races. Bright’s depiction of racism asserts the idea that any person can be racist, reducing racism to its overt side, essentially equating it with bullying. This is enforced by statements from the crew, for example Joel Edgerton, who claims:

[B]eing under that make up actually made me feel very isolated and very alone and not that it made me feel like everybody on the crew was bullying me as I was being bullied in front of the camera, but it made me feel isolated. And bullying is a big aspect of this movie, the way my character is bullied and I feel like racism and cultural kind of judgment is like a group form of bullying, it’s a group bullying another group based on the choices you have or the birth right of a religion or color of your skin, it’s like a gang form of bullying and I really felt that as a character and it was a real draw for me that we were making a big action movie and yet at the same time there was a very obvious and simple social cultural kind of message there as well. (4:00 ibid.)

This is a trivializing view of racism because it focuses on the overt expressions in a way that it is easily digestible for white audiences and post-race sentimentalities, because racism is portrayed as nothing more than being mean to each other. Representations like this shift away from the core of the problem, rather enforce racial essentialism than question it. Bright presents racism as a coping mechanism in a world in which the other is literally monstrous and the solution is not to dismantle the system, but to simply be nice to each other. This “anti-bullying” approach to racism does not work because racism is rooted in deeper levels of social organization. By simplifying racism as a matter of friendliness, attention gets diverted from where the real problem lies.

While the idea of racism against orcs is, therefore, problematic in itself, it is not the only type of racism presented in Bright. Even though the directors chose the fantastic
races as a metaphor for real world racism, they also include people of color as minority groups in their secondary world. While it is unclear if Ward’s blackness is an issue within the fantastic society, the racial organization of humans is hinted at when Jakoby complains about the treatment of orcs to the Hispanic officer Rodriguez:

Jakoby: Everywhere I go, why have the Orcs always gotta be the bad guys?
Rodriguez: Hey, don’t look at me, man. Mexicans still get shit for the Alamo.

This reference suggests that a bias against Hispanic people exists within the world. This bias, then, is based on a historical event. Similar to the explanation of why orcs are evil, racist views against Hispanics are ‘explained’, which leads to the assumption that within the world of *Bright*, racism is based on two factors. First, there are real, biological differences between the races that influence their physical and mental abilities, a standard practice of racial essentialism. Secondly, racism is based on past or present transgressions of that group and is therefore to some degree a justified inhibition. While in the real world, racism is entirely the responsibility of white people, in *Bright*, it is portrayed as a minor character flaw of the racists, who are incapable of forgiving past transgressions, and partly the fault of the groups it is being directed at for not assimilating into dominant culture. A critic said in their review of the film: “It’s a bad sign when you’ve got so many concentric layers of racism going on that a viewer starts getting thrown off by plot holes in the racism canon” (O’Neil) and exactly this is the case. *Bright* takes real world racism and applies it to a racially essentialist world in which race is real, trying to establish a metaphor about why racism is bad. However, because race is real within the world of *Bright*, it cannot criticize the issues of racism at its core, which is, that race is a nonsensical concept that assigns seemingly important differences where they are none. Any altercations with the concepts of race, then, remain on a basis of interpersonal problem-solving and anti-bullying, which is, essentially, not an issue of racism.

18.1. Daryl Ward and Black Culture

*Bright*’s constellations of race and racism are especially interesting because Ward is a black protagonist. This is, unfortunately, surprising due to the conventions within Hollywood, but more specifically, within the fantastic genre. As mentioned before, mainstream fantasy is generally a white space and often the representation of people of
color is deemed ‘unrealistic’. Fantasy drastically lacks in black characters, black authors and producers, as well as black actors. This has often been deemed a result of the “market-driven policies” within the genre that assume that black perspectives are not interesting to a white audience (Rutledge 239). However, in recent years a development to introduce more diversity within the genre has been observed. Books like Ben Aaronovich’s *Rivers of London* Series (2011-present) or TV shows like *Sleepy Hollow* feature black protagonists. *Bright* seems to continue an emerging tradition. But Ward does not tell a tale of overcoming oppression, but instead is agent of racist abuse himself. Ward’s characterization then raises questions about his own ethnicity, and his position towards blackness in general. A reviewer observes:

> Obviously, Ward is Black. A string of one liners with mild-profanity are meant to verify his cultural authenticity. While trying to kill a pesky fairy, he quips “fae [sic] lives don’t matter today.” Meanwhile, Ward’s disdain for his rowdy, gangbanging (by his own observation) neighbors establish his morality. His girlfriend is white, and he has a perfect racially ambiguous daughter. He’s the “good” kind of Black, a position that allows him to enact dominance over one species (fae) [sic] while advocating for another (orcs). As such, Ward’s race is conveniently neutralized in moments where power comes into play. His status as someone struggling to stay in the middle class becomes more of an important identifier than his racial identity. (Bowen)

This is an interesting observation. On the one hand, having a black protagonist as the visible and a white actor as the invisible character is a quite groundbreaking setup within the film conventions. On the other hand, Ward himself is distanced from black culture in every way possible: he plans to sell his house in the black neighborhood he lives in, is distanced from his neighbors, even though they treat him friendly and with respect (5:45). The police officers he spends time with at work are all white (and openly racist against orcs), and when he pulls up to a group of orcs and greets them as “homies” (17:35), he appears provoking and awkward. Moreover, while the Hispanic detective Rodriguez talks to Jakoby about having felt similar discrimination than he does (20:25), Ward never references his race or a history of oppression throughout the movie. There is no mention of him being black at all, let alone any experience of discrimination he might have felt during his lifetime. The worldbuilding heavily suggests that prejudice against people of color exists, Wards behavior, however, does the opposite. This leads to the impression that Daryl Ward was not written as a black character; he is not a representation of the black community, but his blackness is used as a justification in order to tell a tale about
racial oppression without putting a white character into the unpleasant position of being a racist. This is compatible with Higgin’s observations about blackness in fantasy spaces. He claims that “[b]ecause of a deficiency in minority involvement in the creation of this media content, racial visibility is primarily shaped by the perspectives and desires of Whites” (Higgin 18). While Will Smith is a black man, he is not responsible for the role he plays; Daryl Ward was written and directed by Mark Landis and David Ayer, two white men that assert themselves to tell a tale about oppression. This type of representation is therefore still from an ultimately white perspective. Higgins writes:

Visibility hollows out Black representation and corporealizes it, projecting on the body the desires of the dominant cultural imaginary. It is mere inclusion and presence wholly devoid of nuance and the undermining of expectation that representation allows. (Higgin 18)

By presenting Ward as a black man the producers try to approach the issue of racism and discrimination from a new angle, yet by failing to understand the institution of racism, they are unable to create a meaningful contrast. What remains is a messy representation of a number of issues, none of which is ever resolved. Wards character remains unapproachable; it is unclear if his abuse towards orcs stems from a character flaw, institutional oppression, or is a projection of his own struggles with race. The producers erase Ward’s cultural background, creating the impression for a black character to be ‘normalized’, they need to be represented as ‘culturally neutral’, which means white. In this regard, Ward is similar to Jakoby. Both represent a non-white or non-dominant culture, yet both are in their own way culturally removed from their backgrounds in order to make them appealing for a white mainstream audience. It is a bold choice to produce a film that positions itself as a statement against racism, yet focus it around a black character as a whitewashed, racist cop.

While Ward is presented as a racist police man, he still remains the hero of the story, the chosen one who is able to command the Wand and defeat the villain. He is revealed a Bright, a name that appears ironic as it connects physical whiteness with power. At no point is he forced to revise his opinion of orcs as a lesser race; he just comes to barely tolerate Jakoby which is presented as the happy end of their relationship. His racism, then, is played off as a minor character flaw that can be mended through an unlikely friendship with an orc. The fact that the police remains a force of oppression is not further addressed. When the corrupt police officers are eliminated in the shootout by
Ward (40:32), it appears as if all evil is defeated and the police is reestablished as an agent of order, although more than the four officers that die in the shootout are shown to discriminate and humiliate Jakoby and brutalize orcs on the street. The takeaway is this: police violence is not good, but it is inevitable because minorities are unable to assimilate to the dominant culture. Racism is a character flaw that can be overcome through unlikely friendships in which the minority representative has to endure racist abuse for long enough until the abuser understands that they are no threat to them. The handling of these issues suggests that discrimination could be simply avoided by abandoning all cultural authenticity to avoid problems with the dominant culture.

18.2. Bright and the Magical Negro

While Ward generally represents the role of the hero and protagonist, there have been accusations that he might be written as a magical negro (Bowen). This refers to a common Hollywood trope in which an often lower-class black person is revealed to possess magical abilities that are used to aid the white protagonist on their road to success and redemption (Hughey 544). Describing the magical negro, Matthew Hughey writes:

These films all possess a mutual resemblance regarding how the positive and progressive attributes of strong, magic-wielding black characters are circumvented by their placement as servants to broken and down-on-their-luck white characters. This on-screen relationship reinforces a normative climate of white supremacy within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation whereby whiteness is always worthy of being saved, and strong depictions of blackness are acceptable in so long as they serve white identities.” (548)

However, a closer look makes it questionable whether this role actually applies to Ward. The assumption is mostly based on a scene in which a detainee, who is later revealed to be an agent of the Shield of Light, a group that works against the Inferni, explains to Jakoby that he and Ward are chosen to play a part in the prophecy:

I have a message from the Shield of Light. Remember the old ways. Remember what you are. […] Remember your traditions. Only clan ways can save you. The prophecy has chosen you. The man with you is blessed. (22:38)

For Bowen, the use of the word “blessed” here is an indicator that Ward, played by a black actor, is positioned into the role of a magical negro, a suspicion that is well justified considering the traditions of depicting blackness on screen. However, it is debatable if
Ward truly fulfills the trope. First, Ward is not the one who comes from a lower class. As mentioned before, the status of blackness is never really addressed within the movie. Ward is trying to move out of his urban neighborhood, but he is not from a low-income background. Moreover, even though Ward is the one who controls the Wand, he is also the one with more agency—he is “blessed”, yes, but he is not just an aid to serve the hero’s journey of a white character but is the chosen one himself: he is the Bright, the hero of the story. This is simply unclear because he is not the character the audience sympathizes with most. Jakoby, on the other hand, fits the description of the magical negro better: it is not revealed from which social background he comes, but being an orc, he is automatically in the lowest category of the social hierarchy within the world Bright constructs. He is paired with Ward, a jaded police officer who has lost his spirit and rejects Jakoby’s attempts at friendship at first, but through their journey—more specifically through Jakoby’s death and resurrection, an act of magic—Ward becomes a better man. Because the orcs are an amalgamation of minority stereotypes within the US, it can be claimed that Jakoby, rather than Ward, is in the role of the magical negro, with the only caveat that he is not physically black. It is how the narrative constructs him, but this is not necessarily a progressive decision. By putting Jakoby into the position of the magical negro it still perpetuates the idea that within a narrative, the minority character, even if it is an entirely fictional minority, has to be put into the role of sacrificing their own agency to support the character of the dominant culture. This becomes apparent when looking at Jakoby’s agency in the plot: it barely exists. His task is simply to lead Ward to accept his destiny as a Bright. In all confrontations he is reluctant, never the inciting force, and does not even possess magical powers of his own: it is Tikka the elf who brings him back from the dead. It is difficult to say if the film would have been less offensive if Jakoby would have turned out to be the Bright because there is more than one aspect that come into play, but it is certainly a questionable choice to set up a film about a character from an oppressed race who tries to prove himself to the world, only to have his racist and disagreeable partner turn out to be the hero. Although Bright tries to be progressive, it does so at two counteracting fronts; on the one hand, they put a black actor into the role of the hero and give him agency, but on the other hand, they still tell a story about a minority character existing as an aid to help a character from the dominant culture to fulfill his destiny as a hero. This results in a confusing picture that makes it hard to
understand how the film positions itself within the discourse of racism that it deliberately inserted itself into.

19. *Bright as Allegory*

*Bright*’s depiction of racial essentialism is problematic on multiple levels. But why did the well-intentioned allegory ultimately fail? Undoubtedly, director David Ayer aimed to critically explore both the race-based societies of fantasy and reality. At a panel, he issued the following statement:

> You know, this is a process because what’s different about this movie is that it takes itself seriously. The characters in the movie, yeah, there’s elves and orcs and all that, but they still have to pay their bills, they still wanna be happy. They still get married, they still have kids, everybody is still living their lives but there are the social issues, there is a stratification, there is limited mobility and how do you deal with that? And it’s a fantastic way to look at those issues today, without, you know, beating people over the head with it… It’s sad but some people just don’t wanna hear it. You know, they don’t wanna know what’s going on out there in the real world… You know? And this is a world of walls. It’s a world of segregation. And unfortunately… ey, man, we’re living in it right now. What the fuck. (We Live Entertainment 0:38)

Unfortunately, none of these things have been achieved by the film. It appears as if the producers and actors approached the project with a grand vision in mind, yet what is shown on screen does not fit their descriptions. Noticeably, there is a discrepancy between how the film is promoted and what it actually contains. Cast and producers both stress an allegorical reading of the film, foregrounding its supposed political message over plot and characterization. This might be the main problem of the film; it not only takes itself seriously as an apparently ‘unique’ blending of genres, but also as its position as socio-political metaphor. Ayer repeatedly emphasizes his socially aware mindset, for example in an interview for the Los Angeles Times, where he explains his vision:

> Interviewer: The concept of marrying something so fantastical, like a world that’s fantastical, with very relevant social issues today is very new, why is that important to you to explore and like put out there?

> David Ayer: It’s getting… It’s almost getting harder to talk about lots of the issues that we’re having right now because people are becoming so polarized, but I think in the context of a parable, a fable, that it allows you to explore things. You know, and the movie has a light hand with it, I think if you know what you’re looking at you’ll feel like it’s pretty clear. My hope is that, you know, people of closed hearts
may learn something new, may open their eyes a little bit without feeling preached to.

Interviewer: Would you say this is a “woke” rated R action… supernatural action movie?

David Ayer [laughing]: Yeah, it’s woke as fuck. (3:17)

With claiming to be “woke”—a vernacular for socially aware people—he sets himself up for failure. He aims to approach a genre that is rooted in colonial traditions and whiteness and plans to turn it on its head, yet trips over his own ambitions. What is left is confusion at best and offense at worst. A reviewer writes:

Actually, it’s not all that clear what Bright is doing. The film is too busy tearing through a plot stuffed with wands, prophecies, shoot-outs, car chases and evil elf cabals to explain the finer points of its racially charged society. Racial allegories such as this are a staple of sci-fi and fantasy, and are often assumed to shine a light on modern-day society. But if Bright shines a light on anything, it’s how problematic these kind [sic] of movies are. There’s a thin line between racial allegory and straight-up racist. (Rose)

Through Ayer’s statements and promises to be a groundbreaking, socially aware, anti-racist, anti-discriminatory film, he forces a reading of Bright as allegory, but the allegory does not work, first and foremost because the film is told from the perspective of the oppressors. While the graffiti scene in the beginning sets Bright out to be a film about police violence, both protagonists are policemen and the issue is barely addressed at all. While it would be possible to present an urban fantasy movie within a race-based society in a way that makes it applicable to issues of police violence, Bright’s buddy cop influences prevent a critical examination of the police. With two policemen as the focus of identification, the film can only come to the conclusion that police are essentially good but black sheep exist.

The relationship between Bright and the police is furthermore problematic considering its referencing to the Black Lives Matter movement. Especially one of the initial scenes of the film has caused offense with the audiences. In the scene, Ward is asked by his wife to remove a fairy from their lawn. Fairies are small vermin-like creatures, similar to insects or birds. Ward, armed with a broom, stomps into his yard and attacks the fairy with the words: “Fairy lives don’t matter today” while his black neighbors watch (3:43). The line is a clear reference to the Black Lives Matter movement. A reviewer has called it “one of the more egregious examples of the line-crossing, edgy
hilarity in play” (O’Neil). The BLM movement is an inherently serious issue; the organization is actively fighting racial profiling and police violence in the US (Black Lives Matter). Using the BLM slogan and twisting it into a trivialized fantasy one-liner shows an insensitivity for the matter, especially in a film about a police officer from a minority culture who pursues his dream to become a hero. The criticism the film received for this scene was handled differently by the producers. Director David Ayer still remains to pride himself on his insight into racial matters, but Landis reacted defensively by tweeting that the offensive line was improvised by Smith (O’Neil). However, just because an actor ad-libs a line, it does not have to be in the final movie. Yet, the scene has even been put into the official trailer, and it must be assumed that the producers understood it would cause a reaction (Netflix “Official Trailer” 0:15). The scene is irrelevant to the plot, but by putting it into the trailer, it connects the movie to the plight of the BML movement and positions it as an extension of the discourse of police violence and racial discrimination in the US. For Ayer, however, this poses no problem given the suggested overall message of the film. In an interview he says:

I think it’s a matter of, you know, you look at the whole movie, you look at the meaning of the whole movie and again, it’s like I said that, you know, for me it’s an opportunity to maybe stir some awakening in people, to maybe help people a little bit, close minded kinda open up a little bit, you know? I grew up in a diverse neighborhood, I grew up in South LA, it’s… I’ve seen… you know, I saw the Crack epidemic, I saw, you know, how those communities where policed back in the day, you know, I saw a lot of the stuff first hand, experienced and lived it, you know, I’ve seen the violence and I’ve seen what it does to people, so as a film maker, its just, you know… can I do anything to stop it? Can I do anything to help? (Los Angeles Times)

Although David Ayer is white, he inserts himself into a position of authority to speak of racial discrimination. In Bright, this vision remains one-sided and reduces the discourse of race to questions of street violence and criminality. Ayer might speak of personal experience, but his point of view ultimately remains that of a white man. When he chooses to depict people of color as orcs, it remains an act of dehumanization. It is not to say that David Ayer is racist; as mentioned before, personal attacks and questions of character are not productive in this type of discussion. Rather, it is important to point out that Ayer, through his good intentions, was unable to tell the story in the way that he indented to. As Attebery claims, the game of fantasy must be engaged in whole-heartedly (“Tradition” 2). By pushing the allegorical reading, Bright fails to do so. It is so clearly positioned as
an extension to the discourse of real racism that the racial metaphors are too obvious to work. While orcs have always carried a heavy racial (and racist) coding, Bright presents it in a way which makes it impossible to see them without directly equating them with real minorities. It forces its viewers to constantly look for parallels to the real world in a way that makes it impossible to view Bright as a pure fantasy film. By pushing the allegorical reading, the plot and worldbuilding are neglected and the sensation of wonder that fantasy seeks to elicit is completely lost. Instead, the viewer is forced to look for explanations, not only for the plot itself, but also for the metaphors the film aims to establish. Bright demonstrates the confusion between allegory and applicability that Tolkien firmly rejected and through this ends up not only being unsatisfactory as a fantasy, but also unsatisfactory as an allegory as well.

20. Conclusion

Race and fantasy film have a troubled history. As a literary genre, fantasy established traditions of neomedievalism, orientalism, and racial essentialism which tend to enforce the creation of secondary worlds as pre-race spaces in which white dominance is never questioned and non-white cultures are presented as the racial Other. While the genre allows for almost infinite variation, the fact that it is focused around a few central texts such as Tolkien’s LotR makes it difficult to change the public opinion about what is and is not accepted in fantasy. Translated on screen, this becomes a more significant problem. While a book is often up to interpretation, film must translate fantastic reveries into tangible concepts, making their coding visible once and for all. With questions of race, nationalism, and identity on the line, this easily creates a pitfall for producers who uncritically approach the genre. In this regard, Peter Jackson’s Lord of the Rings trilogy and David Ayer’s Bright appear to represent different extremes on the spectrum.

Peter Jackson’s trilogy essentially changed the perception of fantasy film as a genre. With the release of the movies in the early 2000’s, they managed to elevate fantasy film into general acclaim. But while the adaption of Tolkien’s novels was applauded by many, the racial coding of Jackson’s films has not aged well. Most striking is his unambiguous separation of good and evil characters into color coded categories. In
Jackson’s film, all good characters are white, the sophisticated elves the whitest of them all. They stand in contrast with a savage dark horde of grey-skinned orcs and black-skinned Uruk-hai, who exist for the sole purpose of threatening humanity—and being slaughtered in return. While the trilogy comes under the guise of grandeur, a tale of multicultural cooperation among a group of unlikely friends who seek to destroy Sauron’s ring, it quickly turns into a romanticization of large-scale war scenes with hours of relentless orc-slaughter in the name of heroism. With his focus on the race of men, Jackson removes all subtleties from the original and turns the story into a simple binary of good versus evil. This is especially worrying considering the coding of the villains. Jackson’s Uruk-hai, which are largely portrayed by Pacific Islanders, have black skin, coarse hair, and tribal markings on their faces. They are supported by armies of Southron and Easterling warriors, dark-skinned humans with distinctly Arab coding who set out to destroy cities exclusively inhabited by white people. The release date of the films during the beginning of the War on Terror gives this coding a distinctly foul taste; while cinemagoers cheered for Aragorn and co. to defeat their dark-skinned enemies, in the real world, the US government employed troupes into the Middle East. With his focus on the war between orcs and men, Jackson transformed Tolkien’s anti-industrialism into xenophobia, with an army of valiant white men facing off against hordes of dark-skinned enemies, heroically protecting their civilization.

Being based on one of the most influential books within the genre, Jackson’s trilogy has influenced most fantasy films published after the early 2000’s. One of the most recent examples is the Netflix movie Bright. The 2017 film stands out due to its status as the first multi-million-dollar blockbuster production that has been exclusively released on a streaming platform. Free from the refines of traditional box office cinema, Bright explores the fantastic genre from the perspective of buddy cop films. Unfortunately, much was lost in the attempts to create an epic fantasy for modern times. Most strikingly was Bright’s failure to create a meaningful allegory for racial relations in America. Presenting a fantasy film from the perspective of two police officers, the African American Daryl Ward and the orc Nick Jakoby, Bright promised to explore a fantasy world from the perspectives of those that are usually marginalized or demonized within the genre. Regardless of their efforts, however, the ambition to use orcs as a universal stand-in for minority cultures in the US resulted in a confusing hotchpotch of offensive stereotypes
and troubling depictions of racism. While the producers of the film repeatedly claimed that *Bright* should be read as an allegory for racism in the US, it ultimately confirms the notion that race is real and racism an inevitable result, a character flaw that can be overcome through reluctant friendship and assimilation. While *Bright* set out to right the wrongs that Jackson’s trilogy planted, it failed spectacularly to do so.

Both examples illustrate the difficulties for fantasy film to portray racial relations in a sensitive way. In both cases, the orcs as a metaphor for the racial Other is a recurring problem that struggles to be solved in a productive way. The inability to portray monsters without racial coding causes a troubling image in Jackson’s trilogy. While the film was not set out to examine the issue of race, Jackson’s uncritical reproduction of black and white imagery hardly allows for a different interpretation. In *Bright*, the issue was reversed. Ayer’s attempt to deliberately present orcs as the racial Other of US America, the end does not justify the means. His images of orcs as a metaphor for minorities are highly offensive and dehumanizing to people of color. The problem of the portrayal of orcs as racial Other therefore cannot be solved by making the connection explicit. *Bright*’s main problem is that it does not establish the race of orcs as an authentic part of the secondary world, but instead presents them as threadbare metaphor for people of color in the real world. This does not resolve the problems of the genre, but rather enforces it to an extreme degree. While it is true that the habits of the genre must be challenged, to unambiguously present orcs as the oppressed people of color of fantasyland does not provide an effective solution because the direct transcription of institutional racism in the real world and speciesism in fantasy is a contradiction. Instead of questioning racist ideologies, Ayer’s film rather enforces the idea that race is biologically determined influences aspects such as character, culture, and a person’s abilities.

This begs the central question of whether the race of orcs can be visualized in fantasy films without conjuring a discourse of racism, colonialism, Self, and Other. To answer this question, it is necessary to realize that orcs are inherently racial monsters that stem from orientalist and colonial nightmares. To ignore this background is as problematic as to face it uncritically. Because the traditions of the genre are often mistaken for rules, the images of raging orcs keep being repeated, making it more and more difficult for the genre to face its demons. With its tendency for racial essentialism, race discourse in fantasy often undermines the concept of institutional racism within the
real world. To change these conventions, critical examinations of the traditions within the genre, its relation to race, and the workings of racism are essential. This is not to say that central works such as Tolkien’s *LotR* should be discarded in their entirety. Instead, it is crucial to approach them from a critical perspective in order to untangle the genre’s ties to colonialism, orientalism, and racism.

While *Bright* failed to present the question of race in fantasy in a productive way, it showed an effort to change the way in which fantasy film traditionally presents good and evil as white and black. Its struggle illustrates the difficulty of portraying race as fact without supporting racist ideologies. The problem of portraying orcs is that they are inherently linked with stereotypes about non-white cultures and their perpetual position as enemies essentially constructs a discourse of Self and Other. This is not to say that it is impossible to create secondary worlds that are based on the distinction of different races, even to include orcs in a productive way. It does, however, require an understanding about what race is, how it works, and how it relates to fantasy. Given the backlash *Bright* received from the critics, it will be interesting to see how they proceed with their sequel and if they manage to resolve the issues of the first film. Moreover, the upcoming *LotR* series will show whether the producers attempt to change Middle Earth’s problematic relationship with depictions of race. After all, anything is possible within fantasy.

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