

In Search of Authenticity: the ‘Global Popular’ and ‘Quality’ Culture—the Case of *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* and *Pavement*

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In the era of the global, we often forget that lived experience takes place at the local level. *Variety*, published in the USA, with an arguably global readership, looking at New Zealand from abroad, facetiously (and quite probably erroneously) reported that ‘three percent of the country’s population attended the New Zealand premiere’ of *The Return of the King*, which was filmed in that country (*Variety*, 8 Dec. 2003, 79).¹ The national media landscape that *Variety* evokes is an impoverished one in which New Zealanders are sent rushing to the theatre at those rare moments when New Zealand achieves global prominence. Though New Zealand and New Zealanders only occasionally make it to the big screen, the need felt by New Zealanders to read about themselves results in the regular consumption of magazines, conceived and tailored to its market by parent companies such as Australian Consolidated Press (ACP). The New Zealand distributor, Gordon and Gotch entices prospective clients: ‘Did you know that New Zealanders are world leaders in magazines? We read and purchase more magazines per capita than any other country in the world!’ (<http://www.gordongotch.co.nz>). Magazines published in New Zealand for a New Zealand readership dominate the New Zealand market (<http://www.abc.org.nz>; see also <http://www.business.vu.edu.au/bho2250/Top20Media/TopmediaNZ.htm>). The New

¹ *The Return of the King* is the third film in *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* (commonly referred to as LOTR). The trilogy, directed by New Zealander Peter Jackson, includes: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2002. *The Two Towers*, 2003. *The Return of the King*, 2004.

Zealander's desire to see himself or herself verified through print arises, perhaps at least in part, from the fact that the New Zealander is so rarely depicted on the big screen.

I will argue that by looking at the way in which a very 'narrow cast' publication—in this case a life-style magazine—covers a mass-market production (what I call the *Lord of the Rings* [LOTR] phenomenon), we can better understand the relationship between culture that might be considered popular within a global context (such as LOTR), and culture that by definition, in terms of its readership, is local and limited. This examination of very particular texts demonstrates how larger concepts such as nation and identity must be understood in the context of particular lived experience if we wish to comprehend the complexity of these concepts and their tragic exceptions; their blind spots. For the purpose of illustrating this point, I choose to examine here a publication so local that it does not figure on the radar of marketing experts—*Pavement*. This New Zealand magazine, which is published out of Auckland, devoted three special issues to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy; *50th issue: the lord of the rings special* (December 2001/January 2002); *the lord of the rings: the two towers special* (December 2002/January 2002); *the lord of the rings: the return of the king special* (Summer 2003/2004). As a local publication addressing local readers, these issues offer an example of how global and local cultures are constructed for specific readerships. A glossy, large format magazine, *Pavement* describes itself as 'New Zealand's leading contemporary culture magazine' and reports a readership of 12,350 (<http://www.admedia.co.nz/showcase>).² It would be a mistake, however, to see *Pavement* as a non-commercial enterprise on account of its very modest readership; it displays ads from high-end New Zealand designers, as well as from international lines such as Gucci. In the following analysis, I will attempt to suggest the importance of examining publications like *Pavement* in order to understand how national identity is constructed and circulated at a local level with a global context.

Pavement's treatment of LOTR, being symptomatic of a larger discursive formation, illuminates how the larger phenomenon of 'textual formations' or 'reading formations' as

defined by Bennett and Woolacott (1987, 262, 278) operates to define the parameters of interpretation offered to a given readership—which may differ from readership to readership. Importantly, the *Pavement* case indicates how notions of domination or cultural hegemony cannot be understood in terms of the global/local dichotomy.

Pavement's discourse about culture evolves from tensions between global popular culture and quality global culture, often termed 'high' culture. By attracting a mass readership, the global popular dominates 'high' culture; however, historically the position occupied by high culture in a post-colonial context such as New Zealand served to maintain the status of New Zealand as a colony and as subservient to Europe, and to Great Britain in particular. This is one of the primary conflicts that *Pavement* attempts to negotiate as defining terms of the reading formation out of which it is generated and which it reproduces. A close reading of the first special issue devoted to the LOTR phenomenon demonstrates that this is not necessarily a productive tension. Ultimately, *Pavement* marginalizes the indigenous voice—or perhaps more accurately, the tensions between the European and the national, between high culture and mass culture, hide the ways in which local publications such as *Pavement* may occlude and elide the place of indigenous culture. Ultimately, these tensions focus the readers on binary oppositions that do not encourage a more heterogeneous definition of culture capable of being expansive rather than reductive.

Reading Formations

Bennett and Woolacott argue that meaning is produced through a significant inter-textuality, 'a constantly mobile set of inter-textual relations', that produces the interpretation of a given text by a given reader (1987, 6). Meaning as interpretation is multiple and culturally produced, defined by historical and social contexts—by, in the words of Bennett and Woolacott, 'the varying social and ideological relations of reading' that permit, encourage and regulate 'the consumption' of 'texts' (6). They argue that:

The relations between texts and readers...are always profoundly mediated by the discursive and inter-textual determinations which, operating on both, structure the domain of their encounter so as

² As a point of comparison, according to the ABC magazine audit results, *The New Zealand Listener* has a historic NZ net circulation of 75,177, *New Zealand Woman's Day*, 142,610, *Fashion Quarterly*, 22,620 (<http://www.abc.org.audit/index.html>, consulted 28/06/05). *Pavement* is not listed in the audit results.

to produce, always in specific and variable forms, texts and readers as the mutual support of one another. (1987, 249)

Meaning within the paradigm established by Bennett and Woolacott is dynamic and participatory; however, it does not empty the 'text' itself of meaning. The text, rather than offering meaning in isolation, becomes the site around which meanings are produced according to parameters manifested in a number of ancillary texts that a given reader brings to bear upon any given text or situation and that, as such, constitute the context of a given reading. Bennett and Woolacott explain:

...texts are productive of meaning only within particular and determinate reading formations—a concept we have ventured as a means of specifying the inter-textual and discursive conditions which mould and configure the text-reader encounter. (1987, 262)

These contexts are manifested (available as symptoms) in the ancillary texts that are brought to bear upon a primary text. The notion of primary text is one that must be understood in terms of a given reading. For example, in a movie theatre the film may be read as a primary text that is informed by ancillary texts such as magazine articles about a given star. In the context of a living room, the magazine text may be read as the primary text that is informed by the film narrative, which the reader may or may not have seen, as the case may be. Woolacott and Bennett note that: 'there is no fixed boundary between the extra-textual and the intra-textual which prevents the former from pressing in upon the latter and reorganising it' (1987, 263). I would argue further that there is no initial hierarchy that might determine a text of origin that might exercise primacy over other texts. The reading context and the reading formation establish provisional hierarchies that can be transformed or reversed.

'Reading formation theory' (see for example Erb, 1991) posits that material about LOTR becomes part of the LOTR phenomenon and that LOTR as popular fiction inevitably includes this material. I chose here to focus on a very specific and perhaps narrowly defined reading formation as manifested through the magazine *Pavement* because of the way that it illuminates the problems of producing 'local' readings in a global context—that is to say in a context, to quote Benedict Anderson, in which 'substantial groups of people were in a position to think of themselves as living lives parallel to those of other substantial groups of people—if never meeting, yet certainly proceeding along the same

trajectory' (1991, 188). For Anderson, this sense of parallelism initially develops in the eighteenth century and is manifested in the proliferation of geographic names such as London and New London in which the 'new' location existed 'synchronically', 'alongside' the old location (187). I would argue that *Pavement* exemplifies the multiplication of reading formations in New Zealand that revolve around developing and interrogating the capacity of New Zealanders to 'imagine themselves as communities *parallel* and *comparable* to those in Europe' (92). The vexed discursive position of the local in this process of 'imagining' suggests why the project that Anderson describes as emerging in the eighteenth century remains unfinished today.

Global Popular and Quality Global Culture

Pavement's treatment of LOTR underlines the complexities of a New Zealand reading formation that defines itself as such, as 'of New Zealand'. The magazine *Pavement* is modelled on European magazines such as *i-D Magazine*. In this sense the magazine could be seen as part of a 'global' or 'international' style; however it focuses on self-identified New Zealanders. In comparison with more commercial publications such as *Next*, a woman's magazine published by the mega-company ACP, *Pavement* underlines an aesthetic that is international or, perhaps more accurately, evokes 'international-ness'. In a magazine such as *Next*, the reader is more likely to read about local events and to see the depictions of specific local landscapes (see Radner, 2004). While *Pavement* stresses the 'creativity' of New Zealanders and positions itself as aligned with the new 'Creative Industries', it does not depict the local as local; it operates in terms of producing discourses that are defined aesthetically rather than geographically.

Coincidentally, the special issue devoted to *The Fellowship of the Ring* is also the 50th issue of the magazine. Looking back over the last few years, the magazine defines its mission as: 'to take pieces and write stories on people who aspire to be the very best they can be at their special skill' (*Pavement*, December 2001/January 2002, 98). It defines itself against the popular. 'Generally the mainstream is oblivious to their importance, except in terms of the impact of their work as it filters through to the mass market in a diluted, plundered, disenfranchised form' (98). The magazine showcases New Zealanders

‘with many based in major cities overseas’. ‘...[T]hose who are from overseas themselves understand the sensibility of *Pavement*’ (98). Peter Jackson is celebrated as a New Zealander, a ‘humble but incredibly hardworking “hobbit”’ (*Pavement*, 98). Peter Jackson as a cute hobbit stands in contradistinction to the heroic artist evoked in the paragraph above. The ‘hobbit’, however, like the heroic artist, is not indigenous to New Zealand. Both ‘figures’ are imported from Europe and from Britain in particular. Though both imports, they represent two distinct strands that define the ‘creative’ individual, according to *Pavement*. Both figures are nostalgic renditions of European ideals identified with high culture and the educated classes.

It is typical of *Pavement* that it produces these contradictions between heroic artist and hard-working hobbit, between aesthetic fulfilment and financial gain. In its encomium of Peter Jackson, *Pavement* cannot prevent itself from suggesting that the genius of Jackson itself may have been ‘plundered’, diverted from its initial purely aesthetic ambitions. This uneasiness is manifested through the clash of visual styles that characterises the representation of LOTR in *Pavement*.

Peter Jackson’s LOTR trilogy challenges the aesthetics of *Pavement* by overtly appealing to what Simon During calls the ‘global popular’ (During 1999, 211). By this I mean that the films were self-consciously conceived with the goal of creating a work within a specific reading formation that would, along with its associated promotional materials, guarantee an international blockbuster audience, rather than to promote, in Arnoldian terms, ‘the best of what has been thought and said’. It is not necessarily obvious that these two goals (mass audience and quality) are mutually exclusive; however, within the Arnoldian paradigm, favourable reception of a work by a mass audience inevitably casts doubt upon its quality. The defining term of the blockbuster is, arguably, its favourable reception by a mass audience. Thus, films produced for mass consumption on a global scale are immediately viewed with suspicion by contemporary gatekeepers of culture. Simon During, as a professor of English Literature, strives to create a new hierarchy of culture, in which he privileges ‘the global popular’ as an authentic form of mass culture, characterising his discussion of the phenomenon as an attempt ‘to think the global

popular affirmatively' (1999, 211). In particular, he calls into question 'cultural studies', 'welcome to difference, hybridicity and subversion' as the sole authentic location of the popular (1999, 211). The notion of the 'global popular' is useful here in elucidating the cultural conundrum faced by a publications such as *Pavement* (which strive for 'international' standards of excellence within a local context) and the difficulties inherent in a *carte blanche* affirmation of local culture as the adequate antidote to 'globalisation'.

During comments that 'only Hollywood produces systematically for world-wide export' (During 1999, 214) but that not all Hollywood films are made in Hollywood. He also notes that 'cultural globalisation' (which he distinguishes from the 'global popular') encourages Hollywood to produce globally in terms of location and financial backing (214, 215) and further explores the financial stakes of the global popular as an international project (215). The notion of a 'global popular' as defined by During underlines the way in which 'Hollywood' in the twenty-first century is best understood as a transnational category. (See Miller, et al 2001.)

It is not my goal here to detail the finances that produced LOTR or the means by which it was distributed to a global audience. Nor am I concerned with debating whether these are New Zealand films or Hollywood films. Rather, I wish to raise the issue of how the 'global popular' is inscribed as part of a reading formation that is properly of New Zealand. The films are heralded as New Zealand films, but as *Pavement's* treatment of Peter Jackson demonstrates, they do not fit easily within the parameters of New Zealand culture as 'best of what has been thought and said'.

I would argue that *Pavement*, in contradistinction to LOTR, self-consciously attempts to speak within an idiom that might be termed 'global high culture' or 'quality global culture' to a specifically local readership. Both textual productions (LOTR and *Pavement*), then, attempt to exploit self-consciously the manner in which global and local are linked. Like two sides of a sheet of paper, the conceptualisation of the one demands the other, and vice versa. In other words, the very notion of the local is impossible without the pre-supposition of the global—the dimension of parallel synchronicity

described by Anderson above. I argue then that *Pavement* signifies within a discursive system that might be called ‘quality global culture’. I am well aware that this discursive system does not exist independently of the economic and political conditions that produce it; however, I would argue that this system *qua* system is worthy of examination on its own terms because it illuminates the position that New Zealand culture occupies in the imagination of New Zealanders. In particular, the discursive system of *Pavement* operates to elevate New Zealand culture *per se* as ‘cultivated’ and the result of a discerning, and hence ‘niche’, sensibility—as part of a project that sustains and develops ‘the best of what has been thought and said’. The appreciation of New Zealand culture may be international in scope and New Zealand culture itself may be represented within a global arena; however, this arena is that of a quality global culture rather than of the global popular.

LOTR as a discursive structure challenges the discursive structure that characterizes *Pavement*. Its double status as ‘global popular’ and as New Zealand culture means that the films occupy a vexed position within the ‘quality global culture’ discourse of *Pavement*. Because the films are prominent and represent New Zealand within an international context, *Pavement* must seek to include a discussion of the films as part of its mission to promote New Zealand ‘creative’ talents. Yet, the ‘popular’ dimension of these films, as expressed through their visual sensibility, for example, runs counter to that of *Pavement*. This tension is reflected in the particulars of *Pavement*’s representation of LOTR.

Cover Stories

Pavement features the films as ‘cover’ stories in three issues. The ‘popular’ imagery for the two-page advertisement for the film that opens each of these three issues contrasts with the general austerity of the publication. In contrast with the cover photo, the advertisement is decorative, dramatic and evokes the complicated narratives of the films. It looks as if it were ‘drawn’—an illustration from a nineteenth century book of fairy tales. In this sense, the advertisement is nostalgic rather than forward-looking, evoking the world of Rudyard Kipling and other such chroniclers of a colonial past, including

J.R.R. Tolkien himself. It seems distinctly out of place in the publication as a whole and contrasts with the cover photos that precede it.

The cover photograph, in each of the three issues, is of an international film star—Liv Tyler, Orlando Bloom and Viggo Mortensen respectively—depicted without reference to their roles in the film. Bloom and Mortensen are shot with relatively flat lighting against a stark background. Tyler is shot with a softer focus and softer lighting; however the effect is still stark in comparison with the typical fashion magazine cover shot.³

The covers resemble slick high fashion cover shots (such as those shot for *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*) but most closely recalls the counter-fashion style of *i-D Magazine*. This 'anti-style' style is now recognizable and has become a 'style' itself associated with high-end experimental designers such as Prada, Costume National, etc (see Jones & Mair 2003). These 'star' shots differ from the cover shots featured on tabloids such as *New Weekly* because of the emphasis on aesthetic or formal attributes of the image in the *Pavement* photographs. For example, the flat background of the images (the stars appear to be backed against a wall) serves to emphasize the two-dimensional quality of the photographic image as image. Similarly, the figures cast shadows on the wall behind giving the photo an 'untouched' look, which emphasizes its status as a photograph. At the same time, the figures look posed—artificially placed and 'still' for the camera.

In contrast tabloid photographs are obviously cut and pasted for dramatic effect and the photographs often appear to have been taken without the knowledge of the subject. Often the full body is shown in movement, giving the feel of 'reality' to the image. Tabloid representations of stars evoke a narrative or story in which the image features. In this sense, in terms of narrativity, the advertisements for the films are closer aesthetically to the tabloid; however, tabloid 'stories' are often not about the films in which these stars feature, but about the stars' personal lives. Furthermore, the grainy coarseness of the

³ The use of the 'head shot' and the dominance of the face as a visual trope within contemporary media is not in and of itself insignificant; however, the topic is too broad to broach within the confines of this intervention. See, for example, Davis, 2004.

images are in sharp contrast with the soft, nostalgic imagery and technique used by the LOTR advertisements in *Pavement*, which set the ‘film world’ apart, as distinct from the ‘world’ of personal life (the tabloids), and the ‘worlds’ of fashion (fashion magazines) and culture (*Pavement*, itself).

Pavement minimizes the story-telling function of the image on its covers, encouraging the *Pavement* reader to recover the ‘film’ from the other world of fantasy and to place its ‘stars’ (at the very least) in the world of the *Pavement* reader. In this sense these images seem closer to fashion images than to the images proliferated by the tabloids. *Pavement*, however, in terms of style, also distinguishes itself from the typical commercially oriented fashion magazine (such as *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*) as a means of signalling its affiliation with the world of ‘the best of what has been thought and said’. Unlike *Vogue* fashion cover photographs, *Pavement* does not provide a list of products that might be used to achieve the cover look. The ‘stars’ appear to be dressed, coiffed, and made-up in a manner that would reassure the reader that these stars dress and look ‘just like you and me’, or rather, just like the ‘hip’ readers of *Pavement*. Similarly, the *Pavement* cover shots do not use glamour lighting, such as ‘back lighting’ or ‘butterfly lighting’, giving instead a ‘real-life’ effect.

Rather than featuring a list of products associated with the cover image, *Pavement* tells its readers that it will present ‘Liv Tyler & Elijah Wood photographed in New York for *Pavement* by Bryce Pincham’. The focus, then, is on the photographer as a representative of New Zealand creativity abroad. The interview itself does to some degree echo the types of issues raised in similar interviews in women’s magazines. Somewhat unusual is the emphasis on New Zealand, the landscape, and the culture. Liv Tyler, for example, explains what she did in New Zealand: ‘I shopped at Zambesi’ [a high-end New Zealand designer located in Wellington, advertised in *Pavement*] (*Pavement*, December 2001/January 2002, 102). Her comments about the film and the role were thin. The mythic elements that appealed to the male actors were less significant to Tyler. (See interview with Elijah Wood in the same issue, 104-105.) Again, in the interviews, *Pavement* finds it difficult to completely sever its discourse from a popular discourse.

The 'feminine' star is defined by 'shopping', for example. Not coincidentally, both discourses, the global 'quality' and the global 'popular', are intertwined in a manner that produces reading formations that allow and even require the marginalisation and occlusion of indigenous culture.

Conclusion: Aotearoa/New Zealand—the Occluded Term

The vexed nature of this intersection of the global popular and quality global culture is illustrated by the marginal representation accorded indigenous culture by *Pavement* in this same issue. Lawrence Makoare—the only Māori and the only New Zealand actor figured in the *Pavement* feature on the first film in the trilogy—is also the only representative of indigenous culture in this issue. His photo is in black and white, and thus set apart from those of the other actors. Given that he is heavily made-up for his two roles as Lurtz in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2002), and as the Witch King in the final film, *The Return of the King* (2004), he is unrecognisable in the film. His make-up required ten and a half hours to put on and four hours to remove (*Pavement*, December 2001/January 2002, 113). His position illustrates the ambivalence with which both the global popular and global high culture incorporate indigenous culture. *Pavement* mentions Lawrence's subsequent role in *The Māori Merchant of Venice* (2002) in passing. *Pavement* indicates that this film is 'another local feature film'—but one to which *Pavement* does not accord the same attention as LOTR.

In conclusion, if we return to Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagined' 'parallel' 'communities', we can observe that *Pavement* functions within a reading formation that seeks to 'imagine' New Zealand on a European model. This model accords a marginal position to indigenous culture and to the bi-cultural community signified through Aotearoa/New Zealand as the 'other' nation or parallel, imagined community. LOTR as the global popular fails insofar as it cannot 'imagine' the role of indigenous culture in the global popular and allows its representation only 'in disguise' as 'monstrous'. Within *Pavement's* treatment of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the contribution of the Māori to New Zealand culture remains on the margin, presented yet again as monstrous and disguised. This failure of the imagination produces a 'local' culture that is seemingly

without specificity, that is not grounded and that finally relies on the global popular for its identity. This failure, I would argue, suggests limitations in the ways in which the arts are understood. The arts remain defined in terms of a largely global model and an aesthetic of high culture, rather than in terms of the geographic concerns of place, with important political and economic consequences. Both popular culture and high culture may reach a global audience—but the voice of the indigenous peoples, their very language, may languish under the pressures of a global imagination.

This analysis focuses in detail on a particular moment of ‘reading’—one that may be subjected to multiple transformations (and even corrections) as it circulates through space and time. I am aware of the dangers of what is typically a micro-analysis. The examination of a single symptom cannot be the terms for the diagnosis of a culture as a whole. I would argue, however, that this particular symptom suggests the need for further examination of local reading formations across a broader terrain of textual configurations. The important issue raised by this reading may not be about global culture *per se* at all, but about recognizing and reclaiming indigenous cultures that often find themselves situated somewhere outside the local/global debate, rather than at the heart of that debate where they belong.

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