Playing with Gollum: Uncovering the Cultural Life and Transnational Travels of a Complex Character

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Introduction

It dawned on me that the world had changed dramatically since we had all started work on the films in 1999, and that everyone's perceptions about Gollum were changing as the years went by. (Serkis , 2003, 1)

This quotation from the opening of Andy Serkis' account of his "life as Gollum" addresses something of potential importance. In this essay, I explore the processes whereby a fictional character – in this case, of a very distinctive kind – enters into wider cultural processes. What qualities are picked upon, and how are they utilised? To what uses is this "character" put in different cultural contexts? And what trajectories of attention can be discerned, from before a film's appearance to beyond its main public life? The figure of "Gollum" is a fascinating one, not least because of his vivid embodiment in the *Lord of the Rings* (Peter Jackson, 2001-2003) film trilogy. Rightly celebrated for its marriage of still-evolving digital technologies with the acting of Andy Serkis [1], Gollum himself raises a number of issues. Two curious moments, to introduce and illustrate my interests.

1. In 2004, in the *British Medical Journal*, a lecturer and five medical students published the results of a peculiar case they had been "studying": a 587 year-old creature suffering from paranoid delusions about a "Ring."   Providing a forensic pseudo-diagnosis, the authors describe his unkempt appearance, his peculiar passivity associated also with spitefulness and deep delusions; they conclude that, although it might be tempting to judge him schizophrenic, in fact the creature "fulfils seven of the nine criteria for schizoid personality disorder" (Bashir et al., 2004: 1436). This spoof noted, among its sources, discovering 1,300 websites also discussing the state of mental health of this Gollum creature [2].
2. In January 2005, British comedian Paul Merton fronted a Channel 4 documentary on the history of the Comedy Store, showing among other things its role in giving many contemporary British stand-up comedians their first break. Merton took a fledgling comedian – who had previously failed rather badly at an open mike session – through his paces, helping him with some basic techniques. When he eventually came on, he presented a sharp and well-received short set – which included a running joke in which he became

> "Gollum," using him to enact someone taking up two opposite and equally bizarre moral positions.

In both these cases, Gollum figures as a means to play out small but significant cultural issues, be they the relations between medicine and culture, or the enacting of moral choices. The fact that the prestigious *BMJ* took time out to share a joke, and that an apprentice comedian might see this as safe trial materials, attests to a sense of a shared repertoire. It seems that Gollum became for a time a currency through which other social ideas can be checked, chased, and chivvied, a mini-myth semi-detachable from the story (book, film) in which he was originated. The fact that each is funny but pointed, is typical. I begin from the idea, loosely derived from Claude Levi-Strauss, that myths are "good to think with," and I try to identify precisely what thinking Gollum was good for, in this respect.

This essay originates in an encounter in early 2002. [3] I was one among the very many people who received an un-sourced email, whose subject line read "Frodo Has Failed." An attachment displayed a doctored image of George Bush wearing The One Ring. This email was one of my sources of inspiration for developing the international project with colleagues. Subsequently, I have kept coming across doctored images of Bush *as* Gollum [4]. These all raise questions about the processes whereby film characters may operate outside their source narratives, and how they interact with "local" cultural factors.

http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_G1d6nVVkuUQ/TBFxiqTbBXI/AAAAAAAAAZQ/3opglz8N83A/s320/gollum.jpg

http://www.gamersgallery.com/gallery/data/7127/thumbs/funny_picture00411.jpg

As is well known, Gollum is a creature of J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth saga. Named and described early on in the books, he enters midway in the trilogy and begins to play his complex role in the eventual destruction of Sauron's Ring. In the films, he is little more than rumour until *The Two Towers*. His role, in books and films, is pretty much unaltered: a figure balanced between sanity and madness, pursuing the Ring-Bearer with ferocious tenacity but capable of being quelled into a sufficient subservience to help them in their quest, ultimately his devotion to the Ring leads him to do what Frodo cannot. Snatching the Ring when Frodo tries to claim it as his own, he "accidentally" falls into the Cracks of Doom, and thus averts disaster. "For good or ill, my heart tells me he has some part still to play in the fate of the Ring," says Gandalf, and two thirds of the trilogy are the playing out of that half-foreseen drama.

Producing "Gollum"

It is necessary to begin with the production of "Gollum." Note the quote-marks: this is not a discussion of the technical challenges and achievements which enabled the creation of the figure in the film, but of the ways in which the "figure" was appropriated and turned into a circulating representation. As sheer technological achievement, of course, Gollum was bound to be important to the film's makers. So it was no surprise that at Wellington airport and at the cinema that premiered *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* an oversized model of Gollum loomed over the crowds – and travelled the world via press and TV coverage.

http://www.wellington.govt.nz/move/enlarge.php?i=life-events-gollum

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:20041204_gollum_WLG.jpg

But there are also signs that the filmmakers knew that he was a make-or-break character in selling the films to the books' lovers. "Of all the many creatures created for *The Lord of the Rings*, none was the source of more trepidation and concern than Gollum. 'We were very aware that everyone who had read the book had a strong pre-conceived idea of what Gollum should look like,' noted WETA's Richard Taylor. 'Gollum is one of the most iconic and loved folklore images of the twentieth century'" (quoted in Fordham, 2003: 74). From the beginning, therefore, it was more than simply the technological properties which attached to him. In advance of the Special Edition of *The Two Towers*, New Line Cinema bundled an additional DVD with pre-ordered purchases of the cinema version. The DVD prefigures the offer of a special figurine of Gollum with the Special Edition by relating the story of the decision to produce a special set of Collectibles, designed and made by artists at WETA (in association with American company SideShow Collectibles) – as they stress, using the same artists who worked on the films, allowing the actors to pose for them and to critique the results, and choosing moments collectively felt to be the most iconic. In the end, nearly 200 such figures were made to a very high level of detail (down to mud spatters, and the blood on Aragorn's sword, for instance). The figures included busts of key characters, iconic moments from the film, plaques of key confrontations, and limited edition groups of the most outrageous creatures. All the talk is of their "high quality," the artistic dedication of their makers, and their "authenticity" to the film. At the same time it does acknowledge the shift, from figures designed to be painted by collectors, to fully rendered figurines. The change goes with a shift in purpose: "what you are trying to do is to touch the viewer, emotionally," says Taylor.

The rhetorics around Gollum extend to the DVD's packaging, which is presented in a deluxe cardboard slipcase, along with a booklet titled

"Creating Gollum." This is on facsimile fine-art paper, printed in a soft magenta, with cover drawings resembling Albrecht Dürer sketches. The indicators of fine art also include the reproduction of a series of drawings from conceptual artists, through maquettes, to the emergent digital construct. Gollum is being clearly signalled as a very particular kind of artistic endeavour.

http://ecx.images-amazon.com/images/I/41NV68WRWTL._SS500_.jpg

http://g-ecx.images-amazon.com/images/G/01/ciu/b0/12/d00c228348a0188fc156e010._AA240_.L.jpg

The DVD recounts the processes of manufacture, plus the motives for making the collectibles. It makes considerable play of Peter Jackson's and Richard Taylor's personal interests in collectibles, showing their collections, why they chose Gollum to front the Special Edition, and how they chose his iconic moment. This was the Forbidden Pool, when Gollum becomes briefly more Sméagol-like as he catches fish out of a clean hunger – but then is called by Frodo. Suspicion crosses his face. It is a moment between the two halves that are Sméagol and Gollum, a point of tension and transition. And, Taylor and Jackson predict, they are sure that "Gollum is going to be a favourite" among the figurines.

All this supposes not just a certain preferred view of what Gollum is, but also how people might relate to him. They are being invited to remember the *art* of Gollum, and an intensity of feelings achieved through that art. The international travelling *Lord of the Rings*exhibition added another dimension. It offered for sale a series of expensive art-images of central story-characters, each associated with a putative human-moral quality. Sméagol was "Pity," Gollum "Hunger," alongside (among others) Frodo's "Sacrifice" and Arwen's "Beauty." These were, in the early days, the humanising complements to the stress elsewhere on the technological challenge of effecting the character. [5]

http://users.aber.ac.uk/mib/gollum/gollum_7.jpg

http://users.aber.ac.uk/mib/gollum/gollum_8.jpg

Andy Serkis, of course, told his own Gollum story (Serkis, 2003). [6] In a book that mainly recounts the travails of being the physical origin of a cyberthespian, he also talks about his conception of Gollum's nature, and in particular the dangers of "judging people." After his personal Acknowledgements, Serkis dedicates his book to "anyone who lives or has lived in a dark, lonely cave of their own, either driven by incurable obsession or powerless to change their course, loving and hating themselves like Gollum" (inside front cover). And at the close of the book

he returns to this theme, asking his readers how they might respond if handed the most powerful thing in the world, and asked to destroy it. "If Sméagol were alive today in our society, if he were on death row for a drug-related murder that was committed ten years ago when he was a teenager, I wonder how he would be viewed? It's so easy to see those sorts of people as monsters, as evil people different from us, and that, in my opinion, is where the danger lies – in taking the moral high ground" (118). Gollum is to Serkis a sad case-study of a "Ring junkie," and who, like anyone else, simply responds to his addiction in accordance with his "moral stature" (20). Serkis wanted to play him in a way that made his addiction comprehensible, almost forgiveable.

But Serkis and Jackson were well capable of playing to the gallery. With the trilogy properly launched, increasing risks could be taken. At the 2004 MTV Awards, Gollum won the award for Best Animated Character. Appearing by linked screen at the Awards, Serkis' acceptance speech was interrupted by the appearance of Gollum insisting the prize was his, his preciousss. Varying between innocent and foul-mouthed, Gollum berated Serkis, Peter Jackson ("that f***ing hack" [the word was bleeped]) and the MTV audience (while Sméagol tries to hide, apologises, and plays to audience sympathies). Gollum demands recognition for himself as actor, while comparing himself (favourably of course) to *Harry Potter*'s Dobby the House-Elf. Clearly prepared in advance, and in knowledge that they would win the Award, this recognition that there was a "bad-ass" side to the enjoyment of Gollum spoke a quite different language – and most interestingly, had no hesitation about having him cross the fourth wall to speak directly (and abusively) to the MTV audience. This hints at the makers' awareness that Gollum had begun to escape official definitions, and that they would not harm themselves if they played with these kinds of audiences. [7]

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uj411At8VRI

These are some of the official processes that pushed Gollum into the public sphere. They suggest that Gollum was already marked out to be a complex cultural resource. He could be a technological miracle, or meaningful art, or a performative outsider, or a psychological conundrum, at the least. Before coming to what happened next, it is important to explore at least some of the fields of debate to which this is relevant –in particular those which would make it difficult to frame and answer some key questions, because they tend to prejudge issues which ought to be the topic of empirical investigation.

Recent and Contemporary Debates

This research, and the questions it tries to answer, sits uncomfortably at the intersection of a large number of traditions of research, theory and

speculation. Their sheer variety makes it impossible to survey properly the state and quality of thinking in each of these. Nevertheless, for purposes of indicating the hinterlands to this topic, I have attempted a brief sketch of the closest ones.

There has been a small body of work on Gollum himself, located in a number of distinctly different spaces. Each of these, though, has sought to locate some essential meaning. One kind of work has its roots within literary traditions. Focused primarily on the books, this either looks at Gollum for his generic features (Charles Nelson's [2001] essay on him does this by treating him as a variant on the folkloristic category of the "Guide" [8]), or by exploring his potential moral value as a character from whom we might learn. Work of this latter kind in fact spills over into some of the public debates I review later in this essay, where for instance American columnists (very much working within the strong "civics" tradition there for teaching about American culture) deployed Gandalf's views on the need to pity Gollum as part of arguing against capital punishment. [9]

Several other kinds of essay have been written about Gollum, of varying quality. By far the weakest in my view is by Gergely Nagy, who co-opts Gollum to the world of postmodern discourse, identifying him as a site of linguistic tensions: the subject who is no "subject," the spoken speaker, and so on. In the midst of this heavily theoretical account, the essay casually avers that "the reader, along with Frodo, hates and pities" Gollum – as if this is self-evident, given, and needs no evidence or argument (Nagy, 2006: 57). Arguments of this kind are a problem because they appear to solve the questions of reception before they can even be satisfactorily stated.

In a much more interesting essay, Cynthia Fuchs (2006) has argued that Gollum is special precisely because he is, in certain senses, not a representation. [10] He does not belong to a race, class, or sex as others do. He is the lone member of his group in a narrative universe whose creatures are all otherwise placed by myths of origin and inherited cultures. "Because he is unique, he remains frighteningly untethered to community or history (despite and because of his personal back-story). Without a knowable identity or ambition, haunted by traumatic memories, Gollum has no place to go, except the fiery Cracks of Doom into which he throws himself at last" (252). This derives not just from his digital origins, but from his history and role within the narrative. Enthralled to the One Ring, he has become its creature. Other momentary wishes (for company, for fish) are like echoes of another lost life. But even within that one driving motivation, his character has two halves, the doubling of Sméagol/Gollum. These are valuable insights.

But Fuchs' framing is unhelpful, I would argue. Searching for a way of connecting Gollum to postcolonial theorising, she insists on finding a way in which he can be "raced." She writes: "Gollum can't tolerate himself. He is here Fanon's 'wretched of the earth,' self-colonized and self-tormenting, or at best, an anguished subject of the Precious, unable to control or contain himself" (260). I find this questionable on several grounds. Gollum's narrative flow is, more than any other character, made up of a series of set-pieces – often almost to camera – which make the conflict between his two parts very much a *performance*. And that connects with the ways in which audiences related to him, as I will show. Unless one believes as a theoretical axiom that *all* figures must be "raced," this attempt to fix Gollum cannot help us understand how he could travel beyond the film. Indeed it undoes precisely what Fuchs' first insights enable us to see – that it may be his very *blankness* as representation that helps him to operate *outside* the story-world. I return to this issue later.

Something of this odd quality may be gleaned from a consideration of Gollum's place with fan fiction. The revelation after Henry Jenkins' (1992) and Camille Bacon-Smith's (1992) early work of how substantial and vital this field was led for a while to it becoming a major research industry in its own right see (for instance Hellekson and Busse, 2006). But in vast universe of such materials, Gollum's is a very limited place. [11] He appears in only a very small amount of fan fiction writing, while there is a large corpus generally around characters from *The Lord of the Rings*. And where he does appear, it is in an uneasy way. We can see this in a recurrent joke – that to want to write about Gollum is itself a sign of something odd in a person. Witness this comment from Neil Gaiman (2006), long-time comics writer and artist: "I think that all writing is useful for honing writing skills. I think you get better as a writer by writing, and whether that means that you're writing a singularly deep and moving novel about the pain or pleasure of modern existence or you're writing Sméagol-Gollum slash you're still putting one damn word after another and learning as a writer." Gollum constitutes a weird kind of limit-case; and to write a Gollum/Sméagol crossover is a sign of nerdy madness. Gaiman's casual reference to it hints that this may be a shared, recognised reference point. [12]

Away from writing about Gollum himself, there has been a cluster of very important debates about the development, character and role of "special effects'" in film, as Gollum was widely conceived to be. These debates have spanned popular and scholarly work, and have frequently conveyed fears, including concerns that audiences might be blunted by encounters with "noisy" effects, and claims that "synthespians" might replace real actors. Rather than attempt a truncated survey of these debates here, I simply wish to introduce one lesser-known author who, it seems to me, offers an unusual and valuable approach. Shilo McClean (2007), in a

wide-ranging book, offers an insider's (she works as a script consultant, among other things) defence of the role of what she calls "DVFx" in film against the persistent critiques of film scholars who have seen effects as a diminution of narrative. So, McClean challenges (pp. 63-64) Annette Kuhn's suggestion that DVFx depend upon switches in audience attention between credulity and knowledge (which Kuhn believes are connected to "fetishistic" ways of looking). She argues that there is no reason why "effects" should be particularly visible – indeed it may be a mark of their success when they become utterly integrated. McClean maintains that mainstream scholarly approaches suffer from the flaw of not addressing the difference between *good* and *poor* films. In the latter, "loud" DVFx may well work to distract attention from structural impoverishment. But in well-crafted films, she would argue, well-embedded special effects can raise the film to a whole new experiential level – producing an intensity of experience that may amount even to the emergence of a new genre. One of her most interesting arguments uses the journal *Cinefex* which focuses on those films which particularly feature DVFx. McClean shows how over its history it has devoted more than half its attention to films that broadly fall into the "action" genre; she argues that in effect a new "genre" of DVFx films has emerged. This provokes the question whether fantasy films, on the rare occasions they transcend the predominantly formulaic, may have the ability to produce intensified moments and characters, which in turn enable these films to help transitions from their closed narrative worlds, to audiences' lives. (See Barker, 2009 for some discussion of this.)

The general rise in interest within film studies in ancillary materials (to which I have myself contributed [Barker, 2004]) has broken open the previously very enclosed image of "the film text." At one extreme Barbara Klinger (1997) has called for total histories of films that take into account everything about them (their production histories, appendages, receptions, interconnections, etc, etc). At a different level altogether, the work of people such as Thomas Austin (2002) on the multiple publicity strategies attaching to films such as *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) and *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992) has drawn attention to the ways posters, trailers, teasers and the like can provide variable routes into and through a film. This work is expanding, as scholars explore particular fields in detail – see for instance Lisa Kernan's work (2004) on the Hollywood trailer. This immensely valuable work has pressed scholars to attend more rigorously to the life of films beyond the cinema, and in particular the ways they are thus prefigured for audiences. What this work has not much done, to my knowledge, is explore the *aftermaths* of films – what they thereby leave behind as cultural traces and resources.

All these (and a number more) different terrains of debate are attempts within film and cultural studies to address the issue that is at the centre

of my project on Gollum: to think the ways in which films may matter beyond themselves; how ideas, images, meanings and ideologies might be planted and grow, petri-dish-like, within wider cultural arenas. There has been an unwillingness to look for ways of testing claims empirically. In a number of cases, such claims are made in a way that makes empirical testing nigh on inconceivable. What I feel the following research into Gollum can add to this mix of good and bad, specific and speculative work is a cross-cultural case study at least attempting to use empirical methods, aware of both the strengths and limitations that these bring with them.

I need to introduce one concept that I believe is both valuable and necessary to this task: the concept of liminality. It originates within the sphere of anthropology, and specifically in the work of the Dutch ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1960). Van Gennep sought to understand the ways in which traditional societies manage changes in status – for instance between childhood and adulthood. The transition involves an important change in status that has to be managed, by what van Gennep called "rites of passage." These (often ceremonial) rituals ease the transition. In the interim, when a person is going through such a transition, he or she has a liminal status, which can be fraught with ambiguities, and they can be dangerous. It is, it has been argued, one reason for the detailed rites associated with death. In the period immediately after dying, a person's spirit is neither of this world nor of the next, and therefore they can – even unintentionally – be a threat to the living. "Liminality" thus describes people whose status is ambiguous, or "between."

Since van Gennep, the concept of liminality has been expanded, to include among other things certain fictional characters. In his *Screenplay Story Analysis*, Asher Garfinkel (2007) uses *The Lord of the Rings* as an example for analysis of archetypes, and nominates Gollum as a complicated contemporary version of the category: trickster: "In addition to the hero archetype, stories will contain a shadow archetype, or the hero's opposite. This shadow will represent what the hero is in danger of becoming if the hero doesn't accomplish his goals (Gollum) […] In your reading, you will inevitably come across a mischievous trickster figure, essentially a prankster or rebel" (29). The idea of the "trickster" has been most developed within folkloristics, in the analysis of forms of traditional storytelling. As a concept, this is particularly intriguing, since the trickster is in many accounts simultaneously *in* the narrative of these stories, but not *of* them. That is, he is a liminal figure, bringing purposes from outside the narratives, but impacting on their progress. In an internet essay on this, Helen Lock writes:

> The trickster … is not confined to his own sphere of activity, 'playing the fool', he is a trickster in the world at large. He actually is

immoral (or at least amoral) and blasphemous and rebellious, and his interest in entering the societal game is not to provide the safety-valve that makes it tolerable, but to question, manipulate, and disrupt its rules. He is the consummate mover of goalposts, constantly redrawing the boundaries of the possible. In fact, the trickster suggests, says Hyde, 'a method by which a stranger or underling can enter the game, change its rules, and win a piece of the action' (204). Unlike the fool, the trickster aims to change the rules of the 'real' world; he is the lowly outsider who is at the same time powerful enough to transform and reconstitute the inside, or indeed to obliterate the existence of 'sides'.' (Lock, n.d.)

This liminality is explored in one essay. Anne Doneihi (1993) argues against the many accounts of the trickster that seek to find "pure origins" which can then distance the figure from contemporary forms and uses. This, she argues, misses a central feature – that tricksters are positioned simultaneously *within* their stories, and within the stories' *discourse*. They thus not only act on other characters, but also provide a contemporary commentary on them, inhabiting the listeners' culture as much as the story-world. Although I sense Doneihi may mean rather different things by this, I find this insight very helpful. Gollum, I will argue, is the character who most has the capacity to step beyond Tolkien's world, and provide commentary on its perceived issues.

Gollum, of course, is not pure trickster. In Tolkien's story-world, Gollum is produced and tempered by his history, driven and consumed by his desire for the Ring. But he nonetheless has become, through his filmed embodiment, a figure able to travel abroad into wider cultures. Gollum is thus in part a contemporary example of these archetypical tendencies, albeit hardly marked by the comedic tendencies to be found in many other modern cases: Bugs Bunny, Bart Simpson or the Pink Panther. His paranoia, his jokes, and his perfidy make him simultaneously a possible *exemplar* of contemporary deceit, and a *rank and rude commentator* on the very tendencies he embodies.

At the outset of this essay I outlined the things that spurred my enquiry into Gollum. I should add one more. In the course of an earlier investigation into how audiences relate to their Favourite Characters within the film, a real puzzle emerged. Exploring people's reasons for nominating Gollum as their favourite character (by comparison with other leading characters), I found that unusually their interest in him arose specifically from a sense that he has *his own narrative arc* (Barker, 2005). At a strictly narrative level, of course, his contribution is enormous. Without Gollum there is no destruction of the Ring. But that does not appear to be what attracted viewers to him. This suggests that Gollum's fans *sensed* his ambiguous status, his position as part-belonging within but part-visiting Middle-Earth. The notion of liminality is something that

existing approaches struggle to encompass. *How* and *with what consequences* Gollum manages to be in but not entirely of Middle-Earth is the topic of the remainder of this exploration.

Some thoughts on sources and methods

It isn't possible to say how New Line Cinema's official marketing of Gollum was received in different national and cultural contexts. But there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that, from quite early on, many people enjoyed 'playing with Gollum' in ways that stretched his official status. They could do this in a number of ways. Mimicking his voice was an obvious one. In 2008 a contestant on the British reality show *Britain's Got Talent* did just this, but lost precisely because his voicing was simply and only mimicry. Another, slightly wider way was to adapt the cry of 'My preciousss …' to other unrelated situations. Googling the phrase turns up thousands of examples. A third way was to dress up as Gollum, for example for parties, or at least to manipulate photos so that they showed some passing physical resemblance to him.

http://www.flickr.com/photos/rizzato/2251312068/

http://www.freakingnews.com/pictures/32000/Mime-Gollum--32317.jpg

 But while they undoubtedly testify to a general fascination with Gollum, these kinds of use hardly transcend playful copying. They do not accord any symbolic force to the character. Because many such uses have inevitably gone unrecorded, to research these I turned to one resource that reliably stores quotidian materials: the Nexis (formerly Lexis-Nexis) online newspaper database. Nexis offers full-text access (albeit without pictures and with the loss of page formatting) to a range of news sources in most countries. Its coverage is much wider in English-speaking countries, partly because press production has been more heavily digitised here. Nexis presents search findings in a very helpful way: overall numerical results; and listings that display the immediate context of mention (six words either side of the citation). This permits speedy consideration, to determine their likely relevance to a study such as this. It also, interestingly, reveals the extent of repetition and syndication. Use of its "Power Search" tool allows researchers to focus their searches on particular sources, by country, or kind of publication, or even individual title.

The benefits of this should be obvious for anyone researching something like the news coverage, reviews, or general public presence of a phenomenon. But it is important also to note its limitations. A source such as this cannot reveal what might be called the press ecology of any country: sales, penetration, ownership patterns, relations of press to other media, the cultural role of the press, and so on. But as an index,

used with caution, it allows fast and wide access across an expanding historical period. Besides, a close study of press coverage of a topic can in principle bring into view how this medium *positions itself* in relation to other media and cultural processes, through its commentary on them. [13]

My procedure was as follows. Initially comparing five mainly English-speaking countries, I searched for all mentions of "Gollum" on an annual basis between 1999-2008; the UK (1,147 mentions across 18 [national] sources), USA (2,907/470), Canada (1,980/98), Australia (915/78), and New Zealand (434/17). I wanted to determine to what extent he was a topic of mention before, during and after the publication circulation of the film trilogy. Within each January-December search, I gathered for closer analysis a wide range of examples that looked to be more than simply discussions of the films themselves, in order to build a portrait of each country's press use of Gollum.   For the sake of wider comparison, but not conducting the qualitative study, I looked at frequencies of mentions in a number of other countries. In a number where I looked (for instance, China, India, Israel, Argentina and Brazil) the numbers were so low – in each case below ten for the decade – as to defeat the purposes of the analysis. But in four further cases (Mexico (133/8), Germany (288/43), Spain (48/23) and South Africa (44/20), albeit with overall smaller numbers than in my first five cases, there were sufficient to permit a tentative comparison.

The following two graphs present the overall trajectory of mentions across this ten-year period. To achieve rough comparability of measures, since the number of national sources sampled varies, I divided the number of sources into the number of mentions, in a way that would ensure comparability but keep visible the years with relatively small numbers of mentions.

Graph 1:
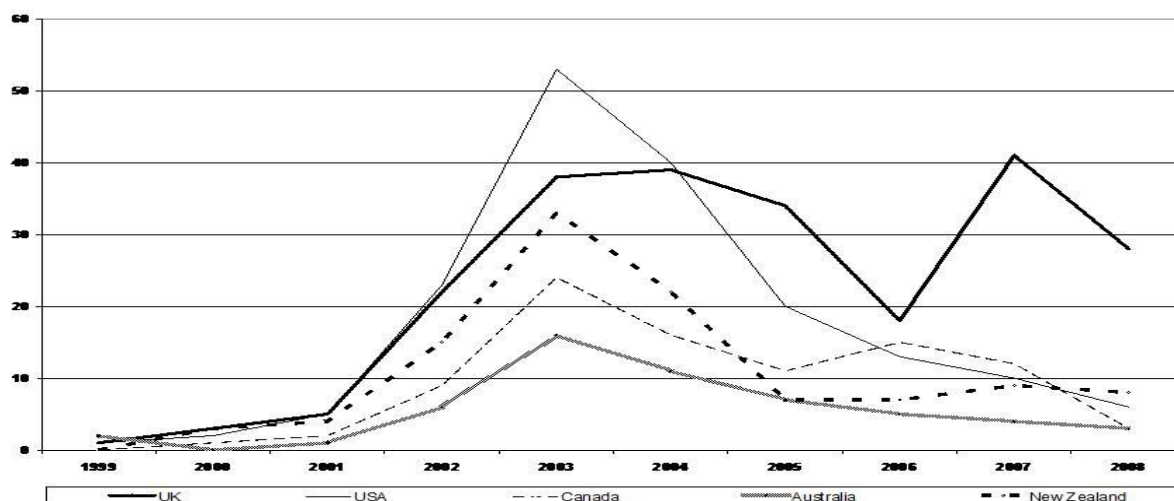
This graph reveals a general tendency for references to begin from a low, but not invisible, position prior to the film; through a fast rise across 2002-2004; then generally tailing off without disappearing – with the exception of the UK (and marginally Canada), which sees a resurgence of mentions in 2007-2008. I will consider both the meanings of the exceptions, shortly. But the general tendency is not, I would argue, as obvious as it might seem. Consider the results for the other four countries:

Graph 2:
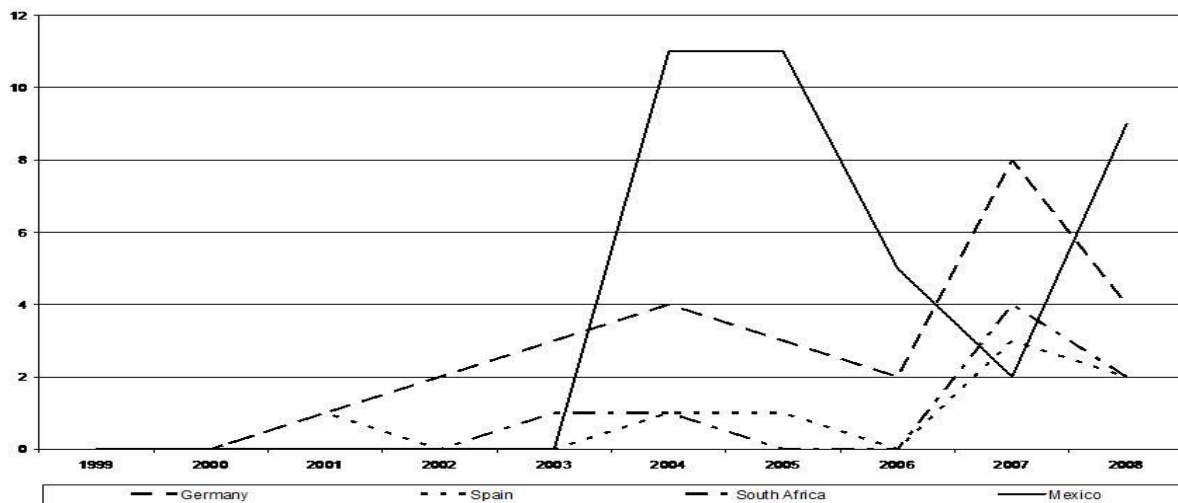
It is striking that the "obvious" pattern is not repeated in countries where a continuous presence of Tolkien's work, and associated cultures, is less assured. My suggestion would be that these rather different graphs indicate that while the level of attention to "Gollum" is lower overall, a process of sensitisation to his character and its possibilities was set in train which took a while to become fully active. I am not pursuing this further here – only to note that Germany is potentially a very interesting case study. As I have noted in another essay (Chapter 9 in Barker and Mathijs, 2007) and has been more systematically studied by Lothar Mikos and his colleagues (2007), the German response to *The Lord of the Rings* was unusual. A strong distributed base of interest appears to have intensified investment in the film – to the extent that in our overall database of questionnaire responses Germany was the *only country* where responses on the Importance of Seeing the Film were higher than Levels of Enjoyment of the Film.

Ground-Work, Encounter, Sedimentation and Symbolisation

My examination of these gathered materials leads me to propose a four-stage conceptualisation. This tries to capture the fact that in many contexts something like a major film release is a *highly predictable* and *therefore predicted* event, and sources like newspapers have in place

routines for orienting to them. The first stage (the *ground-work*) involves a reflection on any existing cultural positioning and prestige that might attach to the story, director, stars, or etc, and thence wondering what the film will be like. At this stage writers in the press are in part predicting how it might play, and what its wider significance, if any, might be. The second stage (*encounter*) couples reviewers' encounter with the film with any wider circulating talk about its reception. This can be a genuine moment of discovery and surprise, which can lead of course to a public rethinking of the film's achievements.   The third stage is one of *sedimentation*: summarising in retrospect the whole process.

What I would stress, here, is the interconnection of these. The first stage is very evidently a *preparation* for the second and third. The second measures responses against the expectations circulating in the first stage. The third summarises the outcomes of the first two, and re-establishes the position and status of the work. This then allows the film to be used as a point of comparison with future releases (and I note in passing how in many countries Gollum featured as such for the creatures in the horror film *The Descent* [Andy Marshall, 2005]). The fourth – *symbolisation* – is a conditional extra. It amounts to the *cultural tentacles* that reach to other parts of the cultural or political arena. In principle, this could begin at any point. But given press dependence on topics generated by other formations, it is more likely to begin once a film has reached a determinate level of public attention. It is these that particularly interest me – because they constitute a concrete and empirically verifiable case of the "influence of film."

This conceptualisation of course constitutes an ideal-type. Not every country has enough of an embedded frame in place to act as ground-work for the reception of a film – even one as widely-known and publicised as *The Lord of the Rings*. In such cases, if the film does make an impact on release, it tills unprepared soil, and the results are likely to be more unpredictable. It looks likely that a country like Mexico, as indicated in the second graph, is a case of such unpredictability.

Let me illustrate the stages from the case of New Zealand (henceforth NZ) itself. NZ had, as Graph 1 shows, a quite steep rise and fall. The small resurgence after 2005 is almost entirely taken up with mentions of Andy Serkis moving on to model King Kong, as he did Gollum. The implication is that at least as far as Gollum is concerned, there is no significant press residue, for all the cultural noise generated by the films' production there. How might we make sense of this?

The *ground-work* stage in NZ is very much a preparation for what this film, "our film" (e.g. *New Zealand Herald*, 9 March 2002: "Ten Reasons to Love Our Movie") is going to be and to mean for "us." Much is speculation on developments – the "secrecy" of it all becomes grounds for

interest (e.g. *Dominion* (Wellington), 11 September 1999).   There's agreement that this will be ground-breaking – and Gollum typifies this (e.g. *The Press* [Christchurch], 18 November 2000 quoted Jackson: "What we're trying to do with Gollum is to take every nuance of what Andy [Serkis] does. We're going to wire him up. He's going to have electrodes all over his body and will be performing on the stage and every physical thing that he does will be relayed to a computer model, including his face, so hopefully Andy's performance will actually come true and break through the barrier which I don't think has ever really been done before.")

At this stage there is space for people to refuse – but in a context that clearly acknowledges that this is risky, exceptional, against the grain. Here is one such example, set against the grain:

> Even in a nation of people with a reputation for liking eyeball-popping adventure sports like bungy-jumping, my guess is you'd be hard-pushed to find anyone foolhardy enough to stand up in a crowded cinema come December 20 and shout: 'I hate hobbits.' That would earn you a reception as warm as the one which met the guy who stood up at the Labour Party conference and shouted: 'What about the bloody war?' I would rather have dinner with the sibilant, slimy Gollum than bungy jump, but – and I say this in a quietly in a little, hobbit-sized voice – I do not like hobbits much at all. (*New Zealand Herald*, 15 December 2001 – also in *Waikato Times*, same date)

Note the contexts offered: Kiwis as basically sports-obsessed, but now also hobbit-captured. This is a mini-discourse on national characteristics.

Here, too, are small predictions, about the future significance of the trilogy, one of which in particular tells a story:

> One thing is certain. No matter how timeless Tolkien's fantasy may be, no matter how epic the Peter Jackson sensation proves to be, it is not going to be the Next Big Thing for ever. Nevertheless, long after all the excitement has gone, the merchandise marked down, the movies exiled to the back of the video shop, there should still be at least one humble but tangible reminder of the glory days of the Rings to be found, lurking in the murky waters of the deep south. In the last year or so, scientists found a new native fish. Its large eyes and swampy habitat prompted the name of Stewart Island galaxid, galaxias gollumoides, after loathsome, slimy Tolkien character Gollum. The hype, it's true, is everywhere. (*The Press* [Christchurch], 8 December 2001)

That last telling sentence completes the framing of the films as, in effect, more sound than substance. For the time being, the NZ press will live (with) the noise.

Stage two (the *encounter*) was just that: much "noise." Not just reviews, but reports on the premieres, the public presence, Jackson's speeches, interviews, and so on. Gollum, where he features, does so either as celebrations of Serkis, and WETA, or otherwise mainly for his large manifestations at the Empire Theatre and airport in Wellington, or as fancy dress at Christmas parades. The press were playing back the public's perceived enthusiasm to them, with cheery ease, as in this summary account:

> Most under-rated heart-throb: Andy Serkis (Gollum) was the surprise hit with the ladies at the LOTR circus. The married father of two was an outstanding performer. Despite admitting he was heartily sick of doing Gollum impersonations, he reeled off hundreds during his short stay in New Zealand. Aside from an inexhaustible supply of Gollum impersonations that DON'T suck, the London lad is also a lovely guy. 'Gollum is a sex god' was one of many banners at the parade, so it has obviously not gone unnoticed. (*The Press* [Christchurch], 6 December 2003)

Thereafter, aside from retrospectives on Jackson, the films, Serkis and WETA, and prospectives on these and *King Kong* (Jackson, 2005), now it is like tidying up after a party, and wondering what all the fuss was about. What remains in some of these, interestingly, is Gollum – as in this retrospective comparison of Jackson's films with *The Wizard of Oz*:

> Margaret Hamilton's Wicked Witch of the West expresses a sense of authentic menace that Jackson's flaming, computer-generated evil-eye cannot begin to match. Among the Rings characters, only Gollum comes even close to having an intriguing internal life. (*New Zealand Herald*, 31 March 2004)

Or again:

> I'm not being critical, I'm praising. I'd never remonstrate with a film so universally admired, a film that won 77 Oscars and earned this country 380 kajillion dollars. Even though popularity is a poor measure of artistic merit, and the Oscars are a sham, and a fraction of that $380 kajillion used to belong to me. Even though once you liposuction all the fat away from this cave-troll of a film, all the pointless exposition, elven history lessons, rambling motivational speeches and every one of Liv Tyler's Cadbury Flake commercial segments, you're left with little more than an action movie. A frail, skeletal creature without soul or heart who wants to be everything

to everyone and succeeds at nothing. You're left with Gollum. But I'd never say that. Ever. (*Dominion Post* (Wellington), 29 December 2006)

The deliberate exaggeration to recapture the hype, the sense of having been deceived by inflated rhetorics, and finally the sense that this is still almost unsayable: we might say that in NZ Gollum functions best as *technical achievement*. But that rather forbids his extension to symbolise other cultural or political figures. I found just one report, and that a comment on uses of his figure in *America*, which pointed to cartoons of George Bush as Gollum (*Southland Times*, 27 May 2004). The press coverage is not condemnatory. There is no sign of the cultural condescension I will show, for instance, in some Canadian newspapers. Not even one lookalike was there, unless it was the suggestion that Kiwis need now to work at *not* being thought of as 'Gollums': "'Our national identity has been swamped by a horde of hobbits and most of the world believes we Kiwis all look like Gollum,' McCormick said. 'We have somehow managed to become the spiritual homeland of nerds and sandal-wearers'" (*Sunday Star-Times* (Auckland), 25 January 2004) This, from a report on a television show in which a politician, a comedian and a writer came together to discuss "New Zealand national identity."

It is for these reasons, I believe, that I can find no signs of a stage-four symbolic use of Gollum in New Zealand.

 With all due caution, given the selective and mediated sources on which these are based, still, I offer the following comparative portraits of the different national receptions of "Gollum" as revealed symptomatically through press discussions.

Canada. In a largely regionalised press ecology but with widespread syndication, the *ground-work* on which the film will build was made up of several, slightly paradoxically related strands. First, there is a simple acknowledgement of the established *popularity* of Tolkien and both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. "Popularity" implies that the film-makers are seen to be taking a risk in potentially cutting across people's devotions; and this couples with a recurrent concern about "typical," "US-style" commercialisation (see, for example, *Ottawa Citizen*, 27 December 2000): is this beloved work going to be ruined by overdoing the sponsorships, tie-ins, and the like? But there is also a strand around "reputation," which is displayed through a combination of general, high-culture interest in great story-telling, and the history of myths; and specifically through seeing a "biblical" interest in stories' capacity to deal with moral issues (e.g. Tolkien's place among "biblical archetypes that pervade the culture of the west" [*Calgary Herald*, 22 December 2001]). This is captured well in one comparison between Tolkien's writing of Gollum, and Milton's Satan (in both cases, their "finest characters" –

Ottawa Citizen, 14 December 2001). Yet I sense that there is a third, far less overt strand – one caught in the fact that while there is an acknowledgement of the story's "popularity," reports on the film's release regularly found it necessary to explain in very basic terms what Gollum is like (phrases such as "there is a character called Gollum," or "a horrid, hobbit-sized mutant" appear to be introducing readers to him). It is as if other people are known to love and bathe in this stuff, and appear to do so for serious reasons – but "we" don't.

If the films were approached nervously, the *encounters* were overwhelmingly positive (the *Edmonton Journal* quoted one scholar's conclusion that the films would now bring new readers to the books [27 December 2002]) – and particularly because of Gollum (see, for example, reviews in *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, and *Toronto Star* [all 31 December 2002]) such that the few slightly negative reviews would mark his achievement in *Two Towers* as lifting the entire apparatus. Some very long articles delved into the ways the film's makers created Gollum's "life and soul." Gollum had "depth," even a "biblical" significance. The fears about commercialisation pretty much vanished. And so the film, like the books, could be talked of in terms of its "mythic" meanings (see, for example,*Vancouver Sun* [23 August 2002]).

As these encounters and judgements *sediment*, press mentions are able to presume knowledge, just giving general reminders of characters' qualities ("the nefarious Gollum" [*Globe and Mail*, 30 December 2003], and even in one case not knowing is used as an indicator of being "out of touch" [*National Post*, 24 November 2005]). Now the film is worth thinking *about*, and thinking *with* (see, for example, *Leader-Post* [Saskatchewan], 18 December 2003, announcing: "Friday: An analysis of the character Gollum: Who is he and what does he represent?"). Comparisons can be made, some of them high-flown (for example, with Alexander Solzhenitsyn). Yet in truth, while I can cite quite a few cases of writers feeling moved to use Gollum as a point of cognitive comparison (the expression "Gollum-like" recurs), it is harder to see a pattern to these – it is as if there is an impulse to use his figure, but it is not so clear to what ends it should be used. There are examples of Gollum being used in connection with regional stereotypes (the Winnipegians, or the Ontarians). In two cases, as in the USA, there are references to our "inner Gollum" – one jokey article on people becoming "withered, starving creatures'" through their dislike of their work closes with "Do you sometimes see Gollum in yourself?" (*Globe and Mail*, 5 March 2004). Passing comparisons with a mayor, and an ice-hockey coach, each going beyond simple look-alikes. He is used as metaphor for curmudgeonliness for both Liberal and New Democrat politicians.

The clearest example I found of a *symbolic* use shows this well, I think. The *Vancouver Province* (24 April 2008) uses his split personality syndrome as source for a specific political critique:

> Watching the NDP tie themselves into knots over Gordon Campbell's climate-change proposal reminds of that great scene in *The Lord of the Rings*. You know, the one where Gollum/Sméagol is having his agonizing internal debate about whether to help the hobbits or steal the ring. On the one hand, NDP Leader Carole James says she supports the Liberal's plan to cut greenhouse-gas emissions by 33 per cent. ('Good hobbitses,' as Gollum would say.) On the other hand, she fights every measure they've taken to reach that goal, opposing Campbell's carbon tax, small hydro projects, the proposed Site C dam and now the government's biofuels bill. ('Nasty, evil hobbitses!') The NDP's quandary was illustrated in the news release they issued in response to the biofuels legislation, which would require fuels to contain five-per-cent renewable or low carbon energy sources. 'While the New Democrats support the use of biofuels, we cannot support this legislation,' NDP energy critic John Morgan says in the release. 'It fails to address growing concerns about biofuels.' They support biofuels. They have concerns about biofuels. Gollum made more sense.

The assumption of our recognition of the figure is particularly evident here ("You know, the one where …"). Here, Gollum measures *degrees of stupidity*, if you will. It is the closest I can come to an outright example of symbolisation. Beyond this, he seems to symbolise just a generalised sour, obtuse obsessiveness.

USA. Within a press structure combining corporate ownership with localisation, but also often showing strong ethico-political partisanship, it is clear that in a number of ways there was already a strong *ground-work* for Gollum – or at least, for his story-world. There is evidently a strong tradition of stage adaptations of Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, particular as children's theatre (and often with child actors – "Wee Performers Show Talent," ran one headline). Gollum is, if anything, a *children's* character in these. There is a sense that Tolkien and his characters are strongly intertwined with America's cultural history ("Given its immense popularity, odds are you're at least familiar […]" [*Tampa Tribune*, 18 December 2001]) – although perhaps needing reminders of this. From the first announcement of the films, there are cases of newspapers reminding their readers of that history – even, telling them that the film will not make full sense without a reminder of both the story, and the history of its presence. (*SF Weekly* [California], 21 November 2001: "If you can answer the riddle 'Box without hinges, key or a lid, yet golden treasure inside is hid,' you can proceed to the nearest multiplex on Dec. 19 for the blockbuster. If not, you need a refresher course in Gollum-

speak.")   In some early reports, there is nervousness about the adaptation.   The most explicit of these is in the *Boston Globe*, which worries precisely about the film becoming childlike.   Fears of a "Gollum Happy Meal with a fisshhhh and chipsss McLunch" nevertheless go along with a reminder of that history back to the counterculture and "Frodo Lives" badges of the 1960s (19 December 2000).   Once the film proves trustworthy, so these anxieties recede, but the historical reminders remain.

Another aspect of the ground-work, but one which crosses into symbolisation, is the use of Tolkien's story for instructional, even religious purposes.   These reports (which appear first in 2001, peak in 2003, but are found across my period) seem an alternative to the counter-cultural history.   Often long, these accounts treat book and film as virtual allegories.   Sometimes, these are simple moral lessons: "'Power is addictive,' says Sister Carol Ann Ziecina, principal of Santa Fe Catholic High School in Lakeland.   'Look at the character of Gollum, whose whole life becomes obsessed with trying to get the ring back'" (*Ledger* [Lakeland, Florida], 19 December 2001).   There are recurrent discussions of the death penalty, drawing on Gandalf's speech about sparing Gollum out of pity.   A number of these reports end in a moment of reflexive commentary, as for instance one column which appeared in both the *Boston Herald* and the *Washington Times*, which reflected on the "divine" meanings of Tolkien's work, closing with a warning to self: "Here is a lesson for those, myself included, who have spent the past few weeks devising gruesome punishments for the American traitor John Philip Walker.   Movies have become our mythology."   Another (*Journal News* [Westchester], 16 December 2001) followed its comments on Gollum by proposing: "The many battles in Middle-earth […] are made to stand for the internal, personal battles that all people wage".

2002's *encounter* saw endless simple celebrations of the digital achievement ("Gollum dominates" [*Statesman Journal* (Salem), 18 December 2002]).   What gets celebrated, however, is a picture of *achieved psychological complexity*:   Gollum is "more compelling than in the books," he is "a murderous schizophrenic" with "psychological density."   The *Seattle Weekly* presented Gollum almost as a discovery: "Gollum's the best character in the movie […] Gollum, like the movie, he is all about duality."   There is a strong sense of Gollum becoming a metaphorical resource, as in this report (*Kansas City Star*, 19 December 2003): "We submit that the most compelling character … is the character of Gollum.   Why is the suffering, bug-eyed humanoid so fascinating to readers/viewers?   Because, metaphorically speaking, we are Gollum. Gollum, who pines for the all-powerful One Ring to the point of insanity. Gollum, the quintessential self-tortured shopper, who knows deep down that he doesn't really need the all-consuming object of his desire – but wants it more than anything, anyway.   Gollum, the end user we can't help

but relate to, if only subconsciously." This is a powerful invitation to cultural self-inspection. In other words, *within* the *encounter*, *prior to* any *sedimentation*, are already the seeds of some very particular *symbolisations*.

Now, a year after the events, some of the press felt able to use *Lord of the Rings*, and Gollum within that, as figures to talk about 9/11. It is as a dark side of the soul that Gollum here figures. The *St. Petersburg Times* (Florida), 13 January 2002: "The tragic events of 2001 continue to tell us volumes about ourselves, as neighborhoods, religions and denominations, types of employment, ethnicities, ordinary individuals. As a former college teacher, a journalist who has traveled the globe, I am not surprised by anything that has transpired since Sept. 11. I am glad for some trends, troubled by others, disgusted by still others and frightened by some. I am glad that so many Americans have reconnected with their government. Many who at this time last year believed the government was their enemy now know better. They know that madmen, such as Timothy McVeigh, militiamen, survivalists and others reside in dark regions with J.R.R. Tolkien's Gollum." The element in here that I would most draw attention to, because it persists, albeit in transmuted form, is the *address to self*. Americans, for these writers, could use Gollum to "look inside themselves." Further to this, writers began to acknowledge the frequency of this. *Scripps Howard News Service*, *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver, CO), both 5 October 2004 and *Ventura County Star* (California), 6 October 2004 all ran this report: "Over the past couple of years, Peter Jackson's film adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's 'The Lord of the Rings' has been invoked countless times as a metaphor for the war on terror. For example, columnist Kathleen Parker suggests that America is divided 'into two cinematic camps: those who believe that America's story was best told in Michael Moore's 'Fahrenheit 9/11,' and those who think Peter Jackson pretty much captured the essence of current events."

Hereinafter, as the films *sediment*, US press mentions of Gollum continued this vein of insistent address to moral meanings. Many newspapers reported the declaration by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops that *The Two Towers* was "one of the best films of 2002," because of its religious implications. At the same time, there was a left/right battle over his symbolic meanings. On the left, Gollum embodied the creepy, sneaky, deceitful and pretending Bush; on the right, Gollum captured various hate figures for their deviousness (see the *University Wire* report, 15 July 2004 for one very lengthy example). But the unifying feature is the continuing sense of self-inspection. Politically it was being recognised that *any* political position could be represented through Gollum (a clever long syndicated column put out on the *University Wire* (9 March 2004) used Gollum's sibilant voice to construct left, middle and right-wing attitudes to politics). The bridge and common ground, I would argue, is provided by recurrent references to our "inner

Gollums" – best represented in a report on the Martha Stewart conviction (syndicated to *The Orlando Sentinel* [Florida], 6 March 2005, *The Sun Herald* [Biloxi, MS], 8 March 2005 and *The Wichita Eagle*, 8 March 2005): "But saying 'mansion' instead of 'stately home' or 'large house' apparently serves our little interior Gollums and allows us to resent her more. A diva and a mansion. Off to the brig with her, impudent strumpet!"

This is what tended to remain. Once the films receded, so did the specificity of the Gollum references. What remained was that sense of inner Gollums, sometimes trivial ("It's scary how something like this brings out the Gollum in me," a columnist writes of his greedy Christmas lists (*Sacramento Bee*, 13 November 2006), sometimes deadly serious (*Times-Picayune* [New Orleans], 18 July 2005): "In my lifetime I have seen the United States transformed from a country that had reason to be proud into a country that has reason to be ashamed. […] We took hold of the ring of Mordor, and it has turned us into Gollums. I now am ashamed of my government. The president lies, Congress is cowardly and the Supreme Court is a political football between extremists."

Australia. With again a highly regionalised press, but less syndication, the Australian press has a considerable variety of uses of Gollum. The *ground-work* appears to be a combination of several things. First, theatrical adaptations of *The Hobbit* meant that the figure is known – but without as strong a child-centred feeling as in the USA. One report (*Canberra Times*, 18 February 2000) explicitly noted the preparatory role of this: "This Hobbit will more than fill the gap until Peter Jackson's live action *Lord of the Rings* hits the big screen. This is all great and excellent fare for children and adults who love Tolkien." The known-ness of Tolkien is revealing, although this must be qualified. Sometimes it is clear that his name and work are more *known about*, than known – hence, for instance, the *Sunday Herald Sun* (Melbourne), 16 December 2001 offering a "cheat's guide" to the story in preparation for the film. For those who *do* know their Tolkien, there are hints that this is a *literary* preference, for whom therefore the film is going to be questionable fare. *Northern Territory News*' (31 December 2001) review of the film is among a number that encounter the film as too technologically dazzling: "The technology […] would have seemed to Tolkien ever bit as magical and frightening as his tale […] He would have been astonished, even grudgingly impressed, by Jackson's achievement – but he would not have approved of it." Too little is left to the imagination, and therefore too little is concerned with "faith and truth and the getting of wisdom."

Two other strands are very particularly Australian. The first is a comedic tendency, a delight in caricatures, evidenced before the films appeared in several reports. One in particular classified politicians by Tolkien character: "Phil Jackson is one of Canberra's many Tolkien fans and with the new film out soon, he's been having a little fun casting it with

Australian political figures" (*Canberra Times*, 16 November 2001). A right-wing politician, David Kemp, was cast as Gollum. Perhaps not disconnected from this is another strand, of gentle mocking of neighbour New Zealand and its denizens – as too serious, obsessive and just plain small. The Kiwi "obsession" with *The Lord of the Rings* occasioned much mirth, for instance in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (2 December 2003): "Screaming fans held banners saying 'Jackson for PM' and touching Kiwi tributes like 'Orlando you big spunk' and 'Gollum is a sex god'."

As everywhere, the *encounter* with the films is overwhelmingly positive, and Gollum again emerges for many as the prize achievement – with the open paradox that as the most created figure he is the one who most escapes the charge of just being spectacle. "OK, OK … the climactic battle scenes are an unparalleled, special-effects-driven whirlwind. And the computer generated Gollum is one of the best characters to hit screens all year … And therein lies the quibble I have with *The Two Towers*: while the effects are very, well, special, they tend to overshadow everything else" (*Sunday Mail* [Queensland], 29 December 2002). Gollum is mostly exempted from this kind of criticism – if there is complaint, it is a small irruption of concerns about his being too scary for children (and the British Board of Film Classification's advice of caution is several times reproduced). But largely there is a great deal of *fascination* with him as, for instance, a "true force of darkness" (*Sunday Herald Sun* [Melbourne], 29 December 2002). His speeches become the topic of quiz questions (e.g. *Geelong Advertiser*, 26 December 2003). Several reports explore Gollum's psychology, identifying it as the most complex in the film (see for instance *The Age* [Melbourne], 26 December 2002). One report compares him to the Norse god Loki, as he becomes "wiliness incarnate."

The tendency to caricature quickly *sediments* into a whole series of passing comparisons. One difficult child is depicted as a mix of "Ginger Meggs [a long-running Australian comic character] and Gollum." Sports news borrowed references. Covering the hostile reaction to the breakdown of Olympic rower Sally Robbins (who cost the Australian team the gold medal), the *Sydney Morning Herald* (26 August 2004) called the lynching attitude a sign of the "Gollum-like desperation rotting hearts everywhere. It's in us, too." This sense that Gollum amounts to a perfect storm of desire, jealousy and despair runs to some strange places – even turning up as a metaphor for the literary Booker Prize: "Out of a swamp of greed, ambition and creative writing crawled a new Gollum, the Booker novel, trailing the slime of self-promotion" (*Courier Mail*, 16 August 2006).

Political cartooning remerges – *Northern Territory News* (27 December 2003) gave "New Year advice" to various figures, including Darwin's lord mayor: "Peter Adamson – to realise that Gollum […] is a movie character,

not a role model." The mockery of New Zealand bit back when Australian newspapers had to cover their Prime Minister John Howard, a Bush-supporter, being barracked on a trip there: "His argument failed to sway New Zealanders, who staged a noisy protest outside the Kiwi parliament as Mr Howard was speaking. And anti-war protestors used the character Gollum […] to make their point, dangling an effigy of Mr Howard from the creature's paws outside a local cinema" (*Cairns Post/Sun*, 11 March 2001).

There are small signs (far weaker than in the USA) of religious or para-religious uses of *The Lord of the Rings* and Gollum. Occasional items either suggest, or report others suggesting, these kinds of uses. It is striking that one of the most prominent of these partially withdraws the notion immediately after proposing it: "The One Ring […] is a symbol of vainglory and malicious pride – the same trick used by Satan to snare Adam and the rest of humanity. And we can all recognise something of ourselves in Gollum, who is alternatively attracted to good and evil. Although the religious element is there for all to discover, Tolkien was determined not to force it on the reader" (*Sunday Telegraph* [Sydney], 9 February 2003).

All this suggests Gollum is a moveable resource, something experienced as powerful, but without a set direction. And perhaps as a result of this, uses and references soon became unspecific indicators of badness. Grendel in the film *Beowulf* is a "monster who makes Middle Earth's Gollum look like a new puppy" (*Townsville Bulletin/Sun*, 12 February 2007); a fringe theatre review sums one character's extreme acting: "Hernandez makes Gollum look socially acceptable as he bares his behind, begs for cash, and returns with what we hope is melted chocolate over half his face – but know isn't" (*Sunday Mail* [South Australia], 18 March 2007); and market gossip causes financial traders to have a "Gollum-like apoplexy" (*West Australian* [Perth], 21 June 2008). All very assuming of shared meanings, but at the same time very diffuse.

UK. It is for the United Kingdom that the results of my research are most remarkable. Britain of course, unlike the other four countries I have considered, has a national press. It also has the very sharp differentiation of broadsheet and tabloid, with one or two in the middle. This, we shall see, has considerable effects. Overall, we find two substantial transitions in the national press. At a trivial level, Gollum provided journalists – especially, but not only, the tabloids – with many opportunities to play the "lookalike" game. Gollum is weird/ugly, so were, variously, Ken Livingstone (Mayor of London) in 1999, Ian Holloway (football manager) repeatedly across the years, Lee Bowyer (footballer) in 2002, celebrity Natalie Appleton in 2004, and a vulture dubbed Gollum in 2005. This most superficial tendency, however, was combined with a

more serious tendency to use Gollum for wider cultural and political commentaries.

In the *ground-work* period, with very few reports of any kind, none of the references are in the tabloids (the book/film had yet to register with them) and almost all are only loose links ("an unflattering image of Livingstone is shown: whey-faced and spooky, like Tolkien's Gollum,", *Observer*, 12 December 1999; "dribbling like a Gollum and beating yourself with twigs," Jo Brand, *Independent*, 26 November 2000 – the use of the indefinite article by Brand emphasises this looseness). By 2001, such mentions were joined by the first thought-preparations for the film trilogy, coupled with varying thoughts on Tolkien's longevity. For the *Mirror*, it was the simple moral oppositions: "Great literature is constantly coming back and saying, there is a right and a wrong. […] How you respond defines what you become. You can become a Gollum or you can become the Returned King" (5 November 2001). In the *Telegraph*, more lofty associations triumph: "J R R Tolkien was not a great opera-goer, but he pored over the text of Wagner's Ring cycle as a young man. It goes without saying that his own great myth about the Ring of Power, The Lord of the Rings, was first suggested by the music-dramas of the German composer. The Ring in Tolkien is lost, like Wagner's Ring, in water. Like Alberich, Gollum is a base figure of pure cupidity. The possession by a low creature of this instrument of power creates reverberations among the higher creatures" (A.N. Wilson's account [24 November 2001] is interestingly class-aware).

But Gollum's qualities largely remain simply drawn – for the *Mirror* he is simply "odious, a reptilian fallen Hobbit." For the *Sun*, he is even lower: "slimy Gollum," or more expansively "this total retard called Gollum who lives in a hole in the ground 'cos nobody wants to see his face. He keeps trying to disappear with this ring, because of all his zits" (2 December 2000). Hints of what is to come begin to appear – comedian Danny Baker borrowed his emergent associations for a humorous column on football: "Of course, simply being a goalkeeper should be enough to condemn a man. Goalkeepers are the Gollums of football's Middle Earth. As young boys picking sides in the park, we soon learn that the more shifty and disinterested members of our group can always be 'stuck in goal'. Indeed, the traditional schoolyard cry 'Well, if you don't want to play, go in goal then', contains everything one needs to know about these sneaky, rootless drifters" (*Times*, 20 January 2001).

Encounter. The British press was less united in responding to the film itself. The mid-market *Mail* was the most enthusiastic, the *Guardian* and *Independent* probably the least. As the films took hold in 2002, so journalists began to take note of the possibilities. Most generally they loved the film as spectacle, but for that very reason played the "safety" card just a little. When the BBFC expressed caution about young people

seeing the film, the *Daily Star* found him "sinister, scampering computer-generated Gollum […] designed to haunt your nightmares" (13 November 2002). The *Telegraph* agreed: Gollum, they said, was "the stuff of nightmares," and children could find him "very, very confusing and disturbing" (12 December 2002).

If the *Guardian* reduced the film to "the continuing adventures of Frodo, Aragorn, Gollum, Gimli, Sneezy and Dopey takes in talking trees and huge battles with plenty of what movie posters now call 'Fantasy Violence'" (14 December 2002), and thereafter tried to ignore it, the *Times*, with its Sunday stable-mate, showed the overall highest levels of interest, but speedily *sedimented* these into a *symbolising* discourse about class. Gollum is an embodiment of an upper class nightmare of chavs. In a report actually about rugby, we find this: "Finally, be strong. Say goodbye to loved ones. Family and friends may come and go, but six weeks is a long time without perma-tanned tat peddler David Dickinson. Let Trisha unravel the sex lives of her council estate Gollums and their precious Argos bling without you. It's for the best. For the next six weeks, your Rugby World Cup armchair needs you" (*Times*,4 October 2003). This throws an interesting sidelight on their description of a Labour politician struggling to cope with a public relations crisis, as doing "a passable impression of the slippery Gollum in his dogged refusal to admit to mishandling anything" (1 January 2003). But the *Times* was not alone in making class comparisons. In the *Telegraph*, too, in an astonishing article, Jonny Beardsall described trying to find local labour in the countryside: "Although we have never managed to persuade anyone to clean our house on a regular basis – and how we've tried – we have just found Stewart, a lad in the next village, who is a demon with a paintbrush, screwdriver and lawnmower. 'What's next?' is his catchphrase. You just point him at a task and away he goes, scurrying about, Gollum-like, for a fiver an hour" (5 July 2003). The *Telegraph* in fact ranged wide, tying Gollum to everything from estate agents ("a race of shifty, Gollum-like creatures that should at all times be mistrusted and kept in their place" [4 September 2004], to one of Princess Diana's aides, Paul Burrell ("A long-term exposure to her has turned Burrell into a gollum figure, lost without his precious," 7 January 2004). The tabloids were not immune to this class discourse, they just found even "lower" people to finger, such as unpopular *Big Brother* contestants (*Daily Star*, 3 July 2004): "In the house he has been nicknamed Gollum. It's a shame they have finished filming the Lord Of The Rings trilogy, because the only job he'd get in showbiz would be as the bald Hobbit's double." The *Sun* with its customary "delicacy" described one contestant as a "gimp Gollum" (3 July 2004). These references of course mirrored expressions generated by the housemates themselves. This sneering attitude reached its nadir with gossip columnist Colette Douglas Hume on Kate Moss: "The pictures of her taken on a beach this week, sharing a laugh with Bianca Jagger, are therefore proof that the camera can lie. In one she is

crouched forward, giggling, wearing only bikini bottoms and looking like someone but who? Then I got it: Gollum" (*Daily Record*, 13 August 2004).

By 2005, some uses of Gollum were becoming very self-aware. The *Independent* reported on a game taking place among Tory MPs during their party leadership campaign: "As a diversion from the stress and angst of the Tory leadership campaign, the so-called Notting Hill set of thirty-something Conservatives surrounding David Cameron have created a game, in which they imagine themselves as characters conducting a political revolution in Middle Earth. […] Another character who dominates the saga is Gollum, originally a hobbit but driven insane by his long, unfulfilled yearning to possess the ring of power, assigned to David Davis" (12 November 2005).

But it is those symbolising class dimensions that are so specifically British, and these lingered on. Gollum embodied all the kinds each newspaper hated, be it the night club owners called "pallid, Gollum-like lizard-people" by *The Times* (12 September 2008), or the "stumpy, penniless Gollum-lookalikes" (21 January 2008) they expected to see at speed-dating parties, or be it (in the tabloids) a "fallen" singer who "went from glam to Gollum" after drinks at a launch event (*News of the World*, 16 December 2007). Not a moral creature at all, now, Gollum is a loser who just doesn't know it.

I have been working on this essay for a long time, and have frequented Google Images across the period. But it wasn't until I had effectively finished this that I considered the significance of one image I had seen repeatedly reproduced. I do not know the origins of "Gollum with Burberry," but it is worth a final pause.

http://gamecenter.pl/forum/uploads/profile/photo-105412.jpg

To a British person, the iconography is unambiguous – the cap, the bling ring, earring and necklace, and the flash car. But if anyone doubted its intended connotations, one use of it dispels all. On 18 February 2009, the *Daily Telegraph* devoted a column to a spoof Hurricane Appeal, so astonishingly vicious in its attitudes I reproduce a large part of it:

> A major hurricane (Hurricane Shazza) and earthquake measuring 5.8 on the Richter scale hit Croydon in the early hours of Friday with its epicentre in New Addington . Victims were seen wandering around aimlessly, muttering 'Faaackinell'. The hurricane decimated the area causing approximately £30 worth of damage. Several priceless collections of mementos from Majorca and the Costa del Sol were damaged beyond repair. Three areas of historic burnt out cars were disturbed. Many locals were woken well before their giros arrived. Surrey FM reported that hundreds of residents were

confused and bewildered and were still trying to come to terms with the fact that something interesting had happened in Croydon. One resident – Tracy Sharon Smith, a 15-year- old mother of 5 said, 'It was such a shock, my little Chardonnay-Mercedes came running into my bedroom crying. My youngest two, Tyler-Morgan and Victoria-Storm slept through it all. I was still shaking when I was skinning up and watching Trisha the next morning.' Apparently looting, muggings and car crime were unaffected and carried on as normal. The British Red Cross has so far managed to ship 4,000 crates of Sunny Delight to the area to help the stricken locals. Rescue workers are still searching through the rubble and have found large quantities of personal belongings, including benefit books, jewellery from Elizabeth Duke at Argos and Bone China from Poundland.

The article was illustrated with Gollum in Burberry. He had become the embodiment of everything the *Telegraph* stood to loathe. Five years after the films' main public presence, Gollum still functions within the British – or perhaps that should be "British" (meaning, a particular perception of national identity) – psyche as a summary for this kind of class dislike.

Conclusions

What conclusions may we draw? The multiple ways in which Gollum functioned beyond the film require complex consideration. There are clear patterns to uses of him, and the ways cultural debates are being carried on in his name. But what is evident is that Gollum generates a charge, a kind of cultural energy field with the capacity to arouse motives to make use of him. Gollum became a dynamic resource, an exchangeable cultural currency. His apparent liminality eases these uses: he is relatively easily detachable from his Middle-Earth context, in a way that the other characters do not seem to be. But liminality is not a fixed quality, it fluctuates. My suspicion is that the charge associated with uses of his name decreases, the further those uses move away from episodes and qualities displayed within the film.

But that charge is taken up and transmuted through the tensions and category-systems of different cultures. I am not reifying the notion of 'national cultures'. Rather, I have used Nexis' country-sorting system simply as a means to access different regions of meaning-production. There is some evidence of significant national differences, but at the same time each country can show awareness of others. Australia's mocking-relation with "little" New Zealand; Canada's irritated-cousin relation with the USA; the fact that the *British Medical Journal*'s spoof is noticed in a number of countries; the way the hype of the New Zealand premiere was covered just about everywhere: all these, and more, blur the boundaries around countries. Even so, as many have noted since Benedict

Anderson's (1991) work on "imagined communities," "nation" remains a significant point of reference and defining system.

Particularly striking to me is that, while clearly *everyone knows* that Gollum is a digital construct, this does not seem to be a basis for his cultural absorption. Contrary to the many theorisations that see special effects as driven by the split between spectacle and its technical achievement, Gollum clearly figures as a *unified creature*. Certainly, widespread admiration of the sheer technical achievement does contribute to Gollum's charge. But this does not shape the uses to which Gollum is then put. There are no signs at all, for instance, of Gollum being instanced as a symbol of ultra-modernity, or of the technologisation of society. He is a creature of basic malign and conflictual desires, before anything else.

One writer who has shown how we might think about such cultural figures is Raphael Samuel. Samuel made a powerful case for the close study of figures of national myth [14]. Ranging from very long-lived ones such as Robin Hood or John Bull, or transformed ones such as Peeping Tom and Mrs Grundy, to short-lived ones such as Pindar of Wakefield (now just a pub name), he argues that they constitute part of the "sacred geography" of nationhood. Without understanding these, we will not fully penetrate the ways in which a nation understands and indeed imagines itself. These figures range, for Samuel, from the heavily ideological (the "freeborn Englishman," for instance) to the plainly irreverent. Samuel is primarily interested in the ways such figures articulate a national sensibility. But it is interesting that among the characters he cites, is Scrooge. Clearly British (Dickensian) in origin, of course, the kinds of characteristics associated with Scrooge are for many people coloured and fleshed by his Hollywood-centred screen embodiments – or his explicitly American, Disney comic-book version. Gollum fits better into such a portrait. While most of Samuel's figures are relevant because of their national connections, Gollum transcends nationhood with ease, and slots into the distinct predilections and proscriptions of each cultural context where *The Lord of the Rings* has a strong enough purchase.

My closing thought is to wonder what other resources there are that could do the same as, or better than, I have managed to do with the Nexis database. I would love to think that other researchers might be encouraged to tackle equivalent questions about the afterlife and cultural circulation of filmic elements, so that the study of cinema's cultural and ideological influences could become more truly empirical. And that would permit equivalent study of some of the many other characters that have had careers beyond their source-films.

Notes

[1] For detail on how this was done, see *Cinefex* 89, 92 and 96, but especially Fordham, 2003. It is worth noting that New Line Cinema, pursuing their Oscars campaign in 2004, exerted considerable efforts "to extract from the Academy a public assurance that Andy Serkis, who plays the synthespian Gollum, would be eligible for an Oscar despite his body never appearing in the film. That is, it is the inspired actor Serkis who is the main author of the performance, not the (equally hyped) ground-breaking special effects team that assembled it" (Editorial, *Convergence*, Winter 2003.) They failed.

[2] Nadia Bashir, Nadia Ahmed, Anushka Singh, Yen Zhi Tang, Maria Young, Amina Abba, and Elizabeth L Sampson, 'A precious case from Middle Earth', *British Medical Journal* , 18 December 2004,329(7480), pp 1435–1436. I found citations of this essay in several countries. I also, however, found signs of debates in both Canada and Australia, in which mental health professionals complained at Gollum's possible 'impact' on public understandings of the plight of schizophrenics.

[3] In a wider sense this essay of course derives its inspiration from the enormous project that I directed in 2003-2004 into the international reception of *The Lord of the Rings*. This project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant No.: RES-000-22-0323), to which I acknowledge my thanks. Many of the main findings of the project have been in Barker and Mathijs, 2007.

[4] Lest anyone think these are politically one-sided, in at least one later image, Gollum becomes Barack Obama.

 [5] In passing, it is worth noting the redesign of Gollum between *Fellowship* (where he makes a fleeting appearance, basically as two saucer-sized eyes) and *Two Towers* (where he is fully realised). The change was largely motivated by the move to motion-capture, using Serkis not only as voice but in particular for his facial expressions. Because the computers were using digital markers on his face as reference guides, it was hard to effect the eyes at their original size.

[6] Serkis' book belongs to the small suite of identically formatted tie-in books, offering official insights into the production processes of the films.

[7] Importantly, this clip was then planted as an Easter Egg on the Special Edition DVD of *The Two Towers*. For those who might know how to look for such a thing, there was Peter Jackson waiting to congratulate them on finding the hidden Extra, with all its obscenities. But general viewers could live in innocence, thinking that Jackson was all clean

seriousness. Thus did he and New Line Cinema play both ends of the game.

[8] Nelson is a substantial figure in Tolkien scholarship, and has written extensively on many aspects of his work.

[9] It is important, I think, to see the connections between these specific discussions and the wider emergence in recent years of books devoted to pop-philosophical discussions of the 'meanings' of films (and other media). The publishers Open Court now have a list of more than 40 such books, beginning in 2000.

[10] In the same volume with Fuchs' essay appears a strange essay by Tom Gunning (2003), who pursues an analogy between Gollum and the "Golem" in Jewish lore. Gunning appears to hesitate between fearing Gollum as an embodiment of worrying instantiating technologies, and condemning an over-theorisation of such worries. He comments that "[t]he creation of Gollum occurs within a long genealogy of fascination with the technical and magical creation of a figure that possesses the essential elements of the human" (343). This, he argues, reinserts Gollum into another teleological history – that, having been made by a machine, Gollum must willy-nilly *represent* "machinery" in some wider sense. This can be seen in his closing sentences: "At the climax of *The Return of the King*, the Ring floats on the roiling lava that has just engulfed Gollum and, before it too melts away, the runes within it illuminate and spill out a brilliant light. Magic … codes ... projected light. At the moment of dissolution, images appear of the film's own conditions of possibility" (348). This strange trope in film theory is apparently still alive and well.

[11] I am indebted to Angelina Karpovich for help in exploring this aspect of Gollum's presence, and in finding what little there is. Angelina wrote to me: "There are a couple of Smeagol fics here: www.libraryofmoria.com/characterpages/smeagol.html, though no Gollum ones, interestingly (I haven't read any of this, so I can't offer any comment on what lies within). There are crossovers featuring both incarnations of the character at www.fanfiction.net/l/382/3/0/1/1/0/88/83/0/0/1/, but bear in mind that the host directory,fanfiction.net, is looked down on throughout fandom, as are a lot of the stories that are archived there (if you still need Gollum/other character, you'll see a little search thing in the top right corner of that page that would help you search for other characters). And there's a Gollum section in the "Very Secret Diaries" series (www.homepages.nyu.edu/~amw243/diaries/), which was phenomenally popular in some parts of the fandom, so that might be worth a look as well." People looking for "subtexts" would do well to take account of this absence. It makes very unconvincing for instance Anna Smol's (2004)

attempt to find gay subtexts in Tolkien purely on the basis of Gollum's occasional moments of insight into Frodo and Sam's friendship.

[12] Another located example of this was unfortunately associated with a broken weblink, at www.nerdgirl_dirtysecrets.html.

[13] My thanks are due to Barbara Klinger, Ernest Mathijs and Sue Turnbull for reading my sections, respectively, on the USA, Canada and Australia for any gross errors in describing press formations. All inadequacies remain mine alone.

[14] See in particular Samuel's introduction, and the opening section, "National Figures."

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