

## **Response to Martin Barker's 'Rise of the Qualiquants'**

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### **Introduction**

In what follows, we respond to Martin Barker's (2018a) review essay entitled 'Rise of the Qualiquants,' published in the previous issue of this journal (15:1). In his review, Barker offers an admittedly not disinterested assessment of our recent book *Fans, Blockbusterisation, and the Transformation of Cinematic Desire: Global Receptions of The Hobbit Film Trilogy* (Michelle, Davis, Hardy and Hight, 2017), and raises a number of questions relating to our ontological commitments and methodological approach, along with a critique of Q methodology more generally. We wish to express our sincere thanks to Martin for such a detailed and thoughtful review – evidently the first in what is to become a new section in *Participations* dedicated to much-needed debates on methodological, epistemological, and ontological issues in audience research. His essay generously draws attention to the contribution and significance of our project, and introduces our theoretical and methodological approach to a wider audience. The issues and questions he raises are certainly worthy of further clarification, discussion, and debate, and we are fortunate to have access to a highly suitable forum for this in *Participations*. We also fully share his commitment to the advancement of audience and reception research.

We attribute this unique opportunity to further explicate the rationale for our approach to the rising salience of audience reception scholarship using Q methodology, and (to a lesser extent) the Composite Model (Michelle, 1998, 2007, 2009). Four papers employing the Composite Model as part of their conceptual framework already have been published in *Participations* (Davis et al., 2014; McKeown et al, 2015; Michelle, 2009; Smets, 2012) and the model is being applied by a growing number of scholars internationally (for example, Granelli & Zenor, 2016; Holland et al., 2015; Smets, 2014; Tager & Mathee, 2014; Van Ommen et al., 2016). Likewise, Q methodology is not entirely foreign to *Participations*, which has to date published nineteen papers either substantially discussing Q methodology or in which Q methodology comprises the principal methodological approach. This corpus includes 15 papers originating from the recently-completed research project on 'News consumption as a democratic resource – News media repertoires across Europe'<sup>1</sup>, and a paper co-authored by some of the most eminent Q methodology scholars internationally (McKeown et al., 2015). In addition, Q methodology has been employed in audience research (broadly construed) in a few hundred studies to date; the current bibliography of Q methodology in audience research, which covers only English-language articles, books, book chapters, and conference papers, contains around

300 items (Davis, 2018). Remarkably, this literature has more than doubled since two of us reviewed it in *Participations* seven years ago (Davis & Michelle, 2011).

It is therefore surprising to note that, rather than seriously engaging with this wider body of scholarship employing Q methodology to study audiences published in *Participations* and elsewhere, Barker primarily relies for guidance on an infrequently cited introductory piece by James Good and a single paper written by Stephenson later in life on the 'Self in everyday life'. We believe this may have contributed to his apparent misapprehension of the central 'ontological commitment' in our research on *Hobbit* film audiences and his evident inability to discern the close alignment of our research with Stephenson's underpinning theory of subjective communicability, which key Q proponents regard as consistent with a social constructionist ontology (see Watts and Stenner, 2012). He also substantially misunderstands key issues relating to sampling and representativeness in Q methodology, making much of his critique somewhat misdirected, for reasons we outline and address below.

In responding to these and other critiques, we hope to alleviate some of the evident unease expressed in Barker's responses to both Q methodology and the Composite Model of reception and their growing influence within the wider field of media, communication, and cultural studies. Much of this anxiety might be attributed to unfamiliarity with the epistemological assumptions that undergird Q, combined with apparent concerns about micro-targeting, disinformation, and 'new' psychological models of audience engagement (Barker, 2018b) that have nothing whatsoever to do with our research. While Barker's review suggests some degree of scepticism, we believe our approach offers a potential solution to many of the methodological and theoretical bottlenecks in audience research that he and other scholars have frequently lamented. We thus welcome the opportunity to debate directly these important and very relevant issues, while shedding further light on the methodological choices we made in attempting to push the boundaries of what is possible, and desirable, in such research moving forward.

## **Our ontological commitment is to audience segments as shared subjectivity among viewers**

The ontological perspective that underpins this research can best be described as moderate constructionism. Whereas Barker suggests Stephenson's later works espoused a humanist notion of Self, we share the view of other scholars who believe his core concepts of *operant subjectivity* and *concourse* are fundamentally consistent with a social constructionist ontology (Watts and Stenner, 2012). From a moderate constructionist perspective, as succinctly outlined by Höijer (2008, p.278), it is assumed that

... people bring basic perspectives, interpretations, cognitive schemas or social and cultural frames of reference with them to an interpretive situation, such as the viewing of a television programme, or an interview. Ideas and interpretations are thought to at least partly reflect some external reality; there is some kind of relationship, although incomplete, between sociocognitive representations and the social and material reality.

In the *Hobbit* Audience Project, our ontological commitment is to *audience segments*, by which we mean groups of viewers who share key characteristics in terms of the nature and form of their

interpretations, frames of reference, identity positions, and affective and cognitive responses to a given text. The audience segment, defined by shared subjectivity among viewers, is therefore our central object of analysis, and this reflects a basic research design decision, not a discovery retrospectively enabled by quantitative analysis of survey data. The entire book is organized around investigation of audience segments and their evolution during the life of the film trilogy.

It is not controversial to segment a population of respondents on the basis of some key attributes or characteristics. Many approaches to segmenting audiences are available; some of the work emanating from the Barker-led *Lord of the Rings* and *World Hobbit* projects employed cluster analysis to identify broad groupings within the wider samples of respondents (Kuipers & De Kloet, 2008; Trobia, 2016). However, unlike much existing research on audiences and audience receptions, we did not segment *Hobbit* film audiences on the basis of respondents' socio-demographic attributes (age, nationality, gender, etc.) or media consumption behavior (such as the number of times a film has been viewed or a book has been read), for reasons that are explained at length in Chapter 2. Nor did we rely on scales measuring particular subjective attributes (such as genre preferences, beliefs about how films such as *The Hobbit* should be classified, identifications with film characters, assessments of film quality, or perceived importance of viewing a film). Rather, we identified audience segments on the basis of *shared subjective viewpoints* about the *Hobbit* films. To capture these shared subjective viewpoints we used Q methodology, which provides a strong and reliable approach to objectively identify and explore groups of likeminded individuals within a given population of respondents.<sup>2</sup> Following identification and interpretation of audience segments as shared subjective viewpoints, analysis involved comparison of similarities and differences between and among the audience viewpoints, interpretation of the overall typology of viewpoints in light of existing theoretical understandings of modes of reception, exploration of the socio-demographic correlates of the audience segments, examination of audience segments in specific contexts of reception, and analysis of the evolution of the audience segments over four key moments in the life of the film trilogy.

If Barker considers we have erred in making audience segments the central object of analysis in our research on audience receptions of the *Hobbit* trilogy, then we invite him to explain why, and indicate alternatives. But given that he, too, attempts to classify his respondents into segments based on similarities he perceives in their responses (most recently proposing a rather broad opposition between *Hobbit* 'critics' versus 'enthusiasts' [Barker, 2017]), we doubt that he seriously objects to this endeavour. If he considers that we were misguided to investigate audience segments as shared subjective *viewpoints*, then once again we would welcome some further explanation on this point, and invite Barker to make the case for a different and preferable basis for the construction of such segments. In our view, the shared subjective experiences and viewpoints of audience members are an entirely appropriate – if not central – object of investigation in audience and reception studies.

We return, then, to a perpetual dilemma within audience studies as a whole; how to access these internal states of mind? Do we simply ask viewers to share their responses to a range of survey questions we consider relevant, and assume that what they say is an accurate and fulsome reflection of their thoughts, feelings, and related actions? Reliance on such methods can be problematic, both because respondents are inclined to answer the questions of researchers regardless of whether those questions address the issues that are most relevant or important from their perspective, and because there is often a difference between what people *say* they do and

think, and what they *really* do, and *really* think – as ethnographic research amply demonstrates. While it is not possible to ever access human consciousness completely or in an entirely ‘unfiltered’ way, we believe Q potentially comes closer to the ‘truth’ of what people really think because it observes their actual communicative *behaviour* as they actively consider each statement and its meaning and relative importance for them in constructing a representation of their individual point of view.

This is the essence of Stephenson’s core concept of *operant* subjectivity – he saw subjectivity as the sum of behavioural activity that constituted a person’s current viewpoint as operationalised at a particular moment and with respect to a specific question or issue, and he readily acknowledged that such viewpoints could change over time or in response to different conditions (Watts and Stenner, 2012). Assuming they have been given suitable ‘tools’ to express themselves through the careful selection of appropriate stimuli, the card sorting process potentially reveals a holistic map of their thoughts and feelings on the topic at hand, while simultaneously exposing what *matters* most to *them*; the things they feel most strongly about. It does this through a process that is largely independent of the researcher, and that positions the individual respondent as the point of personal reference as they make selections and order the statements in ways that are meaningful to them. For these and other reasons, we believe the incorporation of Q methodology within a mixed method research design potentially offers many advantages over reliance on traditional survey or interview questions alone.

We also believe that the identification of shared audience viewpoints using a dimension reduction technique such as factor analysis of Q-sorts is greatly preferable to dependence on the limited capacity of researchers to make sense of very large volumes of qualitative data relating to complex, multi-dimensional topics such as thoughts and feelings about a feature film. Q methodology eases that considerable *cognitive* load by using factor analysis to identify patterns in the similarities and differences among responses, and in this manner brings shared subjectivity to light. If Barker considers that some approach other than Q methodology is a better way to reliably and objectively segment large film audiences on the basis of their shared subjective viewpoints (or some other basis that he considers more relevant), then we invite him to elucidate this, and explain how this alternative approach might generate clearer insights. These are the matters of design, logic, and instrumentation in the research we report in our book that we would expect to be addressed in a meaningful debate about methodology and ontology, and they are ones we believe warrant discussion within the wider field. In the spirit of guiding this important and very necessary debate, we wish to reframe the discussion slightly by offering some comparisons of the approaches used in our study versus that employed in the two much larger projects in which Barker has been centrally involved.

Clearly, the *Lord of the Rings* (Barker & Mathijs, 2008) and *World Hobbit* projects share key ‘qualiquant’ characteristics with our *Hobbit* audience project. Each explored audiences’ receptions of Peter Jackson’s Tolkien-inspired films; in each case, the ambition was to identify patterns of reception across relatively large and diverse populations; each project gathered information primarily from an online survey, with other data-gathering methods (paper surveys, face-to-face or online live interviews) playing supporting roles; each survey collected a variety of qualitative and quantitative information, ranging from long free-form responses to open-ended questions, to responses concerning preferences, beliefs, and objective socio-economic attributes in nominal, ordinal, and interval levels of measurement; in each project, an important goal was to advance

audience reception research methodology; and similar sampling procedures were used in each survey.

But there is a key difference between the Barker-led research projects and ours. We consistently used Q methodology to identify groups of like-minded *Hobbit* film viewers, while Barker and his collaborators used an eclectic variety of qualitative and quantitative approaches to ‘find patterns’ and explore ‘audience categories’ in extensive data sets collected via online surveys (Barker & Mathijs, 2008, p. 227). In finding many patterns and exploring diverse audience categories, the *LoTR* project produced a host of rich and insightful but not readily commensurable results, as we have previously noted and Barker has also acknowledged. The *World Hobbit Project* replicated the design of the earlier *LoTR* research project, producing another batch of interesting, insightful, but similarly incommensurable analyses of various patterns and categories. A plethora of objects of analysis – socio-demographic variables, nations, languages, genres, audience preferences, clusters – have appeared in the research from the *LoTR* and *WHP* and are analyzed, using an eclectic assortment of qualitative and quantitative methods, to detect patterns of possible consequence. Yet, after the two largest audience reception projects in history, readers do not know which audience categories might be considered ontologically prior to others. Specifically: what are the key categories of audience response identified from these studies, where and how did they originate, what is the justification for using the methods chosen to identify them, and what can be said about these categories in more generally applicable terms? Can insights into the nature of audience reception *itself* be drawn from those projects?

From his review, it is clear that Barker has reservations about a number of core aspects of the Q methodological approach, including its sampling procedures, issues relating to quality control, and the generalisability of Q study findings. He also raises a number of concerns about the balance between qualitative and quantitative analysis in our research more specifically. In what follows, we seek to shed further light on what Q methodology is and what it does and does not do, and in so doing clarify many of the things Barker regards as problematic in our book.

### **Making sense of Q as a unique methodological approach**

To begin, Barker expresses considerable apprehension about sampling in survey research and in Q methodology more particularly. He claims to have always resisted referring to the very large number of respondents in his *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* studies as ‘a sample’ (Barker, 2018a, p. 442), and elsewhere asserts that ‘we never sought, and do not claim, to have a “sample”’ (Barker & Mathijs, 2016, p. 161). However, calling a sample a sample seems not to have been problematic at the time of the *LoTR* project. The concluding methodological reflection chapter in *Watching Lord of the Rings* discusses ‘our sampling strategy’ (Barker & Mathijs 2008, p. 223) and recognizes that ‘we can’t say that our sample and its subsamples are representative of some broader population, because we chose the nonprobability alternative’ (p. 223). This is a key similarity between our study and Barker’s two large audience projects. The *LoTR* and *WHP* samples were non-probability (or opportunity, or convenience) samples, so-called because those respondents, like ours, were recruited where ever they could be found and were largely self-selected. That the *WHP* population of respondents can indeed be called a sample is readily recognized by Barker’s collaborators (cf. Jerslev et al. 2016; Trobia 2016; Veenstra et al. 2016). In fact, nine of the 16 articles emanating from the *WHP* and published in the November 2016 issue of *Participations* use the term ‘sample’ to refer to their population of respondents or subgroups of them. Barker himself uses the term in the same

sense in his 2017 paper on disappointment (Barker 2017). Thus, we are somewhat perplexed that *our* use of the term is considered to be so problematic in his review.

We made it abundantly clear in our book that, given our non-probability samples, no reliable assumptions can be made about the representativeness of our *population of respondents* with respect to some larger population, including the larger population of *Hobbit* moviegoers. Most respondents to Barker's surveys and ours appear to be 'fannish' individuals (Jerslev et al., 2016) in that they expressed some higher degree of cognitive, affective, or behavioural engagement with the films, the book, or associated communities, than casual viewers did (although some of our respondents were individuals whose primary interest was a particular issue or an actor and not the film or book at all, as we discovered in our prefiguration survey). Casual or less-engaged moviegoers are a different audience in many respects (Jerslev et al., 2016), and are likely to be harder (and more expensive) to reach, given their lack of intrinsic motivation to participate in research. This raises some important questions for audience researchers more generally given our increased reliance on online research techniques in order to reach geographically dispersed audiences.

That said, enough casual viewers participated in our first post-viewing survey to permit us to identify and characterize an audience segment reflecting what might be considered a distinct viewpoint shared by some of them (*Mildly-entertained Casual Viewers*). And, as we will address in greater detail below, Q does *not require* large numbers of respondents to identify and characterise the *variety* of viewpoints within a given population. However, it cannot discern the *distribution* of those viewpoints within that population, and it may be that Barker has overlooked this important distinction. We attempted to target a very wide range of viewers beyond fans, extending invitations far and wide, including targeting particular interest groups, but did not screen or limit participation. Hence, as in the Barker-led studies, we over-sampled fans, because more of them elected to participate. This does not invalidate our results in any way, for reasons we explain below. Barker also suggests that in our analysis there is a 'slippage' in which we generalise from our study's findings to the wider audience when claiming to have located the dominant pre-viewing perspectives (p. 442). Yet this critique rests entirely on a misrepresentation of what we actually wrote in the complete extract of text that Barker selectively cites, in which we are quite clearly referring to the dominant viewing perspectives *among* our pre-viewing respondents and not the wider *Hobbit* audience, as Barker erroneously suggests.

Barker then offers an extended critique relating to the usually quite small populations of respondents in Q studies, with 30 to 50 (McKeown and Thomas, 2013, chap. 3) or 40 to 60 respondents (Watts and Stenner, 2012, chap. 4) being typical. Barker's critique is fundamentally irrelevant in a review of our book, since we in fact used quite uncommonly *large* samples (>800); something that undoubtedly will raise eyebrows within the wider community of Q researchers. But this particular line of criticism is also quite beside the point, since the selection of respondents (the P-set) is a *secondary* sampling issue in Q methodology. Although Barker cites Good (2010) on the crucial point that in Q methodology, persons are variables and items acting as stimuli are the population in question, he appears not to understand the implications of the distinction, because he subsequently treats the selection of *respondents*, not the selection of stimuli, as posing the key sampling issue. To be absolutely clear on this point, the P-set or participant sample in Q is not intended to be, and does not *need* to be, a *proportionately* representative subset of the wider population. This is because the objective of Q research is to identify and interpret the *variety* of distinct viewpoints, not to estimate their *distribution* among the wider population. Large samples

are considered unnecessary and redundant to achieve that primary purpose. Instead of recruiting a representative sample of respondents, *purposive* sampling is recommended, the goal being to recruit a selection of respondents with suitable (and subject relevant) *diversity*, including members of particular groups that might have a special interest in the topic at hand.

The key sampling issue in Q methodology concerns the selection of *stimuli*, known as the Q-sample. A larger population of potential stimuli, called the *concourse*, must be first ascertained, and then a proper sample drawn from it. The concourse consists of the universe of communicable meaning, the discursive terrain or symbolic field, around an issue or question, and is thus inherently social. Q methodology research almost always uses intensive qualitative means to ascertain the concourse. As we describe in our book, we conducted wide-ranging ‘cultural trawls’ designed to ‘identify the major issues, themes and concerns being expressed in public discussions of these films, and to capture a range of perspectives on them’ (Michelle et al., 2017, pp. 41-42). The principal sampling challenge in Q methodology thus pertains to the selection of a group of items that properly models the larger concourse. This is why the set of items that respondents rank-order is usually called the *Q-sample*. In addition to representing the wider concourse, Q-samples are often carefully *designed*, in that items are selected to represent categories that are inductively observed or theoretically germane. Once again, the procedure is fundamentally qualitative.

A critical analysis of the fundamentals of Q methodology would therefore rightly focus on the epistemological and methodological issues involved in ascertaining the concourse and properly sampling from it. Concourses are the cornerstone of Stephenson’s theory of communication. We would imagine that readers with strong roots in Cultural Studies might express particular interest in the processes used to locate and characterize concourses and derive Q-samples from them, particularly in terms of whether a Q-sample adequately represents the wider discursive field. Barker’s suggestion that Q methodology introduces a crypto ‘ontology of the self’ imported from a possibly tainted psychological paradigm (Barker, 2018b) is particularly misguided, since Q is generally considered an *anti-essentialist* methodology that neither makes nor requires assumptions about the structure of the Self or about the nature of consciousness (Goldman, 1999; Watts and Stenner, 2012). Q assumes only that human beings can create and communicate meaning within a relevant symbolic or discursive field, and that these meanings can be made operant and observable using the technique that Stephenson developed.

Barker also seeks clarification regarding the appropriate criteria against which the quality of Q studies might be assessed. It should be clear at this point that the quality of Q studies is not determined primarily by the overall number of respondents. In our view (and other Q practitioners will have their own thoughts on this), overall quality in Q methodology research is shaped by the following: the depth, range, and overall appropriateness of the apprehended concourse; the quality of the Q-sample and of its design, including its representativeness of that concourse and its congruence with theory; the quality and appropriateness of the P-set, with the inclusion of a suitable range of relevant respondents being more important than the raw numbers of respondents or their numerical representativeness of a wider population; and the quality of the interpretation offered, which often depends on the researcher’s ability to carefully evaluate and synthesise the identified factor arrays *in conjunction with* qualitative feedback from respondents (whether in written or verbal form) to produce a concise summary and interpretation of a holistic point of view (see Watts and Stenner, 2012).

Weak Q studies, we have found, often do not offer a compelling explanation of the decisions involved in preparation of the Q-sample or selection of the P-set, and tend to merely list the statements that defined each viewpoint with little interpretation of them, as though this was in itself sufficient and self-explanatory. Rather, it is necessary for the process of interpretation to carefully examine and analyse the defining statements *in relation to each other* in order to gain insight into the underlying latent perspective that shapes the ranking of the statements – to interpret the *shared subjectivity* of those who loaded on that factor. So, an appropriate question to ask in evaluating a Q study for publication might be, does the interpretation of viewpoints ‘make sense’ – does it weave together qualitative and quantitative insights to ‘tell the story’ of the data, and does that interpretation seem sound, given the available evidence? Would those who loaded highly on that factor recognise themselves as broadly sharing that point of view? Respondents’ comments explaining their rankings of items in the Q-sample, whether collected via face-to-face interviews or online, are absolutely essential to forming an interpretation of each factor array.

The quality of the analysis is also determined by the quality of the factor solution selected by the researcher, and it appears Barker may be confused by aspects of this process. To clarify, once the Q sorts are obtained, the correlation matrix is factor-analyzed by person to identify groups of individuals with statistically similar Q sorts. The technical challenge here has to do with the extraction of factors (and therefore the number and composition of the viewpoints) and the selection of a factor solution from among a number of possible solutions. Factoring is the only step where Q shifts from qualitative to quantitative mode. There are many discussions within the Q community on issues around factor extraction and selection of solutions. The centroid factoring technique favoured by many in the Q community typically is not used in the main statistical software packages, which instead use principal component analysis (confusingly called factor analysis in some statistical software packages). In either case, the researcher must make a decision about which solution to select. Typically the researcher will test a number of possible solutions, going from a larger number to a smaller number of factors. Several statistical tests and rules of thumb are available for assessing potential solutions. One common rule of thumb is that a generally preferable solution is the simplest one, accounting for the most pure defining sorts on the fewest factors with the least number of cross-loaded and non-significant sorts - unless there is a valid reason to select a different solution (in which case, the rationale should be clearly explained). Another common rule of thumb is that a factor should be defined by at least two Q sorts whose loading exceeds whatever threshold of significance has been selected (typically 1%), and which are not cross-loaded (‘confounded’) with other factors. In our research, all audience segments except one are defined by fifteen or more Q sorts; the smallest segment is defined by seven Q sorts. These are very robust groups of similar Q sorts by any standard, and are very unlikely to be methodological artifacts.

As an example of how insightful Q research can be designed with relatively small numbers of respondents and also be highly comparable and relatively scalable, one need look no farther than the November 2017 issue of *Participations*, which published 15 papers from the ‘news as a democratic resource’ research project. In this project, each national team used the same Q-sample of 36 items, each representing a different possible source of news. Each national project had a P-set of 36 respondents, selected from the same categories of individuals. The results are intelligible at the level of each national project, while responses can be aggregated so that the national or regional results can be compared in various ways. This is probably a more suitable model for *cross-national* comparative research than the one we adopted.

A related issue raised by Barker concerns the generalisability of the results of Q methodology studies. In the past, there was no straightforward way to combine Q methodology with extensive surveys. However, the online survey software that we used in our research, FlashQ, combines Q sorting with a conventional questionnaire. Thus, we were able to conduct Q research with very large P-sets, the smallest of which consists of 840 responses. We collected these large samples because we wished to make inferences about the social locations of those who expressed the detected viewpoints. Our unusually large P-sets allow us to make some observations about the reliability of the typology of viewpoints we detect, as well as about the distribution of viewpoints *within* samples of respondents that are ten to forty times larger than conventional P-sets. For instance, we can estimate the likelihood of capturing viewpoints in P-sets of 100 randomly drawn sorts from a P-set ten times larger. If a viewpoint is represented by just 4% of the Q sorts in the larger P-set, at least two Q sorts representing that viewpoint will occur 100% of the time in randomly selected P-sets of 100, enabling detection of the viewpoint. If a viewpoint is represented by just 2% of the larger P-set, it will be detected in a P-set of 100 responses more than 80% of the time. These findings corroborate the position long maintained in Q methodology that most viewpoints in the conventional P-set are likely to be found in a larger *comparable* population. In other words, P-sets on the upper end of the conventional size in Q-methodology reliably capture the major viewpoints.

A caveat has to do with the smallest or more marginal viewpoints, which (as we have found) are not easily detected in randomly selected P-sets of 100 persons even when the larger P-set involved some purposive sampling. For example, the audience segment *Celebrity Followers* in our prefiguration survey was populated by 17 respondents, only 1.7% of the total P-set of 1000 responses. *Celebrity Followers* are fans of one of the actors in the films, who were interested in only this actor, not the films per se. In 25 randomly sampled P-sets of 100 drawn from the dataset, two *Celebrity Followers* were included in the P-sets only 52% of the time. In designing our Q survey instrument we had suspected the existence of this audience segment on the basis of some comments collected in our cultural trawl of the wider concourse. Consequently, we included a statement in the Q-sample to reflect this sentiment, and actively solicited participation in the survey in fan sites devoted to each of the major actors in the film.

Nevertheless, responses from this audience segment were much less numerous than responses from other audience segments, and it is likely that other segments of the wider viewing audience were also underrepresented in our surveys. Had we not used very large P-sets, we easily would have overlooked most of the smaller audience segments (each <2% of the total responses) that we identified: *Celebrity Followers*, *Frustrated Middle-earth Fans*, *Angry Hobbit Critics*, *Mildly-entertained Casual Viewers*, *Disenchanted Hobbit Critics*, and *Middle-earth Appreciators*. The bottom line is that P-sets of 100 responses will effectively detect viewpoints (defined as at least two pure defining sorts) as long as the viewpoints are present in around 4% of the larger population, and a sufficiently wide ranging or targeted recruitment process is used to solicit participation from a diverse range of people within the wider viewing audience. Larger P-sets, by inference, are likely to perform even better in capturing more marginal perspectives.

Therefore, we remain reasonably confident that we have captured the major shared viewpoints within the wider fannish audience of *Hobbit* film viewers (but of course cannot claim to have captured *every* minority view). What we cannot say is how these viewpoints were *distributed* in terms of the proportion of the wider viewing audience that may have adopted any *particular* perspective we have identified. Ascertaining that would require analysis of a representative sample

of the viewing audience, and as Jerslev et al. (2016) note, such a sample is likely to contain much larger numbers of casual and relatively dispassionate viewers than a self-selecting sample comprised of large numbers of avid fans. Importantly, this is why Q methodology offers advantages over the traditional survey approach used by Barker, since a lack of proportional representativeness does not invalidate the claim to have identified the predominant *typology* of viewpoints, particularly in very large Q studies such as ours.

### **Balancing the qualitative and quantitative in large studies**

Another set of reservations expressed by Barker relates to a perceived imbalance in the book between the qualitative and quantitative, such that qualitative data play a secondary support role rather than being analysed in their own right to see what ‘themes and discursive repertoires’ they might reveal. He writes that such materials ‘never get to speak as such – they function only as illustrations of quantitatively arrived-at conclusions’ (p. 443), and later, ‘it would have been good to be offered at least occasional close interrogations of individual cases, to see where and how complexities and conflicts might arise’ (p. 446). He goes so far as to suggest that no new or additional findings are added, developed, qualified, or queried as a result of examination of our extensive qualitative materials.

In response, we don’t believe it is accurate to say that qualitative materials take second place to quantitative data in the book as a whole. Qualitative materials lie at the very heart of Q methodology. As noted above, the concourse in our study was drawn directly from a cultural trawl of expressions of subjective opinion from a very wide range of sources, and respondent’s written explanations for their ranking of most and least preferred items informed the analysis and interpretation of the factors, shaping our understanding of the underlying subjective viewpoint being expressed. Barker also substantially downplays our more detailed analyses of the tremendous volume of qualitative materials obtained from the questionnaires that accompanied our four Q studies. Over the course of the project we systematically analysed *all* responses to more than 20 open-ended questions, using a process of inductive content analysis. Our analyses of these qualitative responses produced significant insights in their own right, and are presented in several different chapters in both qualitative and quantitative (summary) form - as with our extended discussion in Chapter 8 of the complex array of responses to the controversial addition of an invented character, Tauriel, as head of the Mirkwood Elven guard and love interest.

He is, however, correct in observing that when we present the results of our *Q studies*, more specifically, we use respondents’ comments to *illustrate* the identified viewpoints, rather than selecting a few individual comments (on some basis) and subjecting these to discursive analysis in their own right. Such an approach would be inappropriate for these particular qualitative materials, for reasons that Watts and Stenner (2005) note here:

Q methodology ... is most often deployed in order to explore (and to make sense of) highly complex and socially contested concepts and subject matters from the point of view of the group of participants involved (Stainton Rogers, 1995; Watts and Stenner, 2003a). *It does not do this in a thematic fashion, nor does it focus on the viewpoints of specific individuals.* It should be no surprise, therefore, to find that this typical form of Q methodology disappoints when themes and/or individuals are the primary research targets.

To properly appreciate Q methodology, we need instead to recognize that it is essentially a *gestalt procedure* (Good, 2000). This gestalt emphasis means it can never ‘break-up’ its subject matter into a series of constituent themes (*which immediately distinguishes Q from various forms of discursive or interpretative phenomenological analyses*). What it can do, however, is show us the primary ways in which these themes are being interconnected or otherwise related by a group of participants. In other words, it can show us *the particular combinations or configurations of themes which are preferred by the participant group*. (Watts and Stenner, 2005, p.70; emphasis added)

And so it is with good reason that we do not foreground individuals’ comments in our discussions of the various viewpoints identified in each phase of the project: The purpose of these analyses is to convey a concise summary of the *shared gestalt* of a whole group.

But Barker’s evident concern about an imbalance between qualitative and quantitative and a desire for more in-depth *discursive* analysis also raises important methodological questions, which need to be more widely debated in the field of audience research. Namely, *on what basis and according to what rationale* does a researcher select this or that individual’s responses for deeper consideration of its discursive themes? How do they *justify* those selections, and what do the resulting analyses *represent*? What is the appropriate way to treat and analyse qualitative data derived from very large studies? Barker seems to be advocating the selection of qualitative materials for closer analysis based on a ‘cherry picking’ approach whereby the researcher highlights particular examples from amongst a vast array of potential others simply because they find them more interesting or discussion-worthy. Such selections are frequently based on the researcher’s own pre-existing understandings and preoccupations, and do not necessarily reflect major trends or statistically significant patterns in participants’ responses. Alternatively, the researcher might select examples that illustrate or support some point in a wider theoretical argument they wish to make. While we don’t disagree that such analyses are often very interesting, the cherry picking approach to qualitative data analysis risks placing undue emphasis on the responses of individuals who may well be outliers, and whose responses don’t reflect any general or notable trend within the larger set of responses. In contrast, the examples of participants’ comments that we have chosen to highlight always illustrate observable, measurable, statistically *significant* discursive patterns among our respondents, along with associated themes.

A related danger presented by unstructured approaches to the analysis of qualitative materials in large surveys is the potential introduction of confirmation bias. In the absence of an explicit and consistent rationale for the selection of examples, researchers may be inclined to focus on examples that confirm things they *already* believe to be true, or assume important. And it is revealing that, in the example Barker gives of a situation where he would have liked to see a more in-depth discursive analysis of one particular respondent’s comments on reality, he defaults to his long-standing interest in the presumed meaning and significance of *fantasy*, suggesting that ‘a more discursive approach, allowing the qualitative some independent weight in the analysis, might have been able to follow this through and begin to think about the contemporary meanings and expectations of “fantasy” as something “really real”’ (p. 444). Barker’s preoccupation with the meaning and significance of fantasy, we suggest, colours his research in various ways, framing the

questions he asks and the way findings are interpreted. It is a prior interest that influences what is looked for, and what is seen. Such an approach is not bias free investigation of audience *reception* as a phenomenon that unfolds as differently-located viewers encounter screen media texts in diverse contexts of production and reception. Rather, it is a more limited exploration of the meaning and importance of *fantasy* in the lives of those viewing texts *of a particular genre*, whether or not those respondents regard those texts centrally through the same lens. This is important, because one of the key findings of our study was that very many respondents assessed and judged *The Hobbit*, not in terms of its successful creation of a fantastic reality, but rather in terms of its perceived failure to constitute a *faithful adaptation* of Tolkien's beloved novel.

Barker might appear to shift to somewhat safer ground where he suggests that in the absence of in-depth discursive analysis of complexity and contradiction, the perspectives we identify 'really constitute at best *ideal types*: positions to which actual individuals may more or less adhere. The labeled orientations are at risk of being hypostatized, overriding individual variations, compromises, local circumstances' (p. 466). Factor analysis results in the identification of audience segments that represent a shared point of view, but of course they are abstractions. The segments can be considered as latent variables - regularities that cannot be directly observed. But, while there are variations in the *degrees* to which individuals agree with the viewpoint to which they have been assigned by the factor solution, the audience segments we have identified represent much stronger congruence among individual perspectives than can be ascribed to chance. Description of these shared viewpoints can perhaps make them appear more fixed, stable, and internally coherent than they may be in *individual* cases, but the fact that hundreds of participants independently sorted the Q-sample statements in significantly similar ways surely says something important about the social reality of the viewpoints we detected.

Readers should also note that the longitudinal approach we have adopted goes some way toward addressing the issue of how individuals' viewpoints may change over time because it explicitly highlights the capacity for contradiction and change, and thus works as a corrective to any tendency for Q to hypostatize viewpoints. We acknowledge that other approaches, such as in-depth interviews, would enhance the capture of ways in which viewers produce more complex, multi-layered accounts in recounting their experiences than our findings appear to suggest. But again, we can ask whether such accounts really reflect a *reframing* of viewers' actual thoughts and feelings at the time of viewing in response to researchers' direct questions, or a retrospective recounting of them designed to meet what they assume to be the expectations of academic researchers, or in light of their own desire to project a certain impression. Of course, our own approach is similarly retrospective, and no human research is entirely immune to such influences. Nonetheless, we believe the process of independently constructing a Q sort is considerably *less* likely to be subject to researcher effect or impression management than a face-to-face interview, for instance.

That said, we need to stress that it would be misguided to follow Barker's recommendation to focus on cross-loading respondents as a solution to these perceived limitations. Q's ignoring of crossloaders reflects its aim to illuminate shared subjectivity and characterize the range of distinct (i.e. unique) viewpoints. Including crossloaders in such an analysis would work against those efforts by highlighting statistical outliers who express idiosyncratic points of view, while again raising various questions regarding the bases for selection of the chosen examples – which crossloaders should be highlighted, and why?

Further, as a general methodological principle, we take the view that the ability to reliably and systematically characterise shared viewpoints is a necessary first step before one can meaningfully explore contradictions, complexities, ambiguities, and variations in outlying or statistically non-significant viewpoints. If we believe that audience reception is a shared, social phenomenon rather than solely or primarily an individual one, we need ways of clearly delineating what, exactly, is shared and typical in the first instance. The absence of a robust means of objectively segmenting a population of respondents according to shared perspectives has long been a major stumbling block within the field of audience studies as a whole; one to which Q methodology provides an effective remedy. While Q may not deliver everything some might wish for in the ideal quali-quantitative methodology, and while there is room for improvement in the methodological model we have developed, we believe our application of Q nonetheless represents a significant advance on established approaches to studying the complex responses of large and widely dispersed audiences.

### **Why do we need a model of audience receptions, and what does such a model help us achieve?**

A third set of concerns expressed by Barker relates to the theoretical underpinnings of our research. Our interpretation of the audience segments, and of their configuration as a typology of audience viewpoints, is informed by an explicit conceptual framework, the Composite Model of Modes of Audience Reception (Michelle, 2007). As signalled by the term 'composite', this model consciously draws together and explicitly synthesizes the body of research that has observed and attempted to categorise patterns in the form and content of audience reception, including works by Worth and Gross (1974), Hall (1980), Morley (1980), Newman (1982), Corner and Richardson (1986), Dahlgren (1988), Liebes and Katz (1989, 1990), Höijer (1992), Schrøder (2000), and others. In subsequent revisions it has incorporated insights from media psychology that corroborate and further elucidate some of the same fundamental distinctions; in particular Green, Brock, and Kaufman's (2004) work on narrative transportation. Essentially analogous empirical observations made by a range of scholars, but described using diverse terminology, are thus consolidated into a coherent, holistic framework that attempts to chart the distinct forms of reception that have been identified in the accumulated body of research on audiences. The framework is presented in language that is intended to be familiar and understandable, given that theoretical legacy. The genesis and rationale for the construction of the Composite Model and the genealogy of the framework are outlined in considerable detail in Michelle's (2007) earlier essay published in *The Communication Review* (see also Michelle, 1998, 2009; Michelle, Davis and Vladica, 2012. For a background on the debates into which this essay seeks to intervene, see Barker, 2006, Morley, 2006, and Press, 2006, in the same journal).

So, to say that the model contains 'more than a little residue' of Hall's model states the obvious, but is also misleading in its implication. The incorporation of Hall's three categories of dominant/preferred, negotiated, and oppositional response within the description of the discursive mode of reception is explicitly acknowledged in Chapter 2, and outlined in much greater detail in Michelle (2007). Similarly, Liebes and Katz's work informs some of the categories and sub-categories of response charted in the Composite Model, but always in conjunction with the analyses of other authors and in substantially reworked form. In particular, their category of 'critical' is specifically *not* adopted, as it conflates two rather different forms of response that Michelle (2007) contends reflect

a very different relationship to the text; on the one hand perceived as a constructed media product (in a mediated mode), and on the other as an ideological message system (in a discursive mode). Barker is thus incorrect to suggest that we posit the primary division among our *Hobbit* respondents as transparent versus critical, because the mediated mode of reception as defined by Michelle (2007) is not inherently 'critical' in the *ideological* sense implied by Liebes and Katz's use of this term.

Barker then asserts that in the Composite Model, 'the 'transparent' is made virtually synonymous with the 'dominant', the 'immersive', and the 'uncritical' (p. 444). On this point, he is correct, since a transparent mode is indeed defined as one where the text is read 'straight', on its own terms, which in the case of fictional entertainment content usually entails some degree of immersion, or deep engagement in the narrative story world. We assume Barker does not deny the possibility of such a reading position, since to do so would be to deny the full range of potential viewing responses to screen media texts. Presumably then, his objection is to our categorisation of the most commonly adopted viewing position in terms that, in his view, seem to imply the responses of these viewers were passive and unthinking (which is nowhere asserted in the Composite Model), uncritical, and ultimately in line with the presumed intentions of the filmmakers.

Such an objection is consistent with Barker's dismissal of our assertion of a 'preferred' reading for the *Hobbit* films, which we characterise as immersive transportation because Jackson himself identifies this as the kind of experience he hoped to elicit. While it has long been fashionable in Cultural Studies to assert some kind of endless textual polysemy that negates any possibility of there being a preferred reading, and while texts are themselves complexly layered, we take the view that the possibilities for idiosyncratic readings remain, in practice, somewhat constrained. As Curran (1990), Corner et al. (1990), Morley (1993 and 2006) and others note, it is easy to overemphasise apparent evidence of viewers' idiosyncratic meanings and pleasures, whilst discounting significant constraints on textual polysemy in terms of the power of cultural producers to effectively frame audience interpretation and response. As Condit (1989) suggests, most texts are encoded with meanings that the majority of viewers will recognize and understand in broadly similar ways, even though they have different responses to, and evaluations of, those meanings (see also Philo, 1993; Miller, 1994; de Vreese, 2004). Our identification of a preferred reading of course does not negate the possibility of viewers making individual interpretations and adopting non-preferred modes of response; indeed, a good number of our respondents did, and in greater proportions over the course of the trilogy, as we have documented. But it does not necessarily follow that most or all viewers frequently engage in such creative interpretive work in the course of their everyday film or television viewing. The suggestion that they do rests on an 'undocumented presumption that forms of interpretive resistance are more widespread than subordination, or the reproduction of dominant meanings' (Morley, 1993, p. 14).

We also wish to clarify that in categorising the viewpoints of *Enchanted Hobbit Fans*, *Happy Hobbit Viewers*, and *Fulfilled Hobbit Fans* as consistent with a transparent mode of reception, we do not discount the likelihood that some or even many of those aligned with that viewpoint periodically commuted to other more distanced and analytical modes of response. Rather, we deliberately seek to identify and characterise the *predominant* mode of reception reflected in the shared subjectivity expressed by that viewpoint, for the purposes of comparison and analysis with different viewpoints relating to the same film, other films in the same trilogy, and potentially (and most importantly) *other texts* of the same or different genres – a point to which we shall return below.

The concept of a preferred reading was useful for analytical purposes in our research because it allowed us to make distinctions between readings that were broadly consistent with the kind we assume to have been intended by the text's creators, and those that were not, for reasons that might then be explored in greater detail. But it seems Barker does not think it is sufficient to take filmmakers at their word regarding the viewing experience they hoped to create. This leads us to wonder whether Barker would allow the possibility of there ever being a preferred reading (does he reject the concept outright? Or just in this case?), and if he does accept the possibility, what conditions would need to be met in order to claim the existence of a preferred reading, and better yet define it?

We do not consider it unreasonable to take Jackson at his word, nor to imagine that mainstream blockbuster fantasy films primarily aim to entertain viewers by immersing them in a fantastical yet believable world. The main evidence Barker offers to counter the notion that Jackson and his team sought to elicit narrative transportation and the adoption of the transparent mode of reception is this intriguing observation on page 445, where he argues that if *The Hobbit's* makers had wanted *uncritical* participation, 'they would not have done all the work they did, to make sense of Jackson's decisions in adapting from the book.' Conversely, we suggest, it is entirely possible such work came to be considered *necessary* to explain various creative decisions in order to appease Tolkien and *LotR* film fans and mitigate the critical reactions that were already being voiced online and elsewhere, as fans became aware of changes being made in the process of adapting the book to screen. Such concerns and complaints were proliferating online, most notably in the main fan forum [www.theonering.net](http://www.theonering.net), well in advance of the first film's release, as we discovered during our cultural trawl and preliminary research. Why would the creators of these films go to such lengths to justify their creative choices in advance of each film's release, unless they were concerned about the unfavourable reactions and growing disquiet among some segments of existing fan communities later impacting on box office receipts?

A further point to consider in this regard has to do with the tremendous investment made in this trilogy in pioneering high frame rate 3D (HRF 3D), the primary stated purpose of which was to increase the immersion of viewers, according to Jackson himself (Jackson, 2012). Barker downplays the stated intentions of Jackson who, along with James Cameron (Giardina, 2016) and Douglas Trumbull (2011), has explicitly framed his experimentations with high frame rate in terms of its assumed potential to reduce visual discomfort associated with 3D film, increase immersion, and transport viewers into the world depicted on screen. As we note in the book, creating more spectacular and immersive cinematic experiences is seen within the broader industry as a potential solution to declining attendance, because it offers something viewers cannot experience in their own homes. To imagine Jackson might have preferred viewers to critically interrogate the quality of the visual effects rather than feel more immersed by them thus defies logic, particularly given his expressed 'disappointment' at precisely such critical responses at the 2012 CinemaCon in Las Vegas, where an extended excerpt from *An Unexpected Journey* was screened to a less than rapturous reception (Ryan, 2012). In response, Jackson reverted back to standard 24 fps for the San Diego ComicCon screening, and the film was subsequently released in this format in addition to HFR 3D. These do not seem like the actions of a filmmaker and studio actively seeking the critical engagement of audiences with the products of their labour. Indeed, they seem rather more like the behaviours of those keen to avoid viewers having their attention drawn to textual features that might diminish viewing pleasure, by disrupting immersion.

More fundamentally, Barker expresses considerable reservations about the concept of immersion itself and its use to describe intense engagement, suggesting it ‘too easily summons back decrepit assumptions about “loss of self” within viewing, uncritical notions of “identification”, and almost notions of pre-rational viewing.’ (p. 449). He argues that the concept of immersion ‘cuts across the idea that people, in loving the films, were operating within complex interpretive frameworks. They could *recognize dilemmas, understand character’s motivations, find parallels with their own lives*, and engage powerfully with the films *because of and in the light of these*’ (p. 449; original emphasis). However, such interpretive acts are entirely consistent with what we would categorise as a transparent mode of reception in its fuller sense, which is not reducible to one component of it (immersion), as Barker implies, and is in no sense ‘unthinking’; rather, such a mode generates certain lines of thought that reflect a particular way of seeing and experiencing the text. That is to say, when viewers recognise and think about the dilemmas faced by characters and their motivations, they are effectively treating and relating to fictional entities *as though* they were real. Finding parallels with one’s own life similarly suggests a prior assumption that what one is seeing on screen is life itself, or sufficiently like it, so as to render what is happening to those featured and their experiences meaningfully comparable to one’s own life and experience. Such responses accord the fictional world and those depicted in it the status of ‘real life’, temporarily and perhaps playfully, for the purposes of entering into the story and enjoying it on its own terms (Michelle, 2007).

Barker goes on to ask, ‘Why is it assumed that “immersion” is incompatible with the deploying of critical judgements?’ (p. 445). This question ignores or perhaps misunderstands the posited role of commuting in shaping *individual* receptions. The assumption made in the Composite Model is that immersion and cognitive reflection reflect different *modes* of response; inherently *different* ways of seeing and relating to the text. Feeling as though one has been fully transported to another time and place and is experiencing an adventure alongside and with fictional characters who one feels great empathy for and perceives as though they were real people reflects, at that moment, a fundamentally different *kind* of relationship to the text than feeling irritated by a text’s historical inaccuracies, or aggrieved by gaping holes in the plot or weak dialogue, or concerned about the excessive depiction of violence and its possible impact on younger viewers, or angry about the way commercial values influenced creative decision-making. These different forms of response also accord the text a different status – as *life* itself, as *like* (or *unlike*) real life, as a *media production*, or as a *message system*. The Composite Model explicitly allows for the possibility that individual viewers may commute between modes at different moments (interested readers are referred to an extended discussion of this process in Michelle [2007]). But we stand by our assertion, which is very much grounded in the expressed views of our respondents, that there is a limit to the ability of even the most initially enthusiastic and forgiving fan viewer to sustain moments of pleasurable immersion when textual features become seriously distracting or so overtly problematic that they invite disparaging critique; the two states of mind cannot always be easily reconciled. In the interests of preserving analytical clarity it is important to avoid fudging these kinds of distinctions, while still recognising that some (and perhaps many) viewers will undoubtedly have moments when they commute between different modes of reception.

Having taken issue with the definition and implications of certain aspects of the transparent mode in particular, Barker is ultimately of the view that our use of the Composite Model ‘adds not a lot’ to the book. Here, he again rather misses the mark, since its inclusion adds significantly to the book by framing the findings of this particular case study in a coherent and comprehensive analytical

framework that is firmly grounded in the broader field of theory and research on audience receptions. In the process, inclusion of the Composite Model contributes to the progression of the wider field, by making the viewpoints we identified intelligible, meaningful, and potentially useful to other researchers, thereby facilitating and encouraging analytical generalisations within the broader discipline. As described by Höijer (2008, p. 285),

... in *analytical generalizations*, the researcher evaluates and concludes how the results from a specific study can be applicable to another case or situation. Similarities and differences between cases or situations are made explicit by supporting evidence, and theoretical arguments can also be included. In its most simple form, this can be 'reading about other cognate studies and comparing our case with them' (Silverman, 2000: 104).

Reframing the identified viewpoints in terms of a common conceptual framework or shared language renders them understandable and meaningful in more general terms, and thus more easily and reliably comparable to the findings of other studies. By focusing on the *form* of receptions (their modality, which is a property of audience reception as a process) rather than the *content* of receptions (in this case, the identified viewpoints, which are specific to these particular individuals encountering these texts in specific contexts of viewing) we become better able to collectively explore patterns of response across different audiences, texts, and contexts. Facilitating collective inquiry is important due to the proliferation of diverse forms of media content across multiple formats, and thus the extraordinary range and volume of media encounters that contemporary audiences now engage in, which none of us can adequately comprehend as individual researchers, nor even as large collaborative teams. Without a basis for 'objective' categorization of different modes of reception using a shared analytical framework, it is very difficult to reliably and systematically compare findings across different cases, and harder still to think about and theorise audience reception *in general*; in a higher order way that is not limited in its applicability to specific instances. As a field of study, we struggle to have these kinds of discussions and debates because we are not speaking the same *language*. Consequently, we continue to see a proliferation of research on audience reception that treats each instance of this exceedingly common, indeed mundane, human process as though it were some kind of special case requiring each individual scholar to develop unique conceptual tools in order to interpret it. Indeed, Barker (2006) himself has previously lamented this lack of progression in the field, and attributed it to a lack of systematisation in which the lessons of previous work are ignored and each new qualitative study fails to make incremental advances on those that preceded it (see also an insightful commentary by Press, 2006).

The real value of adopting a common analytical framework, however conceived, thus lies not so much in what it contributes to one project but in what it allows us to do in the longer term, and the way in which it facilitates the accumulation of insights about our common object of study – which is surely audience reception *per se*. As Press (2006, p. 97) noted, both Barker (2006) and Morley (2006) have expressed a desire for 'more theoretical progress in the audience field, and a frustration with our lack of ability to speak both in a cohesive manner to one another, so that we might build theory, and also to those in different fields apart from audience study, who might not share either our political or methodological predispositions.' A common analytical framework, we submit, provides some remedy in this regard. For instance, it becomes possible to ask why *Hobbit*

viewers appear to have become broadly divided between the transparent mode and variations of the mediated mode, whereas in other studies such as Michelle, Davis and Vladica's (2012) work on *Avatar*, Davis and Vladica's (2010) study of the computer-animated documentary *Ryan*, or the work of McKeown et al. (2015) on the TV drama *Breaking Bad*, all four modes of reception were identified. What social, individual, textual, and contextual factors help explain why receptions took the forms that they did in each instance? Are particular viewers predisposed to adopting mediated as opposed to transparent, referential, or discursive modes of reception, and if so, why, and with what consequences? Do such predispositions come into play in all circumstances or just in specific situations - perhaps in relation to particular genres, or in certain contexts of viewing?

Pre-empting Barker's likely objection to such 'simplistic' and 'reductionist' characterisations, we might also ask why, and under what conditions, particular viewers commute between modes of response, how often, and with what effects? How do they perceive and experience such commuting? Are they aware they are doing it, and how does it impact on their enjoyment and sense making? Which modes and subcategories of reception are compatible and perhaps mutually reinforcing, and which are irreconcilable? Under what conditions? Asking and answering these kinds of questions, or at least shifting the terrain of our discussions to this level of abstractness about underlying processes of reception, is essential if we are to resolve some of the persistent debates in audience studies more widely, including debates over the respective roles of texts and audiences in asserting and contesting meanings, exerting or resisting media 'effects', and completing or contesting the circuit of culture (Livingstone, 2015).

Barker raises some other objections to the Composite Model that warrant a response. He suggests the Model is somehow incompatible with Q methodology given what he (erroneously, in our view) assumes is Stephenson's ontological commitments to a humanist concept of 'the self', suggesting that 'Q, for Stephenson, was a tool for unpacking and validating his conception of the coherent, conscious self' (p. 445). He suggests the Composite Model, conversely, seems to reflect a reductionist 'split-level ontology of the human mind', and takes issue with the perceived implication that some receptions have a predominantly immersive dimension, as noted above. He suggests there 'would be some strain, at least, between [Stephenson's] working model of "self" and the semi-politicised version proposed by the Composite Model' (p. 447). These concerns seem to be borne out of a rather partial reading of Stephenson via an introductory essay by James Good published in, ironically, the journal *Psychoanalysis and History*. Indeed, Stephenson himself acknowledges that the development of Q was influenced, not merely by Spearman and Fisher, but also *Sigmund Freud*; most notably, his pleasure/pain and reality principles (Stephenson, 1993/4). Thus, it seems unlikely that there is any fundamental ontological incompatibility between Q methodology and the notion that human behaviour might be at times influenced by unconscious forces. In any event, this notion is not a central claim of either the Composite Model or Q methodology. In our view, the Composite Model is entirely compatible with Stephenson's understanding of Q as a scientific method for empirically identifying and characterizing shared subjectivity; indeed, Q offers a highly suitable methodology for evaluating some of the Model's core assertions, since it may provide a means of independently verifying whether the fundamental distinctions postulated do, in fact, constitute key lines of division within a given audience.

## Conclusion

Our research has, in many ways, merely scratched the surface of what might be possible using Q methodology in conjunction with other methodologies such as traditional questionnaires and interviews. We were constrained by time, resources, and space restrictions in what we could present in the book itself, and hence chose to highlight what we believe are the *unique* contributions that Q methodology can offer audience researchers. While we have not delved into the kind of detailed discursive analysis of individual respondents' comments that Barker favours to generate independent insights that are unanchored by quantitative findings, there is no reason why others could not do so. But it would be beside the point to do so in the case of qualitative data generated from the Q-sort process. There exist plenty of models of this kind of discursive approach, including Barker's own work on this and earlier Tolkien adaptations. Undertaking that kind of analysis was not our central purpose in this book.

What we have focused on, instead, is clearly delineating and characterising the range of distinct viewpoints among respondents at each stage of the *Hobbit* film trilogy, and on analysing and interpreting these in a variety of ways that link to existing theory and scholarship concerning similarities and differences in audience engagement. We maintain that Q methodology is a highly suitable approach to identify and characterize complex, multi-faceted, shared responses to media texts among large and widely dispersed audiences. While Barker appears to be ambivalent about the value of such efforts, we would remind readers that our use of Q methodology allowed us to identify and characterize no less than 21 distinct and verifiable audience segments across the course of the *Hobbit* trilogy. This does indeed include some very small groups, which in other quantitative projects would likely be ignored as 'noise' or as so unreliable that they should be discounted entirely. In Q, such groups are considered meaningful and important because they represent a *unique point of view* broadly shared by those who loaded on that factor; one that is significantly *different* from all other shared points of view identified, and statistically very unlikely to be a product of random associations.

But we have also achieved much more than most traditional Q studies, because the scale of our project allowed us to explore the possible relationships between the shared perspectives of different sub-groups of respondents and a wide range of theoretically and empirically significant variables, such as gender, age, class, nationality, fandom, religion, and political belief, which have been long-standing areas of interest in audience studies. While with the benefit of hindsight there are things we might have done differently, we nonetheless believe what we have achieved represents a viable model for large scale quali-quantitative research on audiences for serialised screen texts. We look forward to continuing this very necessary and important conversation on methodological issues as we collectively explore what is possible, and desirable, in this burgeoning field of audience and reception research.

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Adoni et al., 2017; Hight & Zalipour, 2017; Jędrzejewski, 2017a,b; Köuts-Klemm, 2017; Köuts-Klemm & Brites, 2017; Nossek & Adoni, 2017; Peruško, Čuvalo, & Vozab, 2017; Silva et al., 2017; Stark & Bergerhoff, 2017; Swart, Peters & Broersma, 2017; Van Damme, 2017; Van Damme & Swart, 2017; Van Damme, Kobbernagel & Schrøder, 2017; Van Leeckwyck, Patriarche & Dufresne, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Q methodology is described in chapter 2 of our book and very thoroughly covered in three main methodological treatises, which are readily available: Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012; McKeown & Thomas, 2013.