

THE ‘JACKSON EFFECT’: THE LATE 1990s TO 2005

Geoff Lealand

In the closing years of the twentieth century, the New Zealand film industry experienced a time that was unparalleled in its history.

It began in August 1998 with the announcement that the American company New Line Cinema was to make three fantasy/adventure films based on JRR Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR*) books, to be directed by Peter Jackson. Financed with an estimated US\$320 million budget, this huge enterprise preoccupied Jackson (and much of New Zealand) for the next five years. Released in 2001, 2002 and 2003, the three films became a worldwide phenomenon, Jackson’s Weta Workshop grew into a centre for global film making and Jackson was elevated to the highest ranks of the Hollywood elite.

This chapter describes Jackson’s journey from New Zealand cult director to global film maker and examines what might be called the ‘Jackson Effect’: his singular influence on the state of New Zealand film making in the wake of the *LOTR* trilogy. While his global success has not been insignificant in terms of his own career, it has also directly affected several elements of the New Zealand film industry. These include the development of New Zealand as an investment focus for global film making; the development of a New Zealand-based production infrastructure to service both offshore and local film; and a measure of job creation and work stability in the industry.



Peter Jackson reading JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* during filming for *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001)



Fans lining the red carpet for the Australasian premiere of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) at the Embassy Theatre, Wellington, 19 December 2001

Jackson's success has also helped stimulate the growth of destination tourism and has revised our understanding of what a 'New Zealand film' might be in the early twenty-first century.

A different approach

The *LOTR* experience proved above all that it was possible to make a big-budget, globally oriented movie in New Zealand. In this respect, Jackson found himself in the vanguard. At the other end of the scale, through the late 1990s and into the opening years of the new millennium, New Zealand film makers such as Robert Sarkies, Harry Sinclair and Gaylene Preston continued to make small films for local audiences, with the customary modest budgets (provided by the New Zealand Film Commission in most cases). Generally these films also met with critical approval but saw limited box-office returns. There were exceptions: *Whale Rider* (Niki Caro, 2002) was an international success, and *The World's Fastest Indian* (Roger Donaldson, 2005) and *Sione's Wedding* (Chris Graham, 2006) did quite well overseas as well as locally. Meanwhile, other film makers who had initially made their mark in New Zealand (such as Vincent Ward, Lee Tamahori and Sam Pillsbury) had shifted overseas to make films in more established film centres, such as Los Angeles and London.

But Jackson neither limited himself to the local market nor flew the coop. He stayed in New Zealand and effectively created his own brand of local film making: one that was oriented towards global finance, international audiences and worldwide box-office success.

There were a number of other aspects to this reorientation. First, where most local film makers used local source material, Jackson adopted potent examples of Anglo-American popular culture (for example, Tolkien's books, the original 1933 *King Kong*, Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*, 2002). Second, in contrast to the naturalism of most local films, Jackson adopted a fantasy style laden with special effects. Third, rather than target local audiences across theatrical releases, television screenings and DVD sales, Jackson attempted to expose his films to audiences across the globe via all possible avenues. And finally, it could be claimed that his huge box-office takings indicated a type of success measured more in economic than in cultural terms (the reverse being the case with most other New Zealand films). As a consequence, any discussion of Peter Jackson as scriptwriter, director or producer must view him as much more than a New Zealand film maker.

A new direction for New Zealand film

The front cover of the 3 July 2010 issue of the *New Zealand Listener* featured staff writer Jane Clifton's 'The 2010 Guide To Being a New Zealander: How the world sees us'. Images chosen to illustrate her case included the expected and familiar, such as sheep and a Māori warrior in a haka pose; but at the centre of the cover was a dominant representation of Frodo Baggins, *LOTR* hero, staring out at the reader with an Oscar statuette under one arm and a rugby ball under the other. As numerous commentators have noted, Frodo physically resembles Peter Jackson (now a 'Sir'): they are of similar stature, handsomely hirsute and happy to dispense with footwear. They are, of course, worlds apart: Frodo is of the fictional race of hobbits inhabiting the fictional Shire region of the very fictional Middle-earth, while Jackson is a born and bred local from Pukerua Bay, near Wellington. Nevertheless, this blurred entity of Frodo/Jackson has permeated New Zealand cultural life through the first decade of this century. Kiwis may now be distanced from those heady post-millennium days – when planes emblazoned with *LOTR* finery flew low over New Zealand cities, Wellington became 'Wellywood' and red carpets were unrolled the length of the city's Courtenay Place for movie premieres – but Jackson's influence persists in terms of the specific (the ways films are made in New Zealand) and the general (the way the world sees New Zealand, and the ways we think about ourselves).

Global versus local content

An examination of Jackson's canon against the customary expectations and characteristics of New Zealand film reveals a trend towards a more global identity. His earliest films (such as *Bad Taste*, 1988, and *Braindead*, 1992) certainly contain strong elements of New Zealand (locations, accents and a rather black, local sense of humour), and his first major feature (*Heavenly Creatures*, 1994) interprets the tale of a notorious 1954 murder case in Christchurch. But it is difficult to describe his other films as anything other than global in character.

The *LOTR* trilogy, for example, is based on the fictional work of a British academic who drew strongly on Nordic and other European myths and legends and achieved worldwide popularity. (His trilogy, first published in 1954–55, acquired a broad fan base from the 1960s onwards when it was issued in inexpensive paperback editions.) The films were produced, funded, marketed and distributed by an American production company (New Line Cinema), the leading actors were British



Publicity for New Zealand as a filming location, produced by Film New Zealand, 2001

Overleaf: Melanie Lynskey as Pauline Parker (left) and Kate Winslet as Juliet Hulme in *Heavenly Creatures* (1994)

Hobbiton, near the rural Waikato town Matamata, as featured in *The Lord of the Rings* movies



and American, and the production equipment and computer hardware were all imported. Numerous commentators, especially in the press, have claimed that the use of local landscapes make these New Zealand films, but such geography provided only *templates* for settings and not the final version on screen. Digital manipulation and modification often made the familiar unfamiliar: Mount Ngāuruhoe in the North Island was transformed from a generally placid, occasionally stirring volcano into a belching, venomous Mount Doom; a quarry just off the Hutt Valley motorway was turned into a multi-walled, towering castle; and rolling pastures near Matamata were transformed into a bucolic haven of hobbit burrows and fertile gardens.

Of course, one could argue that New Zealand has long been in a state of transformation from swamp and forest to something more domestic and cultivated, but this degree of alteration in the interests of fiction and film was unprecedented. It is significant that Matamata, the most important remnant of New Zealand-as-Middle-earth, continues to attract a steady stream of tourists: their destination is not a pretty corner of a North Waikato farm but a place where memories are stirred of another, imaginary place. And at the time of writing, diggers and earth movers are busy again at Hobbiton, rebuilding the site to make it less virtual and more ‘real’ for these visitors – as well as preparing it for the filming of *The Hobbit*.

New Zealand has provided several imagined worlds for Jackson and his fellow film makers. Locations around Wellington (built, modified and transformed) served as the setting for his 2005 remake of *King Kong*: a surrogate island where dinosaurs roamed and a giant ape ruled. Here again was a film made in, but not of, New Zealand. Indeed, writer Tim Wong in the literary magazine *Landfall* describes Jackson’s *King Kong* as ‘possibly the least New Zealand film ever made’.¹

Global versus local funding

New Zealand connections and locations are also absent or irrelevant in Jackson’s more recent ventures as producer, director, or producer/director (*The Lovely Bones*, 2009; *District 9*, 2009; *The Adventures of Tintin: The Secret of the Unicorn*, scheduled for a 2011 release). These cannot be regarded as local films if, for example, the criteria used by the Film Commission are applied. These include a directive ‘to encourage, participate and assist in the making, promotion, distribution and exhibition of films made in New Zealand by New Zealanders on *New Zealand topics*’ (my

emphasis).² These parameters have governed the decisions of the Commission, which has assisted the production of more than 140 films since 1978. In short, telling New Zealand stories with significant New Zealand content has been the priority of such funding.

With the exception of some support offered to Jackson in the early stages of his career – through the advocacy of producer Jim Booth for *Meet the Feebles* (1989), which accelerated his transition from very low-budget film making to directing independently funded and larger-budget films – he has not been part of this funding process. (Together with his stature as an international film maker, this was probably the reason why he was chosen to co-author the 2010 *Review of the New Zealand Film Commission* report.) Jackson’s position as a global film maker working out of a small South Pacific nation highlights the continuing tension between the vital role that offshore-funded film production plays in New Zealand (in building and sustaining an industry infrastructure) and the continuing desire of other film makers to create films that are more clearly grounded in New Zealand history and culture. At the risk of oversimplification, this division can be seen as a continuation of the struggle between the two imperatives of internationally oriented commerce and local culture.

Jackson is aware of these tensions. Explaining his objectives for the 2009 adaptation of *The Lovely Bones*, he stated, ‘We wanted it to be not a simplistic Hollywood film, nor an esoteric film either. So we tried to balance it.’³ This suggests that he wanted his film to be neither formulaic nor arthouse, in that the former would diminish the spirit and intent of the original source and the latter would confine its appeal to niche audiences (a common fate for New Zealand films). Critical response to the film was generally negative: ‘With 3-D CGI, Peter Jackson made a one-dimensional *Lovely Bones*,’ declared renowned *Village Voice* film critic J Hoberman.⁴ The modest box-office return suggests that Jackson did not get the balance right, and this film can be regarded as a blip in a career that has generated bigger films and greater financial rewards as it has blossomed.⁵

The ‘Jackson Effect’

Peter Jackson might be best described as a New Zealand-born and New Zealand-based global film maker. More specifically, as a director, he makes big-budget, high-concept movies for global audiences – all of which are derived from literary sources or remakes of earlier films (with the exception of his earliest low-budget films). In many ways, he exemplifies



Peter Jackson with one of the early models of Heidi the Hippo for *Meet the Feebles* (1989)

the contradictions and confusion that befuddles attempts to define 'New Zealand film' or to find a tidy definition of 'New Zealand national cinema' within a film culture that is now largely global or transnational in nature.

That said, no history or discussion is complete without a full acknowledgment of the role Jackson has played – and continues to play – in the general health of local film making, in creating New Zealand production houses so that they now fit within patterns of global film making and distribution, and in the shaping of the contemporary culture of New Zealand. Taken together, these factors could well be described as the 'Jackson Effect'. An Australian reviewer of a recent collection of academic essays, *Studying the Event Film: The Lord of the Rings* (2009), also makes the point: 'What this book also shows is that the production of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy had – and still has – profound meaning to New Zealand, almost a decade after the filming took place, easily outstripping the importance of the James Bond or Harry Potter films to the United Kingdom, or any equivalents to Australia or Canada.'⁶

To the New Zealand public, Jackson is more than a film maker: he is the archetypal home-town boy made good, the local hero with a do-it-yourself aesthetic who – uniquely in New Zealand's film history – has achieved success in Hollywood *and* stayed on his home turf. Both popular sentiment and the New Zealand media (Wellington's *Dominion Post* newspaper, in particular) have embraced Jackson as their own and continuously refer to his output as *New Zealand films* – praising him with considerable hyperbole. For film reviewer Barney McDonald, for instance, Jackson is 'the Sir Edmund Hillary of New Zealand film making, forging a humble career move in the foothills of Wellington, then taking it to the highest peaks of Middle-earth'.⁷ And at the Wellington premiere of *The Lovely Bones* on 15 December 2009, the critics' response to the film probably mattered little to the waiting crowds, as the online service newswire.co.nz observed: 'This crowd is Jackson's crowd and they want the film to be a success. Fans holding signs and fliers for autographs, crammed against the barriers, are here to see home-town hero Jackson even more so than superstar Susan Sarandon who plays the film's matriarch.'⁸

These examples suggest that Jackson is much more than the sum of his films, and his influence on film making in New Zealand remains wide and persistent. As a consequence, it is instructive to consider his career and investigate how this happened.

EXPAT DIRECTORS

by Lindsay Shelton



Roger Donaldson was the first of the new crop of directors to leave New Zealand, when the American success of *Smash Palace* (1982) brought job offers from Hollywood. Since then he has directed thirteen international features, beginning with *The Bounty* (1984), featuring Mel Gibson. Like a number of his fellow expats, he has retained a link with the New Zealand film industry, most notably through his 2005 feature *The World's Fastest Indian*.

Vincent Ward lived in Los Angeles for seven years, directing Robin Williams in *What Dreams May Come* (1998) and writing *Alien 3* (1992). No one expected Geoff Murphy to leave, but after his four 1980s productions, he spent twelve years in the United States where he directed four features (including *Freejack*, 1992, starring Mick Jagger) and four telemovies.

Lee Tamahori was catapulted into his international career by the success of *Once Were Warriors* (1994) – his seven offshore features have included the James Bond movie *Die Another Day* (2002). Niki Caro's *Whale Rider* (2002) also had worldwide success, and her first international feature was *North Country* (2005), featuring Charlize Theron.

American-born Sam Pillsbury made two New Zealand features before returning to the United States to direct four features and eighteen telemovies. And following her debut with *Rain* (2001), Christine Jeffs made the British movie *Sylvia* (2003) and the American movie *Sunshine Cleaning* (2008).

Four New Zealand-born directors launched their careers offshore. Jane Campion made her first feature, *Sweetie* (1989), in Australia, then had her greatest

successes with New Zealand films: *An Angel at My Table* (1990) and *The Piano* (1993). Martin Campbell distinguished himself in British television, then directed ten features, including two Bonds and two Zorros. He also shot an action feature in the South Island. Andrew Niccol moved to the United States after making commercials in London, he has since directed four Hollywood features. Andrew Adamson made his reputation in Hollywood visual effects before directing two *Shrek* films and two *Narnia* features (the first of which was shot largely in New Zealand).

Andrew Adamson with Tilda Swinton as the White Witch during filming for *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005)



The Frighteners

Peter Jackson's early splatter films have been well covered in chapter 8, but it would be appropriate to revisit *The Frighteners* (1996). This film was a major stepping-stone in Jackson's career, marking the point at which his world view shifted from New Zealand-oriented stories to stories rooted in Anglo-American popular culture.

Directed by Jackson and co-written with his wife, Fran Walsh, this house-of-horrors feature tells the story of Frank Bannister (played by Michael J Fox) who uses – or, more properly, misuses – his powers to see and communicate with ghosts, enlisting them to scam gullible customers who come to him wanting rid of unwelcome inhuman visitors. Frank starts out as a disgraceful character, and his ghostly assistants – Judge, a cartoonish Western gunslinger (John Astin); Cyrus, a 1970s black gangster (Chi McBride); and Stuart, a 1950s nerdy teen (Jim Fyfe) – are no better. In many ways, this quartet represents a partial microcosm of American film history: the 1950s Western; blaxploitation movies of the 1970s; 1984's *The Revenge of the Nerds*-style films; and earlier Michael J Fox films, such as the popular *Back to the Future* series (1985–90). In the end, the foursome – together with Frank's love interest, Dr Lucy Lynskey (Trini Alvarado) – redeems itself by battling and defeating, in a series of convoluted plot twists, the true nemeses, Johnny Charles Bartlett/The Reaper (Jake Busey) and his evil girlfriend Patricia Bradley (Dee Wallace-Stone).

Robert Zemeckis, the writer and director of the *Back to the Future* films, had originally hired Jackson and Walsh to write a script from an idea they had offered him. However, Zemeckis quickly realised that *The Frighteners* was really Jackson's film and moved to the position of producer, with funding and distribution deals signed with Universal Pictures in the United States. The deal allowed Jackson to draw on the recently established Weta Digital facilities to generate phantoms and evil spirits roaming a possessed house. The computer-generated imagery (CGI) used in *The Frighteners*, including the bulging wall cavities that featured in the marketing material, surpassed those of any other film produced up to that time.

The film was not a box-office success – due in part, perhaps, to the overly cautious R-rating awarded by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA, the American ratings body) and to competition from other American summer releases. Nonetheless, it did come close to breaking even on its US\$30 million budget, and it generally attracted positive reviews, with critics pointing to Jackson's skilful blend of special effects in a complex narrative.



John Astin as Judge in *The Frighteners* (1996)

Michael J Fox as Frank Bannister with Jim Fyfe as Stuart (left) and Chi McBride as Cyrus in *The Frighteners* (1996)

Fran Walsh and Peter Jackson during filming for *The Frighteners* (1996)



Publicity for the first film version of *King Kong* (1933)



Publicity for Ralph Bakshi's animated version of *The Lord of the Rings* (1978)

Publicity for *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003)

From *The Frighteners* to *The Lord of the Rings*

Although it drew little attention at the time, Jackson made *The Frighteners* entirely in New Zealand. The setting, which resembles a Midwestern American town, was primarily shot in the South Island harbour town of Lyttelton and the capital city, Wellington. Thus a pattern was set for Jackson's career, namely involvement in film projects that were initiated, co-written (with Walsh and other regulars) and directed by Jackson; that were primarily funded by overseas companies; that drew on international acting talent; and that were shot in New Zealand locations that were restyled to resemble other places and other worlds. So although it cannot be regarded as a New Zealand film per se, *The Frighteners* is important in that it represents the moment when Jackson was able to convince Universal Pictures, and the American film industry generally, that film making in New Zealand could hold its own with Hollywood.

One direct consequence of *The Frighteners* experience was that Universal Pictures offered Jackson the opportunity to remake the 1933 classic *King Kong*, a film project he had been long nurturing. But it was also a period when a clear gap developed between Jackson and other New Zealand film makers. While Jackson was increasingly oriented towards overseas funding, overseas talent, and the international box office, many of his peers were still intent on making more emphatically local films, with their first port of call for funding being the Film Commission. In late 1997, Jackson publicly criticised the Commission for what he perceived as inconsistent decision making. This was a foretaste, perhaps, of his later judgments expressed in the 2010 *Review of the New Zealand Film Commission*.

Jackson's primary focus of attention, however, was elsewhere. Having discovered the work of Tolkien in his teenage years through Ralph Bakshi's fitfully successful 1978 animated version of *The Lord of the Rings*, Jackson had long considered the possibility of a fully realised, live-action version of the books. In a meeting in November 1995 with Harvey Weinstein (owner, with his brother, of the then-independent American production house Miramax), Jackson mentioned his interest in Tolkien. Some eighteen months later, in April 1997, Miramax acquired the option from producer Saul Zaentz, and script development began, with New Zealand screenwriter Philippa Boyens joining the Jackson-Walsh partnership.

A glitch arose in July 1998 when Weinstein insisted on there being only one film, but Jackson was given four weeks



THE LORD OF THE RINGS

THE RETURN OF THE KING

NEW LINE CINEMA PRESENTS A WIMONDY FILMS PRODUCTION "THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING" ELIJAH WOOD IAN MCKELLEN LIV ULLER VIGGO MORTENSEN
SEAN ASTIN CATE BLANCHETT JOHN RHYS-DAVIES BERNARD HILL BILLY BOVD DOMINIC MONAGHAN ORLANDO BLOOM HILGO WEAVING MIRANDA OTTO DAVID WENHAM KARL URBAN JOHN NOBLE
FEATURING ANDY SERKIS AS GOLLUM WITH IAN HOLM AND SEAN BEAN COSTUME DESIGNER JOHN HUBBARD AND AMY MACLEAN EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS VICTORIA BARROWS PRODUCERS NGILA DICSON RICHARD TAYLOR EDITOR WETA LTD. NZ DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY JIM RYGIEL
MUSIC BY HOWARD SHORE EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS ANNE LENNIX PRODUCED BY JAMIE SELKIRK EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS GRANT MACHO PRODUCED BY ANDREW LESNIE, ACS EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS REX FORRAS JAMIE SELKIRK EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS MARK ORDENSY BOB WEINSTEIN HARVEY WEINSTEIN
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS ROBERT SHAVE MICHAEL LYNNE PRODUCED BY BARRIE M. OSBORNE FRAN WALSH PETER JACKSON WRITTEN BY J.R.R. TOLKIEN DIRECTED BY FRAN WALSH & PHILIPPA BOVEN & PETER JACKSON PRODUCED BY PETER JACKSON

PG-13 PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED
Some Material May Be Inappropriate for Children Under 13
INTENSIVE LANGUAGE, SOME DRUG USE AND FRODO'S DEATH

DECEMBER 17

AMERICA ONLINE KEYWORD: Lord of the Rings www.lordoftherings.net

THE JOURNEY ENDS



in which to find a more generous source of funds, which might finance a two-film adaptation. In August 1998, New Line Cinema (founded in 1967 and acquired by the media conglomerate Time-Warner in 1996) went one further and announced that it would fund the production of three films, with shooting to begin in May 1999 and the first film to be released one year later. Jackson's success in achieving this goal can be attributed to his combination of bravado and guile, as well as to the impact of his twenty-six-minute show reel of CGI experimentation and landscape shots. There was also a good deal of business sense involved: one apocryphal story has Bob Shaye, founding director of New Line, asking why film-goers would pay US\$9 (the price of a cinema ticket in the United States at that time) to see one film when they could be paying US\$27 to see three.

So, three films it was. Shooting of the first began in Wellington in October 1999, with Barrie Osborne (whose former production credits included *The Matrix*, 1999) signed on as producer. The first scene to be shot features the hobbits cowering in a cavity of tree roots (shot on Mount Victoria in Wellington) as the Black Riders thunder by. The budget for the three films, set at US\$270 million initially but eventually increased to US\$320 million, was subsidised in part by tax breaks provided by the New Zealand government (an estimated US\$10–12 million per film). Ancillary support came from the New Zealand Army, which provided soldiers for crowd scenes, built roads and facilitated communications. These local gestures of support prompted then Labour Minister of Finance, Michael Cullen, to declare that it might have been cheaper to provide every New Zealander with a free ticket to the films.⁹ Nevertheless, from late 1999 on, there was a growing awareness that something big was happening in New Zealand, and no one wanted to spoil the party.

Much has been made of Jackson's skills and risk-taking as an entrepreneur, but there were other reasons why the *LOTR* films happened, and why they happened in New Zealand. First, there was a match between Jackson and New Line in respect of film styles, with New Line having achieved its first major success with the low-budget horror *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). Next, money clearly played a key role. Distribution deals for both the films and merchandise – such as promotional toys from Burger King and the licence afforded to Electronic Arts to produce film-related games – reduced the overall financial risk for New Line. It is estimated that international distribution deals accounted for nearly two-thirds of the production costs for the three films.



Cartoon by Tom Scott, *Dominion Post*, 4 March 2004

Peter Jackson on location, surrounded by Orcs during filming for *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003)

Ian McKellen as Gandalf (left) and Christopher Lee as Saruman the White on location with Peter Jackson during filming for *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001)

In addition, the tax breaks and logistical support provided by the New Zealand government (or, more correctly, the New Zealand taxpayer) helped greatly, as did the non-unionised nature of the New Zealand workforce, who often worked for wages far below those to which American film workers were accustomed.

Another reason lay in the source material of Tolkien's much-loved books: star power was not required, for loyalty to the story was paramount, especially with an enormous and highly expectant fan base lurking both online and offline. Indeed, few of the American, British and Australian actors had much of a profile before *LOTR*.

And finally, digital technology (such as FastSCAN, a portable laser scanner, enabling the scanning of objects on site) had developed to a stage where films – especially those dependent on CGI – no longer had to be made in traditional production centres such as Hollywood – as demonstrated by *The Frighteners*. But just how digital were the *LOTR* films?

The films were initially shot conventionally on 35mm film stock, which was photochemically processed in the laboratory. The footage was then scanned so that CGI could be added: monumental sets and landscapes; crowds of digital extras and orcs; or entirely fabricated principal characters, such as Gollum. Once the CGI material was combined with the digital copy of the original footage, the results were printed back onto film, and the movie was completed in a more or less conventional way. Notwithstanding the much higher degrees of resolution and verisimilitude, the digital component of the films still had much in common with the analogue tricks and *trompe l'oeils* that had been developed and used by film makers since the earliest days of cinema. The Weta Workshop artists were the direct descendants of the matte artists, model makers and stop-motion animators who had produced the effects for film such as *Star Wars* (1977) and *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (1958) – movies that had inspired Jackson to pick up a camera in the first place. Even Gollum was built around a flesh and blood performance by actor Andy Serkis – a man behind the ultimate digital mask.

The contribution of the Weta artists – of, indeed, the entire local workforce – is a testament to the advanced skill base of New Zealand's film professionals, a large number of whom were enlisted to work on the trilogy. A 2003 estimate by *Los Angeles Times* journalist PJ Hufstutter claimed that the films were directly responsible for 23,000 production personnel (actors, writers and film crew) and related jobs in building, accommodation and other ancillary support.¹⁰ The prospect of so many people in gainful employment, fulfilling

the Labour government's promise of a 'creative economy', raised expectations of considerable financial benefits to the country. Although there has been some subsequent debate about the real flow-on effects on the economy (any direct effect being mitigated by the tax breaks, for example), there was generally total support from the New Zealand public, from politicians across the spectrum and from local media (who indulged in a quite extraordinary display of boosterism). This support continued unabated across the production phases and releases of the three films. A June 2003 item on the leading fan website, *TheOneRing.net* – posted on the eve of the release of *The Return of the King* – made this summation:

It has taken seven years from conception to conclusion. Filming of all three movies took place back-to-back over 274 days between 1999 [and] 2000. In total they cost [US]\$330 million to make, not counting the \$210 million spent persuading you to go and see them. The first two chapters – *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers* – have already made \$1.8 billion at the box office and ultimately, the franchise is expected to make \$3 billion. The movies were nominated for 19 Oscars and won six. There is a woman in Thailand who claims to have seen *The Fellowship of the Ring* 250 times already.¹¹

According to the leading movie website Internet Movie Database, the film trilogy eventually gathered \$US2.91 billion at the global box office,¹² and this figure does not take into account the considerable income from DVD releases. Beginning with a two-disc DVD release of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, followed by a Special Extended DVD Edition in November 2002, a pattern was set for a similar DVD releases with the other films, which extended far beyond their cinema life – not merely as another delivery system but as an extension and elaboration of the films. Much of the additional material, such as behind-the-scenes footage and interviews, was carefully tailored to increase the mystique of the films (and of Jackson as director), rather than diminish their power.

Another factor to consider when assessing the financial return to New Zealand is the increase in tourist visits that followed in the films' wake. Tourism New Zealand confirmed 'a definite and immediate impact on web traffic – visits to [its consumer website] www.newzealand.com were up 40 per cent on expected numbers following the first premiere in December 2001, and up 50 per cent in the following year after the release of the second film'.¹³ Total international

RICHARD TAYLOR

by Matthew Grainiger



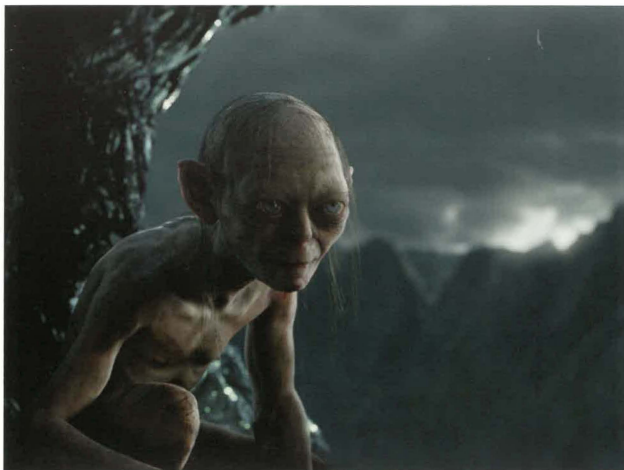
Born in England and raised in Te Hihi, South Auckland, Richard Taylor grew up largely unaware of film but was determined to make 'cool stuff' with his hands. His introduction to prosthetics make-up came when, as a young art director working for Wellington's Gibson Group, he created a severed finger for a Pork Industry Board video.

Puppet-making for the 1988 television series *Public Eye* brought him into contact with Peter Jackson, for whom Taylor and partner Tania Rodger moulded twenty-five alien heads in the bathtub of their one-bedroom flat to feature in *Bad Taste* (1988). Taylor and Rodger went on to create *Meet The Feebles* (1989) lovingly

grotesque characters in a flea-ridden Wellington railway shed. Taylor and Rodger's Weta Workshop was established prior to *Heavenly Creatures* (1994), and the company would subsequently spawn Weta Digital to create computer-generated visual effects. Ground-breaking work on several local and international projects preceded Jackson's landmark *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, for which Taylor won four Academy Awards. A fifth Oscar followed in 2004 for his work on *King Kong*. Taylor's empire now encompasses collectables, books and children's television, with a particular focus on developing intellectual property of New Zealand origin. Taylor was knighted in 2010 in recognition of his services to film.

The belief that he shares with Rodger – that 'anyone with aptitude, enthusiasm and work ethic can be taught almost any craft' – defines what is sure to be Taylor's enduring legacy: the many hundreds of artists and artisans who have developed and honed their skills at Weta. As the film industry makes the inexorable transition to the digital realm, Weta Workshop embodies a peculiar dichotomy, and is something of a 'cutting-edge throwback'. Taylor is a global ambassador for this very notion – the idea that cool stuff made by hand still generates magic on screen that digital effects have yet to supersede.

Richard Taylor working on a *Halo* figure, 2009



Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001)

arrivals for the period 2000–04 were also far above the norm, though they quickly subsided again in following years.

Altogether, it would be safe to speculate that all of this additional income (from DVD releases, merchandising and destination tourism) would have at least doubled the box-office return.

In terms of their global performance against other box-office successes, the three films have been both collective and individual triumphs. *The Return of the King* (2003) was the biggest hit. It built on the success of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) and *The Two Towers* (2002) – their box-office returns allowed for even greater expenditure on special effects in the third film. *The Return of the King* remains at number three in all lists of the highest-grossing films of all time (bumped down from number two by James Cameron's *Avatar*, 2009). It also won eleven Academy Awards from eleven nominations (overall the trilogy won seventeen Awards from thirty nominations), although none of these awards was for a specific acting role.

Negative appraisals were few and tended to be swamped in a tidal wave of praise verging on adulation. The formal review website *rottentomatoes.com*, which does not hesitate to damn mediocre films, awarded the films a positive 94 per cent critics' rating,¹⁴ while *Los Angeles Times* critic Kenneth Turan declared, 'The trilogy will not soon, if ever, find its equal.'¹⁵ So far, he is right. Although *LOTR* initiated a rash of film adaptations of fantasy books (of which CS Lewis's *Narnia* series was of greatest significance for New Zealand), nothing yet has matched the trilogy's global success, which for an extended period turned the world's gaze towards New Zealand as a film-making nation. The global community took notice of these three films of unprecedented breadth and cost, made in a small and 'insignificant' country, steered by a director of as yet unproven international quality and awaited with growing eagerness by legions of fans. But this phenomenon cannot be attributed solely to Jackson or his production company (Wingnut Films). As with almost all film making, it was a collaborative venture, drawing on the creative talent of individuals such as designer and head of Weta Workshop, Richard Taylor; editors Jamie Selkirk and Annie Collins; Jackson's fellow scriptwriters (principally Walsh and Boyens); composer Howard Shore; lead actors Elijah Wood (Frodo), Ian McKellen (Gandalf), Orlando Bloom (Legolas), Viggo Mortensen (Aragorn), Andy Serkis (Gollum) and Cate Blanchett (Galadriel); and myriad part actors and extras, visual artists, cinematographers, sound recordists and fans.

The question then, in the wake of the 2003 red-carpet premiere of *The Return of the King* in Wellington, was: what would Peter Jackson do next?

After the Rings

Most signs of the physical impact of the *LOTR* films have been effaced from the New Zealand landscape, but other, more lasting effects remain. The trilogy enabled the establishment and development of a film infrastructure that simply did not exist before: not only a workforce of skilled technicians and actors but also the world-class post-production facilities at Park Road (in Wellington). Originally the state-owned National Film Unit (purchased from TVNZ by Jackson in 1999), this 10,200 square metre site was the location for the making of the later stages of the trilogy, *King Kong*, much of the Jackson-produced 2009 science-fiction hit *District 9* (directed by Neill Blomkamp) and virtually all of the visual effects for *Avatar*. Regarding the latter, Weta Workshop again employed the computer technique MASSIVE (Multiple Agent Simulation System In Virtual Environment) that had created the *LOTR* virtual armies and battle scenes. *Avatar* required a doubling of the Weta workforce (to over 900 personnel working continuously for three years), which led James Cameron to remark that Weta ‘has the largest computer “farm” in the world’.¹⁶

Weta Workshop (computer simulations, modelling and set design) also played a central role in Jackson’s 2005 remake of *King Kong*, a film project he had nurtured ever since he watched the 1933 original as a nine-year-old. His boyhood dream came true when the American production company Universal Pictures offered him US\$20 million (the highest fee Hollywood had ever offered a director) to direct the remake, along with a record-breaking production budget (for a single film) of US\$207 million.

Written by the same team of Jackson, Walsh and Boyens, and starring Naomi Watts, Jack Black and Adrien Brody, *Kong* was shot primarily in Wellington, using existing buildings and re-creations of downtown New York of the 1930s. Andy Serkis once again took a leading role in animating a major character, in this case the giant ape. The running time grew to more than 200 minutes. The film opened with a New York premiere on 5 December 2005, followed by a gala event in Wellington on 13 December and nationwide American release on 14 December. Although the early returns were below expectations, the box-office takings eventually topped US\$550 million, placing *King Kong* among the five highest-grossing films of 2005 worldwide.



Post-production work on *District 9* (2009) at Park Road Post Production, Miramar, Wellington



Peter Jackson (foreground) on location directing *King Kong* (2005)

As with *LOTR*, ancillary income swelled the coffers. For example, in the first six days of its release, sales of the DVD exceeded US\$100 million, following a precedent set by the earlier release of *King Kong: Peter Jackson's Production Diaries* in both online and DVD formats, which helped build pre-release anticipation of the film. According to the website boxofficemojo.com, *Kong* has returned more than US\$700 million to Universal Pictures, making it the fourth-highest grossing movie in that company's history.¹⁷

King Kong was presented three awards (Visual Effects, Sound Mixing and Sound Editing) at the 2006 Academy Awards, along with broad approval from the critics, with rottentomatoes.com giving a 77 per cent rating.¹⁸ Jackson's Park Road Post Production house continued its involvement with the film beyond its screen life through its creation of the 'King Kong 360 3-D' attraction, which has become part of the official tour at Universal Studios in Hollywood.

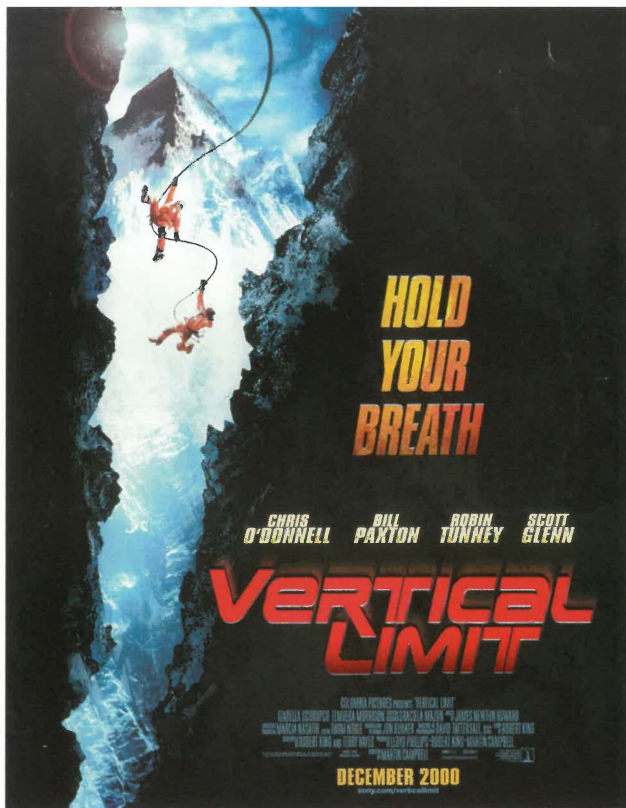
Jackson did not take on another directing job until *The Lovely Bones* (2009), but his fingerprints were on numerous projects in the intervening years. As well as becoming a mentor for emerging film makers, he increasingly assumed a role as producer, notably on the surprise hit *District 9*. The film, whose opening credits trade openly on Jackson's reputation ('Peter Jackson presents...'), is ostensibly a 'what if' story about an alien invasion of South Africa. However, it has been interpreted as a commentary on recent South African history, in its references to forced evictions, xenophobia and corporate corruption. With a relatively unknown cast, low-budget special effects (the 'prawn' aliens and their mothership were designed but not built by Weta Workshop), a multilingual soundtrack and an interesting new twist on alien-human interactions, the project clearly appealed to Jackson, and he bestowed his magic touch on it. As well as broad critical approval, by the end of 2009, it had returned more than six times its estimated production budget of US\$30 million. Jackson was also instrumental in several local projects, such as the restoration of the much-loved (albeit notoriously nationalistic) documentary *This is New Zealand*, which first screened at the World Expo in Osaka, Japan, in 1970. He also takes a leading role in the judging of 48HOURS, the annual New Zealand 48 hour film-making competition.

Jackson may never again be associated with a film project of the scale of *LOTR*. Kristin Thompson, author of *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and modern Hollywood* (2007), describes it as a 'once in a lifetime event',¹⁹ but there does not seem to be any shortage of new enterprises.

District 9 (2009)

From left: Jamie Bell as Tintin, Andy Serkis as Captain Haddock, Peter Jackson and Steven Spielberg on the Motion Capture Stage in Los Angeles for *The Adventures of Tintin: The Secret of the Unicorn* (due for release in 2011)





Publicity for *Vertical Limit* (2000)

A number of major projects occupied Jackson through the first decade of the twenty-first century, among them a Tintin movie (with Steven Spielberg) and a remake of the 1955 British war classic *The Dam Busters* (with first-time director Christian Rivers). Another is a two-film adaptation of *The Hobbit*. This was initially to be directed by acclaimed director Guillermo del Toro (*Pan's Labyrinth*, 2006), who withdrew in May 2010, citing frustration at delays in shooting. He continued to work on the screenplay, however, commenting, 'I would love for Peter to direct it',²⁰ as he now is.

Shooting of the first film of *The Hobbit* began in March 2011, but not before the production had been embroiled in a very public row late the previous year, prompted by a threat from the Australian Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance to blacklist the films in order to secure a better deal for the New Zealand actors involved. The local media, Jackson and seemingly most of the New Zealand population argued over different versions of events until the government stepped in. They invited Warner Brothers to top-level discussions in Wellington and offered sufficient inducements (financial subsidies and swift changes to New Zealand's labour laws) to persuade the American production company to keep the films in New Zealand.

Overseas and 'runaway' production in New Zealand

Given the proof provided by Jackson that big-budget, globally oriented films can be made in New Zealand, other producers and directors have made their way to the small nation in the South Pacific. American interests use the term 'runaway productions' to describe projects that bypass traditional centres (Los Angeles, New York, London, Mumbai) and take their scripts, actors and crew to new territories. New Zealand is now one of these destinations, thanks to several factors: the precedent set by *LOTR*, a non-unionised and proven workforce (and thus lower labour costs), film-friendly political structures and/or tax regimes, an attractive exchange rate, a politically safe environment, a diversity of locations, a reliable climate and sophisticated post-production facilities.

Pundits in the American film industry apply pejorative overtones to the term 'runaway' because they see the trend as detrimental to their interests. In 2004, Ben Affleck declared that 'runaway production is probably the most important issue facing the state of California today'.²¹ The Directors Guild of America distinguishes between creative runaways – which leave the United States because their story takes

place in a setting that cannot be duplicated locally – and economic runaways – which leave the country in search of lower production costs resulting from a favourable exchange rate, lower wages and other causes. Technically, the *LOTR* trilogy cannot be considered a runaway production, since it appears never to have been seriously considered as a local (that is, an American) film project. And neither, given the role of CGI in enhancing or modifying location shoots (sometimes beyond recognition) in New Zealand, can it be regarded as a creative runaway. Ultimately, it remains the creative vision of largely one man who was intent on staying in his own country. In this endeavour, he was greatly assisted by the globalisation of the film industry and the ease with which films can be made pretty much anywhere these days.

Nevertheless, Jackson did open the door a little wider for film and television productions that had fewer New Zealand links and can be regarded more properly as runaways. Some of these predate *LOTR*, such as *Vertical Limit* (Martin Campbell, 2000). *Hercules* and *Xena* (see page 244) were shot around Auckland, and the latter made a star of New Zealand actress Lucy Lawless. But to all intents and purposes these American cable television series featuring mythical or imaginary Greek heroes were simply using New Zealand as a low-cost filming location. It was much the same for the children's television series *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (1993–95) – a number of episodes were shot in New Zealand. However, probably the oddest runaway example was *Lucy*. This 2003 telemovie for the CBS television network in the United States was filmed at the Henderson Valley Studios in Auckland, with New Zealanders supplying most of the cast and crew. Even though much-loved television star Lucille Ball, the subject of this biopic, had no tangible connection with New Zealand, this did not deter the American production company, which received assistance from a local firm set up for just such situations. Paul Carran from Film Factory New Zealand explained: 'We can fake America better than anyone else. We faked 50 years of American history for *Redhead* [also known as *Lucy*] in Auckland – which included Los Angeles and New York.'²² In 2004, Film Factory collaborated on *Ike: Countdown to D-Day*, wherein General Eisenhower (Tom Selleck) launched the liberation of Europe from the shores of New Zealand, with Kiwi actor Ian Mune playing Winston Churchill.

Many of the recent runaway films shot in New Zealand have passed under the radar. Numerous Hindi language (or 'Bollywood') productions, for example, have used New



Sammir Dattani as Raj Dholakia and Sonam Kapoor as Simran on location in Queenstown filming the Bollywood production *I Hate Luv Storys* (2010)

Overleaf: On location on the shores of Lake Wakatipu shooting special effects sequences for *The Waterhorse* (2007)

Andrew Adamson (in white hat) on location in Auckland filming for *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005)



Zealand's scenery as a picturesque backdrop for song and dance routines, usually bringing self-contained film units that make minimal use of local production facilities. In 2007, the Labour government offered a further lure to runaway productions by increasing the tax rebate from 12.5 per cent to 15 per cent for film projects that spent more than NZ\$15 million of their production costs in New Zealand.

There have been major films, too, that have benefited from such tax breaks (in addition to *LOTR* and *King Kong*). These include *The Last Samurai* (2003) and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005). The former, originally inspired by New Zealand film maker Vincent Ward, was made by the American director Edward Zwick. Principal filming took place in New Zealand: Mount Taranaki stood in for Fujiyama, and a Japanese village was constructed in the backblocks of rural North Taranaki – a real (reconstructed) place, rather than an imaginary world. The presence of megastar Tom Cruise (who plays American soldier Nathan Algren), along with other overseas actors, attracted considerable local attention. The film went on to make more than three times its US\$140 million budget. Indeed, one unanticipated consequence of increased offshore or runaway production in New Zealand is that these projects have generally increased the cost of making local films – local crews, post-production workers and other ancillary staff now have expectations of higher wages.

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe has a more tangible New Zealand connection in that it was directed by expatriate New Zealander, Andrew Adamson. Born in Auckland in 1966, Adamson created commercials and graphics for New Zealand television before moving to Los Angeles, where he served as technical director on *Toys* (1992) and effects director on *Batman & Robin* (1997). He later made his name as director for the internationally successful animated features *Shrek* (2001) and *Shrek 2* (2004), before moving on to *The Lion* as director, executive producer and scriptwriter. In some ways, his story parallels that of Jackson's – in 2005, the *New Zealand Listener* linked the two as the 'Kings of Fantasy'²³ – although, having based his career primarily in the United States, Adamson has never really been regarded as a New Zealand film maker.

Estimating the 'Jackson Effect'

Peter Jackson has played a significant role in global film making and accelerating trends in films: for instance, the rapid shift to films dependent on special effects and CGI, and the film release as an 'event', with all the ancillary considerations that accompany a release. It is possible to argue that Jackson and his American producers (New Line Cinema) first appreciated and exploited the energy and passion of fan expectations, especially with regard to online communities. In terms of local cinema, his influence has been immense. The 2010 *Review of the New Zealand Film Commission*, co-authored by Jackson and Australian academic David Court, argued that: 'There might be no more than 25 or 30 truly talented screen writers and directors working in a country the size of New Zealand'.²⁴ If this is true, then Jackson must be counted as part of New Zealand's share, not least for his local influence over the past decade or more. If there had been no Jackson, it is difficult to imagine how film production in New Zealand over these years might have looked. It would be misleading to imply that the 'Jackson Effect' has rubbed off on all other local films. Certainly, there have been some remarkable recent successes – *Whale Rider* (2002) made an overall return of US\$41 million worldwide (split evenly between the New Zealand and international box offices), and *Boy* (Taika Waititi, 2010) earned more than NZ\$9 million in local cinemas in its first five months – but most other New Zealand-made films failed to make a profit, with few even covering their production costs.²⁵ In light of this situation, film making in New Zealand during the past decade remained more of a cultural activity (or, as the Film Commission and other champions of New Zealand film might argue, a cultural necessity), rather than a financially viable pursuit. It is fair to assert, nonetheless, that what Jackson did with *LOTR* and *King Kong* was to drag New Zealand (very willingly, in most cases) onto the international film-making stage, enabling the development of a top-class production infrastructure and drawing the world's attention to this small nation at the bottom of the globe. In the wake of his contribution, Kiwis can now talk more confidently of a 'New Zealand film industry'.