The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug: The filmmakers waste considerable talent and skill

Christine Schofelt
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Directed by Peter Jackson; written by Jackson, Fran Walsh, Philippa Bowens and Guillermo del Toro; based on the novel by J. R. R. Tolkien

One enters a movie theatre for various reasons: for some insight perhaps into what makes us human or the way we live, or for an engrossing adventure or drama that provides a moment's escape *from* the way we live. In my view, *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*, the second installment of a three-part film series based on J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937), offers little along those lines.

In the first place, producer, director and co-writer Peter Jackson confronts a monstrosity, to a large extent of his own making. *The Hobbit* trilogy, even more than its predecessor, *The Lord of the Rings*(2001-2003) series, is a gigantic marketing phenomenon created out of a slight, charming children's book, upon which careers, studios and even entire national economies (New Zealand) are said to depend. There is no leeway here for experiment, spontaneity or genuine levity—this is serious, billion-dollar business!

With the exception of a brief flashback at the start, *The Desolation of Smaug* picks up where The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey left off. The titular Hobbit, Bilbo Baggins (Martin Freeman) and the dwarves he accompanies, after what has already been a hazardous journey, continue on their way to the Lonely Mountain. The dwarves hope to retake their homeland, which they lost to the gold-loving dragon, Smaug, who still lies within the castle.

The group must get there by the last light of the sun on Durin's Day (the dwarves' New Year) to spot the keyhole that will open the door to the mountain. Gandalf (Ian McKellen) leaves them early on in search of a sinister necromancer (Benedict Cumberbatch), who is gathering the forces of Evil.

Along the way, the dwarves and the hobbit are imprisoned by elves, from which predicament they escape by way of a protracted barrel-ride through rapids and down waterfalls, while fighting off the vicious orcs [nasty humanoid goblins] who have been pursuing them since the first installment.

They are aided by a couple of the elves. Tauriel (Evangeline Lilly) was invented for this production since there are no other female characters of note. The second helpful elf is the very popular Legolas (Orlando Bloom), a character who, while a creation of Tolkein, does not appear in *The Hobbit*. The inclusion of these two also provides the possibility of a tepid and unnecessary love triangle.

That the journey is perilous is driven home to us repeatedly. *The Hobbit, The Desolation of Smaug* proceeds through a series of narrow escapes, CGI-fueled battle scenes and yet more dizzying scenery. If the first film in Jackson's *Hobbit* trilogy was dominated by endlessly steep mountains and the characters nearly falling off them, this one throws the spotlight on ridiculously high stairs and walkways, lofty tree branches and the characters swinging from ropes, chains, cables, etc. Lurching from chase scene to battle scene to chase scene and back again, Jackson's latest pseudo-epic drags one along on a frenetic but ultimately tiresome ride.

For all the action and activity, there is little genuine excitement.

The filmmakers have wasted considerable talent and skill on this film. Actors—and there are some fine ones involved—are lost in a sea of makeup, computer-generated effects and leaden dialogue. One has to ask why, for example, so much is being made of Benedict Cumberbatch's involvement in the film when, as both the necromancer and the dragon Smaug, his voice is

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distorted beyond recognition. Any emotion that might have been brought to these characters by Cumberbatch is obliterated in the editing and effects process.

The dialogue between Smaug and Bilbo Baggins may be the only portion of the film true to the book. The exchange is lifted almost directly from Tolkien's novel, and provides one of the major dramatic passages in the original work. Here the use of vocal effects is especially disappointing. Rather than projecting a sense of threat, as one supposes the deepening of Cumberbatch's voice is intended to do, the end result is cartoonish and distracting. Here, too, as with the extended scene in the previous film between Baggins and Gollum (Andy Serkis), the spectator is allowed to glimpse Freeman's acting abilities—but only just. As was the case with the Gollum scene, this one too seems out of place in the film as the makers have conceived it.

Ian McKellen as Gandalf is relegated to brief, disjointed appearances and, for the scant dialogue given him, could have been played by anybody. Jackson's misuse of this actor is verging on criminal.

The 1937 novel, at around 300 pages (depending on the edition), is an interesting and entertaining diversion. Tolkien's outlook involved a yearning to go back to a pre-industrial utopia. His ideas of good and evil were heavily influenced by his own experiences in the First World War, and he turned those experiences into an engaging body of work with enduring appeal. He wrote with some humor, and had a good eye for the dramatic. *The Hobbit*, set in the same world Tolkien created for the *Fellowship of the Ring*, asked some interesting questions and contained some well-developed characters with clear (and sometimes conflicting) motivations. In short, there was something on which to base a good, modest film or possibly two.

What Jackson has done in the latest film, however, as he has largely done from the beginning, is to pound out any of the subtlety Tolkein included. The writer-director-producer's narrow view of what "audiences want" ignores the ability of the viewers to appreciate anything other than the bombastic. That these books have been enjoyed by generations of readers, avidly read and reread, apparently means little. This shows through in Jackson and company's willingness to expand and distort this slim, tightly-woven volume into a sprawling three-part blockbuster comprised largely of filler chase and action scenes that do not propel the story forward.

The viewer waits for something to happen, and the small scraps that are offered—the revelation of the necromancer's identity, the conversation with the dragon—come at a high price in terms of time spent waiting and wading through hacking, slashing, chasing and menacing. Ultimately the only thing truly imperiled is one's patience.

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