Choosing the Way of Pain:
a dialog on *Lord of the Rings*[1]

Steve Mohn & Peter Watts

Much has been said of Peter Jackson's take on J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, *and to say more may feel a day late. DVDs wold with the films are crammed with extras, and websites abound. It had made more money than anything else, ever, and everyone loves it. So when the relevant essay I had promised On Spec crumbled like stale cake in my clumsy hands, Jena Snyder, our production editor, suggested a dialogue with Peter Watts, author of the sf trilogy* Starfish, Maletsrom, *and* Behemoth, *and a guy who, Jena assured me, really knew his Tolkien[2]. I leapt at this since I don't know anything and can always afford to learn something new.*

New because this would not be two guys sitting at a table, nor even two e-mailers batting epistles back and forth in shuttlecock imitation of a transcripted dialogue. Days, not minutes, passed between replies. Each is a small essay, not so much worked as meditated on, with scarecely any cuts. We could go where we wished, yank the discussion in whatever direction. The only rule was that we had to have seen the films.

You may have to chew your way through parts os what we ended up with but, between my own solemn trench-digging and Peter under full sail, running before the wind, we have talked about Jackson's Rings *in a fashion unlike what you are liable to find elsewhere. And so then...*

---

[2] Retroactive co-authorial footnote: I don't know why Jena thought this. I do not, nor have I ever, pretended to be any kind of scholar or expert on Tolkien or his trilogy. I certainly have *opinions* to burn, but then, I have opinions on just about everything under the sun; and Jena would be the first to point out how ill-founded many of them are. *PW*.

Steve Mohn: It may seem unfair to complain that **The Lord of the Rings** is not an important film, even if it is a terrific movie, but I think it has to be faced that, in a lot of ways, **LotR** isn't really a film at all, and that Peter Jackson is not our Kubrick even if **LotR** is his **Spartacus**. **LotR** is an ordinary epic. It doesn't have style so much as production design, and lots of films have that. You never get the sense with **LotR** that you're watching a man work with film, unearthing inherent cinematic problems the way composers leave musical problems for later composers to pick up and solve. Jackson's camera rarely finds where it has to be in order to fulfill some purpose greater than scene coverage. Think of Kubrick's dolly shots, those long takes prefiguring so much New German Cinema, and his rare resorts to close-ups, so that every close-up punctuates the scene. Or think of how, in **A Clockwork Orange**, Alex is held head-underwater by former Droogs, now cops, as they beat him with truncheons. It's a direct violation of Chaplin's maxim: Close-up for tragedy, long shot for comedy -- the Kubrick shot *is* a long shot, yet it's a tragic moment for Alex, but at the same time darkly comic for us. This friction between stylistic imperatives is devastating. Kubrick often violated film to make us laugh at what was not funny, to make us sit through a nightmare. He was film-*making*, and **LotR** never quite does anything like that. Instead, it faithfully illustrates a much-beloved novel, which, incidentally, I've never read. I have to lay those cards on the table.

Peter Watts: Stop. Rewind. Ask yourself: why should a mere "movie" aspire to the exhalted status of "film" in the first place? So that viewers can be yanked out the story and forced to dwell upon the precious technicalities of camera technique and inbred homage? What is the director's job, ultimately: to immerse us in another world, or to to show us how clever he is? Is that the difference between "movies" and "films"—one aspires to engross us into forgetting that it's an artefact, while the other keeps reminding us of that same fact?

Don't misunderstand. I creamed my pants at the sight of **2001**'s bone/spaceship cut. Alex's myopic glower sent chills up my spine. I'm even willing to appreciate the little red staccatoes punctuating every other shot of **Eyes Wide Shut**, although I don't know what the fuck Kubrick was trying to prove with that. But I was also blown away by the lighting of the mountain beacons in **Return of the King**. To me, that sequence is no less masterful for not having prefigured New German Cinema, or for not having tipped its hat to Fritz Lang. It *moved* me, on a gut level. It took my breath away in the same way that Kubrick's bone-cut did.

It's the goal that matters, not the tools used to achieve it. If the impossible operation succeeds—if the patient recovers and thrives against all odds—who are we to complain that Bergman would have used a different scalpel in the third act?

There are so many things you could have done, so many real weaknesses you could have exploited. You could have attacked Tolkein for his reliance on *deus ex machinas* like giant eagles and dead armies, none of which we ever heard of until they conveniently appeared, like gizmos from Batman's utility belt, to save Fellowship asses in the nick of time. You could have attacked Jackson for the changes he wrought—the Ents's peculiar ignorance of a clearcut only thirty seconds' walk away, or the movie's trivialization of Sarumen's "work for good within an evil system" rationale--seductive and *reasonable*--down to bwa-ha-ha cardboard villainy. You could have attacked plot holes, inconsistencies, even the military absurdities rife in both book and films: no drawbridge at Helm's Deep? Defensive gates that swing *inward*? A catflap in the Hornburg?

But no. You have chosen to fixate on some arcane distinction between "movie" and "film", a trifle that matters only to film-studies undergrads and fact-checkers for the Boomer's edition of Trivial Pursuit.

You have chosen— the way of *pain*.

SM: The director's job is whatever he says it is but increasingly all directors do is illustrate, and Peter Jackson's doting on the source material ultimately does it a disservice. After a while, all those guys on horseback, galloping like mad past picturesque mountain ranges, start to feel the same. And I'm not looking for something artsy here: let's remember that the bone-to-satellite cut in **2001** is just a scene change striking for its economy, eliminating the march-through-the-ages *montage* Kubrick originally intended: his desire to get rid of that resulted in the metaphor of progress supported by the bones of murder.

Here's the thing I'm really getting at, and where I think Jackson truly let us down. It's about silent film as the Base Language of cinema, and how it's disappearing. Guys like Kubrick and David Lean learned cutting and camera work from watching silents, and it shows in things like **2001** and **Lawrence of Arabia**. And it's interesting that Jackson did so much digital tinting of the images in **LotR** -- making the night scenes almost monochromatically blue, the Rivendell scenes golden, while desaturating the daylight scenes nearly to the point of their becoming black and white. The tinting is old silent technique from before the days of color -- they did it by hand. (Jackson did a mock-umentary for New Zealand TV, proving that film was actually invented there, so he knows all about this stuff.) But Tolkein's text is such a straightjacket, and so driven by the spoken word, that the film has no choice but to hack its way from scene to scene with a broadsword of stated intentions.

The only time he really slows down to do something special of his own is when Elrond warns Arwen what will become of her life if she marries Aragorn: the color almost leaves the scene and Jackson pulls back slowly from a stone bier wearing

Aragorn's death effigy. It's nearly a black-and-white still and it's the most memorable shot in *Two Towers*. It's appropriate.

PW: Okay, I can see where you're coming from *vis-a-vis* the galloping cavalry cavalcade. I don't agree, necessarily—each charge was, to my eye, distinctive enough to stand out from the others—but, yes.   There's only so many ways to make huge honking hordes of horses look different.

What I don't understand is your claim that Jackson let us down—or more precisely, with the way you tied this to the death of the Old Ways. Your underlying premise seems to be that modern film is best served by using techniques from a bygone era. Even if I accept that at face value (although I'd like to see you make the same arguments in other fields—medicine, for example), don't your own examples show that Jackson *is* giving the past its due?   Don't his "almost monochromatic" treatment of various locales tip their hat to the silent masters? What am I missing here?

In fact, Tolkein's text was not nearly the straitjacket you seem to think.   That evocative scene at Aragorn's grave never happened in the main text. Jackson pulled it out of one of Tolkein's appendices, and polished a couple of throwaway paragraphs into the little gem you see on screen. Aragorn's inner conflict, his reluctance to assume the mantle of leadership? Not Tolkein. 100% Walsh, Boyens, and Jackson.

The film abandons major episodes from the books. It shuffles written timelines without mercy. Characters are merged and split, motivations and attributes retooled. I would quibble with some of these changes—I have, above—but overall I'd say that Jackson improved on the original. Yes, there were problems with Tolkein's text; but Jackson was too good a director to let them interfere with the story. And while the films have their failings, I cannot describe them as flaws in *direction*.

I'd agree wholeheartedly that Arwen's graveyard watch was memorable, but I found equally memorable shots throughout all three films. The swooping camera work that started off The Two Towers, taking us smoothly from the stratosphere into the very heart of the Misty Mountains. The Balrog in free-fall. Gollum and Smeagol, arguing. Pippin serenading Denethor while Minas Tirith's troops ride to their deaths. I've already mentioned the lighting of the beacons. I could go on (I usually do). I honestly don't understand what makes any of these scenes less accomplished than Arwen's quiet despair at Aragorn's graveside.

Of course, I'm no expert, no formal student of film history. I didn't even know that Kubrick had intended a 4-million-year montage between bone and bomb, which is especially embarrassing since **2001** remains one of my all-time favorite films. But presumably the Director's Guild of America *does* have some level of expertise in these matters, and they just handed Jackson this year's award for Best Director. That's gotta be good for something.

SM: I hear leeches have made a comeback in medicine.

What you call the "Old Ways" of cinema, of interest only to bean counters, misstates my underlying premise, which has less to do with some nameless bygone era than with the everlasting value of rhetoric. When you say it's the goal that matters, i.e., the content, and not the tools used to achieve its evocation, you might as well say a building can stand without reliance on girders or stone foundations: it's all just floors and windows, the parts we actually pay attention to. In other words, we're somehow expected to read a book or watch a film strictly for its manifest content, while treating the rhetorical method as irrelevant or, at best, transparent. Strunk and White have for years celebrated a see-through prose style that only bureaucrats actually write in. There's not a writer in the

Western Canon whose prose style does not in fact leap off the page and sing. Must we now claim to see films with no regard to images, no regard to texture or composition -- the very things that *make images into images* -- just as if there somehow exists, underneath the images, a true and verifiable content independent of them? My good man, that way madness lies! Next you'll say good style is like good breeding: it never draws attention to itself. But you don't write that way, and I don't write that way, and neither did Mr. Hemingway. You would be hard-pressed as well to find any film in what's becoming a global canon of cinema that anyone lauds for being stylistically sedate. In fact, insistence on the transparent style is one of the great hypocrisies of our age: no one actually works in it but everyone cheers on the notion just as if it were legitimate, and not merely a salve for mediocrity. But I digress.

Look. I liked watching this movie. I could see in every frame not only that Jackson is a hell of a talented man, not only that he is also just plain bright enough to want to get the look and feel of the story absolutely nailed down in terms of color desaturation and monochromatic tinting -- wanting those things as much as Kubrick wanted space to be silent and without gravity -- but also the kind of filmmaker who could have done more of what he had it in himself to do, if he didn't also have to answer to the fans of Tolkein, of whom Jackson is one himself. I started this off by saying that, alas, Jackson is not our current Kubrick, but I never would have made the comparison if I hadn't instinctively felt he belonged at the same table, or will one day. He is really good and tried very hard to do something almost impossible to do.

I still take issue with his camera work. Too much of it is Modern Slapdash, a style much in vogue at MTV (if they're still around) but pioneered by Robert Altman (who is still around). Altman realized a long time ago, when everyone worked with a zoom lens strapped on the camera, that if you

just kept zooming in or out you could cut from any zoom shot to any other kind of shot, without regard to composition, movement or distance from the subject. It forgives so much. Now we know that if you just keep moving the camera -- spin it, keep swooping up or down, keep throwing or dropkicking it over the barn -- you can cut from any shot to any other. It's given us The Big Scribble, in which there is no consistent IDEA behind the lens, no EYE, like a writer with no voice. Jackson's camera does everything, and runs the risk of doing nothing. And whether or not you're a film student is immaterial: you are affected by these things. You can't *not* be affected by rhetorical devices, good or bad, written or filmed.

PW: I'm a huge fan of style. It surprises me that you'd interpret my argument as a dismissal of style, whether cinematic or literary.   In fact, I've always resented those "transparent" writers who (stylistically speaking) couldn't write their way out of a fortune cookie, while at the same time racking up sales figures orders of magnitude greater than anything I've ever achieved.

My view is not that cinema--or any other form of art--should be bereft of style. My view is that Peter Jackson's Rings trilogy has style to burn, whether or not it meets the stylistic conventions of bygone days (or even present days, for that matter). I judge the work on its own terms, not Fritz Lang's, and I don't find it scribbly or unfocused. I find it downright *moving* in places, so much so that I expect to get the same lumps in my throat when I go to see **Return of the King** for the eighth time as I did the other seven.

The thing is, movies are *not* houses. Houses have, yes, girders and foundations and other vital things beyond windows; but movies themselves *are* windows. Whatever the technology that produces them, whatever the cinematic legacy that any given work builds upon-- in the end, all that matters is up there on the screen. All that matters is whether those sights

and sounds work in service of the tale; there is no hidden dry rot, no badly-placed support beams that would allow an expert eye to think "Sure it all looks solid *now*, but by this time next year half the frames will have collapsed."

I can accept the house-equals-movie analogy only so far: if a house is built along unsound engineering principals it will fall apart, just as a movie assembled with no regard for the rules of cinema will fail. But one need not be an architect to know what a collapsed house looks like; why must one have formal training in the History of Cinema to recognise the wreckage of a failed movie? (I'll grant that film scholars would certainly have an edge at understanding *why* a given work has failed.)

We may never agree on this. You cited Hemingway as an author whose prose leaps off the page and sings; I'd cite as him as a member of the Western Canon whose transparent, style-free prose has always bored me to tears. That both of us could cite the same author to support such utterly opposite positions makes me wonder if we haven't somehow strayed into the reaches of religious argument. But I think that at least two telling points have emerged from this dialog: 1) that we could argue endlessly about the merits and failings of Jackson's trilogy, and 2) that Jackson's trilogy is *worth* arguing about.

As I recall, movies like **2001** provoked the same sort of heated discussion in their day. I think that says something.